

Social Determinates of Health

The Importance of employment, and economic opportunity to health

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As the Commission on Affordable Health Care researches the literature on the impact of the “Social Determinants of Health” on health status and outcomes I respectfully suggest that it will be important to consider the role that employment, and economic opportunity play in this area.

Across the world today there is increased focus on the social determinants of health by policy makers in the health policy arena. In America today many are looking at efforts to promote “population health” as a way to improve the health status of individuals and communities. The factors being considered in this endeavor (not listed in order of importance or priority) include:

- Work/Wages
- Unemployment
- Early life events
- Addiction
- Education
- Housing
- Food/Nutrition
- Transportation
- Stress
- Social Exclusion
- Social Support and Social Gradient

Throughout the studies on the social determinants of health there is a recognition that differences in health are due more to the characteristics of a society than the health care provided. Impacts can be demonstrated in factors such as mortality rates, morbidity rates, and the types of conditions that are prevalent in society today. Marmot, a well-regarded researcher in health policy stated that “health does not determine social position, social position determines health.”

In studying this area, it is clear there are intersectional factors and actions that can combine to promote advancement within a society, and thus health. Education, housing, nutrition/food all play a role but I argue that central to these are income. Many factors are linked from early childhood to economic status is a central component of each.

In America we have historically focused on the obligation of society to present economic opportunity to individuals but then the individual must take the responsibility to manifest their destiny in exploring such opportunities.

Thus, I propose that the opportunity for economic advancement is an important component to health and it may be the one element that is easiest to manifest since it does not require extensive additional government spending, complicated new programs, or detailed infrastructures in order to be promoted. That said, research (Bartley, Fee and Montgomery) points out that one must also look at the continuum of one's work experience because the stresses associated with long term insecurity of tenure of work can be as significant as the stress of unemployment itself.

Studies further indicate that the level of one's income alone does not address other needs, however it is a start. Historically, in America, entrepreneurialism and small business creation have provided the way out of poverty for many. So what is needed to address the opportunities for economic advancement for the needy? There are several factors but most significant are:

- An environment that promotes economic opportunity for individuals in creating and operating small businesses;
- Limiting barriers to entry (i.e., burdensome regulations, fees and licenses, etc.) that restrict efforts toward self-sufficiency and independence;
- Technical educational opportunities which empower individuals to see their way to a better life through skilled work;
- Access to capital through loans, grants, and other means.

In considering the topics within the Social Determinants of Health I urge the Commission to consider employment, job creation, and reducing barriers to entry for entrepreneurial effort as one way to promote health. Other factors are also important, but this area should be emphasized.

References

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"Social Determinants of Health; The Solid Facts" (Second Edition) by Wilkinson, Bartley, Ferrie and Montgomery, The World Health Organization

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