

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on the Social, Structural, and Political Determinants of Mental Health and Health Equity

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“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. ... These are ... position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects.” – APA Operations Manual

Issue:

The social determinants of health encompass the conditions in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, and worship, and age, including the environments and policies that influence these conditions. This list of factors is expansive, and includes but is not limited to: housing, climate change, physical and emotional safety, racism and discrimination, nutrition, voting and the right to self-determination, accessible and quality educational opportunities, economic stability, quality of neighborhood infrastructure and the built environment, loneliness and social connection or isolation, and other factors affecting health care accessibility and quality. In addition to these factors, the social determinants of health include the actions and norms of larger institutions and systems beyond healthcare such as the economic, legal, political systems. The structural determinants of health and political determinants of health are additional frameworks which clarify these concepts and define the role of advocacy, voting, and government policy in addressing health inequities.

The relevance of social determinant factors to mental health have been robustly documented, including contributing or causing worsened severity of psychiatric symptomatology and increased rates of psychiatric illness, including substance use disorders, across the lifespan. Addressing social determinant factors is a necessary requisite for optimal mental health outcomes and health equity. Improvements or worsening of social determinants of health factors is primarily driven by system level policy, and further research on the social determinants of health should be followed by evidence-based interventions to address these factors.

APA Position:

It is the position of the APA that the social determinants of health have substantial effects on health outcomes, especially mental health outcomes for marginalized and under-resourced groups. Research and evidence-based system-level interventions, including payment models that incorporate screenings, should be employed to address these social factors to improve the mental health of, and advance health equity for communities and the nation.

Authors: Eric Rafla-Yuan, MD, Nadia Cacodar, MD, Devin Cromartie Bodrick, MD, Enrico G. Castillo, MD, MS, Helena Hansen, MD, PhD, Evita Rocha, MD

Collaborators:

Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities
Council on Advocacy and Government Relations
Caucus on the Social Determinants of Mental Health