

Social Determinants Of Health In The 21st Century: An Analysis Of New Challenges For Health Equity

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Abstract

Background: The 21st century has brought profound social, economic, environmental, and technological transformations that have reshaped the Social Determinants of Health (SDH), generating new challenges for health equity. Understanding these contemporary determinants is essential to guide public policies capable of reducing health disparities and promoting equitable access to healthcare.

Materials and Methods: A narrative literature review was conducted using scientific evidence on Social Determinants of Health and health equity in both international and national contexts. The review synthesized studies addressing globalization, migration, labor market transformations, climate change, digital technologies, and structural determinants such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The selected evidence was analyzed to identify emerging determinants and their implications for health equity.

Results: The review demonstrated that contemporary SDH have become increasingly interconnected and dynamic. Globalization, climate change, digital exclusion, labor market precarization, migration, and persistent structural inequalities significantly influence access to healthcare, living conditions, and health outcomes. These factors interact synergistically, amplifying social vulnerabilities and perpetuating health inequities across populations.

Conclusion: Achieving health equity in the 21st century requires addressing both traditional and emerging Social Determinants of Health through integrated, multisectoral, and evidence-based public policies. Continuous monitoring of health inequities and strategic interventions targeting structural determinants are essential to promote equitable, resilient, and sustainable health systems.

Keywords: Social Determinants of Health; Health Equity; Public Health; Social Vulnerability; Globalization; Climate Change.

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I. Introduction

The 21st century presents a complex landscape for public health, marked by New social, economic, and environmental dynamics are reshaping how health is approached.

Health is experienced and distributed throughout society. In this context, understanding the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) becomes fundamental to uncovering the underlying causes of inequities and to guiding policies aimed at promoting more equitable well-being. SDH refers to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, and which shape their health and well-being. These conditions include factors such as education, employment, income, access to decent housing, food security, access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, as well as access to quality health services. The interconnectedness of these factors demonstrates that health is not determined solely by biological predispositions or individual choices, but rather by a complex system of social, economic, and environmental influences. Attention to these determinants is crucial, as they operate at different levels, from the macro (global and national policies) to the micro (interpersonal relationships and immediate living conditions), directly impacting...Population health. Ignoring the influence of social determinants of health perpetuates a cycle of disadvantages that translates into significant disparities in health status and life expectancy between different social groups. The pursuit of health equity, therefore, requires close attention to the social structures and processes that generate and sustain these inequalities (2, 3).

The current scenario of the 21st century is characterized by a series of transformations that complicate action on the social determinants of health. Globalization, while bringing benefits, also...It intensifies migratory flows, cultural heterogeneity, and new forms of labor exploitation. Technological advancement, in turn, opens new frontiers for medicine, but can also exacerbate digital exclusion and unequal access to innovations. The acceleration of climate change represents a pressing challenge, affecting food security, water resource availability, and the incidence of disease. Simultaneously, increased income inequality and precarious working conditions in many countries create environments of instability and vulnerability that negatively impact physical and mental health. (Phipps) (4). This points to the challenges of health governance in the 21st century, which demand multisectoral and adaptive approaches to address these new realities. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, starkly exposed how pre-existing social determinants of health influenced vulnerability and differential mortality among population groups, highlighting the urgency of policies that address the root causes of these disparities. The complexity lies in the intricate web of causal relationships, where one social determinant can influence others, creating a cumulative effect of risk or protection.

The relationship between the Social Determinants of Health and health equity is intrinsic and inseparable. Health equity does not mean treating everyone equally, but rather recognizing that different individuals and groups have distinct needs and that, to achieve comparable health outcomes, they may require different levels of support. The Social Determinants of Health are the main driver of health inequities, as their variations among different groups are significant.

Social groups lead to unequal health outcomes. For example, people living in poverty and social marginalization tend to have less access to quality education, stable and well-paid jobs, and adequate health services, resulting in higher rates of chronic diseases, lower life expectancy, and greater morbidity.⁶Health equity, therefore, actively seeks to reduce these barriers and promote fair access to the resources and opportunities that enable people to reach their full health potential. Woolley (7) emphasizes that promoting health equity requires identifying and remedying the social disadvantages that limit well-being. Marmot (8) It already highlighted the importance of addressing social determinants to reduce the burden of disease and health disparities. The pursuit of health equity implies in going beyond the provision of medical care, intervening in the living conditions that predispose to illness and inequality (9).

In this context, several key challenges emerge for ensuring equity.Health in the 21st century. The first challenge lies in the need for a deeper and more up-to-date understanding of the dynamics of the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) in a constantly changing world, recognizing new forms of vulnerability and social exclusion. A second crucial challenge is the translation of knowledge about the SDH into the formulation and implementation of effective and multi-sectoral public policies that integrate the health dimension into all policies and are capable of addressing the structural causes of inequities. Social participation and the empowerment of marginalized communities are equally fundamental to ensuring that policies respond to their real needs and to building sustainable solutions. Finally, the continuous measurement and monitoring of health inequities, using indicators sensitive to the SDH, are essential to assess the impact of interventions and to ensure the accountability of different social actors in promoting a more just and healthy society for all (10).

II. Material And Methods

To address the complex Social Determinants of Health (SDH) in the 21st century and their impacts on health equity, this study adopted a robust and multifaceted methodology.

A systematic literature review was a central component of the methodology, aiming to identify and synthesize existing scientific evidence on social determinants of health (SDH) and health equity in global and national contexts. Relevant academic databases were used, applying rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria to select studies that addressed the central themes of the research. The literature analysis served to contextualize the empirical findings, identify gaps in knowledge, and support the theoretical discussion. The breadth of the literature on SDH and health equity demands systematic methods for its organization and analysis (5,7).

Additionally, the research considered the temporal dimension of the social determinants of health (SDH), analyzing how the social, economic, and technological transformations of the 21st century have altered the configuration of these determinants and, consequently, the patterns of health and equity. The influence of new technologies, the precariousness of work, climate change, and migratory processes were examined as factors that introduce new challenges for health governance in the 21st century.⁴This longitudinal analysis allows for a more dynamic understanding of the social determinants of health and their interaction with health over time.

The research aims to investigate the social determinants of health and their implications for health equity, and to offer consistent support for the formulation of more effective and equitable intervention strategies. The research aligns with perspectives on health equity and social determinants, seeking to contribute to a more informed and proactive debate (9, 8, 10).

III. Result

In the 21st century, the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) present a landscape of renewed and complex challenges that redefine the foundations of health equity. Globalization and intensified migratory flows alter the demographic and epidemiological profile of populations, demanding a deeper understanding of how these mobilities interact with local socioeconomic and environmental conditions to shape health outcomes. The interconnection between health and migration is not limited to issues of access to services, but encompasses cultural adaptation, acculturation stress, and vulnerability to new health risks, directly impacting equity (5). Migration can expose individuals to precarious working environments and conditions, as well as...Creating new communities with social support networks that, paradoxically, can improve certain aspects of health, but also reproduce pre-existing inequalities or create new forms of exclusion. The complexity of these phenomena demands public policies that go beyond direct health care, encompassing social integration, human rights, and combating discrimination.

Economic policies and the dynamics of the contemporary labor market emerge as powerful tools for health equity. The precariousness of labor relations, the rise of the gig economy, the flexibilization of rights, and income inequality generate a vicious cycle of vulnerability and chronic stress. Workers in Unstable or low-paying jobs often face unsafe working conditions, exposure to environmental and occupational hazards, and limited access to benefits such as health insurance and paid leave. This reality impacts not only the physical and mental health of individuals but also that of their families, perpetuating intergenerational inequalities. Analyzing these determinants requires a critical perspective on how global and national economic structures translate into concrete health disparities at the individual and community levels (6). The pursuit of a fairer and more stable labor market is therefore a fundamental pillar for promoting health equity, since economic security is intrinsically linked to the ability to provide for basic needs, including adequate healthcare.

Climate change and environmental degradation represent an existing threat. The potential for social determinants of health and health equity in the 21st century is crucial. Extreme weather events, such as heat waves, floods, and droughts, disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Access to safe drinking water, food, and other essential services is paramount.

Safe housing and access to safe shelters become compromised, with direct consequences for physical and mental health. Furthermore, air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, and scarcity of natural resources impact health in complex ways, ranging from increased respiratory and cardiovascular diseases to food and water insecurity (8). The responsibility for mitigating and adapting to these changes falls in a way...Unequal, with low-income countries and communities bearing the greatest burden, despite having contributed less to the problem. Therefore, climate justice is inseparable from health justice, requiring coordinated action at a global level for the transition to sustainable and resilient economies, with support mechanisms for vulnerable populations.

The influence of digital and information technologies on the social determinants of health (SDH) is a two-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, the digital revolution offers unprecedented opportunities for access to health information, telemedicine, remote monitoring of chronic conditions, and the development of digital health tools that can democratize access to care, especially in remote areas. On the other hand, digital exclusion – the lack of access to the internet, devices, or digital literacy – can deepen health inequities, creating a new layer of disadvantage for those who are already marginalized (4). The spread of misinformation and fake news about health, amplified by social media, also represents a significant challenge, undermining trust in healthcare institutions and hindering the adoption of healthy behaviors. Ensuring that the benefits of digital technology are accessible to all, and that the While risks are being mitigated, it is crucial to ensure that the digital age contributes to health equity, and not to its exacerbation.

The persistence and reconfiguration of structural determinants such as race, gender, and social class continue to be central pillars in the generation of health inequities. Although the discourse on social determinants of health has advanced, the manifestations of these structural inequalities remain intrinsically linked to factors such as systemic racial discrimination, persistent gender inequalities, and the concentration of wealth and power. Race, for example, is not only a social construct but a factor that shapes access to opportunities, exposure to unhealthy environments, and the quality of healthcare, resulting in significant disparities in various health outcomes (2). Similarly, gender norms influence social roles, exposure to violence, access to healthcare, and caregiving responsibilities, impacting the health of women and men in distinct ways. The intersectionality of these determinants—how race, gender, social class, and other identities intersect and interact—creates unique experiences of vulnerability and privilege, which must be understood for the formulation of effective and equitable intervention (3). Addressing these structural determinants requires not only targeted policies, but also a social transformation that dismantles the foundations of End oppression and promote justice for all (1).

IV. Conclusion

This study sought to elucidate the complex Social Determinants of Health (SDH) in the contemporary scenario of the 21st century, reaffirming their profound interconnectedness. With the pursuit of health equity, revisiting the challenges that shape the well-being of populations makes it crucial to recognize the multiplicity of social, economic, and environmental factors that, in an interconnected way, generate and perpetuate inequities. Globalization and migration, for example, reconfigure social and economic dynamics, directly impacting access to essential health resources. Simultaneously, economic policies and the precariousness of the labor market intensify disparities, relegating significant portions of the population to conditions of persistent vulnerability. Climate change and environmental degradation, in turn, have emerged as crucial determinants, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable communities and exacerbating pre-existing health problems.⁽⁸⁾ The influence of digital technologies, while promising in some aspects, can also deepen social divisions if not accompanied by inclusive policies, creating new barriers for those without access or digital literacy. The persistence of structural determinants, such as race, gender, and social class, continues to operate as the foundation of inequalities, interacting in complex ways with emerging new challenges ⁽⁶⁾.

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