



Highlights from a scoping review on addressing the structural determinants of health and health inequities

Need for a scoping review

To inform an upcoming environmental scan focused on the structural determinants of health, the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH) wanted to know more about:

- policy-level interventions impacting the social and structural determinants of health and related population-level health outcomes,
- the conceptualization of social and structural determinants of health in the grey and peer-reviewed literature, and
- public health involvement in actions that impact the structural determinants of health and health equity.

About the scoping review

The NCCDH collaborated with the National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools and St. Francis Xavier University on a scoping review¹ that consulted the peer-reviewed and grey literature. This review explored what is known about interventions for addressing the structural determinants of health and health inequity as they affect population and public health outcomes in G20 and Nordic countries. Related activities and findings are outlined below.

Methods

- The authors retrieved 23,799 records; assessed 776 full-text articles for eligibility; and included 179 studies. They included articles that were published between 2005 and 2021 and reported on population-level health outcomes of a policy-level intervention impacting the conditions of daily life.
- The authors chose the World Health Organization's *A conceptual framework for action on the social determinants of health*² to map interventions and extract data.

Results

- Of the 179 included studies, the majority were published in the United States.
- Interventions were mostly implemented at the federal level and primarily acted on income, universal health care or health insurance, immigration, gender inequity and access to care.
- Not all of the described interventions reported positive health outcomes as a result of the intervention (e.g., in the context of anti-immigration policies).
- Over half of the included studies (92 of 179) did not provide explicit descriptions of either structural or social determinants of health to frame or contextualize the intervention described.
- The studies that did explore these concepts tended to focus on social rather than structural determinants of health, as described in *A conceptual framework for action on the social determinants of health*.²
- The majority of study methodologies consisted of trend studies, cross-sectional studies and retrospective cohort studies.
- Only 54 of the included studies mentioned a role for public health. Of these, most noted the importance of the article's topic to public health, the importance of reporting the public health implications of the findings, or the potential role of public health nursing in connecting families to services.

What we learned

- Descriptions of structural determinants of health are inconsistent and lack conceptual clarity.
- There is little research examining Canadian policy-level interventions on the structural and social determinants of health and reporting on related population health outcomes.
- Interventions on structural determinants at the population and policy levels may exist, but they are not being documented in the health literature (where population health is an outcome of interest). The broader public health community is likely ahead of what is reflected in published research.
- Regular large-scale data collection of health outcomes at the population level (e.g., vital statistics or routine national studies) is essential for assessing the population-level effects of policy decisions related to the structural determinants of health.
- Opportunities for public health to engage in structural interventions are not well defined, indicating an area of practice and scholarship that needs further development.

Related systematic review

A subset of studies from the scoping review was used to develop *Structural interventions that affect racial inequities and their impact on population health outcomes: A systematic review*.³

Implications for public health

The public health community, including public health researchers, needs to know more about:

- clear ways to describe structural determinants of health and related concepts;
- the effectiveness of interventions on structural determinants of health;
- current public health actions to address structural determinants of health; and
- opportunities for public health to design, modify and evaluate interventions intended to address structural determinants of health.

For more information about this scoping review, or to request a copy of the manuscript (available in English only), please contact nccdh@stfx.ca.

References

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The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health is hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaw People.

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