

Connections to Health

How housing connects to health

When housing cost burdens are high, individuals and families must make difficult choices with limited options. They may experience unhealthy, poor-quality housing, save money by living with others, limit use of utilities, skip routine check-ups or wait to seek healthcare, and buy lower cost food. When budgets are stretched, households also experience housing insecurity and are vulnerable to displacement from their homes and neighborhoods.

Housing instability, crowding and homelessness are associated with: low birth weights, depression, behavioral problems, and educational delays for children; asthma, tuberculosis, and other communicable diseases; skipped meals and medical appointments or medication; social isolation; and loss of political voice. When low-income residents are forced to leave high cost areas, they often leave behind places rich with opportunity, and may need to commute long distances, straining budgets and worsening air quality. Poor quality and unstable housing quality exposes residents to toxins, mold, pests and conditions that can trigger asthma and increase risks of injuries.



How transportation connects to health

Everybody should have safe, accessible, and convenient transportation options to get to work and other destinations, especially if they do not own or have access to a car. Lack of access to a car should not limit people's access to opportunities. Getting around by foot, bike, and transit also creates opportunities for physical activity, encourages social cohesion, and reduces contributions to climate change and air pollution.

Having safe, adequate, and accessible transportation options has been linked to improved physical and mental health, physical activity, employment outcomes, medical care, and resiliency during disasters. For households and individuals without access to a car, including many low-income individuals and people of color, public transportation, active transportation, and shared mobility options can be critical links to jobs and other health supportive destinations that provide essential goods and services. These transportation options can also be cheaper alternatives to driving and help people save on the costs of owning and operating a car.



Lack of adequate transportation options can negatively impact one's health, especially if it makes it difficult to get to a job, healthy food options, health care services, and other destinations. Where transit service is scarce, when routes are cut back, and when sidewalks and bicycle facilities are lacking, people have less access to goods and services, employment, and other opportunities. Low-income individuals and people of color who, use active and public transportation options the most, are greatly impacted by lack of access.



How education connects to health

Early childhood is a crucial period for brain development, shaping nearly every aspect of one's future health and wellbeing. Quality preschool is important for healthy development, and has been associated with lifelong educational, economic, and health benefits. Quality preschool is associated with a 40% higher rate of graduating high school, higher college attendance and grade retention, and lower placement in special education programs.

Education is linked to increased life expectancy and reduced chronic disease rates, infant mortality, and other negative health outcomes. Education contributes to health in many ways: high school graduates are more likely to find quality jobs with living wages and decent working conditions; school-based learning contributes to the knowledge and cognitive skills necessary to make healthy choices; and students learn social and physiological benefiting skills including problem solving, teamwork, self-control, social support, and life skills.

Everyone should have the opportunity to seek higher education and go to college if they choose. A college education is essential for many higher-paying careers, and it also helps people develop the cognitive skills and knowledge necessary to make healthy choices. A college education can also build important social and physiological skills. Higher education, including having some college education and bachelor's degree or higher, are linked with even better health outcomes and higher incomes. College graduates are more likely to find quality jobs with living wages and decent working conditions. Higher learning contributes to overall knowledge and cognition, and students learn social and physiological skills including problem solving, teamwork, self-control, social support, and life skills.



How healthcare access connects to health

Health insurance dramatically improves health outcomes by allowing people to access necessary care. Insurance allows people to receive ongoing, consistent care and establish ongoing relationships with medical providers. It also enables regular screenings and check-ups—helpful for early diagnosis and reduced mortality for cancers and other diseases.



People with insurance are far more likely to get medicines to control chronic diseases. Insurance access also has community wide impacts, reducing the spread of communicable diseases. In addition, health insurance helps families save money on expensive medical care. Almost 50% of bankruptcies in the U.S. are due to medical expenses, and one study found that uninsured families can afford to pay for only 12% of hospitalization costs.



How neighborhood connects to health

Parks can encourage physical activity, reduce chronic diseases, improve mental health, foster community connections, and support community resilience to climate change and pollution. Many studies have documented that living within walking distance of parks and open spaces encourages physical activity (especially for children)—helping to lower rates of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, obesity, and diabetes. Parks and greenspace can also lower stress, improve cognitive functioning and mental health, help people like veterans recover from traumatic events, and promote health-protective social connections. Reducing paved surfaces, like roads and parking lots, and increasing greenspace and parks can also reduce heat-island effects (where hot air builds in heavily developed areas) and filter out pollutants. While park access is important for everyone, access is disproportionately lower for low-income communities and communities of color, who are also more likely to live near parks without sufficient space or facilities.



Trees are beneficial for mental and physical health in many ways. They can provide shade and cool surrounding areas, reduce stress, and promote health, wellness and physical activity. Trees are essential to mitigate the effects of climate change, especially extreme heat events. They can also promote physical activity by providing shade and a pleasant environment for walking and bicycling. Expanding the tree canopy in areas without a lot of trees, especially low-income communities and communities of color, can promote healthier communities. Less tree canopy can contribute to poorer health outcomes and vulnerability to climate change.

How clean environment connects to health

Everyone should be able to live in neighborhoods where it is safe to breathe. Since diesel and fine particulate matter are so small, they can reach deep into people's lungs leading to adverse health outcomes. This can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and mortality. It can also cause adverse respiratory outcomes such as chronic obstructive lung disease, asthma, altered pulmonary function, and

other symptoms. Diesel PM and PM2.5 are especially dangerous for children, exacerbating pulmonary inflammation and other risks. Evidence that links diesel PM and PM2.5 to low birth weight and infant mortality is growing.



How social and civic engagement connects to health

Census participation has been shown to be an indicator of social capital – or how residents of communities cooperate with one another to collectively solve problems and build their community. Numerous studies have shown a positive association between population health and social capital. While researchers do not fully understand whether Census participation is caused by social capital or vice versa, policies on the local level that are designed to increase either social capital or Census response rate will likely have a strong influence on each other. Not only does the Census help obtain funding for local communities, but it is also a critical tool for local planners and decision-makers to understand the social, economic, and demographic conditions within their communities. Without an accurate understanding of community conditions, policy decisions may not be appropriate to meet the needs of residents.



Voter participation is also an indicator of both civic engagement and social cohesion. It has strong, but indirect, connections to health. Communities with higher rates of voter participation typically have more civic engagement than other communities and are often better positioned to successfully influence the local conditions that shape health. For instance, communities may advocate for beneficial programs and education or against the location of toxic facilities in their neighborhood.

How economics connects to health

Economic opportunity is one the most powerful predictors of good health. Impacts on health are especially pronounced for people in or near poverty. When families are in poverty, they often do not have reliable access to the goods and services that are necessary for a healthy life. They may also face trauma and chronic stressors such as violence and insecure housing, employment, and food. These stressors have strong and long-term effects on both mental and physical health, and can even influence the health of one's children and grandchildren. Low-wage workers are also more likely to face unemployment and perceived job insecurity, which are associated with depression, anxiety, and overall poor health. When families face economic challenges, adults often work long hours and/or multiple jobs, making it more difficult to engage with their communities, cook healthy meals, spend time with family and friends, go to medical appointments, and participate in physical activity and other healthy activities.



Experiencing poverty makes it more difficult to afford to live in places with healthy community conditions like parks, good schools, employment, clean air, and safe streets. Stable employment provides people with the income necessary to buy these goods and services and maintain good health. Research indicates that economic opportunity, especially having a job, is one the most powerful predictors of good health, and that impacts on health are especially pronounced for people in or near poverty. Employment can also help some people avoid trauma and chronic stressors such as violence and insecure housing and food.

