

Introduction to Social and Behavioral

Sciences in Public Health

Introduction to Social and Behavioral Sciences in Public Health
(Key concepts, frameworks, and applications for quick reference)

1. Why Social & Behavioral Sciences Matter in Public Health

Aspect	Public Health Relevance
Determinants of health	Social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors explain >80% of health outcomes.
Population-level impact	Behaviors (e.g., tobacco use, diet, physical activity) affect millions; small changes can yield huge health gains.
Policy & program design	Understanding how people think, decide, and act guides effective interventions and legislation.
Equity	Social science reveals how power, stigma, and structural barriers create health disparities.

2. Core Concepts & Terminology

Term	Definition	Example in Public Health
Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)	Conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age.	Access to safe housing, quality education, income security.
Behavioral Determinants	Individual actions that directly influence health risk or protection.	Smoking, vaccination uptake, hand washing.
Health Belief Model (HBM)	Predicts health actions based on perceived susceptibility, severity, benefits, barriers, cues to action, and self-efficacy.	Designing a flu vaccine campaign that emphasizes personal risk and ease of access.

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Term	Definition	Example in Public Health
Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)	attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.	Understanding why adolescents may or may not use condoms.
Social Ecological Model (SEM)	Multi-level framework: individual ? interpersonal ? organizational ? community ? policy.	A tobacco-control program that combines counseling (individual), peer support (interpersonal), smoke-free workplaces (organizational), community media (community), and taxation (policy).
Diffusion of Innovations	How new ideas spread through social systems over time.	Adoption curve of mobile-health apps for diabetes self-management.
Cultural Competence	Ability of providers and programs to deliver services that are respectful of and responsive to cultural differences.	Translating health messages into multiple languages and using culturally relevant symbols.
Stigma & Discrimination	Social processes that devalue certain groups, leading to reduced access to care and poorer outcomes.	HIV-related stigma hindering testing and treatment.
Social Capital	Resources embedded in social networks (trust, reciprocity, norms) that facilitate collective action.	Community groups mobilizing for clean water projects.

3. Major Theoretical Frameworks

Framework	Core Elements	Typical Use in Public Health
Health Belief Model	Perceived threat, benefits, barriers, cues, self-efficacy.	Designing screening reminders.
Theory of Planned Behavior	Attitude, subjective norm, perceived control ? intention ? behavior.	Predicting condom use, recycling habits.

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Framework

Core Elements

Typical Use in Public

Health

Sciences in Public Health

Social Cognitive Theory	Observational learning, outcome expectations, self-efficacy, reinforcement.	School-based nutrition programs.
Transtheoretical Model (Stages of Change)	Precontemplation ? contemplation ? preparation ? action ? maintenance ? termination.	Tailoring smoking cessation counseling.
Social Ecological Model	Interacting layers of influence.	Comprehensive obesity prevention strategies.
Diffusion of Innovations	Innovation, communication channels, time, social system.	Rollout of HPV vaccine.

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