

Introduction to Health Equity and Disparities

Introduction to Health Equity and Disparities

(A concise, easy-to-read guide for students, public health professionals, and anyone interested in understanding the basics.)

1. Core Definitions

Term	Meaning
Health Equity	The fair and just opportunity for every person to achieve optimal health, regardless of social, economic, or demographic factors.
Health Disparities	Measurable differences in health outcomes or access to health resources that are unfair , avoidable , and linked to social disadvantage.
Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)	Conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age—e.g., income, education, housing, neighborhood, and discrimination.
Health Inequity	A broader term that includes structural and systemic forces (policies, power dynamics) that create and sustain disparities.

2. Why Health Equity Matters

- **Moral imperative:** Everyone deserves the chance to be healthy.
- **Public health impact:** Reducing inequities lowers overall disease burden and improves population health.
- **Economic benefit:** Healthier populations reduce health care costs and increase productivity.
- **Social stability:** Greater equity correlates with reduced crime, higher education attainment, and stronger communities.

3. Key Dimensions of Health Disparities

Dimension	Example Indicators	Typical Populations Affected
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Race / Ethnicity	Higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, infant mortality among Black and Hispanic groups.	Racial/ethnic minorities
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Lower income ? limited access to nutritious food, preventive care.	Low-income families, uninsured
Geography	Rural residents face provider shortages; urban “food deserts.”	Rural communities, inner-city neighborhoods
Gender & Sexual Orientation	Transgender individuals experience higher rates of mental health issues and barriers to care.	LGBTQ+ populations
Disability	Physical barriers to health facilities; higher rates of chronic conditions.	Persons with disabilities
Age	Older adults may encounter ageism and limited mobility.	Elderly populations

4. The Social Determinants Framework

[Socioeconomic Status] ?
[Education] ?
[Employment] ?
[Housing & Neighborhood] ?
[Access to Health Care] ?
[Health Behaviors] ?
[Health Outcomes]

- **Interconnected:** A change in one determinant often influences several others.
 - **Policy Levers:** Interventions can target any node (e.g., affordable housing, universal pre-K, living wages).
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5. Measuring Health Equity

Metric	Description	Data Sources
Rate Ratios / Rate Differences	Compare disease incidence or mortality between groups.	Vital statistics, disease registries

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Metric	Description	Data Sources
Concentration Index	Quantifies inequality across the socioeconomic gradient.	Household surveys
Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)	Composite score of community resilience to hazards.	CDC/US Census data
Health Equity Impact Assessment (HEIA)	Systematic evaluation of policies for equity effects.	Policy analysis tools

Tip: Use **disaggregated data** (by race, income, geography) to reveal hidden gaps.

6. Common Drivers of Disparities

- 1. **Structural Racism** – Policies that historically segregated housing, education, and employment.
- 2. **Economic Inequality**