

Introduction to Vulnerable Groups

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Key concepts, definitions, and considerations for working with or studying vulnerable populations.

1. What Is a Vulnerable Group?

Aspect	Description
Definition	A segment of the population that faces heightened risk of harm, discrimination, or exclusion because of social, economic, health, or environmental factors.
Core Features	- Limited access to resources or services - Reduced capacity to protect personal interests - Higher exposure to adverse conditions (e.g., poverty, violence)
Why It Matters	Understanding vulnerability helps shape policies, programs, and research that promote equity and human rights.

2. Common Categories of Vulnerable Groups

Category	Typical Characteristics	Examples
Age-related	Physical/developmental dependence; limited legal autonomy	Children, adolescents, older adults
Health-related	Chronic illness, disability, mental health challenges	People with disabilities, HIV-positive individuals, mental health patients
Socio-economic	Low income, unstable housing, limited education	Homeless persons, low-wage workers, refugees
Cultural/Identity	Stigmatization, discrimination, marginalization	Ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ persons, Indigenous peoples
Legal/Political	Restricted civil rights, exposure to conflict	Asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, prisoners
Situational	Temporary or crisis-driven vulnerability	Disaster survivors, victims of domestic violence, pandemic-affected groups

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Note: Individuals may belong to several categories simultaneously (intersectionality), which can compound vulnerability.

3. Dimensions of Vulnerability

1. **Exposure** – Likelihood of encountering harmful events (e.g., natural disaster, violence).
2. **Sensitivity** – Degree to which a group is affected by an adverse event (e.g., children's physiological sensitivity to pollutants).
3. **Adaptive Capacity** – Ability to cope, recover, or mitigate impacts (e.g., access to social support networks).

Vulnerability = Exposure × Sensitivity ÷ Adaptive Capacity.

4. Legal and Ethical Frameworks

Framework	Main Purpose	Key Provisions
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	Protect children's rights globally	Right to education, health, protection from exploitation
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)	Ensure full inclusion of persons with disabilities	Accessibility, non-discrimination, participation
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	Guarantee basic economic and social rights	Right to work, health, social security
World Health Organization (WHO) – “Social Determinants of Health”	Address health inequities	Focus on income, education, environment
Ethical Principles (Beneficence, Non-maleficence, Justice, Respect for Autonomy)	Guide research and service delivery	Informed consent, equitable resource allocation

5. Assessing Vulnerability – Practical Steps

1. **Identify the Target Population**

Introduction to Vulnerable Groups

- Demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity)
- Geographic location (urban/rural, conflict zone)

2. Map Risk Factors

- Economic: income level, employment status
- Health: prevalence of chronic disease, disability rates
- Social: stigma, discrimination, legal status

3. Evaluate Protective Resources

- Social networks, community organizations, government programs
- Access to health care, education, legal aid

4. Prioritize Needs