

Glossary of Key Terms

Health Disparities

Health disparities (also known as health inequalities) can be defined as differences in burden of disease and other health status indicators between different population groups (e.g. race, age, gender, income).

Table 1: Examples of Health Disparities

Health Status Indicator	Population Group
Immunization levels are lower for Asians, Latinos and African Americans as compared to Whites (4:3:1 Series at 24 months)	Race/Ethnicity – Asian, Latino and African American
African American and American Indian infant mortality rates are consistently higher as compared to other racial/ethnic groups	Race/Ethnicity – African American and American Indian
Females have higher rates of breast cancer than males	Gender – Female
Older males have higher rates of prostate cancer than younger males	Age – Older Men

Determinants of Health

Health disparities are attributable to biological variations, free choice, and external environment and conditions known as determinants of health. Determinants of health are divided into five areas: individual behaviors (e.g. exercise and alcohol use); social and economic environment (e.g. racism, stress, income and employment); physical environment (e.g. housing and environmental hazards); genetics and biology (e.g. age and gender); and systems and policies (e.g. health care access and access to healthy foods). Most often there is no one factor that causes poor health, disease, or early death and no one determinant that contributes to health, wellness and a long life. In fact, multiple determinants contribute at varying levels to health and wellness of individuals and communities. The three determinants that make up social determinants of health are the social and economic environment, physical environment, and systems and policies.

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Addressing Health Inequities -The Role of Local Health Departments in Minnesota
MDH, Center for Health Statistics and Office of Performance Improvement, February 2012

Table 2: Examples of Determinants of Health

<p>I. Individual Behavior: Includes tobacco use, substance use, nutrition, exercise, preventative care</p>
<p>II. Genetics: Includes gender, age, biological</p>
<p>III. Physical Environment: Includes housing, neighborhood, environmental hazards, safety</p>
<p>IV. Social and Economic Environment: Includes education, income, employment, racism, stress, culture</p>
<p>V. Systems and Policies: Includes access to affordable health care, smoke-free environment, access to high quality education</p>

Health Inequity

A health inequity is a health disparity that is the result of unequal social and/or economic environment, physical environment and/or systems and policies (social determinants of health) that are systemic and avoidable – and thus unjust and unfair (Unnatural Causes). Health equity is the absence of these conditions.

Health Inequity = health disparity + social determinant of health

Table 3: Examples of Health Inequities*

Health Disparity**	Social Determinant Factor
Children living in homes built prior to the 1950s have higher rates of lead poisoning	Physical Environment (neighborhood, housing)
African Americans have higher mortality rates compared to other racial/ethnic groups	Social and Economic Environment (Racism, stress, income)
Rural patients have higher rates of lower extremity amputations than urban patients	Systems and Policy (Access to care, policy)

* Health outcomes are often the result of a complex interplay of many factors including social determinants of health.

** Health disparities identified are for illustrative purposes only.

