

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES FOR BETTER HEALTH

BACKGROUND

The problem of health disparities—specifically, the higher incidence of certain diseases and health conditions among communities of color—is increasingly gaining attention among policymakers. Community leaders, public health officials, and an array of state and national organizations seized on the issue, seeking to educate policymakers and the public and advocating for an expansion of policy initiatives across the country. Such efforts have focused most often on expanding access to health care and improving individuals’ experiences within the health care system.

Improving access to health care and the quality of that care remain critically important and challenging goals. But research on the causes of illness and mortality in the United States suggests that improving health care and health outcomes in communities of color would be most successful with a simultaneous focus on those communities’ social, economic, and physical environments. Far from being a mere backdrop for interventions designed to change individual health and health behavior, community environments must be understood to have equal importance.

The “Building Stronger Communities for Better Health” issue brief (accessible at www.jointcenter.org) presents a framework for understanding how community conditions affect individuals’ health both directly and indirectly. It discusses how attention to these determinants of health requires a shift from a narrow focus on treatment to a broader

approach that includes, prevention and health promotion. The overarching roles that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status play in health status are explored within this context, and the case is made that the legacy of racism must be addressed if the continuing health disparities between white Americans and Latino and African Americans are to be eliminated.

The final sections of this brief discuss the implications of this community-effects concept for designing new policy and program

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strategies. Such changes will require approaches—ranging from local neighborhood action to securing public funding and effecting policy changes—that will not be easy given current fiscal and political constraints. Nonetheless, the interviews, current research, and the experiences of African Americans and Latinos all underscore the need for continued leadership and action in the effort to improve the health status of these populations.

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNITY EFFECTS ON HEALTH

In its 2002 report *Reducing Health Disparities Through a Focus on Communities*, PolicyLink proposed a framework, based on emerging research, to describe how social, economic, and physical environments in neighborhoods affect health. This framework, updated for this publication, is based on various conceptual models found in the public health literature and on the theory and practice of community building (that is, community driven efforts to improve neighborhood and family conditions). It also reflects many public health practitioners' increasing focus on neighborhoods, as well as a parallel increase in concern about health among urban planners, community leaders, and municipal administrators.

Neighborhood factors influence health at least four ways:

- (1) Direct effects on both physical and mental health,
- (2) indirect influences on behaviors that have health consequences,
- (3) health impacts resulting from the quality and availability of health care, and
- (4) health impacts associated with the availability of "opportunity structures."

Opportunity structures include such things as access to healthy and affordable food, safe and enjoyable spaces for exercise and recreation, capital for business or home-based assets, and transportation resources that facilitate employment and education.

PROMISING POLICY APPROACHES TO REDUCING HEALTH DISPARITIES

Beyond the continued importance of the issues of access, affordability, and quality of health care services, the community-effects framework proposed in this brief suggests that local, state, and federal policymakers already have available a number of policy options for reducing health disparities by improving the social, economic, and physical environments of local communities. This brief illustrates the critical intersection between health and the community environment, including the presence of environmental toxins, housing conditions, access to jobs and transportation, the quality of education, and health promoting activities. African Americans and Latinos are especially affected by disparities in these life-quality factors, so significant health improvements can occur only when these factors receive serious attention and show improvement as well.

Long- and short-term policy approaches with the goal of reducing the social, economic, and physical isolation of poor communities through revitalization efforts and opportunities for wider resident participation are outlined below.

Expand Economic Opportunities

- **Promote job training and economic development.** Programs that reach a diverse range of clients with both job-specific and academic training are necessary. New innovations with community benefit agreements suggest how economic development can ensure benefits to long-time low-income residents.

- **Facilitate access from isolated neighborhoods to new job centers.** As suburban areas continue to grow, inner-city residents are increasingly isolated from jobs and other economic opportunities. Policies that provide workers with transportation to new job centers could

significantly improve the economic standards of poor communities.

• ***Support inclusive housing policies.***

Regulatory and financing strategies that require a set-aside of new housing units for low- and moderate-income households foster mixed-income communities and reduce concentrated poverty. In addition to providing decent housing, such programs translate into access to jobs, schools, retail businesses, and the social connections that can enhance quality of life and access to opportunities.

• ***Encourage public and private reinvestment in low income communities.***

Direct subsidies, tax credits, loan guarantees, and other incentives that subsidize private investment in low-wealth communities can create “double bottom line” outcomes, benefiting both investors and communities when they are tied to concrete community benefits. In economically strong urban centers, these efforts must be implemented hand in hand with affordable housing to avoid residential displacement.

Expand Health-Care Access and Quality

• ***Expand access to affordable, quality health care.***

African Americans and, to an even greater extent, Latinos are disproportionately represented among the nation’s 44 million non-elderly uninsured. In addition to preserving existing health care programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), the long-term goal should be universal access to health care. For African Americans and Latinos in rural areas, the scarcity and inadequacy of health care service is further exacerbated by the lack of public transportation to access those services.

• ***Revise eligibility rules that restrict access to care.*** Eligibility rules that restrict access to health care based on immigration status pose additional obstacles for Latinos and other immigrants. Key steps are expanding access and ensuring enrollment upon eligibility.

Improve the Physical Environment of Communities

• ***Improve air quality.*** Low-income communities are far more likely to be located near freeways, industrial sites, and high levels of diesel traffic and trucking facilities, which contribute to poor air quality and a higher incidence of asthma. Current efforts involve changing bus and truck idling rules, relocating bus depots further from homes and schools, and ensuring that new schools are not sited next to freeways and environmental justice advocates are using litigation to seek enforcement of current Clean Air Act standards.

• ***Expand the availability of open space.***

Increasing the number, safety, and affordability of exercise venues, such as parks and walking paths, is an important prerequisite for increased physical activity.

• ***Expand affordable housing.*** Decent affordable housing is critical for families’ economic stability as well as for their health, given the prevalence of asthma, lead poisoning, and other problems associated with dilapidated units. Enforcement of habitability standards, increased focus on lead abatement efforts, and additional funds for affordable housing construction could be secured through further low-income housing tax credits, a national housing trust fund, or increased enforcement of Community Reinvestment

Act requirements for financial institutions.

• ***Encourage brownfields redevelopment.***

Brownfields, defined as abandoned, idle, or under-used industrial or commercial facilities where expansion or redevelopment is complicated by a real or perceived environmental contamination, are disproportionately found in low-income, urban communities of color. Their commercial redevelopment is an untapped opportunity that will require new approaches to environmental remediation.

Expand Opportunities for Quality Education and for Social and Civic Engagement

• ***Improve the quality of public education.***

Education remains a key determinant of health.

• ***Expand support for non-governmental social institutions serving as community anchors.*** Across the country, community health centers, educational institutions, and neighborhood-based community development organizations are putting into practice the concepts in this framework, and should be better supported and replicated through appropriate governmental and philanthropic initiatives.

• ***Support community organizing strategies and local leadership development.*** Expansion of leadership development opportunities, particularly among people of color, and support for local organizing efforts often bear residual benefits for communities above and beyond a given issue or campaign.

The community effects framework emphasizes that the determinants of health, and therefore effective strategies to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities, cannot be viewed solely within the scope of traditional health policy. Instead, policymakers and local health leaders will need to look to other sectors, including economic development, transportation, housing, employment development, and education, for policy solutions that address more environmental and community conditions.

Meeting the challenge posed by today's health disparities will require the full participation of the public, private, and philanthropic sectors. Local initiatives supported by both the public and private sectors can serve as the basis for further targeted investments. Private foundations have already aimed grant-making at comprehensive initiatives rooted in local communities. Finally, all strategies that strengthen communities of color will benefit from local leadership and initiative.

As policymakers, advocates, and community leaders, now is the time to work together to move this important agenda forward. The health of our communities demands it.