

Virtual Mentor

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Medicine and society

Where you live matters to your health

by Abigail Silva, MPH

Sociologists have long recognized the importance of geography, particularly neighborhood, in the lives of individuals. After all, as Peter Rossi noted, neighborhoods are the places in which we find medical facilities that tend to our health, schools that teach us, factories and businesses that provide jobs, and parks in which to play and socialize [1]. However, with a few exceptions [2-4], the examination of the role of “place” in an individual American’s health has been a focus of study only during the last decade. Recent interest in the social determinants of health has drawn attention to the role of environment [5, 6]. In fact, during this short span, numerous studies have found that neighborhood context may be related to health independently of individual-level attributes [7-32].

One neighborhood characteristic that has been repeatedly associated with poor health outcomes is poverty. After adjusting for individual-level risk, living in an economically disadvantaged (often defined by level of income, education, employment status and other variables) neighborhood has been found to increase the risk of mortality [7-11], low weight births [12, 13], coronary heart disease incidence [14, 15] and childhood asthma [16, 17].

Another related environmental factor shown to affect health is racial residential segregation. All residential segregation, although most dramatically in the African American community, has been shown to result in racial disparities in socioeconomic status and has been linked to health outcomes such as all-cause mortality [18, 19], premature mortality [20], infant mortality [21, 22] and tuberculosis [23].

Neighborhood stressors

While the exact pathways of stressors in economically disadvantaged and segregated environments may not always be clear, there are circumstances that are likely to affect health. For instance, it has been well established that the tobacco and alcohol industries market disproportionately to poor and minority neighborhoods [24-26]. These same disadvantaged neighborhoods are often plagued by high rates of violence, chronic illness and financial strain [27] that can contribute to increased levels of stress. Faced with these pressures, individuals often turn to tobacco and alcohol to cope. The combination of environmental stressors and the heavy advertising of alcohol and tobacco is not conducive to healthy behaviors.

Another characteristic of disenfranchised neighborhoods that impedes healthy behaviors is the paucity of supermarkets [28, 29]. While it is widely accepted that a nutritious diet is essential to good health, ready access to fresh produce and other healthful food often depends on where one lives. Many low-income and minority communities are plagued by vast fast-food choices and few alternatives [30]. Moreover, the price of fresh fruits and vegetables may be prohibitive to some low-income consumers [31, 32]. Combined, these conditions can lead to poorer nutrition.

Where one lives also partly determines access to medical care. For instance, it has been documented that health care facilities in poor and minority communities are more likely to close than those in higher income areas [33-35]. This leaves some neighborhoods with limited or no access to care. Those who live in such neighborhoods often delay treatment (and, even more so, preventive care) to the long-term detriment of their health.

It is vitally important to assess a patient's health risks and lifestyle stressors in the medical encounter in order to determine a diagnosis and prescribe treatment. Yet how often is the patient's environment assessed? Consider a patient with asthma who smokes. Why would anyone with this health problem take such a risk? Perhaps she lives in an environment with high rates of unemployment and crime, and smoking helps her cope with these conditions. How should a clinician use this information in the care plan? In this case a physician might deem it appropriate to refer the patient to a stress management program or a mental health professional who can help her find better ways of coping with stress. Another example is the patient whose health would benefit greatly by weight loss and a better diet. Such a patient might be willing to make these lifestyle changes but must overcome several barriers to do so. Suppose she lives in a neighborhood with poor recreational facilities and a limited number of supermarkets with fresh fruits and vegetables. These facts of the patient's life can be as important as the physical exam in creating a realistic treatment plan. And they most definitely influence whether the patient will be able to adhere to the plan.

Conclusion

It is widely recognized that disparities in health among individuals in different racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels are pervasive and that the causes are multifactorial. Moreover, these differences tend to be most striking when geographic location is taken into account. Clinicians who consider the effects of both individual and environmental risks when assessing a patient stand a better chance of being effective with their treatment and help to reduce disparities in health.

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