Health Disparities
Part Two: Populations Affected

Summary

- Health disparities refer to the differences in health status among segments of the population including differences that occur by gender, race or ethnicity, education or income, disability, sexual orientation, or living in various geographic localities.
- A population has a health disparity if there is a significant difference in the rates of incidence, prevalence, morbidity, mortality, and survival for a particular disease.
- U.S. populations with health disparities include racial and ethnic groups, as well as groups with other shared characteristics or circumstances.
- A person can be a member of more than one group that is at risk for health disparities.
- Healthcare providers can use the information on health disparities populations to understand the patterns of health and disease in their communities.

Categories of populations with health disparities (from Healthy People 2010):

Unless otherwise noted, the information is from Healthy People 2010 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

Race or ethnicity

**African American**

Compared to the white population:
- Infant mortality rate is double.
- Heart disease death rates more than 40% higher.
- Death rate for all cancers 30% higher. For prostate cancer, it is double.
- Death rate from HIV/AIDS is more than seven times higher.
- Rate of homicide six times higher.
- Although African Americans are less likely to have breast cancer than whites, they are more likely to die of the disease. This is despite a mammography screening rate that is nearly the same as for white women.

**Hispanics living in the U.S.**

- Almost twice as likely to die from diabetes as non-Hispanic whites.
- 20% of new cases of tuberculosis although only 11% of the population.
- Higher rates of high blood pressure and obesity than non-Hispanic whites.
- Differences among Hispanic groups. For example:
  - Rate of low birth weight of Puerto Rican infants 50% higher than for whites, although...
  - Rate of low birth weight of total Hispanic population infants is lower than for whites.

**American Indians and Alaska Natives**

Compared to the white population:
- Infant death rate is almost double.
- Twice the rate of diabetes.
- Stomach and liver cancers rate in men twice that of white men.
- AIDS rate 40% higher.
- Overall rate of strokes 60% higher; rate for women is two times higher.
- Cervical cancer rates are three times higher.

In addition, compared to the general population:
- Disproportionately high death rates from unintentional injuries and suicide.
- Life expectancy is 2.4 years less (Indian Health Service, 2006).
- Death rate from alcoholism-related conditions is 510% higher (Indian Health Service, 2006).

Indian women experience sexual assault and rape at a level 150% higher (Amnesty International, 2007).

**Asians, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders living in the U.S.**

One of the healthiest population groups in the U.S. but disparities in subgroups within the population:
- Women of Vietnamese origin have cervical cancer at nearly five times the rate for white women.
- New cases of hepatitis and tuberculosis higher in Asians and Pacific Islanders living in the U.S. than in whites.
Gender

Men:
- Life expectancy is 6 years less than women’s.
- Twice as likely as women to die from unintentional injuries.
- Four times more likely than women to die from firearm-related injuries.

Women:
- Increased death rates over the past decade in areas where men have experienced lower death rates, such as lung cancer.
- At greater risk for Alzheimer’s disease than men.
- Twice as likely as men to be affected by major depression.

Disability

Large population-based studies are lacking. Some studies show that people with disabilities are at increased risk for:
- Obesity
- Cardiovascular disease
- Osteoporosis
- Seizures
- Mental illness and behavior disorders
- Hearing and vision problems
- Poor conditioning and fitness (Horwitz et al., 2000, Satcher, 2001)

People with disabilities tend to report more:
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Sleeplessness
- Days of depression
- Fewer days of vitality

Geographic location

Rural populations. Twenty-five percent of Americans live in rural areas, that is, places with fewer than 2,500 residents.
- Injury-related death rates are 40% higher in rural than in urban populations.
- Heart disease, cancer, and diabetes rates exceed those for urban areas.
- Rural residents are less likely to use preventive screening services.
- They are less likely to exercise regularly, or use safety belts.
- In 1996, 20% of rural population was uninsured vs. 16% of urban population.
- Rural residents often lack timely access to emergency services and availability of specialty care.

Although Healthy People 2010 does not address urban and suburban health disparities, some general information is below.

Urban. Urban areas constitute a continuum that ranges from small towns that may or may not be adjacent to urban areas, to large urban areas with a population of a million or more (USDA, 2004).

Health disparities are not evenly distributed across urban areas; they may be related to socioeconomic and cultural issues that, compared to the general population, lead to:
- Higher homicide rates.
- Lower levels of health insurance coverage.
- Higher infant mortality rates.
- Higher rates of disease related to environmental quality, e.g. asthma.

Suburban. Data on this geographic population is incomplete because the current Office of Management & Budget categorization of health influences by geographic location does not allow for this type of analysis.

“According to data from the late 1990s, this category often included the healthiest populations” (Eberhardt & Pamuk, 2004, p. 1685).
### Sexual orientation

According to Healthy People 2010, “America’s gay and lesbian population comprises a diverse community with disparate health concerns.”

Major health issues for gay men are:

- HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases
- Substance abuse
- Depression
- Suicide. Gay male adolescents are 2-3 times more likely than their peers to attempt suicide.

Compared to heterosexual women, some evidence suggests that lesbians may have higher rates of risk factors related to:

- Smoking
- Obesity
- Alcohol abuse
- Stress
- Avoidance of health screening and healthcare (National Lesbian Health Organization, n.d.)

For men and women, the issues surrounding personal, family, and social acceptance of sexual orientation can place a significant burden on mental health and personal safety.

### Income and education

Differences by income and education in occurrence of illness and death, including:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Elevated blood lead level
- Low birth weight

*Population groups with highest poverty rates and least education suffer the worst health status.*

Higher incomes permit increased access to medical care, better housing and schools, safer neighborhoods, and opportunity for health-promoting behaviors.
References


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