What Causes the U.S. Health Disadvantage?

The U.S. health disadvantage can be explained by the ways in which the United States differs from other wealthy countries, for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Policy and Spending</th>
<th>Social and Economic Conditions</th>
<th>Social and Environmental Factors</th>
<th>Individual Behaviors</th>
<th>Healthcare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Such as taxation, social welfare programs, and investments in education</td>
<td>Such as poverty and income inequality</td>
<td>Such as access to affordable housing and recreation and parks, and exposure to violence</td>
<td>Such as diet, misuse of alcohol and drugs, and use of seat belts</td>
<td>Including cost of and lack of access to healthcare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racism and bias is increasingly identified as an important contributing cause of poor health outcomes for such population groups as people of color. Racism and bias affects well-being through several intertwined pathways. For example, residential housing segregation, unequal treatment within the criminal justice system, and lack of access to credit and capital have the effect of concentrating poverty, limiting access to quality education, and limiting employment and economic opportunities. Each of these contributes to poorer health outcomes. Racism and bias in the diagnosis and treatment of disease also contributes to poorer health outcomes.

Americans tend to think of health as healthcare. But health happens in communities and is largely driven by conditions outside the healthcare system that compromise health, limit opportunity, and shorten life. In fact, 80–90% of health outcomes are the result of conditions in communities.

These community conditions are known as “vital conditions” because everyone needs them in order to have the opportunity to achieve their best health, wealth, and well-being. The U.S. health disadvantage has its roots in poor conditions in neighborhoods and communities where the vital conditions that shape health are unmet for some residents.
Communities that lack some or all of the vital conditions that shape health are considered “low-opportunity” neighborhoods. Such neighborhoods are plentiful across the United States and are often found next to “high-opportunity” neighborhoods. Low-opportunity neighborhoods diminish the life chances of the people who live there, particularly children.

Characteristics of low-opportunity neighborhoods—such as poor-quality education, unstable housing, low incomes, and food insecurity—reduce consumer spending; affect workers’ health and productivity; and contribute to more absences and greater presenteeism among workers. 7

Unmet vital conditions and associated lack of educational and economic opportunities are found in low-opportunity neighborhoods. These unmet vital conditions drive the U.S. health disadvantage and raise costs for businesses.

Notes


10 The complete Surgeon General’s report describes the U.S. health disadvantage and the importance of strengthening communities and improving the health of residents. It also offers recommendations for how businesses can address the U.S. health disadvantage by engaging with and investing in communities, while creating value, lowering business costs, and improving the health of employees and other stakeholders.

For more content—including supporting references and additional resources—view the complete report, business digest, fact sheets, and other supplementary materials at [https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/reports-and-publications/](https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/reports-and-publications/).