



Social Determinants of Health

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The concept of social determinants of health originated nearly 200 years ago, when philosopher and businessman Friedrich Engels identified living, working, and environmental conditions as primary causes of morbidity (illness or lack of health caused by disease, disability, or injury) and mortality among the working class in Victorian-era England.

Today, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [defines social determinants of health](#) as “the nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, worship, and age. These conditions include a wide set of forces and systems that shape daily life such as economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies, and political systems.”

These nonmedical factors can positively or negatively impact people’s ability to lead healthy, productive lives. The five primary categories include:

1. healthcare access and quality;
2. education access and quality;
3. social and community context;
4. economic stability; and
5. neighborhood and built environment.

In Colorado, the Department of Public Health and Environment’s [Office of Health Equity is tasked](#) with monitoring and reporting on the role of social determinants of health.

1. Healthcare Access and Quality

Healthcare access and quality refers to people’s access to comprehensive, high-quality healthcare services. Obtaining timely, high-quality healthcare results in improved health outcomes.

Maternity deserts are an example of this determinant in Colorado. Some rural Coloradans lack access to obstetric services because labor and delivery units have closed, creating maternity deserts. Only [17 of Colorado’s 43 rural hospitals](#) have an obstetric department. Counties classified as maternity deserts have [significantly higher maternal mortality rates](#) than counties with full access to care. [Longer travel times to birthing hospitals or birth centers](#) are linked to worse maternal and infant health outcomes.

2. Education Access and Quality

Education access and quality refers to high-quality educational opportunities and help for children and adolescents to do well in school. [Education is strongly associated with life expectancy and health](#), as it can influence future opportunities such as employment.

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Half of Coloradans live in a licensed childcare desert, where there are [at least three children from birth to age five for every one available licensed early childhood care and education slot](#). Without access to early childcare and education, parents may struggle to financially support their families and advance in their careers. A lack of childcare may also serve as a [barrier to attending adult healthcare appointments](#) and can impact a family's mental health.

3. Social and Community Context

Social and community context refers to the support people need in the places where they are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age. These social and community relationships can significantly affect health and wellbeing.

In rural Colorado, for example, [nine in ten trips depend on personal vehicles](#). As a result, older Coloradans in rural areas can become isolated from services and social connections once they stop driving. Social isolation and loneliness are [linked to worse cardiovascular and mental health outcomes](#).

4. Economic Stability

Economic stability refers to the relationship between people's financial resources (e.g., income, cost of living, socioeconomic status) and their health needs. Achieving economic stability ensures that people can afford basic necessities, like food, housing, and healthcare. In Colorado, this determinant impacts [one-third of Coloradans who struggle](#) to afford

healthcare, food, or housing. About a quarter ([27.5 percent](#)) of all Coloradans have [skipped healthcare](#) because they could not afford it.

Programs like [Colorado's Family and Medical Leave Insurance \(FAMLI\)](#) ensure that workers can access paid leave to take care of themselves or their families, helping provide economic stability when life circumstances pull people away from work.

5. Neighborhood and Built Environment

Neighborhoods and built environments (e.g., access to transportation, sidewalks, bike lanes, parks) refer to environments that influence health, wellbeing, safety, and quality of life.

Residents in 80216 (Denver and part of Commerce City) live in an area where railways, highways, and industry are highly concentrated. As a result of their built environment, [residents are disproportionately exposed to pollution](#) and experience more pollution-related chronic health conditions.

In areas where [human development is close to or within natural terrain and flammable vegetation](#), known as wildland-urban interface areas, [communities may require residents](#) to proactively mitigate fire risk by adding an automatic sprinkler system, managing vegetation, and ensuring emergency vehicle access, for instance. These types of policies attempt to protect life and property through mitigating environmental risks.