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Feature Article

Are Socially Unequal Communities Less Healthy?

Report on the Canadian Population Health Initiative Research Program

We have long known that the rich live longer than the poor. The correlation between a person's socio-economic situation and that individual's health status has been clearly demonstrated to date. But some researchers have suggested that people's health is also affected by the socio-economic status of the broader society in which they live. Specifically, there is evidence that those societies with a wide income spread between the rich and the poor seem to be less healthy than societies with a narrow income range.

In fact, comparisons of advanced industrial nations show that people living in the wealthiest countries (such as the United States and Germany) actually have a lower life expectancy than those in poorer, more egalitarian countries (such as Ireland and Greece). Similarly, death rates for adults in New York City's Harlem are higher than in Bangladesh, even though the incomes of the poor in Harlem are much higher than that of the average Bangladeshi.

The Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI) (www.cihi.ca/Roadmap/CPHI/start.htm) supports a number of research projects that explore the relationship between social inequality and health. One promising area of research compares income range and health outcomes in American and Canadian cities.

Along similar lines, CPHI researchers are studying how health might be affected by the unequal distribution of such public goods and services as schools, municipal infrastructure, public transit and housing. For example, residential zoning and land use policies may create social environments that support or impede the health and well-being of Canada's city-dwellers.

Findings to Date

So far, CPHI researchers have drawn several early conclusions.

- **Canada "bucks the trends."** Canadian cities and provinces have much greater income equality than most U.S. cities and states, as well as much lower mortality rates. In Canada there is almost no association between income inequality and mortality.
- **The distribution of public resources appears to matter.** One of the major differences between Canada and the United States is the way health care and education are distributed. In Canada, services are publicly funded and universally available. The result is that individual income appears to be a much stronger determinant of health in the United States than in Canada.

- **Canada's tax system supports population health.** Canada's progressive income tax system appears to be very effective in redistributing income in a way that reduces the negative health impacts of inequality.
- **Exploring Canada — U.S. differences holds great promise.** The differences in urban structure and governance between Canada and the United States may be significant in explaining the inequality — health relationship.

With these results in hand, it is now time to get the word out about the determinants of health. Dissemination of research findings such as these to policy makers, researchers and members of the public is one of the functions of the CPHI. Two of the CPHI researchers — Dr. Michael Wolfson from Statistics Canada and Dr. James Dunn from the University of British Columbia — have presented their work to academics and policy makers across North America. Soon, they hope to link to a network of Canadian policy makers at all levels of government in sectors such as health, social services, human resources development, housing and urban development.

The Canadian Population Health Initiative

The Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI) studies determinants of health across Canada. First proposed by the National Forum on Health (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/forum_e.htm) in 1997, it aims to generate new knowledge, develop information infrastructure, improve decision-making and report on key public policy issues. www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/contents.htm

CPHI is part of the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI). (www.cihi.ca/eindex.htm) In September 1998, CPHI received \$20 million over four years from the 1999 federal budget to improve health information. CPHI is one of the key components of the health information strategy, the "Roadmap Initiative." (www.cihi.ca/Roadmap/rdindex.htm) The CPHI Council is made up of accomplished Canadians who represent diverse interests.

The Canadian Population Health Initiative will be linked to other CIHI information projects, to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and to the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health.

For more information, contact Carmen Connolly, Director of CPHI cphi@cihi.ca.

Population Health at Work

Population health is gaining momentum around the world as an approach to health, bringing its own new insights and challenges. The following activities include a mix of resources and applications, ranging from strategies for intersectoral collaboration to ways to apply the population health approach at the community level.

The Intersectoral Action Toolkit: The Cloverleaf Model for Success

Health Canada's new *Intersectoral Action (ISA) Toolkit* is a compact, practical guide for government, community and business partners working across sectors. It is the result of a collaboration between Health Canada (Population and Public Health Branch (PPHB), Alberta/NWT Region) and the Dietitians of Canada. Based on the Amherst Wilder Foundation's publication, *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey*, the kit includes two Alberta case studies. It will be available this fall on the Alberta/NWT Regional Web Board at: <http://healthforum.ic.gc.ca:8080/~board31>.

The U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Evaluation Working Group (www.cdc.gov/eval/)

Use this Web site to learn about the CDC Evaluation Working Group, which promotes program evaluation in public health. The site offers a framework for program evaluation and advice on how to use it.

The Evidence of Health Promotion Effectiveness

Published in 2000 by the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (www.iuhpe.org).

This two-part book assesses 20 years of the health, social, economic and political impacts of health promotion and disease prevention. It responds to the question: "What is the evidence that health promotion is an effective public health strategy?"

Success Stories: Caledon Institute of Social Policy Community Stories Series

Health Canada's Community Action Program for Children (www.hcsc.gc.ca/hppb/childhoodyouth/cbp/capc/index.html) funds community groups that address the developmental needs of at-risk children aged 0–6 years. Health Canada has worked with the Caledon Institute of Social Policy (www.caledoninst.org/) to profile three CAPC projects in the Institute's *Community Stories* series.

Vancouver HIV/AIDS Care Coordinating Committee

The Vancouver HIV/AIDS Care Coordinating Committee (VH/ACCC) co-ordinates service organizations that fight the HIV epidemic. In September 1998, the Committee adopted a population health approach to developing its second strategic plan. The 1999/2002 plan and supporting documentation are available at www.aidsvancouver.bc.ca/VHACC/stratplan/titlepage.html.

The Voluntary Sector: An Important Partner in Health

This fall, a new addition to the Population Health Web site (www.population-health.com) will describe the voluntary sector, its important contribution to Canadians' health and well-being, and its partnership with the federal government. Voluntary health organizations benefit the public through support, preventative services, funding and research, but volunteers providing these services also enjoy improved health through their participation. Having voluntary sector partners involved in developing effective public policies demonstrates how intersectoral collaboration contributes to public health.

PRI's Horizons Newsletter

The theme of this issue of *Horizons*, the Policy Research Initiative's newsletter, is sustainable development. (<http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/keydocs/horizons/horizons-e.htm>) It looks at how inequality obstructs sustainable development, and how to apply sustainable development concepts. A list of resources is on the corresponding sustainability theme site. (<http://policyresearch.schoolnet.ca/community/enviroe.htm>)

Expanding Knowledge on the Determinants of Health

The determinants of health framework is undergoing constant clarification as knowledge is gained and integrated. The following is a sample of recent documents representing what we are learning about the interaction among various “environments” or factors and their impact on health.

Healthy Development of Children and Youth: The Role of the Determinants of Health (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/childhood-youth/spsc/e_healthy.htm)

This Health Canada report looks at how various health determinants shape healthy child development, and discusses conditions and trends relevant to the health of Canadian children and youth.

Social Determinants of Health

The Social Determinants of Health: The Solid Facts, a readable 27-page booklet published in 1998, is available at www.who.dk/healthy-cities/determ.htm. It is part of a WHO Regional Office for Europe campaign to make the non-scientific community aware of evidence of social determinants of health, and to promote debate and action.

The message of the booklet is expanded on in *Social Determinants of Health* (edited by Michael Marmot and Richard G. Wilkinson, Oxford University Press, 1999). This book shows that health is not just about individual behaviour or exposure to risk, but that a population’s social and economic structure shapes its health.

Nutrition for Healthy Pregnancy: National Guidelines for the Childbearing Years

In this Health Canada report (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition), nutrition and pregnancy are discussed in the context of health determinants such as economic status, education, culture and lifestyle factors. The guidelines are intended for health professionals who offer nutritional guidance to women.

How Healthy are Canadians?

Statistics Canada Health Reports, Catalogue No. 82-003-XPB99003

The special winter 1999 issue of *Health Reports* focuses on the health of Canadians. Compiled jointly with the Canadian Institute for Health Information, it includes articles on health in mid-life; psychological health and depression; income inequality and mortality among working-age people; and personal health practices. Copies of the report cost \$35 and are available from order@statcan.ca or by calling 1-800-700-1033.

Building a Healthy Future

Looking for a way to explain Population Health to the public? Health Canada has worked with the Canadian Public Health Association (www.cpha.ca) to produce *Building a Healthy Future*, which will provide health organizations and the general public with key messages from the *Second Report on the Health of Canadians*. This short, plain-language document is one way of getting population health messages out to people who are not likely to read the Second Report itself. To get copies of this publication, contact CPHA at hrc@cpha.ca. You may also access it electronically at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/phdd/resources/Building_e.pdf. Please help to get this information to the public!

The Latest Policy and Program Developments

The resources below are full of fresh ideas and shared interdisciplinary knowledge about creating effective health policies. They draw on some of the best work being done in Canada and the United States.

Healthy People 2010 ToolKit

(www.health.gov/healthypeople/state/toolkit/overview.htm)

The *Healthy People Toolkit*, produced by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides guidance, technical tools and resources promoting successful, state-specific Healthy People 2010 plans. It is also useful for other communities embarking on similar health plans.

Population Health, Sustainable Development and Policy Futures

This 1999 discussion paper by Michael Hayes and Sholom Glouberman (www.cprn.com/cprn.html) examines changing ideas on and links between sustainable development and population health. It also looks at the possible pitfalls and rewards of integrating them into health policy. The authors conclude that both frameworks are consistent and offer new approaches to health policy, but that they demand policies that consider the long-term as well as the short-term.

Tools of Change: Proven Methods for Promoting Health and Environmental Citizenship (www.toolsofchange.com/)

This Web site, founded on the principles of community-based social marketing, offers tools, case studies, and a planning guide for helping people improve their health and that of the environment. It will help you integrate the best practices of programs that have successfully changed people's behaviour.

The Canadian Handbook on Health Impact Assessment (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ehp/ehd/oeha/hia/index.htm)

This handbook helps health professionals who are inexperienced in environmental impact assessment (EIA) to provide health advice to an EIA process. Conversely, it also helps EIA practitioners, project proponents, and government, non-government and academic representatives who are not health experts familiarize themselves with the methods and disciplines of health assessment.

ISUMA: Canadian Journal of Policy Research (www.isuma.net/)

ISUMA is a bilingual journal published by Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal on behalf of the federal government's Policy Research Secretariat. The journal focuses on issues and policy research that cut across disciplines and government departments. Its goals are to encourage multi-disciplinary, "horizontal" research and to inform experts, researchers and the public.

ACPH Hard at Work

The 2000–2001 Workplan for the Federal, Provincial, Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health (ACPH) was approved by the Conference of Deputy Ministers of Health at its June 22–23, 2000, meeting. At that meeting, the Deputy Ministers developed policy advice on current and future population health priorities including public health, early child and youth development, tobacco control, HIV/AIDS, injection drug use and other directions towards health for all in Canada.

This fall, the ACPH will release a paper called *Opportunities of Adolescence: The Health Sector Contribution*, which will reinforce the importance of early childhood to healthy development later on. The paper also reinforces the need for investments that support healthy adolescent development.

Conferences: Reports and News

What's going on in the world of Canadian and international public health conferences? Read on for details about upcoming sessions and for the results of previous ones. Follow the Web links to learn more about attending these valuable conferences.

Upcoming conferences

Policy Research Forum's 3rd National Conference
(Ottawa, Nov 30–Dec 1, 2000)

The Forum's canada@the.world.ca conference will explore the impact of global interdependence on Canadian public policy through four cross-cutting themes. Visit www.theworld.ca for updates about the sessions.

Global Aging: Working Together in a Changing World
(Vancouver, July 1–6, 2001)

Internationally recognized experts in gerontology will address key topics in research, education, public policy and clinical practice. Visit www.harbour.sfu.ca/iag/ for more information.

The Economics of Health, Within and Beyond Health Care
(York, UK, July 22–25, 2001)

Amartya Sen will give the plenary address; sessions relevant to both developed and developing countries will cover a wide range of topics in health economics. Visit www.ihea2001york.org.uk for more information.

Information from previous conferences

Workshop on Addiction and Population Health
(www.ccsa.ca/adh/adhtop.htm)

The Web site for the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse includes the proceedings from a June 1999 symposium on addiction and population health. The symposium focused on the role of addiction in the population health model and on how the model might affect future directions of addictions programming and policy.

Canadian Journal of Public Health
Volume 90, Supplement 1, November/December 1999

Several articles in this special CJPH supplement (www.ihpr.ubc.ca/frameset/frset_publicat.htm) come from presentations made at the National Conference on Shared Responsibility for Health and Social Impact Assessment. The conference focused on the population health approach. Participants came from around the world, from all levels of government, from the voluntary sector and from the research community.

Leading the Way on Population Health

(www.changefoundation.com/OHA/tcfprj.nsf/main/003001)

The Change Foundation Web site includes proceedings from the November 1999 conference, *Leading the Way on Population Health*, on the evolution and application of population health, including population-based approaches to planning, managing and delivering health services in Canada.

The Verona Initiative

(Italy, July 5–9, 2000)

The European Regional Office of the World Health Organization created the Verona Initiative to promote its Health For All policy framework through an *Investment for Health* approach. The approach promotes health through social and economic development. The Initiative allowed political, business, media, academic and non-governmental leaders to learn how the approach can support communities at all levels. For more information see www.who.dk/verona/main.htm.

The Fifth Global Conference on Health Promotion

(Mexico City, June 5–9, 2000)

The theme, *Bridging the Equity Gap*, addressed health determinants related to economically and socially disadvantaged populations. Eighty-seven countries, including Canada, signed the *Mexico Ministerial Statement for the Promotion of Health From Ideas to Action*. The Statement affirms that health promotion strategies contribute to the sustainability of local, national and international health activities, and commits signers to draw up country-wide health promotion plans. For more information, visit www.who.int/hpr/conference/participate/index.html.