
Research

A Definition of “Social Environment”

Recently, interest in the social environment and its influence on population health has increased among both public health researchers and practitioners. This interest is demonstrated by a recent request for applications from the National Institutes of Health titled *Health Disparities: Linking Biological and Behavioral Mechanisms with Social and Physical Environments*.¹

Despite the upsurge of interest and an increasing number of publications focused on this important issue, a clear and comprehensive definition of *social environment* has proved elusive. We would like to offer the following definition, in hopes that it will prove useful to our colleagues—if only as a touchstone for debate.

Human social environments encompass the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact. Components of the social environment include built infrastructure; industrial and occupational structure; labor markets; social and economic processes; wealth; social, human, and health services; power relations; government; race relations; social inequality; cultural practices; the arts; religious institutions and practices; and beliefs about place and community. The social environment subsumes many aspects of the physical environment, given that contemporary landscapes, water resources, and other natural resources have been at least partially configured by human social processes. Embedded within contemporary social environments are historical social and power relations that have become institutionalized over time. Social environments can be experienced at multiple scales, often simultaneously, including households, kin networks, neighborhoods, towns and cities, and regions. Social environments are dynamic and change over time as the result of both

internal and external forces. There are relationships of dependency among the social environments of different local areas, because these areas are connected through larger regional, national, and international social and economic processes and power relations.

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Reference

1. National Institutes of Health. *Health Disparities: Linking Biological and Behavioral Mechanisms With Social and Physical Environments*. Bethesda, Md: National Institutes of Health; 2000. RFA ES-00-004.