

Health Inequality Is a Window into Society

Joey Park

Bundang International School

Abstract

Health inequality is better understood as a sociological phenomenon than simply as a medical issue or the result of individual responsibility. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a starting point, this study demonstrates that unequal health outcomes were shaped by differences in employment, housing, income, and access to healthcare rather than by personal choices alone. The Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) framework is used to explain how social and economic conditions influence opportunities to achieve good health throughout the life course. Fundamental Cause Theory further explains why health inequalities persist despite advances in medicine and public health by emphasizing the unequal distribution of flexible resources such as education, income, and social connections. Health inequality is also examined as both an outcome of broader social inequality and a mechanism through which inequality is reproduced across generations. Ultimately, health serves as a window into society, revealing how opportunities, resources, and risks are unequally distributed.

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit worldwide in 2019, it affected everyone equally in all aspects. It was often described as a public health crisis. In the beginning, public officials repeatedly emphasized that “we are all in this together.” However, as the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that equal exposure did not lead to equal outcomes. Across the US, low-income communities, racial and ethnic minorities, and

essential workers experienced disproportionately higher rates of infection, hospitalization, and death than other groups (Tai et al., 2021). On the other hand, many professionals who were able to work remotely experienced lower rates of infection because they could isolate safely while maintaining stable employment and access to healthcare. These differences challenged a widely held assumption about health that good health is primarily the result of individual choices.

These unequal outcomes challenged a long-term assumption that health is primarily the result of individual choices. Health is often understood as a matter of personal responsibility, encouraging people to exercise regularly, eat nutritious foods, avoid unhealthy behaviors, and seek medical care when necessary. While these behaviors undoubtedly influence health, the pandemic demonstrated that individual choices alone cannot fully explain why some groups consistently experienced greater health risks than others. Furthermore, COVID-19 highlighted the importance of the broader social and economic conditions that shape people's opportunities to protect and maintain their health. The COVID-19 situation brought a new realization and raised a broader sociological question: why certain social groups consistently experience poorer health outcomes across different diseases, historical periods, and communities.

This paper examines how health inequality cannot be fully understood as a medical issue or the result of individual responsibility. Instead, unequal health outcomes are best understood as a sociological phenomenon that reflects how societies distribute opportunity, resources, and risk, based on the evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Social Determinants of Health framework, and Fundamental Cause Theory.

Why Individual Responsibility Cannot Fully Explain Health Inequality

Health is often viewed through the lens of individual responsibility. Public health campaigns

frequently encourage people to improve their health by exercising regularly, eating nutritious foods, avoiding harmful habits such as smoking, and seeking medical care when necessary. These recommendations are important because individual behaviors do influence health outcomes. However, emphasizing personal choice assumes that everyone has a similar ability to make healthy decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that this assumption does not always hold true.

Although the virus itself did not discriminate, people's ability to protect themselves differed dramatically according to their social and economic circumstances. During the period, millions of Americans were encouraged to stay home, wear masks, practice social distancing, and seek testing when symptoms appeared. While these recommendations applied universally, the capacity to follow them was far from equal. For example, a software engineer whose job could be performed remotely had a much greater opportunity to reduce exposure while maintaining employment and income. By contrast, grocery store cashiers, warehouse employees, healthcare workers, public transportation operators, delivery drivers, and other essential workers were required to interact with large numbers of people every day. This comparison between the jobs shows that the health risks are not from personal choices but from the conditions of their work.

Housing conditions demonstrated another inequality. Families living in spacious homes

could often isolate household members who were sick, reducing transmission within the household. However, families living in crowded apartments with fewer rooms or multigenerational homes frequently had little opportunity to separate sick family members from others. Quarantine was one of the best options to reduce transmission, but it was far more difficult in crowded apartments regardless of how carefully individuals followed public health recommendations.

Access to healthcare and financial security further shaped people's ability to respond to the pandemic. Individuals with stable employment were more likely to have health insurance, paid sick leave, and the financial flexibility to remain home when they became ill. In contrast, many low-income workers faced an impossible choice between protecting their health and maintaining their income. Being absent often meant losing wages or even risking unemployment, making compliance with public health recommendations significantly more difficult. Even seeking medical care could add a substantial financial burden for those without adequate insurance. These structural constraints influenced health outcomes long before medical treatment became necessary.

The unequal impact of COVID-19, therefore, demonstrates that health cannot be understood solely as the product of individual behavior. People's ability to make healthy choices depends not only on their knowledge or motivation but also on their employment, housing, income, healthcare access, and other social conditions that

lie largely beyond individual control. Consequently, health inequality cannot be fully explained through medicine or personal responsibility alone. Instead, it points toward the broader social structures that systematically shape who is most vulnerable to disease.

Health as a Sociological Phenomenon

Recognizing the limitations of individual responsibility changes the way health inequality is understood. Rather than asking why one person became sick while another remained healthy, sociology asks why certain social groups consistently experience poorer health outcomes across different diseases, historical periods, and communities. This shift moves beyond individual biology and medical treatment to examine the broader social conditions that shape health. From a sociological perspective, health is not simply a biological condition but also a social outcome that reflects how opportunities, resources, and risks are distributed within society.

This perspective helps explain why patterns of health often mirror broader patterns of social inequality. Differences in life expectancy, chronic disease, and vulnerability during public health crises consistently correspond to inequalities in education, employment, income, housing, and access to healthcare. These factors influence not only whether people become ill but also their ability to prevent illness, recover from disease, and maintain long-term health. Health inequality therefore extends beyond medicine; it offers insight into how social and economic

opportunities are distributed throughout society.

The United States illustrates this relationship particularly well. Despite spending substantially more on healthcare than any other high-income country, it continues to experience lower life expectancy and wider health disparities than many comparable nations (OECD, 2023). If medical care alone determined health outcomes, this pattern would be difficult to explain. Instead, it suggests that healthcare, while essential, cannot fully overcome inequalities rooted in broader social conditions. Hospitals, physicians, and advanced medical technologies often intervene only after health has already been shaped by years of unequal living and working conditions.

To better explain these broader influences, public health researchers developed the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) framework. SDOH refers to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, all of which influence health throughout the life course (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). These conditions include educational opportunities, employment, income, housing quality, neighborhood environments, healthcare access, transportation, and social support networks. Together, they shape whether individuals can obtain nutritious food, live in safe environments, access preventive healthcare, and respond effectively when illness occurs.

Importantly, the Social Determinants of Health framework shifts attention away from individual behaviors toward the environments in which

those behaviors occur. Choosing healthy foods, exercising regularly, or attending medical appointments may appear to be matters of personal responsibility. In reality, these choices depend heavily on whether individuals have access to affordable groceries, safe neighborhoods, reliable transportation, flexible work schedules, and adequate financial resources. Healthy behaviors are therefore not simply personal decisions; they are enabled or constrained by the social environments in which people live.

Braveman and Gottlieb (2014) describe these broader influences as the "causes of the causes" of disease. Rather than focusing only on immediate medical risk factors, they argue that improving population health requires addressing the underlying social and economic conditions that produce unequal exposure to those risks in the first place. This perspective fundamentally changes how health inequality is interpreted. Poor health is no longer viewed simply as the consequence of poor decisions or unfortunate biology. Instead, it reflects unequal access to the resources and opportunities that make healthy lives possible.

Viewing health through this sociological lens also changes what health inequality represents. It is not merely evidence that some individuals become sick more often than others. It actually reveals how societies distribute opportunity itself. Differences in health become visible expressions of deeper inequalities in education, employment, housing, economic security, and neighborhood

conditions. In this sense, health serves as a window into society, revealing patterns of inequality that extend far beyond medicine alone.

Health Inequality as Evidence of Unequal Opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic provided one of the clearest illustrations of how health reflects broader patterns of social inequality. Although the pandemic initially appeared to be an unprecedented public health crisis, it soon became evident that COVID-19 was not creating entirely new inequalities. Instead, it exposed long-standing disparities that had shaped health outcomes for decades. Communities that experienced higher rates of infection and mortality during the pandemic had often faced persistent disadvantages in employment, housing, education, and healthcare long before COVID-19 emerged.

This pattern becomes even more apparent when health outcomes beyond infectious disease are considered. One striking example is the variation in life expectancy across neighborhoods in the United States. Researchers have found that communities located only a few miles apart can differ in average life expectancy by more than ten years. Such disparities cannot be explained by biological differences alone. Instead, they closely correspond to differences in income, educational attainment, neighborhood safety, environmental quality, employment opportunities, and access to healthy food. In many cases, a person's ZIP code predicts health outcomes almost as accurately as

traditional medical risk factors because it reflects the social and economic conditions that shape everyday life.

These disparities demonstrate that health is fundamentally connected to opportunity. Individuals living in neighborhoods with well-funded schools, stable employment opportunities, clean environments, and accessible healthcare are more likely to enjoy longer and healthier lives than those living in communities characterized by poverty, environmental hazards, limited educational resources, and inadequate healthcare access. The unequal distribution of these social resources creates unequal opportunities to achieve good health long before individuals make personal lifestyle decisions.

Maternal mortality provides another compelling example of this relationship. In the United States, Black women experience significantly higher rates of pregnancy-related death than White women, and this disparity persists even after accounting for differences in education and income. If health outcomes were determined primarily by personal responsibility or socioeconomic status alone, this gap would be expected to disappear once these factors were controlled. Instead, research points to broader structural influences, including unequal treatment within healthcare systems, structural racism, and the cumulative effects of chronic stress associated with long-term social disadvantage. Even during one of the most closely monitored periods of medical care, health outcomes continue to reflect broader social inequalities.

Together, these examples show that health inequality is not simply a consequence of disease or individual behavior. It consistently reflects unequal access to the social conditions that support healthy lives. Whether the outcome is life expectancy, maternal health, or vulnerability during a pandemic, the same pattern emerges: groups with fewer economic and social resources experience poorer health because they have fewer opportunities to avoid risk, access protective resources, and maintain health over the course of their lives.

Therefore, health inequality is more than one consequence of social inequality. It is one of its clearest indicators. Patterns of health reveal how societies distribute education, employment, housing, environmental quality, healthcare access, and economic security. In this sense, health functions as a window into the broader organization of society. By examining who becomes sick, who recovers, and who lives longer, sociologists gain insight into how opportunities themselves are unequally distributed.

Finally, recognizing health as evidence of unequal opportunity raises an important question. If unequal health outcomes repeatedly emerge across different diseases, historical periods, and populations, why do they persist despite advances in medicine, technology, and public health? Answering this question requires moving beyond identifying the social conditions associated with health and explaining the underlying mechanisms that reproduce these inequalities over time. Fundamental Cause Theory provides

that explanation.

Why Health Inequality Persists: Fundamental Cause Theory

While the Social Determinants of Health framework identifies the social conditions that influence health, it does not fully explain why health inequalities remain remarkably consistent across different diseases and historical periods. Even as medical knowledge advances and new treatments become available, disparities in health continue to emerge. Fundamental Cause Theory, developed by Link and Phelan (1995), addresses this question by explaining why health inequality persists despite changes in medicine, technology, and public health interventions.

According to Fundamental Cause Theory, socioeconomic resources including income, education, knowledge, power, prestige, and social connections function as flexible resources that can be used to protect health across a wide range of circumstances (Link & Phelan, 1995). Unlike disease-specific treatments or health behaviors, these resources remain valuable regardless of the particular health threat. As new diseases emerge or medical knowledge evolves, individuals with greater resources are generally better positioned to obtain information, adopt preventive measures, access effective treatment, and benefit from new medical innovations. Consequently, although the immediate causes of illness may change over time, the social pattern of health inequality often remains remarkably stable because the unequal distribution of these resources remains

unchanged (Phelan et al., 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this process clearly. Although the virus represented a universal biological threat, people did not possess equal resources with which to respond. Individuals with stable employment often transitioned to remote work, reducing their exposure while maintaining their income. Families with financial security could purchase protective equipment, absorb temporary income loss, or relocate to safer living arrangements when necessary. Those with comprehensive health insurance generally had greater access to testing, medical consultations, and treatment without facing the financial barriers experienced by uninsured or underinsured individuals.

By contrast, many low-income workers had far fewer options. Essential employees often continued working in occupations that required close physical contact, increasing their exposure to the virus while facing greater financial insecurity. Limited savings made taking unpaid leave financially impossible for many workers, even when they became ill or were advised to quarantine. Crowded housing further reduced opportunities to isolate infected family members, increasing the likelihood of household transmission. These differences were not simply the result of individual decisions; they reflected unequal access to the flexible resources that enable people to protect their health during times of crisis.

Importantly, Fundamental Cause Theory suggests

that these patterns are not unique to COVID-19. As diseases change and medical technologies improve, the specific mechanisms producing health inequality may also change. However, individuals and communities with greater socioeconomic resources consistently benefit first from new knowledge, preventive strategies, and healthcare innovations, while those with fewer resources continue to face disproportionate risks. In other words, health inequalities persist not because particular diseases remain constant, but because the unequal distribution of flexible resources remains embedded within society.

Fundamental Cause Theory therefore extends the argument developed throughout this paper. If the Social Determinants of Health explain what social conditions shape health, Fundamental Cause Theory explains why these inequalities endure across changing social and medical contexts. The theory demonstrates that unequal access to flexible resources continually reproduces unequal opportunities to avoid disease, obtain treatment, and maintain long-term health. Health inequality is therefore not a temporary consequence of a particular pandemic or medical crisis but a persistent feature of broader systems of social inequality.

Health Inequality as a Mechanism for Reproducing Social Inequality

Viewing health inequality through a sociological lens reveals that it is not simply an outcome of unequal social conditions. Poor health also shapes future educational, economic, and social

opportunities, creating a cycle in which existing inequalities are reinforced across the life course and even across generations. In this way, health inequality is both a consequence of social inequality and a mechanism through which that inequality is reproduced.

The effects of poor health often begin early in life. Children experiencing chronic illness or limited access to healthcare may miss more days of school, struggle academically, or have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities that contribute to their educational development. These disadvantages accumulate over time, influencing academic achievement, college access, and future career opportunities. Health disparities therefore extend beyond physical well-being; they shape the educational pathways that influence an individual's life chances.

The consequences continue into adulthood. Individuals experiencing poor health may find it more difficult to maintain stable employment, advance professionally, or achieve financial security. Chronic illness can reduce productivity, increase medical expenses, and limit career opportunities, while unemployment or reduced income further restricts access to safe housing, nutritious food, preventive healthcare, and other resources that support good health. Health and socioeconomic status therefore reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating cycle rather than functioning as separate social problems.

This reciprocal relationship helps explain why inequality often persists across generations.

Children raised in communities with fewer educational, economic, and healthcare resources are more likely to experience poorer health early in life. Those health disadvantages can reduce educational attainment and future employment opportunities, limiting economic mobility in adulthood. The next generation then grows up under similar conditions, reproducing many of the same disadvantages. Health inequality thus becomes one pathway through which broader patterns of social inequality are transmitted over time.

Understanding health inequality in this way broadens its significance beyond public health. It demonstrates that health is deeply intertwined with the major institutions that organize social life, including schools, labor markets, neighborhoods, housing systems, and healthcare institutions. These institutions do not operate independently. Together, they shape both health outcomes and individuals' opportunities to succeed throughout their lives. Consequently, reducing health inequality requires more than expanding access to medical treatment. It also requires addressing the broader social conditions that influence who has the opportunity to achieve and maintain good health.

From this perspective, understanding health inequality is not merely one indicator of social inequality but also one of the mechanisms through which inequality is sustained. It reflects unequal access to resources while simultaneously influencing who is able to benefit from education, employment, and economic mobility

in the future. Health therefore serves both as a measure of individual well-being and as a powerful mechanism through which broader systems of inequality continue to reproduce themselves over time.

Conclusion

Overall, health inequality cannot be fully understood as a medical issue or the result of individual responsibility alone. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed longstanding disparities that had shaped health outcomes long before the emergence of the virus, demonstrating that people's ability to avoid illness, access healthcare, and recover from disease is profoundly influenced by the social conditions in which they live. Examining health through a sociological lens shifts the focus from individual behaviors to the broader systems that distribute opportunities, resources, and risks. The Social Determinants of Health framework illustrates how education, employment, housing, and neighborhood environments shape health throughout the life course, while Fundamental Cause Theory explains why these inequalities persist despite advances in medical knowledge and technology. Moreover, health inequality is not only a reflection of unequal opportunity but also a mechanism through which social inequality is reproduced, as poor health influences educational attainment, employment, and economic mobility across generations. Consequently, improving population health requires more than expanding healthcare services or promoting healthier individual behaviors; it

also demands addressing the structural inequalities that shape people's life chances. Ultimately, health inequality serves as a powerful sociological indicator of how societies allocate opportunity and resources, making it a window into the broader organization of social inequality rather than simply a measure of individual well-being.

Work Cited

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