



CENTER ON SOCIAL DISPARITIES IN HEALTH
University of California, San Francisco

What is health equity? What are health disparities? And why do the definitions matter?

The Office of Health Equity
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“The poor are getting poorer, but with the rich getting richer it all averages out in the long run.”



What are “health disparities/inequalities”?

- Differences, variations: descriptive terms
- Most official U.S. definitions refer only to differences between unspecified groups
- But we really mean: Health differences that are unfair (in a particular way)
- M. Whitehead: unfair, avoidable, and unjust
- But ideas of fairness, avoidability, and justice vary

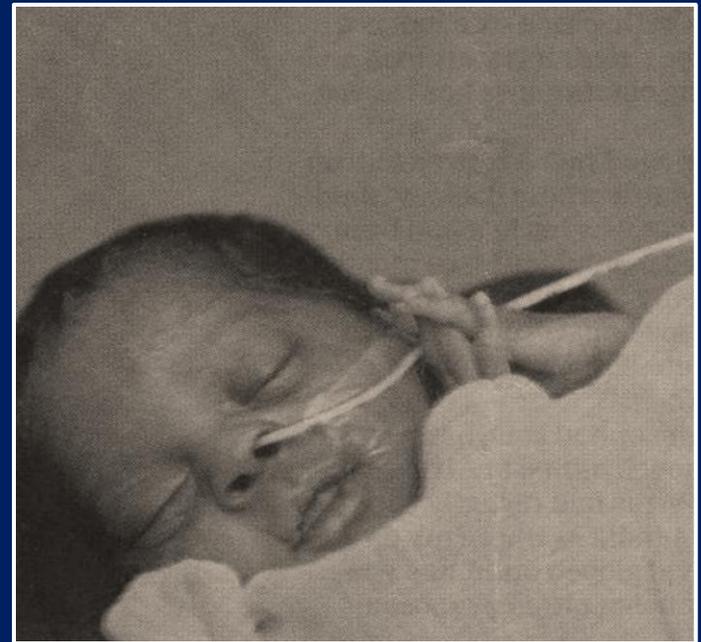


Are all health differences unfair?

- Skiers have more arm/leg fractures than non-skiers
- Women live longer than men
- Wealthy people in Manhattan have a health problem that wealthy people in Hollywood, CA do not
- Younger adults are generally healthier than elderly
- White women are more likely to be diagnosed with breast cancer
- Who determines what's fair?
- Who determines what's avoidable?

What if the causes are not known?

- African-American newborns are 2 or more times as likely as White newborns to be
 - born too small (low birth weight)
 - born too early (premature)
 - And these predict infant mortality, childhood disability, and adult chronic disease
- The causes are not known
- Can we call this unfair?





Human rights principles provide guidance

- Social & economic rights, including the right to achieve the highest attainable standard of health
- Rights to: education, living standard adequate for health, benefits of progress, participation in society
- Governments should progressively remove obstacles to fulfillment of rights of all, **especially for those with more obstacles**
- Non-discrimination & equality: prohibits actions with intent **or effect** of discrimination; requires affirmative action



Which groups ?

- NIH has a new institute on minority health and health disparities (NIMHD).
- Should NIMHD prioritize health of:
 - Veterans?
 - People with autism?
 - People with rare but catastrophic diseases?
 - Affluent communities that demonstrate higher rates of certain health problems?
 - White women's high incidence of breast cancer?
 - Men's shorter life expectancy?
 - LGBT groups?

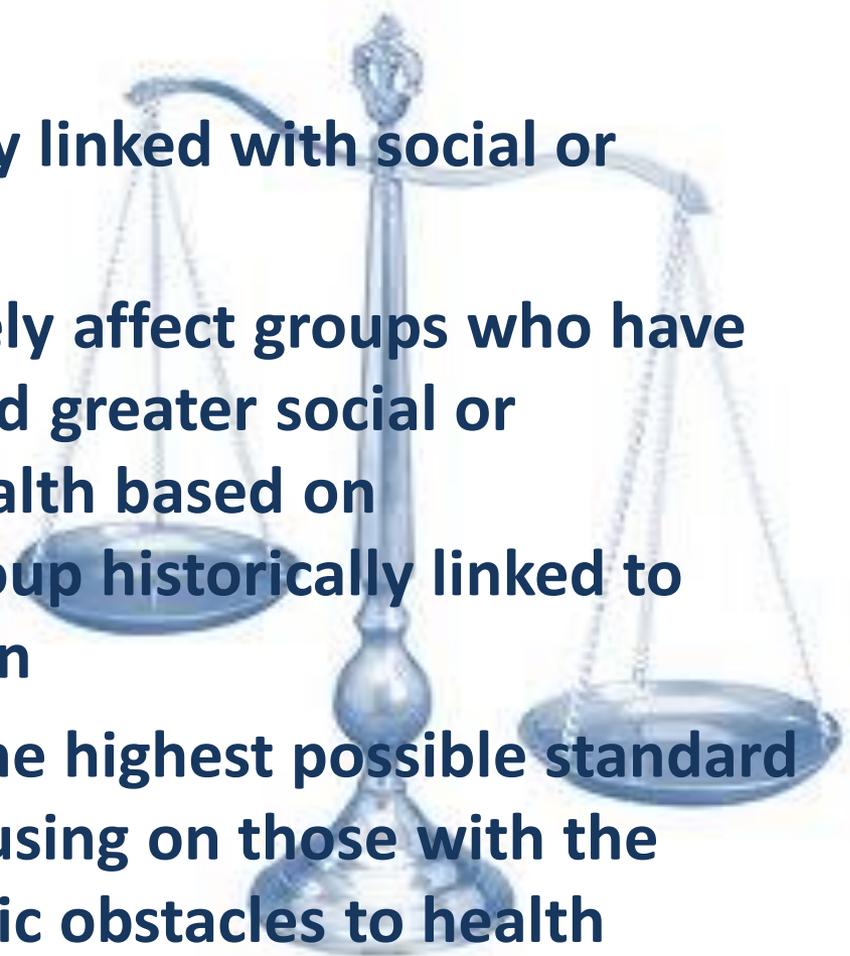


Human rights principles: Non-discrimination and equality

- **Vulnerable groups: race or ethnic group, skin color, religion, language, or nationality; socio-economic status; gender, sexual orientation or gender identity; age; disability; geography; political affiliation**
- **Implicit: vulnerability due to history of discrimination, social exclusion or marginalization**
 - **Examples: slavery, genocide, hate crimes, expropriation of ancestral lands, targeted marketing of harmful goods, negative media depictions, slurs**

A human rights-based definition of health disparity & health equity

- A health difference closely linked with social or economic disadvantage
- Health disparities adversely affect groups who have systematically experienced greater social or economic obstacles to health based on characteristics of their group historically linked to discrimination or exclusion
- Health equity: pursuing the highest possible standard of health for all while focusing on those with the greatest social or economic obstacles to health



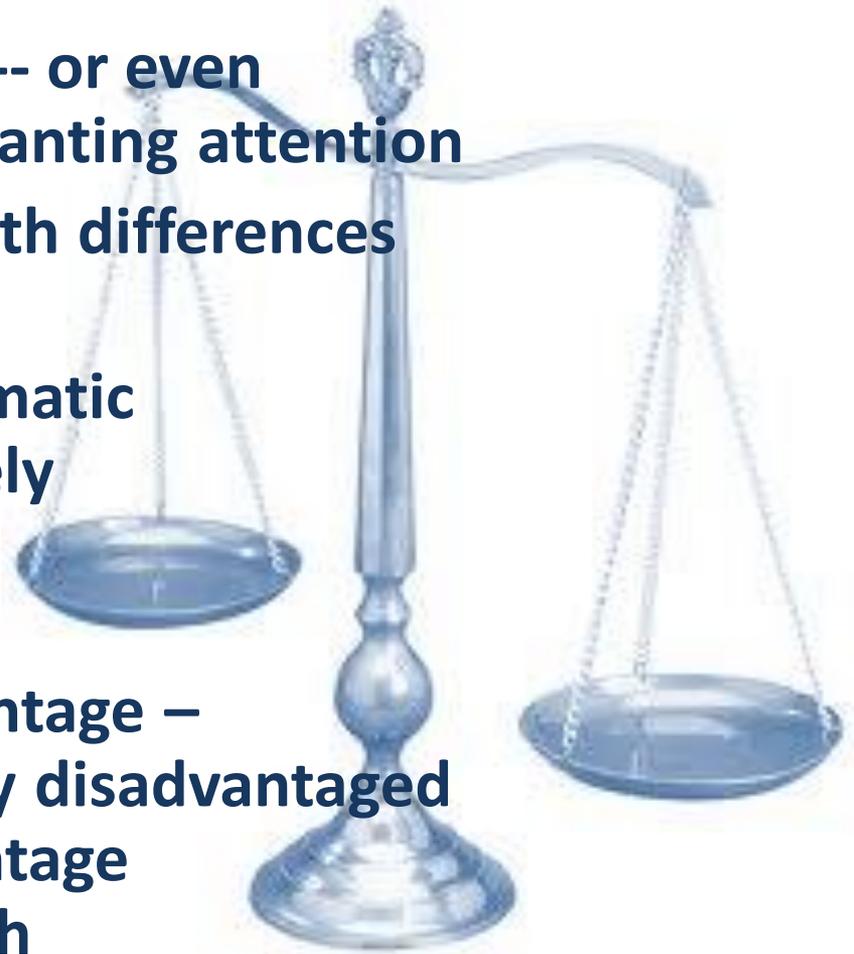
A human rights-based definition of health disparity & health equity

- **Equity versus equality**
 - Equal rights for all. Does not mean equal resources
- **Obligation to focus on those with the greatest obstacles to fulfilling their rights.**
- **Obligation to address not only medical care but also the social determinants that shape opportunities to be healthy**



Not all health differences are *health disparities*

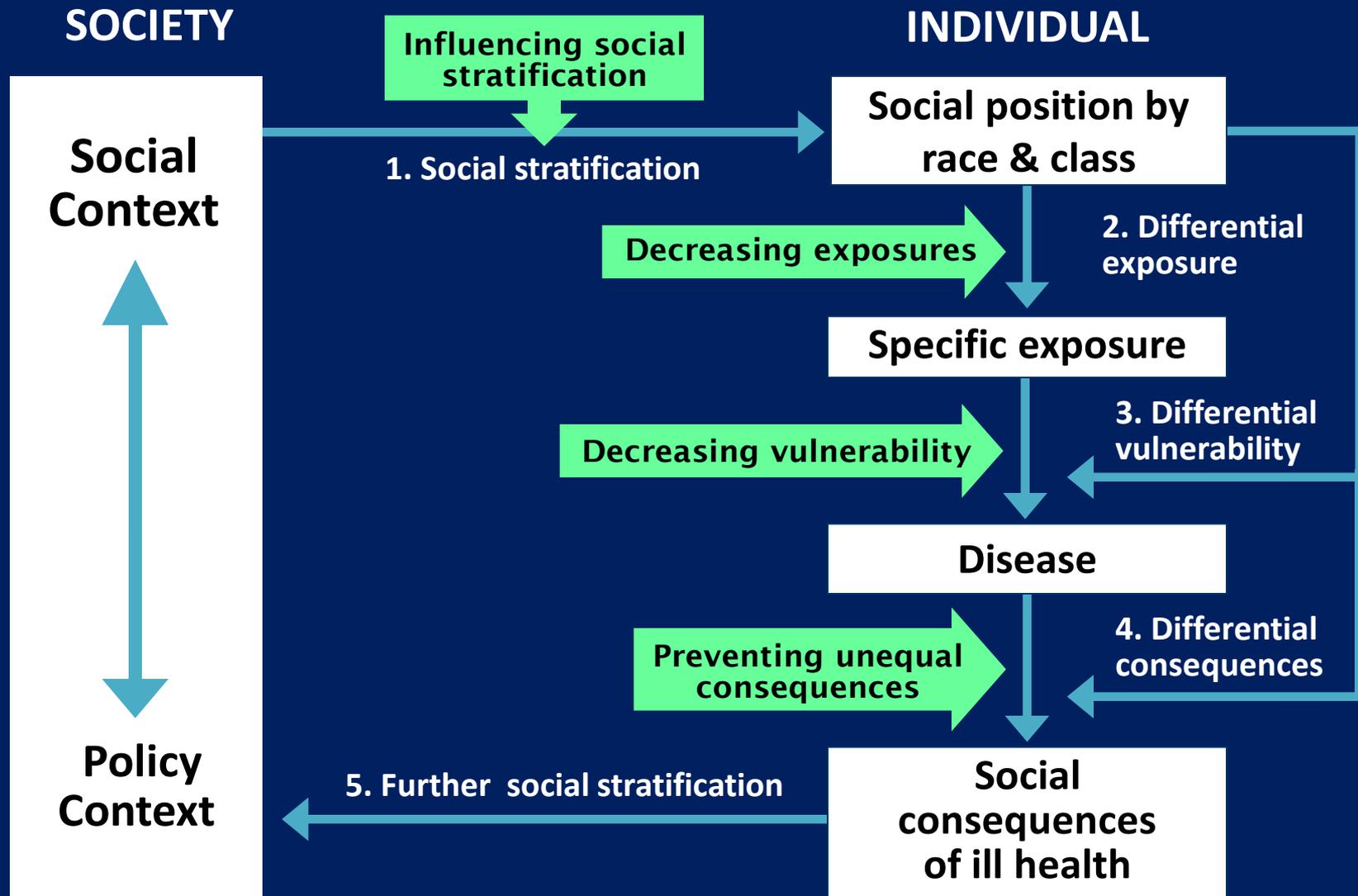
- Not all health differences -- or even all health differences warranting attention
- A particular subset of health differences that reflect social injustice
- Plausibly avoidable, systematic health differences adversely affecting a socially disadvantaged group
- May reflect social disadvantage – but in any case put already disadvantaged groups at further disadvantage with respect to their health



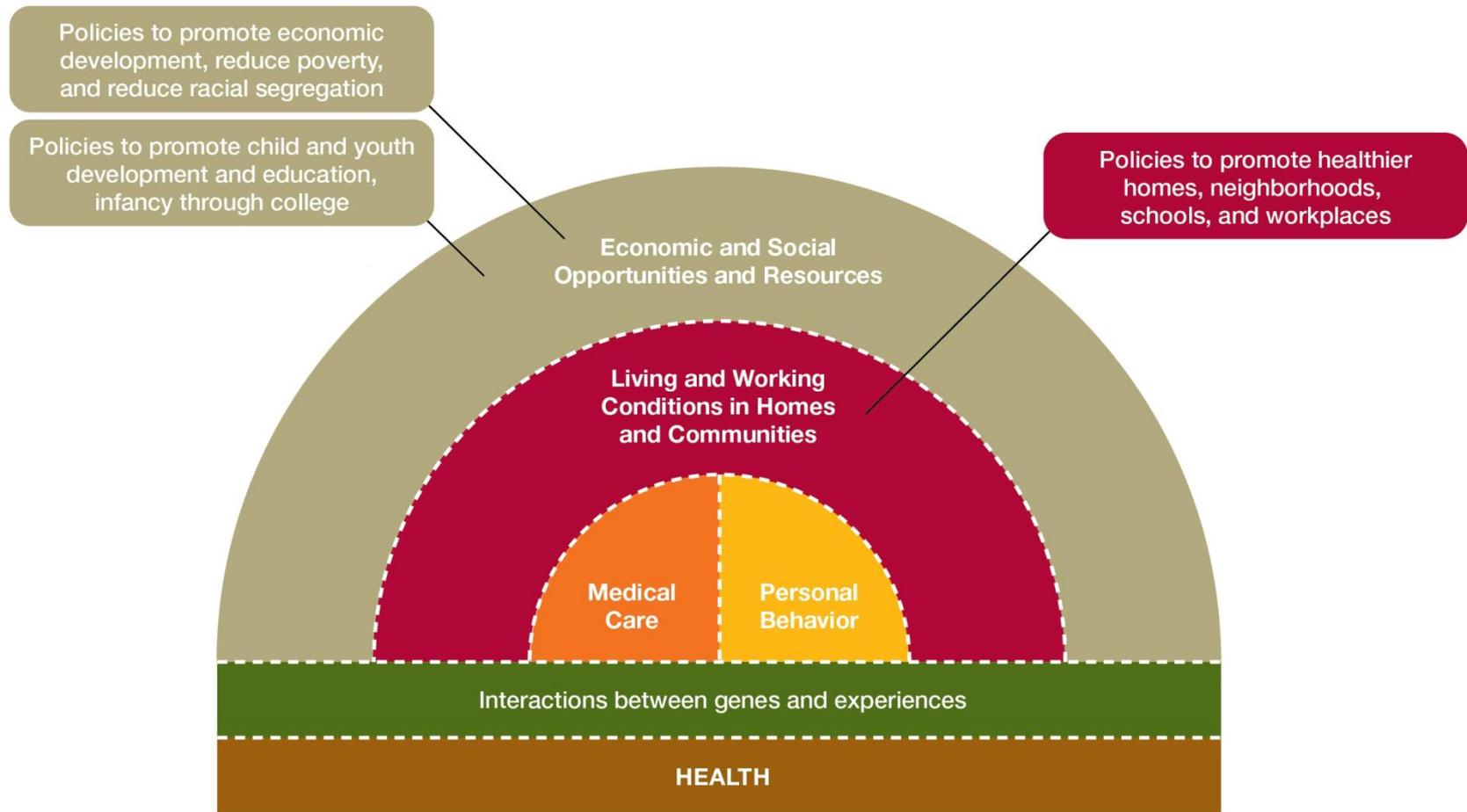
Concepts and measurement of health disparities and health equity: not just a technical issue

- **Based on values**
 - **Equity is the ethical principle underlying a commitment to reduce disparities**
 - **Health disparities are the metric by which health equity is assessed**
- **Implications for policy and resource allocation in multiple sectors, including medical care**
- **Pursuing equity requires swimming upstream, against prevailing tides – will encounter resistance**
- **Need to know where we are headed and why**

Understanding health inequities across the life course and across generations



Striving for health equity: Understanding the role of social factors



Achieving health equity by understanding how health is transmitted across lifetimes and generations

