

Voting and Health

Health Equity Council

Executive statement

Social Determinants of Health (SDOHs) are products of decision-making on power and resources (Political Determinants of Health). Voting is one of the key ingredients of decision making. Health conditions caused by inequities in SDOHs influence access to voting, and voter participation influence power redistribution that impacts SDOHs. Public health recognizes the interdependence of health equity and voting. Achieving health equity requires the inclusion of all voices in shaping decisions that impact their health and wellbeing; including factors shaping the social, environmental and economic circumstances.

Background

Health is a significant contributing factor to political participation. Research shows strong association between voting and physical and mental health. Voting impacts health, and health impacts voting patterns. Voting as a form of social participation can lead to increased social connectedness that improve mental and physical health and prosocial behaviors. Research also shows that certain health conditions such as, heart diseases, smoking, alcoholism, depression, and many other physical and mental disabilities are associated with lower rates of voting.

The choice to vote is not only a function of personal capacity but also the broader social and political context. Poor health is associated with differences in voting participation, by limiting function and capacity at the time of voting as well as intersections with race, class and income. Inequities in voting, such as barriers to immediate access to vote and life-years lost to early deaths, shape policymaking that does not respond to and prioritize the health needs of all, which further increases inequities.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ensure universal rights to voting

Voting is a fundamental right. This fundamental right must be available to all, including persons experiencing disabilities, youth, incarcerated, noncitizens and all other marginalized populations.

Recommendation 2: Set civic participation as a health goal

Adopt measures to track data in voter registration and participation, and include civic participation in Community Health Improvement Plan.

Recommendation 3: Partner with healthcare and community organizations

Healthcare settings and community organizations can play a role in voter education, voting, and participation in other democratic processes. Partnering with such organizations and funding programs can lead to reaching marginalized populations and decreasing disparities.

Recommendation 4: Increase levels of civic engagement

Voting is just one of the ways to engage in political decision making. To ensure inclusion and equitable processes and outcomes, decision making must involve increased levels of community engagements at all levels of decision-making.