

# Towards an Understanding of Health Equity:

## Glossary



AHS Tri-Project Glossary  
Working Group

Population and Public Health

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## Preamble

Numerous general and specialized health promotion glossaries exist. However, the aim of this Glossary is to provide a clear and useful set of terms and definitions related to health disparities, health inequalities and health inequities in one accessible document for use within Population and Public Health (PPH). We are confident that the Glossary will contribute to building knowledge capacity with respect to these concepts.

The Glossary is the outcome of the combined efforts of two teams within *Health Promotion, Disease and Injury Prevention* (HPDIP) and one team within *Surveillance and Health Status Assessment* (SHSA) in the PPH Division of Alberta Health Services. The three teams, known as the Tri-Project Glossary Working Group (TPGWG), collaborated to produce three deliverables: the Glossary, the Annotated Glossary and the Glossary Methods. The teams' respective work intersects along the lines of research, policy and practice, and these efforts connect the concepts of health disparities, health inequalities and health inequity as they relate to population and public health.

Glossaries aim to provide neutral definitions of a term; however, the meaning of a word ultimately depends on the context in which it is used. For some terms within the Annotated Glossary, a *Context* section was added to help illustrate the more complex terms, whereas context information was not provided for terms deemed more straightforward. This Glossary is a "living document." This implies that an evolution of understanding will occur as the organization and its components learn and develop. The intention is for this document to be revised and updated on a regular basis to better reflect changes in use of the terms contained within it and overall societal change.

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## A

### Aboriginal People(s)

Aboriginal peoples is a collective name for the original peoples of North America and their descendants. The *Constitution Act* of 1982 recognizes three groups of Aboriginal peoples – First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

### Access

Access is the right or privilege to approach, enter or make use of something. In health care access is also defined as the fit between individual or group needs and the health care system's ability to meet those needs.

### Advocacy

Advocacy represents the strategies devised, the actions taken and the solutions proposed to advise or influence decision making.

## C

### Collaboration

Collaboration is the active relationship between groups based on shared goals. Collaborations are formed to take action to achieve improvements in population health outcomes.

### Community

Community is a specific group of people who share a common bond based on place, culture, interests, beliefs, values and/or norms.

### Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building is any activity that builds on strengths among individuals, organizations and communities. The aim of community capacity building is to achieve and sustain optimal health outcomes, social environments, well-being and/or quality of life for all.

### Community Development

Community development is a process whereby community members come together to take action on common problems and generate solutions to benefit the community.

### Community Engagement

Community engagement is a broad practice of two-way interaction guided by a set of principles, processes and activities that provide an opportunity for interested parties (known

as stakeholders) to be involved in meaningful interactions.

## Context

Context is a broad set of social, economic, political and cultural aspects of a society.

## Culture

Culture is the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution, organization or group. Culture is transmitted and reinforced through tradition, art, language and ritual.

## D

### Deprivation

Deprivation is a state of observable and demonstrable social and/or material disadvantage. Deprivation is relative to the local context, wider society and/or nation to which a group belongs.

### Determinants of Health

Determinants of health are the range of personal, social, economic and environmental factors that influence the health of individuals and populations.

### Disability

Disability is having an impairment, activity limitation or participation restriction that substantially affects one or more life activities.

### Disadvantaged Populations

Disadvantaged populations are groups of people who do not have the same access to social and material resources compared to more advantaged social groups.

### Discrimination

Discrimination is the process of making distinctions among groups of people, usually with the implication that some prejudice has been applied in making these decisions.

### Diversity

Diversity includes all the ways people are unique and different from others.

## Diversity Competency

Diversity competency is the ability of individuals and systems to respond respectfully and effectively to individuals, families and communities of all diverse backgrounds.

## Downstream

Downstream refers to factors and interventions that directly influence individual and population health outcomes.

## E

### Education Level

Education level is the highest level of schooling attained by an individual or group.

### Employment

Employment is a formal arrangement to exchange labour (work) for pay, goods or services and shaped by the relationship between workers and employers. Worker-employer relations vary depending on the social, economic and political context.

### Empowerment

Empowerment is a process through which individuals, groups or communities gain greater control over decisions and actions affecting their health and well-being.

### Ethnicity

Ethnicity includes multi-faceted characteristics of a group sharing certain traits in common. Ethnicity is associated with ancestry, cultural traditions and languages. Ethnicity is based on self-identification, whereas race is imposed on a population by society.

## F

### First Nations

*First Nations Peoples* generally refers to the original Peoples of Canada. Though the term First Nations is widely used no legal exists.

### Food Insecurity/Security

*Food insecurity* is the inability to acquire or consume an adequate diet quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so consistently.

*Food Security* is the condition in which all people can at all times acquire safe, nutritionally

adequate, and personally acceptable foods in a manner that maintains human dignity.

## G

### Gender

Gender is the characteristics of women and men which are socially constructed, whereas sex designates those characteristics that are biologically determined.

### Gender and Sexually Diverse Persons

This designation refers to all people who identify themselves as being gender and/or sexually diverse.

## H

### Health

Health is a resource for living, not the objective of living; a positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources as well as physical capabilities and assets.

### Health Behaviours

Health behaviours are activities engaged in by individuals that promote, protect, maintain or harm their health.

### Health Equity

Health equity means that all persons have fair opportunities to attain their health potential to the fullest extent possible.

### Health Impact Assessment

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a combination of procedures, methods and tools used to assess the potential effects of a policy, program or project on the health of a population.

### Health Indicators (Population Based)

Health indicators include the various signs, counts, rates and statistics through which assessment and interpretation of the health of a population is conducted.

### Health Inequalities

Health inequalities is a generic term used to designate differences or variations in health outcomes between population groups. Some health inequalities reflect random variations (i.e., unexplained causes), while others result from individual biological endowment, the

consequences of health behaviours, social stratification, economic opportunity or access to health care. The term *health disparities* is more commonly used in the U.S. while *health inequalities* is used more often in the Canadian context.

## Health Inequities

Health inequities refer to differences in health outcomes between population groups that are socially produced, unfair and unjust.

## Health Literacy

Health literacy is the ability to access, understand, evaluate and communicate information as a way to promote, maintain and improve health in a variety of settings across the life-course.

## Health Outcomes

Health outcomes are changes in the health of an individual or group which may or may not originate from health system interventions.

## Health Status (Individual & Population)

Health status is a description and/or measurement of the health of an individual or population at a particular point in time.

## Healthy Communities

A healthy community strives to continually improve its physical and social environments, and its community resources. Healthy communities enable people to mutually support each other in performing life functions.

## Healthy Public Policy

Healthy public policy includes decisions or actions enacted by various levels of government and other public actors intended to have a positive effect on the health of a population.

## Homeless

Homeless refers to people who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they choose.

## Housing Continuum

The housing continuum is a framework for understanding the housing needs and the range of housing choices (rental and ownership, market and non market) available to households with varying socio-economic status.

## Human Rights

Human rights include individual rights and social rights, and provide a universal frame of reference for deciding questions of equity and social justice.

## I

### Immigrant

Immigrants are people born outside of Canada who currently reside within the nation and who have sought permanent residence in Canada. Known as landed immigrants, these individuals have been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities.

### Income

Income is the gain or benefit received usually for goods and services derived from labour or capital.

### Intersectoral Action

Intersectoral collaborative action is the joint action taken by health and other government sectors, as well as representatives from private, voluntary and non-profit groups, to improve the health of populations. Intersectoral action achieves more effective, efficient or sustainable outcomes than could be accomplished by one sector acting alone.

### Inuit

Inuit are the Aboriginal people of arctic Canada who self-identify as Inuit.

## L

### Lifestyle

Lifestyle is synonymous with identifiable patterns of behavior which are determined by the interplay between an individual's personal characteristics, social interactions and socio-economic and environmental conditions.

### Living Wage

Living wage is the amount of income an individual or family requires to meet their basic needs, maintain a safe, decent standard of living and to save for future needs and goals.



## M

### Marginalized Populations

Marginalized populations refer to populations that are not fully integrated into all aspects of society.

### Mental Health

Mental health is defined as “[a] state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (Herrman, Saxena, & Moodie, 2005).”

### Mental Illness

Mental illness disturbs a person’s thoughts, emotions and/or behaviours, and may interfere with day-to-day functioning. A person can have a mental health problem or concern without having a diagnosable mental illness.

### Métis

Métis refers broadly to people with mixed First Nations and European ancestry who self-identify as Métis.

### Minority Populations

Minority populations are populations or groups with similar ethnic, racial, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics and are a smaller proportion to the rest of the population in a given area.

## O

### Organizational Capacity

Organizational capacity is the ability of an organization to facilitate, support and fulfill an initiative, program, mandate or common goal.

## P

### Pathways

Pathways are the courses of biological and social development.

## Physical Environment

The physical environment consists of two main components the natural environment (air, water and soil) and the built environment (housing, indoor air quality, community design, transportation and food systems).

## Policy

Policy includes the decisions and actions that maintain or change what would otherwise occur. Policy sets priorities and guides resource allocation to achieve a desired objective.

## Population Health

Population health is a term that describes the health of the population and can be measured by health status indicators and other indicators.

## Population Health Approach

A population health approach is an approach to health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups.

## Poverty

Poverty is the condition of not having sufficient economic and other resources to live with the dignity, choices and power that enable full participation in society.

## Prejudice

Prejudice is a preconceived judgment, preference or idea formed without accurate knowledge or examination of appropriate facts.

## Public Health

Public health is a professional practice aimed at improving health, prolonging life and enhancing the quality of life among whole populations.

## Public Policy

Public Policy, also known as government policy, is the broad framework of ideas and values that guide decisions, action or inaction that governments take with respect to matters affecting the population.

## R

### Race

Race is an arbitrary classification of individuals and groups based on physical and cultural characteristics. Race includes socially constructed differences among people based on characteristics such as accent or manner of speech, name, clothing, diet, beliefs and practices, leisure preferences and/or places of origin. The concept of race is imposed on populations whereas ethnicity is based on self-identification.

### Racialization

Racialization is the process by which societies construct races as *real*, different and unequal in ways that matter to economic, political and social life.

### Racism

Racism is an ideology, action or conduct that either directly or indirectly conveys that one racial group is inherently superior to another. Racial classifications are socially constructed views of arbitrary physical and cultural distinctions.

### Refugee

Refugee refers to an individual or group who leave their country of origin or habitual residence due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group and/or political affiliation.

### Remote Populations

Remote populations include groups that are geographically isolated and may have limited access to some resources and services for all or part of the year.

### Resilience

Resilience is the capacity of individuals, families, groups, communities and societies to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity or risk.

### Rural-Urban Continuum

The rural urban continuum is a classification scheme that distinguishes urban settlements from rural settlements and can be thought of as the degree of urbanization and proximity to metropolitan/urban areas. Rural-urban continuum captures the concentration of population, service, governance, and economic activity in a physical environment, as well as the way people live in these settlements.

Recognizing the shift from viewing urban and rural as opposites, Alberta Health Services' Geographic Working Group, in partnership with Alberta Health & Wellness, developed an official of *rural-urban continuum* for the Alberta context. Lead by the AHS Geographic Working Committee, the is comprised of seven categories: (1) metro (Edmonton and Calgary); (2) urban (Fort McMurray, Grand Prairie, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat); (3) geographies with moderate metropolitan influence; (4) geographies with moderate urban influence; (5) rural (6) rural remote and (7) rural centre areas.

## S

### Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)

Social determinants of health are the social conditions and processes that promote and/or undermine the distribution of health outcomes among population groups.

### Social Environment

The social environment includes the groups to which individuals belong, the neighbourhoods in which they live, the organization of their workplace and the policies created to order individual's lives.

### Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is an expression of unequal relations of power among groups in society that determine unequal access to economic, social, political and cultural resources. Social exclusion limits full participation in social life.

### Social Gradient

The social gradient is the linear decrease or increase in health outcomes that corresponds with social stratification whether measured by income, occupation or education levels.

### Social Justice

Social justice includes ideas and actions towards creating a society or institution that is based on the principles of equality and solidarity. Proponents of social justice understand and value individual and collective human rights and recognize the dignity of every individual and group.

### Social Stratification

Social Stratification is the process of sorting people into different social groups according to their access to prized societal values and resources (e.g., social status, class, power and community respect).

## Socio-economic Status (SES)

Socio-economic status is a composite measure of individual and group income, education, occupation and social status.

## U

### Unfair

Unfair can be defined as not based on or behaving according to the principles of equality and justice.

### Unjust

Unjust can be defined as not based on or behaving according to what is morally right and fair.

### Upstream

Upstream refers to a broad array of factors or conditions that influence individual and population health usually characterized as beyond an individual's direct control.

## V

### Vulnerable Population

Vulnerable populations refer to groups that have increased susceptibility to adverse health outcomes as a result of inequitable access to the resources needed to address risks to health.

## W

### Well-Being

Well-being is a self-perceived satisfactory state of existence. Well-being is subjective but may include the presence of health and a sense of empowerment enabling an individual to influence their determinants of health.

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