



Kent Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (Kent JSNA)

## Social determinants of health

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# **Social determinants of health**

The demographic characteristics of those living in the county reflect historical trends, patterns of fertility and migration trends. The age, gender and disability status of Kent people affects health both at individual and population-wide levels. Certain fundamental environmental factors require special consideration because they have particular health issues and needs.

## **Children**

By 2016 it is estimated that there will be 360,000 0-19 year old children in the county (nearly 26% of the 1.4m population). Whilst overall the health of children and young people in Kent is good, there are particular risks in middle and later teenage years. Children are also particularly vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of older children and adults. In deprived circumstances, children have higher rates of psychological and behavioural problems and lower educational and occupational expectations.

Access to educational opportunities provides the foundation for future access to economic opportunities for job and security, provides people with a sense of control over life circumstances and enables them to participate in society. Children and adolescents who receive good quality education are set on to life pathways that affect their health and wellbeing over time. Conversely children with low levels of education are more likely to have poor health as adults.

Lack of consideration to children in urban and transport planning is also an issue. Road traffic accidents are the leading cause of death amongst youths aged 15-24 and a second leading cause of death for those aged 10-14.

## **Older adults**

Older people can become invisible within local communities. They may become house bound due to physical impairments. Pride may discourage them from seeking help. Special consideration is needed to ensure that older people can preserve their autonomy and independent living for as long as possible and can access health and other social services including home based care.

## **People with disabilities**

People with disabilities are strongly affected by their physical and social environments which can greatly facilitate or undermine the independence and quality of their lives. The social environment influences the degree of stigma and discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. In particular people with chronic mental disorders or intellectual disabilities can be adversely affected.

## **Natural and built environment**

The greatest impacts of climate change, whilst modest compared to other parts of the world, will have the greatest impact on people in urban areas where resources and infrastructure are concentrated. Heat waves, excess winter deaths, air pollution and severe storms could become more common. Housing conditions are fundamental to good health. Transport systems have a major impact on levels of regular physical activity among people living in urban areas of the county. Pedestrian and bicycle friendly facilities as well as robust options as regards public transportation encourage physical activity. Conversely over reliance on private motorized transport acts as a barrier to regular physical activity. Poor planning allows poor pedestrian access to amenities and the lack of separation of people from vehicular traffic. Transport systems also influence healthy air quality and social health and wellbeing are also affected since poor transportation can compromise mental and physical health through noise pollution, chronic stress and social isolation.

## **Social and economic environment**

At a local level the economic environment influences health through the degree of wealth disparity. Relative poverty commonly defined as living on less than 60% of the national median income has been demonstrated to relate to poor health and risk of premature death, arguably through the psycho-social stress of low socio-economic status and poorer quality of social relations.

Fear of crime isolates communities and has financial repercussions for individuals, the private sector and governments. Concerns about violence isolate the poor in their homes and encourage the richest to live in segregated spaces. The social environment influences health in local areas through buffering or enhancing the impact of stressors and regulating access to the emotional and material goods that influence health. High

levels of social support have been shown to contribute to a variety of positive health outcomes. Social support gives people the emotional and practical resources they need and can have a powerful protective effect on health. Conversely social isolation and exclusion are associated with poor health status and premature death. Social cohesion, the quality of social relationships and the existence of trust, mutual obligations and respect in communities, helps to protect people and their health. Areas with high levels of income inequality have less social cohesion. High levels of mutual support will protect health while the breakdown in social relations reduces trust and increases violence.

### **Non-communicable diseases**

Non-communicable diseases and conditions such as asthma, heart disease, cancer and diabetes are a significant health problem. Much of this heightened risk can be traced back to diet, the lack of physical activity as a consequence of modern living, as well as exposure to air pollutants including tobacco smoke. Urban living is associated with a shift towards calorie dense diets characterized by high levels of fat, sugar and salt. As a result obesity is on the rise across the world. On top of this, many people tend to have physically inactive types of employment and urbanization further discourages physical activity. Further factors that inhibit regular physical activity include over-crowding, high volumes of traffic, over reliance on motorized transportation, crime and poor air quality. Poor housing conditions, over crowding, noise pollution, unemployment, poverty and cultural dislocation can cause or exacerbate a range of mental health problems including anxiety, depression, insomnia and substance abuse.