

Neighborhood Immersion for Compassion & Empathy

Companion Guide

This guide highlights key lessons from the simulation and suggests strategies for providing care to patients who live in highly segregated and under-resourced urban neighborhoods. Many of the scenarios and lessons learned about the family depicted apply to other minority groups, but this simulation focuses on an urban Black neighborhood. See the [Reading and Resource List](#) for resources related to each concept.

Key Lessons:

Social Determinants of Health (SDoH)

On average, the most advantaged people live 15 years longer than those with the fewest advantages. Health care explains only about 20% of that difference. The remainder is accounted for by genetics (20%), health behaviors (30%), and the social and physical environment (30%). Social factors such as poverty, under-education, and segregation can generate health inequalities that are considered root causes of poor health. There is an urgent need for clinicians to be aware of these contributors to health inequities in order to improve healthcare, and enhance health for all.

Place and Health

Zip code is a better predictor of future health than genetic code. The simulation highlights the role place plays in influencing our health. All places are naturally overflowing with assets and risks that help or hinder a patient's ability to live a healthy life, obtain health care, and manage chronic conditions. When risks and assets are discovered in the environment, participants will see the effects on a character's life expectancy. For example, financial literacy education might offset loss of life expectancy due to generational income inequality. Elimination of predatory marketing might avoid the decrease in life expectancy caused by tobacco use. Emphasis on community and personal assets such as social support, religion, and family can further enhance health.

Economic Redlining

Multi-generational urban poverty must be understood in the context of historic discriminatory lending policies put in place in the late 1930's called redlining. Neighborhoods that were inhabited by immigrants and black families were marked for banks to avoid lending, setting these communities up for economic failure. Policy decisions that intentionally withheld resources from communities persisted until 1974, and have left an economic scar on neighborhoods that persists still. Today's urban neighborhoods are even more segregated and impoverished than they were in the decades after the 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed housing discrimination. These patterns have reduced opportunities for economic mobility and have created a dramatic racial wealth gap in the US. For every \$100 in White family wealth, Black families have just \$5.04. Thus, the median wealth for Black families was just \$17,600 compared with \$171,000 for White families.

Toxic Stress

It doesn't help to name these disadvantages without understanding exactly how these toxic stresses impair health and shorten life expectancy. Allostatic load, described in the simulation, describes the mechanism of impairment in physiologic function that causes poor health chronic disease and poor health outcomes. Exposure to profound disadvantage generates toxic stress that reduces overall health.

Social determinants of health

are conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality-of-life outcomes and risks.¹

Categories of SDoH include:

- Economic stability
- Education
- Social and Community Context
- Health and Health Care
- Neighborhood and Built Environment

Health inequality, disparity, or inequity? These concepts are interrelated but have important distinctions. Health inequality and disparity simply indicates a difference of some kind. Health inequity specifies unfairness and injustice. In 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane".

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Digital Redlining

Gaps in access and digital skills parallel historic redlining and compound inequalities that led to some working in low wage jobs that cannot be performed from home. This further contributes to health inequities. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the urgent need to close gaps in internet access. Internet access is crucial for enabling people to stay home. Children must have online schooling available. Adults need access to internet resources for employment, smart phone function, and telehealth.

Systemic Racism

Like science, systemic racism is real whether you believe in it or not. Like science, systemic racism has profound consequences when it is ignored. Systemic racism is defined by pervasive systems of discrimination throughout the criminal justice system, housing, education, health care, and more. These unjust systems offer advantages to the privileged cultures while generating cumulative deficits for Black and Brown people in the US. These patterns may reinforce individual belief systems and interpersonal racism. Sometimes, when people are set up for failure generation after generation, failure will in fact find them.

Strategies for Improved Care Delivery

Addressing patients' social needs can seem overwhelming. There is no easy answer.

It is not whether you have time to address these issues, but whether you have learned how to address them in the time that you have. Such efforts improve therapeutic relationships.

Interprofessional Health Teams

Team-based care is well aligned with the goal of considering patient social needs in care planning. Patient navigators, case managers, social workers, behavioral health professionals among others may be part of a Patient-Centered Health Home that integrates physical, mental health and substance abuse needs. Community Health Workers (CHWs) have a unique opportunity to support patient social needs as they come from the communities they serve, are highly trusted and trained to serve as a bridge between patients, health systems, and their communities.

Motivational Interviewing

Clinicians trained in motivational interviewing are more successful at supporting behavior change. The principles of motivational interviewing include: 1. express empathy, 2. avoid argumentation, 3. roll with resistance, 4. support self-efficacy, and 5. develop a discrepancy. Training and certification are available.

Screening and Referral for Social Needs

Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) is a quick and easy way to identify and address health-related behaviors in the clinical setting. SBIRT started to support brief tobacco and alcohol screening and referral, but has extended successfully to help providers understand and act on patient social needs.

Trauma-Informed Practice

Adverse Childhood Events (ACEs) are strongly associated with a broad spectrum of poor health outcomes throughout childhood and into adulthood. ACEs focus on personal and family trauma. Black and Hispanic children are more likely to have been exposed to ACEs.

Implicit Bias

Attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner are described as implicit bias. We all have such biases that unconsciously but unfairly direct us along positive and negative pathways. Implicit bias awareness and training has become an important feature of contemporary clinical practice.

Empathy – the ability to understand and share other people's feelings—is a fundamental tool of the therapeutic relationship. Health professionals with more accurate empathy are more efficient in promoting therapeutic change. It is important for health professionals to understand people's feelings, opinions and experiences in order to assess their needs and advise accordingly. Accurate empathy describes the humility to understand that our perception of the feelings of others may not represent how they actually feel. Practicing empathetic curiosity and exploring the feelings that lie beneath their experience allows authentic connection and improved therapeutic relationship.²

1. Healthy People 2020. Social Determinants of Health. Updated Oct 20, 2020.
2. Moudatsou M, Stavropoulou A, Philalithis A, Koukoulis S. The Role of Empathy in Health and Social Care Professionals. *Healthcare*. 2020 Jan 30;8(1):26. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8010026>