Urban Community Health Assessment
Defining Urban Health

The term “urban health” can encompass a broad range of factors and influences. However, central to this term is the idea that the health of a population is influenced by a set of common factors.

Below are two general definitions of urban health:

• **Urban Health** = Health of a population that lives and works together as a result of a common water supply and similar living conditions - Mosby’s Medical Dictionary

• Urban Health focuses on the health of whole populations and of subgroups within the population (Galea and Vlahov, 2005)

Importantly, the study of urban health has evolved to include the social determinants of population health within urban settings.
What Influences Health in Urban Settings?

At both an individual and societal level, health is often a complex construct. When we think about the factors that influence our own health, we often think about what we eat, how often we exercise, the things we do or do not stress about and, importantly, the resources in our lives that help us maintain health and engage in healthy behaviors.

A similar approach may be applied to our conceptualization of the factors that influence health within an urban setting.

The focus shifts to social structures and social patterns and, importantly, includes factors such as poverty, racism and other social inequities that impact health.

The Dalhgreen and Whitehead model (on the right) illustrates the influences on health in an urban setting.
Why is a Conceptual Understanding Important?

How we conceptualize health plays a critical role in our approach to not only understand the factors that influence health, but also efforts designed to improve health outcomes. This is critical when planning and conducting community health assessments.

A narrow conceptualization of health may only focus on the immediate influences on health such as food intake, exercise, other comorbid conditions, family history, etc. If a health assessment only considers these factors, then it is highly likely that many important covariates to health will be excluded.

Why does this matter for a health assessment?

The process of conducting a health assessment is not only resource intensive, but also time intensive. Furthermore, health assessments often form the basis for a broader community health improvement plan. Therefore, in order to achieve a sustainable improvement in health, it is critical that the health assessment capture the full array of factors that contribute to health.
A Community Health Assessment (CHA) or Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) is a systematic process that identifies health needs and resources through a comprehensive process of data collection and analysis.

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) defines the community health assessment as “a process that uses quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically collect and analyze data to understand health within a specific community.”

According to NACCHO, a well-designed assessment should include information on risk factors, morbidity, mortality, quality of life, community assets, social determinants of health and demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.
The community health assessment can serve many purposes, but is most often used as a decision making tool when:

1. Planning or implementing interventions
2. Setting priorities
3. Coordinating and allocating resources
4. Documenting need in order to strengthen community buy-in or generate political support for a public health intervention

Community health assessments are also routinely conducted by health care institutions and their community partners in order to comply with new IRS regulations and the Affordable Care Act.
The process of conducting either a CHA or a CHNA (these are often synonymous) often includes several key steps.

- The starting point for a CHA/CHNA begins with identifying the team and resources in order to conduct the CHA.
- Next, it is important to define the purpose and scope of the assessment and establish clear parameters for completion.
- Data collection represents a central step in the CHA process. This often includes both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- Once the data is collected and analyzed, it is important to work with community partners to review the results and prioritize findings.
- The final steps may include a community health improvement plan and/or development of interventions to address key findings.
The heart and soul of the community health assessment process is Collaboration. Given the scope and complexity of a well-designed health assessment, it is often difficult for a single organization to carry out the work on its own. Furthermore, the CHA process is also an important opportunity to engage community stakeholders and create partnerships that can yield long-term benefits.

Important stakeholders in the CHA process may include:

- Public health agencies
- Other health and human service agencies
- Hospitals
- HMO’s
- Community organizations
- Community health centers
- Community residents
- Legislative and executive bodies of community government
- Representative group of community members
The Wordle below was created based on the results of a community health needs assessment that was conducted in Boston in 2010. Each of the factors below was indicated as an important influence on health and well-being by participants in this assessment.
The Future of Public Health, Institute of Medicine, 1988, identified three core functions for public health:

1. Assessment
2. Policy Development
3. Assurance

Community health assessment serves as an important mechanism to address one of these core functions (Assessment).
Three of the ten essential public health services are assessment functions:

1. Monitor health status to identify community health problems
2. Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community
3. Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services

*Developed by the Future of Public Health Steering Committee, 1994

Monitoring health status includes not only health assessment, but also the development of methods to communicate data and maintaining health registries.

Diagnosing health problems and hazards is a primary goal of the health assessment process. This service also include the development of plans to address identified health threats.

Evaluation and quality improvement are most effective when woven throughout the health assessment process.
• Data represents one of the most valuable resources in the community health assessment process. In the context of this introduction, it is important to note three primary roles of data:

1. **Data can provide a demographic and socioeconomic profile of a community that provides important context for health assessment findings**

2. **Data can highlight potential differences and disparities that may be addressed through a community health assessment and subsequent health improvement plan**

3. **Data drives the evaluation of programs designed to address identified areas of need**

Much of the data used in health assessments is publicly available. However, there are important limitations that must be considered when using certain types of public data. In the following slides, we will review data from Boston to better understand the multiple factors influencing the health of this urban population.
As we see in the charts below, a majority of Boston’s population is White; however, non-White populations experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment and poor educational attainment.
Examination of data related to health indicators reveals disparities across a range of health outcomes among Black and Latino residents of Boston compared to White residents.

Source: Health of Boston, 2011
The infant mortality rate (IMR) is an important indicator of the health and well-being of a given population. Because the infant mortality rate is influenced by a range of factors, observing disparities in this rate often suggests the presence of a broader range of inequities within that population. As we see in the data below, the IMR has been consistently higher among Black residents of Boston compared to White residents.
What is Social Justice?

- The data presented in the previous slides reveal striking disparities across a range of social, economic and health indicators. While this data reflect the state of health in Boston, it is likely that similar trends would be observed in many large urban centers across the country and around the world.

- The concept of social justice has become an important framework through which disparities, their root causes and possible solutions may be viewed.

- The definition of social justice is grounded in the idea that there is an equal distribution of the resources required to achieve full economic, social, physical and emotional health. This may also include concepts related to social responsibility and self-agency.
This definition of social justice presented in the previous slide yields a strong intersection between social justice and public health. As we noted earlier, health is often the product of a complex interplay of factors. When these factors are unequally distributed within a population, we are likely to see disparities in many dimensions of health.

Gostin and Powers note that “JUSTICE IS VIEWED AS SO CENTRAL TO THE MISSION of public health that it has been described as the field’s core value: “The historic dream of public health…is a dream of social justice.”

Social justice, at its core, is grounded in a principle of fairness. This not only concerns the distribution of assets and resources, but also the way in which decisions are made and people are treated. This understanding has paved the way for much deeper understanding of how racism, poverty and other social inequities impact health at both the individual and population level.
Why is Social Justice Important in CHA Practice?

• Understanding the link between social justice and public health is an important step in any successful community health assessment, particularly in communities where significant disparities exist.

• In many cases, the focus on social justice is operationalized through a social determinants of health framework (SDOH).

• The CHA, as a process and as a product, also offers and opportunity to engage stakeholders and community members and to give a voice to individuals and communities that may have been marginalized in prior decision making processes. To this end, the CHA also represents an opportunity to reduce the burden of social injustice that may exist within a given community.
Urbanization, defined as population growth within cities, has a significant impact on individual and population health. These impacts can be both positive and negative and may include:

1. Economic factors – availability of jobs, availability of housing, poverty, economic development

2. Social factors – neighborhood cohesion (how connected are individuals to one another?), residential stability (how long do they live in the community), violence, trauma, food security

3. Environmental factors – this includes proximity to industrial areas, high-traffic areas, environmentally hazardous sites, pollution

4. Resource availability – health centers, hospitals, non-profits, community centers, green spaces, high quality schools
Urbanization Trends

• Urbanization is one of the leading global trends of the 21st century that has a significant impact on health.

• By 2050, over 70% of the world’s population will live in cities. The factors influencing urban health include urban governance; population characteristics; the natural and built environment; social and economic development; services and health emergency management; and food security.

• While cities can bring opportunities, they can also bring challenges for better health. Today’s cities and those of tomorrow are facing a triple threat: infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, TB, pneumonia, diarrhoeal diseases; noncommunicable diseases like asthma, heart disease, cancer and diabetes; and violence and injuries, including road traffic injuries.