



**SOCIAL DETERMINANTS
OF MENTAL HEALTH**



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OF MENTAL HEALTH

This publication is part of a broader series of thematic papers, co-produced by the World Health Organization and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's Global Mental Health Platform. The series consists of four publications and covers the following topics.

- Innovation in deinstitutionalization: a WHO expert survey;
- Integrating the response to mental disorders and other chronic diseases in health care systems;
- Social determinants of mental health;
- Promoting Rights and Community Living of Children with Psychosocial Disabilities (forthcoming).

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OF MENTAL HEALTH

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Foreword.....	06
Acknowledgements.....	07
Executive summary.....	08
Background and context.....	12
Methods.....	15
Main findings and discussion.....	16
Principles and actions.....	39
Conclusion.....	43
References.....	44

FOREWORD

The Gulbenkian Mental Health Platform and the World Health Organization have collaborated to generate a series of thematic papers on pressing mental health issues of our time. Topics were identified by the Platform's advisory and steering committees, and prioritized based on the issue's potential significance in making a substantial improvement in the global mental health situation. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the topics of the thematic papers are highly consistent with the four key objectives of WHO's Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020.

Thematic papers in this series address the following important topics: population-based strategies that can be implemented through health and non-health sectors to promote mental health and prevent mental disorders; health-system based strategies to organize and deliver integrated care for mental disorders and other chronic health conditions; and innovative methodologies for shifting from institutional to community-based mental health care. Draft versions of each paper were reviewed by a distinguished group of mental health experts at an International Forum on Innovation in Mental Health, held in October 2013, after which the papers were further revised. An additional thematic paper is currently in production, and will cover strategies to stop human rights violations of children with mental disorders.

The topic of this thematic paper, Social determinants of mental health, was selected in order to enhance our knowledge about the many interacting forces that between them shape individual and collective levels of mental health and well-being, and set out actions that can be pursued to promote and protect good mental health. The paper provides a coherent framework that employs a life course approach for assessing the social determinants of mental health. Taking a life-course perspective usefully demonstrates how risk exposures in the formative stages of life can affect mental well-being or predispose towards mental disorder many years or even decades later.

A prominent message to come out of this paper is that actions and public policies to address existing health inequalities need to be universal and inclusive, yet proportionate to need. Targeting resources at the most disadvantaged groups alone runs the risk of detracting from the overall goal of reducing the steepness of the social gradient in health. A further clear message is that since risk and protective factors for mental health act at several different levels, responses to them need to be multi-layered and multi-sectoral. Health, education, welfare, transport, and housing sectors all need to be concerned and involved, and contribute to a 'health in all policies' approach.

We trust that you will find this paper both thought provoking and useful, and we encourage you to read the accompanying thematic papers from this series, too.

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JoAnne Epping-Jordan (Seattle, USA) served as editorial manager of the overall series of thematic papers.

All thematic papers were produced under the overall guidance of the Gulbenkian Global Mental Health Platform's Advisory and Steering Committees (below).

Advisory Committee: Paulo Ernani Gadelha Vieira (Fiocruz, Brazil); Marian Jacobs (University of Cape Town, South Africa); Arthur Kleinman (Harvard University, USA); Sir Michael Marmot (University College London, United Kingdom); Mirta Roses Periago (Former Director, Pan American Health Organization); P. Satishchandra (National Institute of Mental Health & Neurosciences (NIMHANS), India); Tazeen H. Jafar (The Aga Khan University, Pakistan); and Observer to the Advisory Committee, Shekhar Saxena (WHO Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse).

Steering Committee: Benedetto Saraceno (NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal; Head and Scientific Coordinator of the Platform), José Miguel Caldas de Almeida (NOVA University of Lisbon, Portugal), Sérgio Gulbenkian (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation), Jorge Soares (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY MESSAGES

- Mental health and many common mental disorders are shaped to a great extent by the social, economic, and physical environments in which people live.
- Social inequalities are associated with increased risk of many common mental disorders.
- Taking action to improve the conditions of daily life from before birth, during early childhood, at school age, during family building and working ages, and at older ages provides opportunities both to improve population mental health and to reduce the risk of those mental disorders that are associated with social inequalities.
- While comprehensive action across the life course is needed, scientific consensus is considerable that giving every child the best possible start will generate the greatest societal and mental health benefits.
- Action needs to be universal: across the whole of society, and proportionate to need in order to level the social gradient in health outcomes.
- This paper highlights effective actions to reduce risk of mental disorders throughout the life course, at the community level and at the country level. It includes environmental, structural, and local interventions. Such actions to prevent mental disorders are likely to promote mental health in the population.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The prevalence and social distribution of mental disorders has been well documented in high-income countries. While there is growing recognition of the problem in low- and middle-income countries, a significant gap still exists in research to measure the problem, and in strategies, policies and programmes to prevent mental disorders. There is a considerable need to raise the priority given to the prevention of mental disorders and to the promotion of mental health through action on the social determinants of health.

METHODS

Building on analyses completed by the WHO Commission of Social Determinants of Health, the Mar-

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