



How Do Social Factors Affect People's Health and Longevity?

World Health Organization Commission on Social Determinants of Health meets in New Orleans

SUMMARY

The World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Determinants of Health held a three-day meeting in New Orleans November 18–20, 2007, to discuss the ways in which social factors—such as access to money, education, housing and health care services—affect people's health and longevity.¹

The Satcher Health Leadership Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine, Atlanta, hosted the meeting. David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D., the Institute's director, is a former U.S. Surgeon General and a member of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health.

Satcher chose New Orleans as the U.S. meeting site in order to showcase the role of social factors in people's physical and emotional recovery from the devastation wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. At the end of the meeting, attendees toured New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward, a low-income neighborhood hard hit by the disasters.

Inspired by the city tour, the Satcher Health Leadership Institute, with permission from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), used Foundation funds not spent on the meeting to create a community-based mental health project that used small-group, large-group and individual activities for residents of the Lower 9th Ward. The project aimed to counteract the impact of the hurricanes on children's emotional health.

The social determinants approach is about working upstream with government and other entities on the local, state and federal levels to target those factors that make it difficult for people to stay healthy—not just to get health care but also to lead healthy lifestyles.

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.

¹ The New Orleans meeting was one of more than 10 meetings that WHO held around the world from 2005 to 2008 to highlight social determinants of health worldwide. .

RWJF's Interest in This Area

The work of the WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health coincided with two projects in RWJF's Vulnerable Populations portfolio, which also focused on the social factors at the root of health disparities:

- Several members of *RWJF's Commission to Build A Healthier America* spoke at the three-day WHO meeting in New Orleans. In April 2009, the RWJF commission produced a report with recommendations on how to address the social factors that impact people's health.²
- Four years in development, in 2010, RWJF released a report³ and a 90-minute webinar, "A New Way to Talk About the Social Determinants of Health."⁴ Both outline the most effective way to explain to the general public the impact of social determinants of health on people's overall health and longevity.

Results

The November Meeting

- The meeting drew a diverse group of some 50 attendees, including:
 - Members of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health
 - Representatives of foundations, including RWJF, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
 - Researchers from numerous universities
 - Government officials from New Orleans, including the mayor and director of the health department
 - Representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)⁵
- Proceedings of the meeting are available online.⁶ A larger WHO report on social determinants of health also draws information from the New Orleans meeting as well as other commission meetings held worldwide.⁷

² "Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America," Princeton, N.J.: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2009. Available [online](#).

³ "Messaging Guide: A New Way to Talk About the Social Determinants of Health," Princeton, N.J.: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010. Available [online](#).

⁴ "Webinar Recording: A New Way to Talk About the Social Determinants of Health," Princeton, N.J.: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010. Available [online](#).

⁵ For a complete list of participants, see Appendix A of the published proceeding: *Special Meeting of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health*, Atlanta: Satcher Health Leadership Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine, 2008. Available [online](#).

The Community-Based Project

- Some 78 children participated in two multi-session programs, 31 in the fall of 2009 and 47 in the fall of 2010.

During the weekly sessions, local visual and performing artists worked with the children to help them express their thoughts and feelings about their losses—including the loss of their homes as a result of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Among the activities were writing poems about their shared experiences and constructing a model house, representing the homes they had lost. The children also participated in a puppet workshop and a cultural excursion to the New Orleans School of Cooking.

- About 20 adults participated in a separate but complementary group of sessions for parents in the fall of 2010. Four to six adults attended each session. Counselors from the community led the parents in discussions and role-playing exercises based on themes in the book, *How to Raise Emotionally Healthy Children: Meeting the Five Critical Needs of Children And Parents Too!* by Gerald Newmark.
- Some 125 community members, government officials and others attended a community mental health forum on October 28, 2009, in the Lower 9th Ward. Satcher hosted a panel discussion, “Essentials to Rebuilding Our Communities: Healthy Minds and Healthy Bodies.” In addition to Satcher, panelists included a community activist, a neighborhood pastor, the chief medical editor for a local NBC television affiliate, a child, an adolescent and a family therapist. Six representatives of service providers also attended the forum and manned tables displaying information about their services.

Lessons Learned

1. Provide transportation to and from the site of a meeting or activity for residents of low-income communities. Some parents did not want their children to walk to the program sessions because of gang activity and violence in the neighborhood. To solve this problem, Ayanna Buckner, M.D., M.P.H., who directed the community-based project, and the counselors often used their personal cars to shuttle the children to and from the sessions. (Project Team Member/Buckner)
2. Provide a hot and healthy meal as part of an activity targeted at children from vulnerable neighborhoods. “We know a lot of kids who receive free lunch during the week at school don’t really eat very well on weekends,” Buckner said.

⁶ *Special Meeting of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health*, Atlanta: Satcher Health Leadership Institute at the Morehouse School of Medicine, 2008. Proceedings available [online](#).

⁷ *Closing the Gap in a Generation, Health Equity Through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, The World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, Geneva, Switzerland: The World Health Organization, 2008, available [online](#). In the report, the commission urges world leaders to enact policies that improve everyone’s access to social necessities, and thus, improve every person’s health and longevity.

- Partner with people who live in the city in which you plan to host a meeting. Because of their detailed knowledge of their city, local people are the best equipped to plot out the logistics of a meeting. Local officials in New Orleans served as a valuable resource to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health meeting planners. (Project Team Member/Joyce Nottingham, M.S., Ph.D.)

Funding

RWJF supported these projects with a grant of \$239,474.

Afterward

A group of professionals who attended the November 2007 meeting are collaborating on projects that address the link between social factors and the quality of people’s health and longevity. For example, four of the meeting attendees participated in the symposium, “Global Disasters—Lessons Learned From Post-Katrina New Orleans,” during a meeting of the World Congress of Psychiatry held in Prague in September 2008.

Josie White, the New Orleans social worker who oversaw the parents’ sessions in the Lower 9th Ward, continues to host group meetings with parents at her private office.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Meetings or Conferences

Proceedings

“Special Meeting of the World Health Organization Commission on the Social Determinants of Health,” November 18–20, 2007, New Orleans. Attended by about 50 registrants from eight countries, 11 states and Washington, D.C. Eleven sessions including a tour of the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans. Proceedings available [online](#).