

Understanding Context, Systems, and Environment



The Role of Social Determinants of Health in
Infant Mortality

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Learning Outcomes



Define Social
Determinants of Health
(SDOH)

Identify key SDOH
impacting infant
mortality and unsafe
sleep

Understand how
poverty and housing
instability create risk
factors

Learning Outcomes Continued



Recognize the role of
systemic racism in
health disparities

Explain how maternal
health and caregiver
stress influence risks

Identify environmental and
systemic factors
contributing to unsafe
sleep

Learning Outcomes Continued

- Recognize and mitigate personal and institutional biases
- Apply culturally responsive practices in case assessments
- Engage public health and prevention partners post-investigation

Infant Mortality: A Public Health Indicator



**Definition: Death of
an infant before
their first birthday**

**Beyond individual tragedy:
A mirror of societal health**

**Disparities often
highlight systemic
inequities**

**Unsafe sleep
environments: A
significant, often**

What are Social Determinants of Health (SDOH)?



Conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play



Not just individual choices, but the context for choices



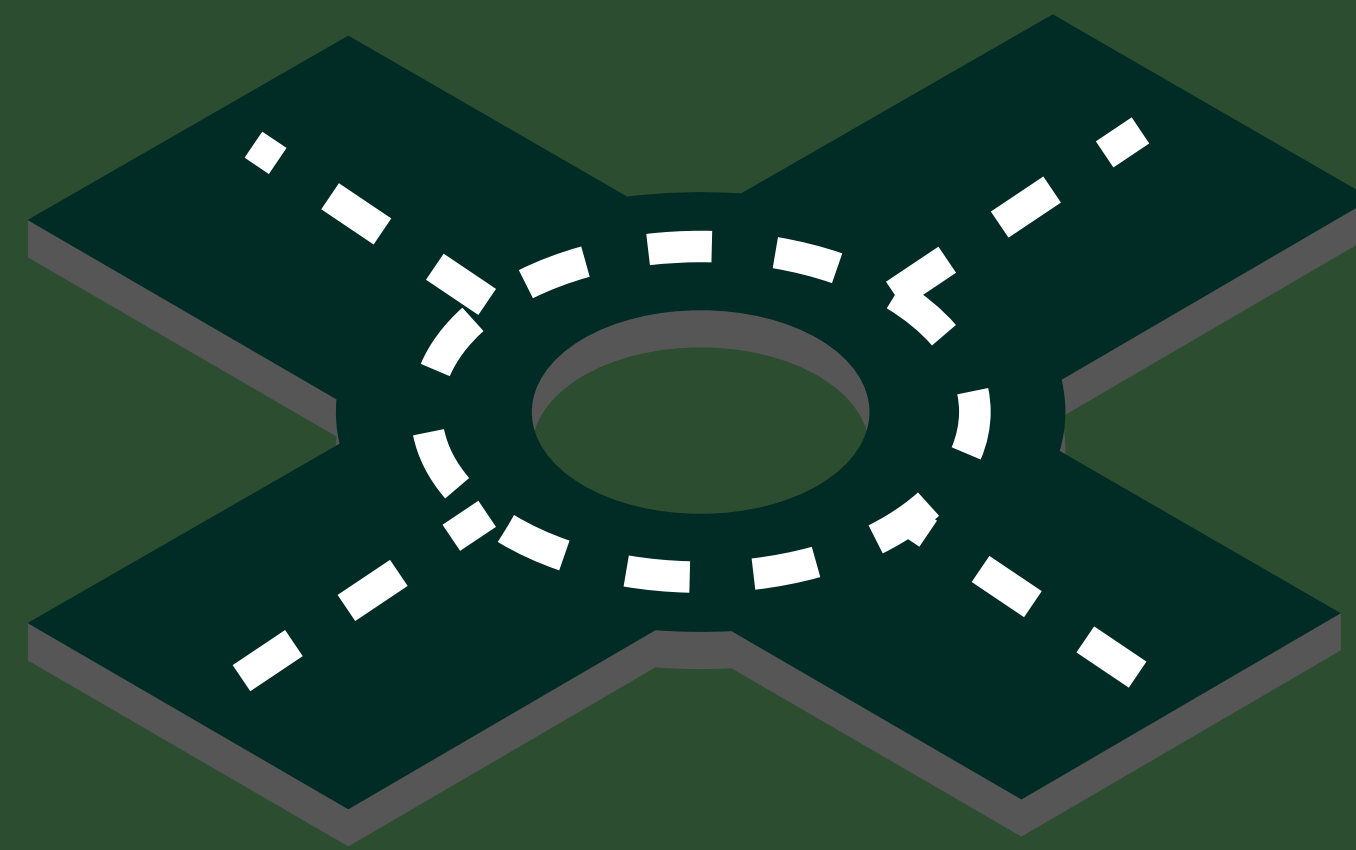
Broader than healthcare; impact health outcomes significantly

Five Key Categories of SDOH



SDOH & Infant Mortality:

The Intersections



SDOH are interconnected

Rarely is one factor isolated



Cumulative risk

Low income >> inadequate housing >>
unsafe sleep



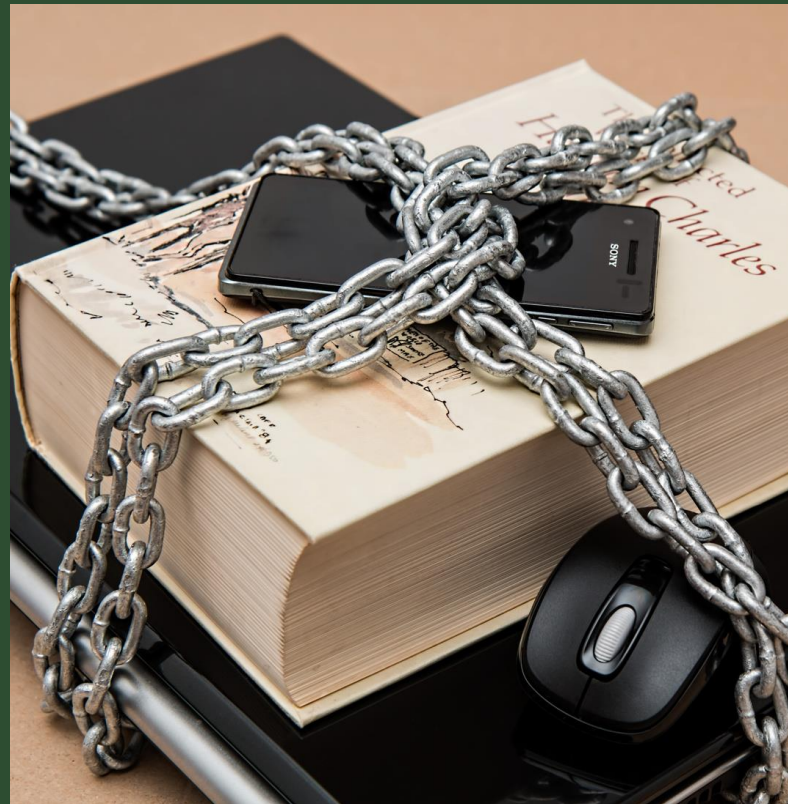
Direct influence

Directly impact exposure to risk factors for
infant death

Deep Dive: Poverty and Economic Instability

LIMITED RESOURCES

Inability to afford safe sleep products (cribs, bassinets)



NECESSITY VS CHOICE

Unsafe alternatives due to lack of options



FOOD INSECURITY

Stress, developmental impacts on infant and caregiver



EMPLOYMENT PRECARITY & STRESS

Unstable hours, multiple jobs, lack of paid leave

Financial stress exacerbates caregiver exhaustion and mental health



Investigative Relevance: Poverty & Economic Instability



OBSERVATIONS

Lack of appropriate sleep equipment, worn/damaged items, evidence of multiple jobs



INTERVIEWS

Inquire about financial stressors, access to basic necessities (respectfully)



COLLABORATION

Social workers can connect families to resources; Law enforcement/ME/Coroner understand context

Deep Dive: Housing and Neighborhood Instability



Crowded conditions



Substandard housing



Transient living



Unsafe neighborhoods



Investigative Relevance: Housing & Neighborhood Instability



OBSERVATIONS

Overcrowding, lack of dedicated sleep space, apparent structural issues



DOCUMENTATION

Detailed notes and photos of the entire sleep environment and adjacent areas



INTERVIEWS

Inquire about living situation history, challenges, and support



REFERRAL OPPORTUNITIES

Connect families to housing support agencies



Applying the SDOH Lens

Think of a recent SUID case

How might poverty or housing instability have played a role?

What additional information would an SDOH lens prompt you to seek?

Deep Dive: Systemic Racism

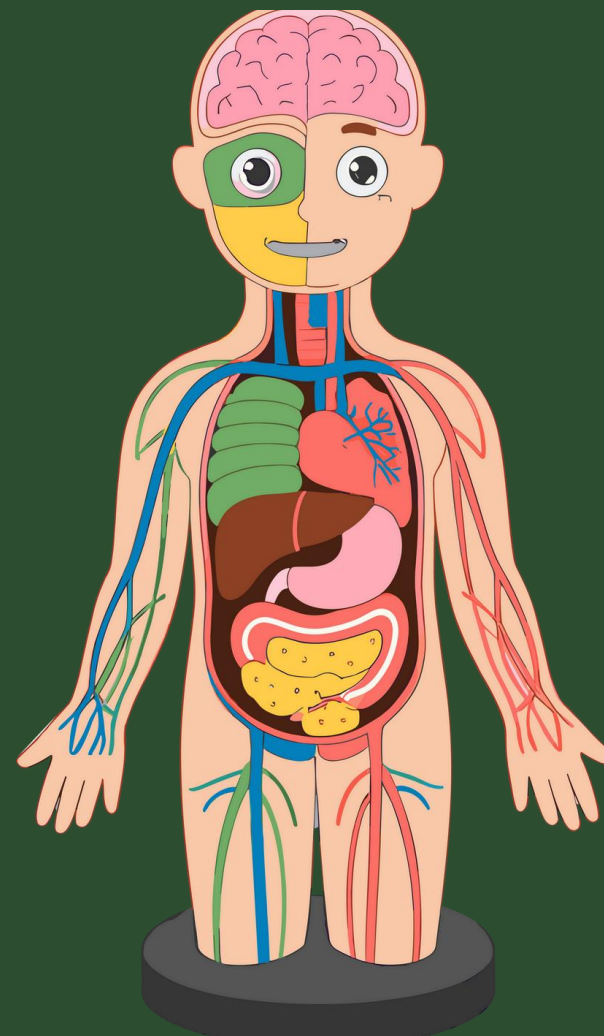
DEFINITION

Embedded policies, practices, and norms that perpetuate racial hierarchy



IMPACT ON HEALTH

Not individual acts, but institutional and structural disadvantages

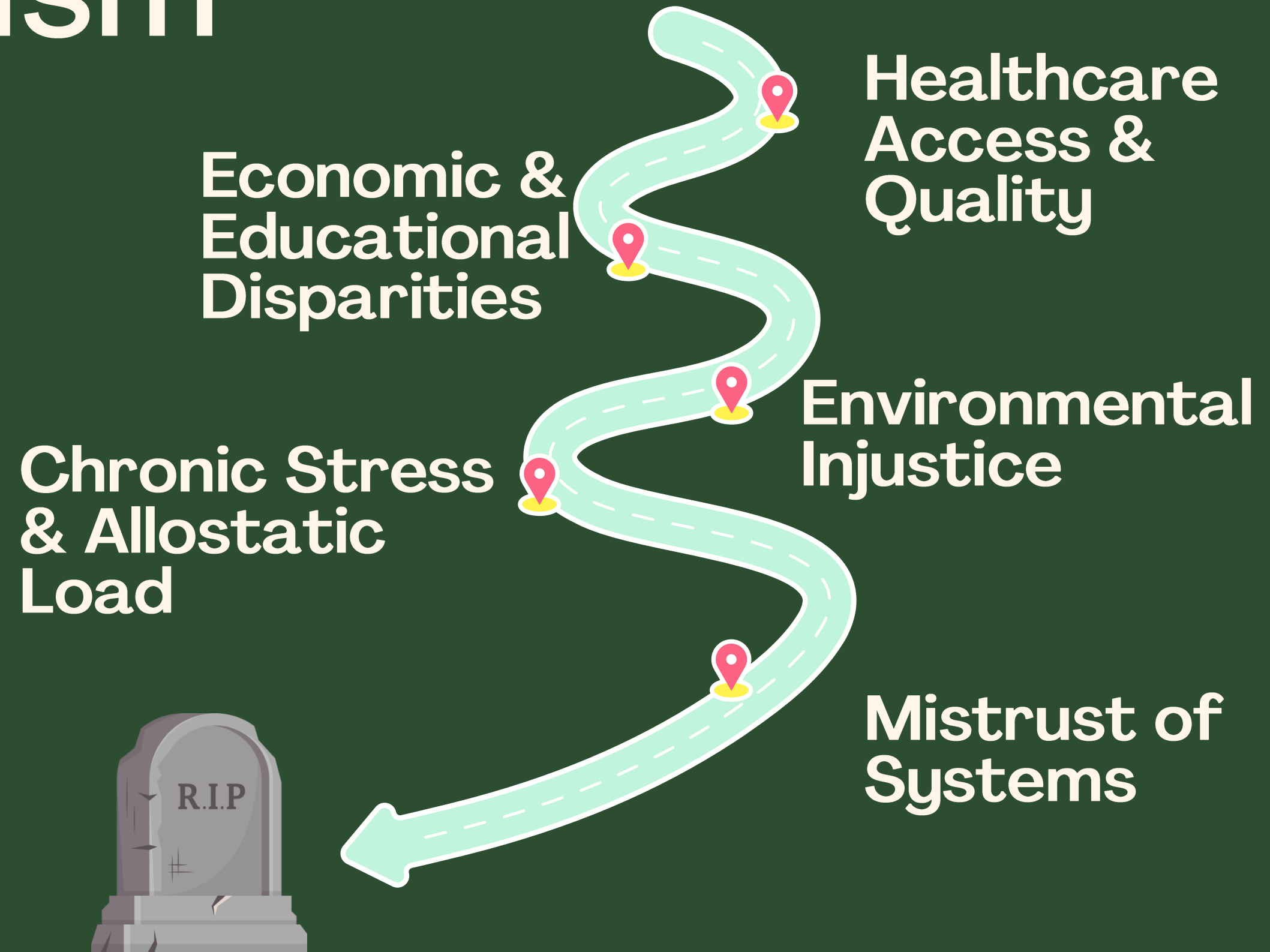


HEALTH DISPARITIES

Leading cause of persistent gaps in infant mortality for specific racial/ethnic groups



Pathways of Systemic Racism to Infant Mortality



Investigative Relevance: Systemic Racism



RECOGNIZE CONTEXT

Understand historical and ongoing inequities in the community



MITIGATE BIAS

Be aware of how your own biases might manifest



RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Adapt communication, build trust



ADVOCATE FOR EQUITY

Share findings that highlight systemic barriers

Deep Dive: Maternal Health

PRENATAL CARE ACCESS

Insufficient or late care increases risk for preterm birth, low birth weight



SUBSTANCE USE

Maternal substance use can increase risk of SUID, withdrawal, developmental issues



MENTAL HEALTH

Postpartum depression, anxiety, other mental health challenges impact vigilance, bonding



CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Unmanaged maternal chronic diseases (e.g., hypertension, diabetes)



Connection to SDOH: All these maternal health issues are often exacerbated by poverty, racism, stress.

Investigative Relevance: Maternal Health

Collaboration will be essential with medical providers, law enforcement and social workers



RECORDS REVIEW

Obtain and review comprehensive maternal medical history



INTERVIEW

Respectfully inquire about prenatal care, postpartum challenges, substance use history



OBSERVATION

Observe and document any signs of current impairment in caregivers



TOXICOLOGY

Request and review toxicology screens where appropriate

Deep Dive: Caregiver Stress and Burnout

COMPOUNDED BY SDOH

Poverty, housing instability, discrimination, lack of support

CHRONIC EXHAUSTION

Impairs judgment, reduces vigilance, affects sleep patterns

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

Depression, anxiety, substance use as coping mechanisms

IMPACT ON SAFE SLEEP

Less capacity to maintain safe sleep practices, inadvertently falling asleep with infant in unsafe location



NOTE: Past trauma can exacerbate stress responses.

Investigative Relevance: Caregiver Stress



OBSERVATION

Clutter, disorganization as potential indicators of overwhelming stress



INTERVIEWING

Use trauma-informed, empathetic approaches; look for signs of distress



CONTEXT

Recognize that stress isn't an excuse, but a critical contributing factor



RESOURCE CONNECTION

Direct families to mental health and support services

Environmental Factors & Unsafe Sleep Practices



Unsafe surfaces, positions



Bedding/Objects



Shared sleep space



Temperature



Documenting Sleep Environments with Precision



Photography



Objectivity



Doll
Reenactment



Notes/Reports



Consistency

Recognizing and Mitigating Personal Bias



Implicit Bias

Unconscious attitudes affecting understanding

Confirmation Bias

Seeking info that confirms pre-existing beliefs

Fundamental Attribution Error

Overemphasizing personal over situational factors

Impact

Misinterpretation of caregiver behavior, choices, environment

Strategy

Self-Awareness: Acknowledge your own biases

Strategies for Mitigating Bias

Considerations include:

Structured Protocols

Standardized tools, checklists

Fact-Checking

Verify info., avoid assumptions

Diverse Perspectives

Consult with multidisciplinary team

Slow Down

Allow time for thoughtful analysis

Humility Emphasis

Approach with respect and a willingness to learn

Applying Humility in Practice



Active Listening

Listen without judgment; understand their narrative



Non-Verbal Cues

Be aware of your own and theirs; interpretations & differences exist



Open-Ended Questions

Encourage full explanations of practices



Respectful Inquiry

Frame questions about beliefs or traditions sensitively



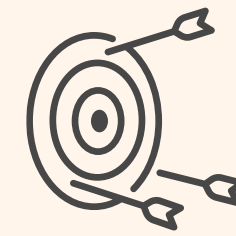
Avoid Stereotyping

Treat each family as unique, regardless of background

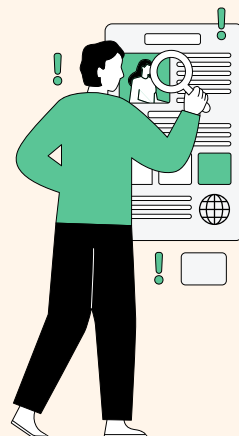
Systemic Inequities and Case Outcomes



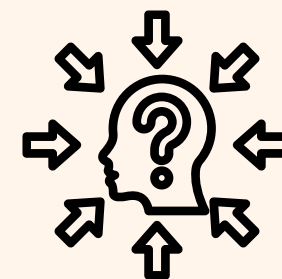
Systemic inequities can influence how cases are perceived and processed



Risk of misclassification or missed prevention opportunities



Disproportionate scrutiny for marginalized families



Ethical imperative to address underlying factors

The Public Health and Prevention Link



Investigations provide critical data for public health

Identifying patterns and trends is key to prevention

Moving from individual case resolution to community impact

Roles of Public Health and Prevention Partners



Data Analysis



Targeted Education



Community-Based Interventions



Resource Navigation



Policy Advocacy



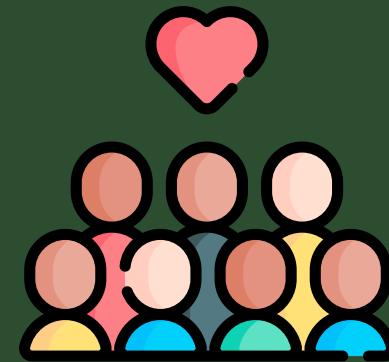
Engaging Public Health Post- Investigation: Benefits



**Broader
Impact**



**Resource
Optimization**



**Community
Resilience**



**Systemic
Solutions**



**Reduced
Recurrence**

Practical Steps for Engagement



CFR Teams

Active participation and sharing of findings



Data Sharing

Contribute to state/local surveillance systems



Present Findings

Inform local public health committees/boards



Joint Training

Collaborate on educational initiatives



Open Comms

Establish regular, formal communication pathways

Case Study: Applying the SDOH Lens

Scenario: Infant death, 3-month-old. Found in adult bed with parents. Scene shows signs of severe disorganization, limited food, and no dedicated crib. Mother is visibly exhausted and states she fell asleep with baby out of sheer fatigue after working two overnight shifts. Parents are immigrants with limited English proficiency.

Traditional Focus: Unsafe sleep, co-sleeping, possible neglect.

SDOH Lens Questions:

- **Poverty/Economic Stability:** Are their jobs sufficient to cover basic needs? Access to paid leave? Ability to afford a crib?
- **Housing:** Is this shared sleeping due to lack of space or resources? Is housing stable?
- **Maternal Health/Caregiver Stress:** Is exhaustion linked to economic stress? Are there language barriers to accessing support?
- **Social/Community Context:** Do they have a support network? Are they isolated? Do cultural norms influence sleep practices?
- **Systemic Racism:** How might their immigrant status or ethnicity impact their access to services or experience with systems?
- **Bias Check:** Am I judging their home's disorganization? Am I making assumptions about their parenting based on appearance or language?

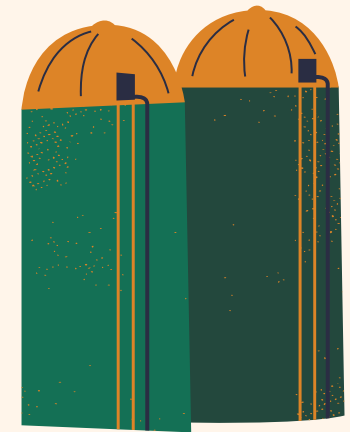
Overcoming Challenges: A Collective Effort



Resource Limitations



Interagency Silos



Changing Mindsets



Complex Data Integration



Call to Action: Your Role in Prevention



BE OBSERVANT

Look beyond the obvious



BE EMPATHETIC

Seek to understand, not just judge



COLLABORATE & EDUCATE

Engage across disciplines
Share your insights to
inform prevention efforts



ADVOCATE

Champion systemic
change

Final Thoughts



Infant mortality is a complex societal issue

SDOH are foundational drivers of risk

Your work provides critical insights

Collaboration is key to prevention

Resources for Further Learning

- CDC Social Determinants of Health website: <https://www.cdc.gov/about/priorities/why-is-addressing-sdoh-important.html>
- World Health Organization (WHO) SDOH: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health>
- National Child Fatality Review Center: <https://ncfrp.org/>
- American Academy of Pediatrics Safe Sleep Guidelines: <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/safe-sleep>
- IDOH Safe Sleep: <https://www.in.gov/health/safesleep/safe-sleep/safe-sleep-program/>

Thank you!

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