

Best Practices for SDOH Data Collection and Use Improve Health Outcomes



The World Health Organization estimates that social and economic factors determine from 30 to 55 percent of [health outcomes](#). Known as social determinants of health (SDOH), these factors include elements like education, safe housing, social support, and food security. Effective collection and use of SDOH data proves critical to health equity.

The medical community recognizes the importance of SDOH. In fact, a recent study showed that 80 percent of organizations collect data about the conditions in which people live, work, learn, worship and play. However, lack of standardization and other challenges make it difficult for these organizations to leverage this data to improve health outcomes.

Social and Economic Factors Critical to Healthcare Success

SDOH data can help healthcare organizations improve patient outcomes first by identifying the needs and challenges of different populations. Having identified specific needs and trends, providers can then develop interventions tailored to addressing root causes of health disparities. And by collaborating with other stakeholders, they can create important systemic changes.

For example, an Oregon program used SDOH data to identify high-risk pregnant women. The program then provided these women with coordinated care including home visits, social services, and referrals to community resources. This in turn reduced preterm births, low birth weight, and infant mortality among the participants.

SDOH data delivers the most value when integrated with clinical and other types of health-related data. In this way, it builds a comprehensive understanding of health status, risks, and opportunities for both individuals and populations.



Challenges to Gathering and Using SDOH Data

While the healthcare community largely agrees on the value of SDOH data, collecting and using that information effectively involves challenges. For instance, a lack of standardization in how and what data are collected reduces data value. As yet, no consensus exists on what constitutes SDOH and how to store, measure, and report the data.

Secondly, SDOH data are often scattered across various agencies, from education and housing to social services and public health. Accessing and integrating these data requires collaboration among stakeholders. Technical and legal frameworks must also be built to ensure data quality, security, and privacy.

Another key challenge involves ensuring the privacy and security of individuals whose data is collected and shared. SDOH data may contain sensitive data such as race, sexual orientation, immigration status, disabilities, and domestic violence. Laws such as HIPAA and ADA strictly govern the collection, management, and use of this sensitive information.

Analyzing and interpreting the data presents challenges, as well. SDOH data are complex and multidimensional, requiring advanced analytical tools and skills to identify patterns and associations. Moreover, SDOH data need to be interpreted in the context of the local culture, history, and values of the populations they represent.

Best Practices for Collecting and Managing SDOH Data

Overcoming these challenges will require more collaboration and innovation among stakeholders from multiple sectors. For example, organizations can use methods such as surveys, screening tools, and interviews to collect SDOH data. Using tools and methods that have been tested and standardized will help ensure the quality and usability of the data.

Before beginning data collection, however, the organization must develop clear and specific goals for how and by whom the data will be used. These goals should also include outlining the intended benefits the data will bring to individuals and communities. This information will determine the type and quantity of data needed, as well as how to obtain informed consent.



Because of the nature of the data collected, organizations must ensure [regulatory compliance](#), preserving [data security](#) and privacy. In addition to informed consent, this may include anonymizing the data and implementing data encryption. It will also involve carefully managing data access and data lifecycle.

Throughout the process, collecting organizations must engage and empower the individuals and populations whose data they gather. When the process is collaborative, respecting the privacy and preferences of the affected populations, its effectiveness increases.

Effective Data Management Unlocks Data Potential

SDOH data can have significant impact on outcomes by providing insights into social and environmental factors that affect health. By collecting, integrating, and using SDOH data wisely, healthcare entities can design programs to effectively address health disparities.

An important step in this process involves information governance, the process of locating, managing and securing data across the enterprise. The [information governance experts](#) at Messaging Architects can help healthcare organizations harness the power of their data.