

Sociology of Health

Social factors play a critical role in determining or influencing the health of individuals, groups, and the larger society. Many of the greatest threats to an individual's health and physical well-being stem largely from unhealthy lifestyles and high-risk behavior and are closely linked to social conditions and culture. Health and physical well-being are also influenced by the manner in which societies organize their resources to cope with health hazards and deliver medical care to the population at large.

This course will examine the relative importance of individual and institutional variables in determining the health of individuals and important subgroups of the population. We will focus on the social patterning of illness and disease by social class, gender, race, and ethnicity, and on the structure of health care delivery and finance in the United States.

We will review research methods such as participant observation, qualitative interviewing, surveys, archival research, and spatial analysis (GIS). Students will choose a topic in the sociology of health and develop a study over the course of the semester. This will culminate in a 20-25 page final research paper.

Potential topics may include patterns of help-seeking, risky behaviors, narratives of illness experiences (including pain management), doctor-patient interactions, the experience of accessing care, the stigma of certain diseases, the impact of stress (including racism) on health, linguistic and cultural difference, and how health care finance and insurance limits access to care, among many others.

Requirements

Students will be asked to make a few class presentations, leading discussion of the empirical and theoretical literature on individual and institutional explanations of health over the first month. They will also have to write memos in preparation for the term paper, including a statement on their research question and research methods. Students will be asked to make two presentations related to their research papers; one presentation of their research proposals and one presentation of the results. Presentations and memos will count for half of the final grade, with the final paper counting for the other half.