

Evidence in Public Health

Steps to Make It Real



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KEYWORDS

- Literature review • Public health • Methodological studies
- Social determinants of health • Health impact assessment

KEY POINTS

- Effectiveness in public health entails establishing interventions that focus on the determinants of the health-disease process.
- The examination of the Cochrane Public Health Group reviews indicates trends in this direction, as well as the influence of the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health.
- Successful experiences, qualitative studies, reports, case studies, or other nonrandomized methodological designs should be taken as health evidence, based on narrative syntheses that show the impact on health determinants.
- Most of the public health reviews that were examined in this study deemed that the evidence was weak, moderate, or nonexistent.
- We identified that evidence of the analyzed public health interventions had some impact on health, as well as a difficulty in capturing the impact of their use.

INTRODUCTION

Public health problems are diversified, complex, and reflect the unequal distribution of wealth. Although it is a challenge to obtain evidence in public health, researchers can currently rely on theoretic and methodological frameworks as well as practical experiences to develop the synthesis of evidence.¹ Along with the growing governmental

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recognition of the importance of evidence-based public health, these resources are intended to lead the transformation of public health policies and practices toward equity.¹

The systematic review (SR) indexed in the Cochrane Library as reviews of public health interest correspond with approximately half of the titles, with high diversity observed with regard to the interventions of interest (pharmacologic or nonpharmacologic), breadth of the context (local or national, home, community, work-related, or environmental), and object of the intervention (age group; cultural group; life cycle stage; other affinities/identities/demographic characteristics, such as gender, social class). This quantitative contingent is consistent with the current popularity of SR and evidence in public health and social sciences.²

Cochrane has adopted the reviewing of global public health issues, in compliance with the priorities of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) created in 2005³ by the World Health Organization, as a support to address the social causes of health inequalities. The CSDH gathers and analyzes evidence about interventions that promote the reduction of health inequalities, focusing on the “causes of the causes” associated with the need to (1) improve living conditions; (2) address inequalities in the distribution of power, money, and resources; (3) measure and understand the problem, and (4) assess the impact of actions and interventions.⁴

The Cochrane Public Health Group (CPHG), in accordance with the Cochrane Health Equity Field, recommends that reviewers endeavor to analyze the effects of interventions on health equity,⁵ which means addressing the theoretic and methodological challenges of exposing social determinants that generate inequalities.⁴

Traditional research designs tend to capture fragments of the well-established relationship between working and living conditions and the state of health or disease, which makes it difficult to clearly show the “causes of the causes.” To clearly show the social determinants of health it is necessary to show the objects of intervention in their multiple determinations, thus exposing the mediatory connections between social structures and health problems. To show these requires research designs, such as case studies, and sources of evidence, such as experiences of health workers and of institutions that study failure and success rates, in addition to the research designs already used to measure the effectiveness of clinical treatments.⁶

This article therefore (1) discusses different views on the adequacy of synthesis of evidence methodologies for reviews in public health, and (2) examines the reviews registered in the CPHG to exemplify syntheses of evidence in public health and their applications and practical impacts.

METHODOLOGIES FOR SYNTHESIS OF EVIDENCE IN PUBLIC HEALTH: SOME CONTROVERSIES

Health literature reviews are based on systematization, analysis, and evaluation of primary research that places importance on research designs from the positivist tradition, with the potential to show hypotheses related to objects of the natural sciences. In this tradition, health literature reviews can be either based on biomedical categories or on the already existing health problems and/or on the associated risk factors,⁷ with restrictions of the reviews and studies shaped by this paradigm being criticized by Marxism,⁸ among other schools of thought.

A broad definition is appropriate:

Evidence-based public health is the process involved in providing the best available evidence to influence decisions about the effectiveness of policies and interventions and secure improvements in health and reduction in healthinequalities^{1(p22)}

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