

Healthy North Carolina 2020 and Social Determinants of Health

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To the Editor—The September/October 2012 issue of the NCMJ focuses on social determinants of health such as poverty, education, and housing. These influences on health are significant factors in the lives of North Carolina's residents, and they contribute to our state's overall health ranking of 33rd in the nation [1]. The Healthy North Carolina 2020 objectives recognize the important role that social determinants play [2]. Income level, educational attainment status, and quality of housing all contribute to health status and ultimately to life expectancy [3]. Individuals dealing with the challenges of poverty are more likely to engage in risky behaviors that negatively impact health outcomes [4]. All of these determinants factor into known barriers to accessing appropriate health care along with higher utilization of emergency departments and more hospitalizations [5].

North Carolina is making progress in addressing some key social determinants. A recent report shows that over 80% of high school students graduate in four years—North Carolina's highest rate ever [6]. However, the percent of households spending more than 30% of their income on rental housing has increased from 41.8% in 2008 to 47.9% in 2011 [7], and there has not been any improvement in the percentage of individuals living in poverty [8]. And while North Carolinians have reached a higher average life expectancy (78.2 years in 2011), the percentage of adults who report feeling that they are in good, very good or excellent health has not changed significantly. [2, 9, 10].

Quality of life is shaped by many factors—environment, education, and family—and it is an intangible but critical component of health. It is essential that North Carolina continue its efforts to support students in graduating from high school, find more ways to promote affordable housing, and enhance outreach programs that can provide individuals and families with the help they need to live healthier lives.

Healthy NC 2020 serves as our state's health improvement plan, which will address and improve our state's most pressing health priorities. Using the Healthy North Carolina 2020 objectives as a unifying vision across programs, divisions, organizations, and communities, North Carolina can achieve the population health improvements that will lead to "a better state of health" for all. More information about Healthy North Carolina 2020 is available at <http://publichealth.nc.gov/hnc2020/>. NCMJ

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