Policy Recommendations for UTSA/UpTogether/Methodist Healthcare Ministries Social Determinants of Health Study

From Fall 2021 to January 2023, the University of San Antonio, Texas (UTSA) conducted a comprehensive study commissioned by the H.E. Butt Foundation, Methodist Healthcare Ministries, and the San Antonio Area Foundation. The study aimed to evaluate the impact of recurring cash assistance and opportunities for social connection and the exchange of social capital, facilitated by the national nonprofit organization UpTogether, on the social determinants of health (SDOH) for its participants. The study specifically focused on a cohort of 1,000 individuals and families residing in the City of San Antonio, whose income fell at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level as of December 2020, and who had faced financial hardships as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., job loss or reduced working hours). Over the span of 25 months (December 2020 to January 2023), the participants received $5,108 in unrestricted cash assistance.

Research strategies to understand the impact of UpTogether participation on variables that impact SDOH for participants entailed:

- By analyzing the extensive data collected through SMART Surveys from 511 (out of the original 1,000 families) willing participants, UpTogether gained valuable insights. The SMART Survey on the UpTogether Community asks members to share information about their housing, financial information, impact they are creating with the investment, and involvement in community and within their networks. All survey questions are optional, and members answer different questions at different intervals. Some may answer a question more than once.
  - For example, some questions are asked only once in 365 days whereas other questions may be asked every 2 weeks. As of January 2023, participants had collectively responded to 12,196 surveys. (On average, participants answered about 24 surveys or one survey per month).
- Collecting new data through the design and administration of a broader survey that included additional variables related to SDOH at three different points in time (April 2022, September 2022, and January 2023), with several open-ended questions in the last survey. The first survey was administered to 260 participants; the response rates for the second and third surveys were 73.6% (i.e., 192/261) and 78.5% (i.e., 205/261), respectively.
- Comparing SDOH indicators for UpTogether participants to nationally representative surveys administered by the U.S. Census Bureau.
Key findings from the study participants' SMART and UTSA-administered survey responses conclude that monthly household income(s) increased considerably during the last nine months of fund investment; however, participants who lived in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of poverty experienced relatively smaller increases. The findings also reveal that individuals used direct cash investment to support SDOH of economic stability.

Moreover, the study's findings underscore a relationship between the deprivation of resources and opportunities, and the resulting health disparities and adverse outcomes observed within socioeconomically marginalized communities. However, in the face of these socioeconomically disadvantaged circumstances deliberately imposed by systemic structures, the individuals directly affected by them in this study have demonstrated and continue to exhibit remarkable resilience, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and compassion. For example, in the open-ended questions in the January 2023 survey, individuals described how they improved their personal mental health and well-being, created meaningful opportunities to provide for and connect with their families, and increased community engagement. This should be met with heightened concern from policymakers' and increased public investment. These investments must protect and further promote the positive and intrinsic characteristics found in these resilient communities. In this vein, participants' survey data and responses challenge public policymakers to reimagine and reshape existing public policies and institute new ones that facilitate a more equitable, compassionate, and strengths-based oriented society. Specifically, participants' responses to the open-ended survey questions on their feedback about their participation and goals for the future highlight the need for the following:

1) increased wraparound services to support healthcare and preventative health services;
2) Increased educational opportunities;
3) Increased employment prospects with higher wages to support economic stability;
4) improved transportation;
5) increased quality affordable housing options;
6) increased public investments toward neighborhood preservation and revitalization;
7) increased public investments toward community and civic engagement initiatives that support relationship building; and,
8) the necessity of more strength-based aligned direct cash investment initiatives that include more frequent and higher payment amounts.

By addressing these aforementioned community needs through forward-thinking public policies, while concurrently expanding the implementation of regular direct cash investments to under-resourced families, policymakers can drastically improve health outcomes and foster economic mobility within these communities.

Captured below are several proactive policy recommendations based on the quantitative survey data coupled with sentiments from the qualitative analysis. Collectively, these recommendations underscore the pivotal role played by neighborhood and community context in shaping health outcomes and economic mobility, while emphasizing the potential impact of cash investments on such outcomes. These recommendations stress the urgency for additional investments in critical areas such as housing, employment, education, transportation, and community engagement initiatives:
1. Policy Recommendations for Local Policymakers

- Local governments should use their convening power and resources to host and/or sponsor regular community engagement events, where community members can build social capital;
- Local governments should prioritize using federal funds to build new affordable public housing units that include optional wraparound services and community centers, while also revitalizing and preserving existing low-income communities and protecting residents from displacement;
- Local governments should allocate a significant portion of their remaining American Recovery Plan Act (“ARPA”) funds to: 1) building new public infrastructure (e.g., housing, education, childcare); 2) directly supporting public employment expansion, and 3) funding direct cash transfer programs; and,
- Local governments should work in partnership with nongovernmental entities to develop site-based educational and civic engagement initiatives in underserved and under-resourced communities.

2. Policy Recommendations for State Policymakers

State governments can do the following to protect, proliferate, and expand the scope of strength-based investments, thus ensuring better health outcomes in historically marginalized, financially underinvested and under-resourced communities:

- Increase monetary contributions that states provide to qualifying residents enrolled in higher education programs through state educational opportunity grants, thus enabling more financially constrained residents to pursue their higher education dreams;
- Institute refundable child tax credits that can be received on a monthly basis and child and dependent care credits to enhance the economic security and health outcomes of lower-to-middle income families with children and other dependents;
- Institute or raise the ceiling on circuit breaker tax credits for qualifying renters with low incomes;
- Mandate a statewide living wage to ensure the best possible outcomes for residents’ subsistence, health, and vitality; and,
- Provide economic incentives to lure fresh food markets and supermarkets to food and economic deserts while concurrently investing in education and community nutrition programs.


The following policy recommendations for federal policymakers are based on the essence of data and responses from survey participants:

- In order to better reflect the decades of wage stagnation and hyperinflation, federal policymakers should raise income limits and substantially lower the antiquated “30 percent” metric, an output of the 1969 Brooke Amendment, which determines the affordability of public or government subsidized housing for a tenant;
● Federal policymakers must make large and sustained investments in growing and revitalizing the nation’s public housing stock;

● Federal policymakers must expand income eligibility ceilings and increase maximum amounts for the federal educational grant for first-time tertiary and vocational education students from households with low incomes;

● Federal policymakers should enact a multi-year guaranteed income pilot program, which would enable the most marginalized in our society to have improved health outcomes, housing and economic stability, and capital to pursue new opportunities; and

● Federal policymakers should permanently reinstitute the expanded benefits of the 2021 Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.