

Can Better Methods Help Us Understand and Solve Inequitable Treatment in Health Care?

The Public Health Problem

Current health care frameworks often treat equity as a separate concern. Researchers lack methodological tools to systematically identify, measure, and address inequities across key domains: availability, patient-centeredness, access, effectiveness, and implementation.

Persistent and widening health disparities—driven by systemic barriers—leave marginalized populations with worse outcomes and fewer opportunities for recovery and wellness.

Background

Unjust structural conditions tied to race, income, geography, and other social determinants lead to inequitable treatment in health care, which is perpetuated—and often deepened—by inequities in health care itself (barriers to access, poor quality, and ineffective care).

Without better methods, we risk misunderstanding or overlooking where these problems take hold.

What This Article Addresses

This paper identifies practical, interdisciplinary research approaches that can help uncover and address inequities across five domains of health care delivery.

What They Did *(Methods)*

The authors synthesized concepts and methods from epidemiology, health services research, and implementation science to provide guidance on evaluating health care imbalances through a conceptual, cross-disciplinary lens.

What They Discovered *(Findings)*



Inequities are everywhere: Health care disparities emerge across all aspects of care—not just access.



Old methods fall short: Conventional research often misses the systems and context driving inequitable treatment.



Better tools exist: Interdisciplinary, patient-informed methods can reveal where these issues take root—and how to change them.

Opportunities for Action

The study findings highlight opportunities for:

Health care leaders and providers

- Examine all domains of care (not just access) to uncover where disparities emerge.
- Use data analytics and patient feedback to improve health care delivery.
- Redesign services with equity as a foundational principle.

Policymakers and payors

- Fund research that addresses disparities in care and treatment outcomes.
- Expand flexible delivery and payment models that meet the needs of underserved communities.
- Invest in data systems that promote longitudinal study of structural determinants on care delivery and treatment outcomes.

Researchers

- Move beyond identifying inequitable treatment areas—focus on how it forms and persists.
- Apply participatory, multilevel, and context-specific methods.
- Choose methods aligned with the health care domain being studied.

Patients and families seeking recovery

- Talk to your providers about barriers that impact your health care.
- Use available tools to navigate the health care system.
- Advocate for transparency and accountability in health care outcomes and reporting.