

---

## POLICY BRIEF

---

### **THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING**

This policy brief presents the main findings and recommendations from the Southgate research project ‘The Social Determinants of Health and Psychological Wellbeing: Improving the mental health of all through broad based policy and intersectoral action’, which examined state-based policy for strategy that enabled population mental health.

The global burden of disease attributable to mental disorders continues to increase in all countries. Consistent with this, the incidence of mental health issues in Australia and South Australia continues to rise. In addition to clinical models that focus on individuals, mental illness and treatment, promotional and preventative models are urgently needed to support a focus on enabling population mental health and psychological wellbeing.

### **MAIN MESSAGES**

- **Population mental health is best promoted when policies and strategies utilise a social model of health, implemented at social, cultural and political levels.**
- **The development of healthy public policy that has the potential to address the social determinants of health (i.e. education, employment, financial security, housing & transport) is necessary to improve population health and mental health.**
- **The sectors responsible for the built and natural environments have much to offer population mental health.**
- **Intersectoral policy and practice is essential to develop and implement action that supports population mental health.**

The focus on rising mental illness rates has resulted in recognition of the need for increased mental health services and treatments, but to reduce these rates, an additional focus on population mental health and psychological wellbeing is needed.

A focus on psychological wellbeing is enabled when policy frames mental health as a dynamic state influenced by and connected to place and social context. Such framing is needed in both health and public policy as psychological wellbeing is impacted directly and indirectly by all policy.

---

This research examined South Australian policies from the health, built and natural environment sectors. The *30-year plan for Greater Adelaide (2010-2040)* and the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People Strategy (2016-2021)* were found to demonstrate explicit concern for the increasing incidence of mental illness and have provided strategy which will improve population health and mental health. These healthy public policies have utilized the SA government's Public Health Partnership approach to enable cross department action to develop (Mentally) Healthy Settings.

In the *30-year plan*, there is policy and strategy that prioritises the development of safe, liveable and connected neighbourhoods, which will in turn support social connection, inclusivity and cohesion. These factors enable the development of a sense of community and a sense of place, both which contribute to psychological wellbeing. In doing so, these factors will decrease the likelihood of social isolation and loneliness which are associated with the development of depression and mental illness. The planning of liveable suburbs encouraged by the *30-year plan* has, to date, been applied to suburbs nearer the city centre rather than those further away. This uneven development has the potential to increase health inequities.

In the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* initiative, there is policy and strategy that prioritises the development of green neighbourhoods, access to greenspace and contact with nature. These factors provide opportunities to reduce stress, restore attention and improve emotional regulation, again significantly contributing to psychological wellbeing. The policy includes a specific focus on connection to country to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who bear an inequitable burden of mental illness, as do those who are struggling with socioeconomic disadvantage.

Strategies from these two policies can be applied by a range of sectors, local government and non-government organisations. The broad application of these strategies will support collaborative practices that advance the development of socially connected, green built environments with services and amenities that support liveability, wellbeing, health and mental health.

## KEY BROAD RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Develop intersectoral partnerships to design strategies that will act on the social determinants of mental health. The Health in All Policies initiative and the Public Health Partnerships hold great promise.**
- **Implement and expand all *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* strategies across a range of sectors, local governments and non-government organisations.**
- **Ensure urban development is built to enable the social processes integral to a healthy community as this will support liveability, wellbeing and mental health. Such strategies should be prioritised in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged suburbs in the first instance. Such prioritisation will contribute to reducing health inequities.**

---

## SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. It is recommended that all sectors consider their ability to register as a Public Health partner and utilise the Public Health Partnership model to support the collaboration and projects necessary to achieve action on the social and structural determinants of health. It is also recommended that the SA Health Department not only continue to support and authorise the model but expand it.
2. The Health sector supports a continuum of approaches necessary to govern for health and mental health including treatment, prevention and promotion. It is recommended that preventative and promotional approaches in SA Health are significantly reinvigorated and strengthened. The recent development of *Wellbeing SA* is a welcome initiative.
3. Implementing all the 7 strategies of the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People Strategy*, including the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* strategy at local and state levels of government and by non-government organisations will significantly support population mental health.
4. The delivery of the *30-year Plan* has capacity to achieve improved neighbourhood based social outcomes and therefore improved population mental health outcomes. These outcomes need to be sought for all Greater Adelaide to address mental health inequities. Further, the SA Government needs to value and measure social outcomes equally with environmental and economic outcomes. Social outcomes are frequently overlooked as important measures of population mental health. Ensuring they are measured will increase their visibility and elevate awareness of the impact of social, political and cultural context to population mental health and psychological wellbeing.

For further information visit [Stretton Health Equity](#) at the University of Adelaide, or email: [strettonhealth@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:strettonhealth@adelaide.edu.au).