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Health disparities and the environment: Widening the focus

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Health disparities and the environment: widening the focus

- Definitions
 - How could the social environment impact health disparities?
 - Creating, exacerbating, and perpetuating health disparities
 - How can this perspective inform environmental health research and policies?
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“The poor are getting poorer, but with the rich getting richer it all averages out in the long run.”

Health disparities

- Differences in health that raise concerns about justice and human rights
 - Worse health among socially disadvantaged groups, e.g., by race/ethnic group or class (socioeconomic resources/position)
 - Plausible that could be improved by policies
 - Health disparities are the metric by which we measure progress toward greater health equity
 - Equity is an ethical concept: distributive justice
 - Equalizing opportunities to reach one's full health potential
 - Requires addressing key determinants of health
 - Also informed by human rights principles
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How could the environment influence health?

- Obvious: Toxic exposures, pollution, physical hazards in homes, neighborhoods, workplaces
- Less obvious: The social environment
 - Social and economic conditions such as
 - poverty & the stressors that often accompany it; educational attainment; employment & wage levels and working conditions; incarceration rates; social inequality; racial residential segregation
 - The built environment, which shapes and is shaped by social and economic conditions

The social environment: How could your income affect your health?

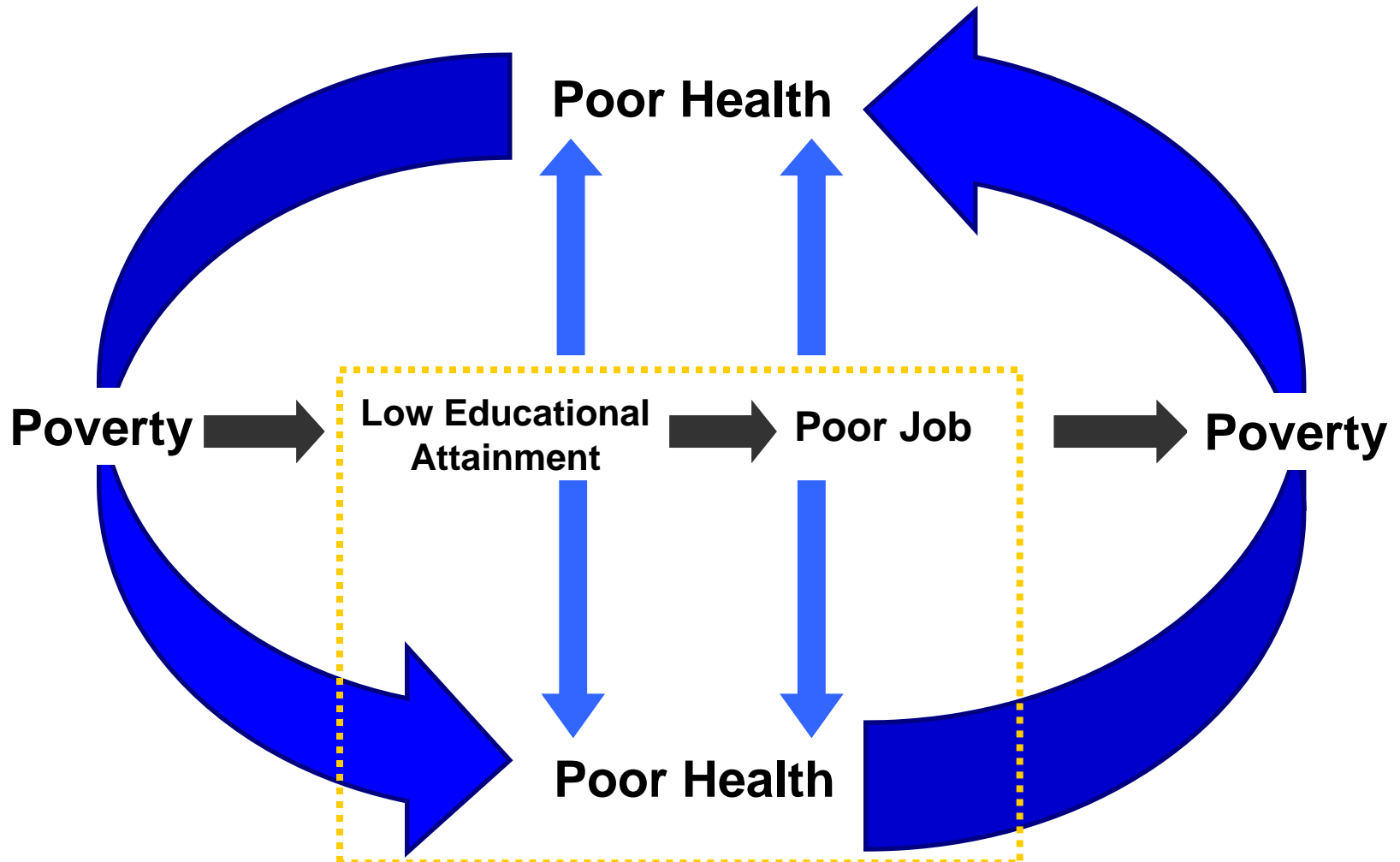
Income directly shapes:

- Medical care
- Housing quality
- Nutrition & physical activity options
- Neighborhood conditions
- Stress
- Social support

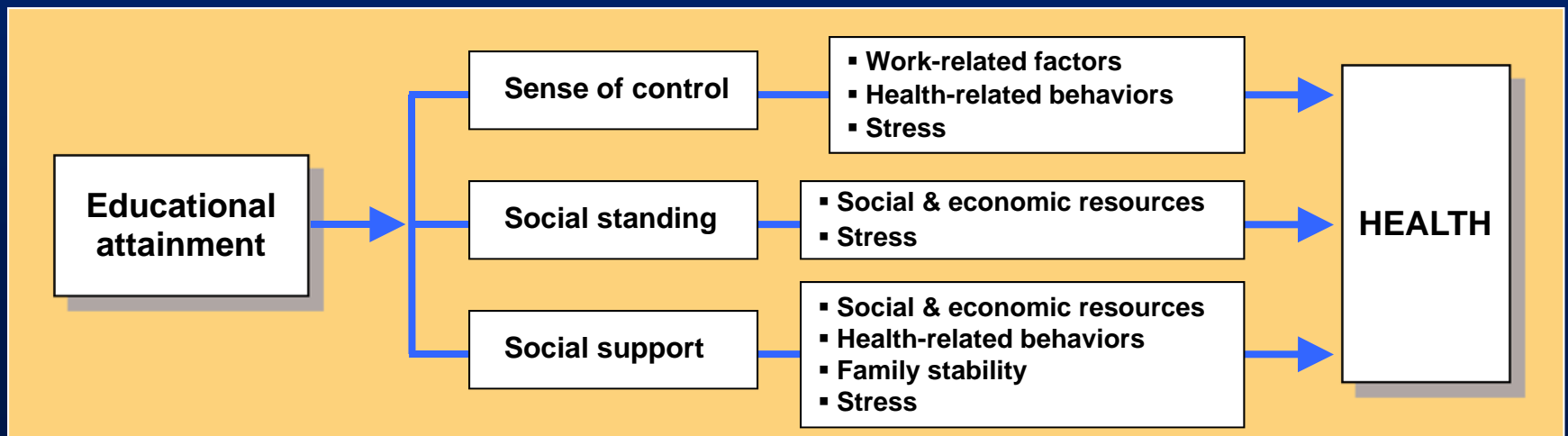
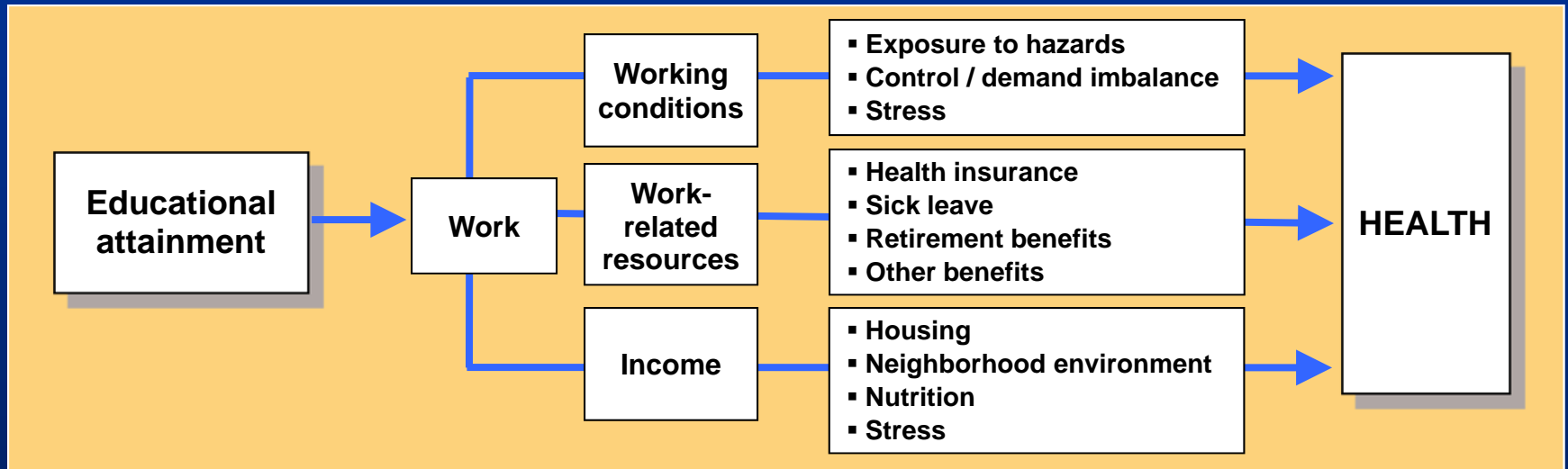
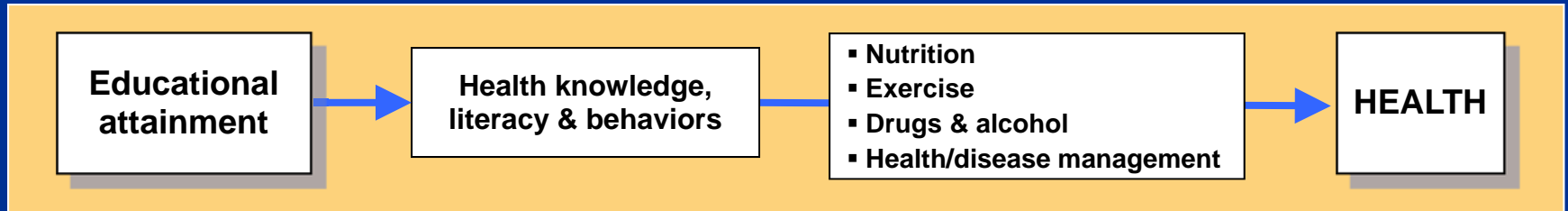
Parents' income shapes the next generation's:

- Education
- Working conditions, including control
- Income

Vicious cycle of poverty and poor health



How could education affect health?

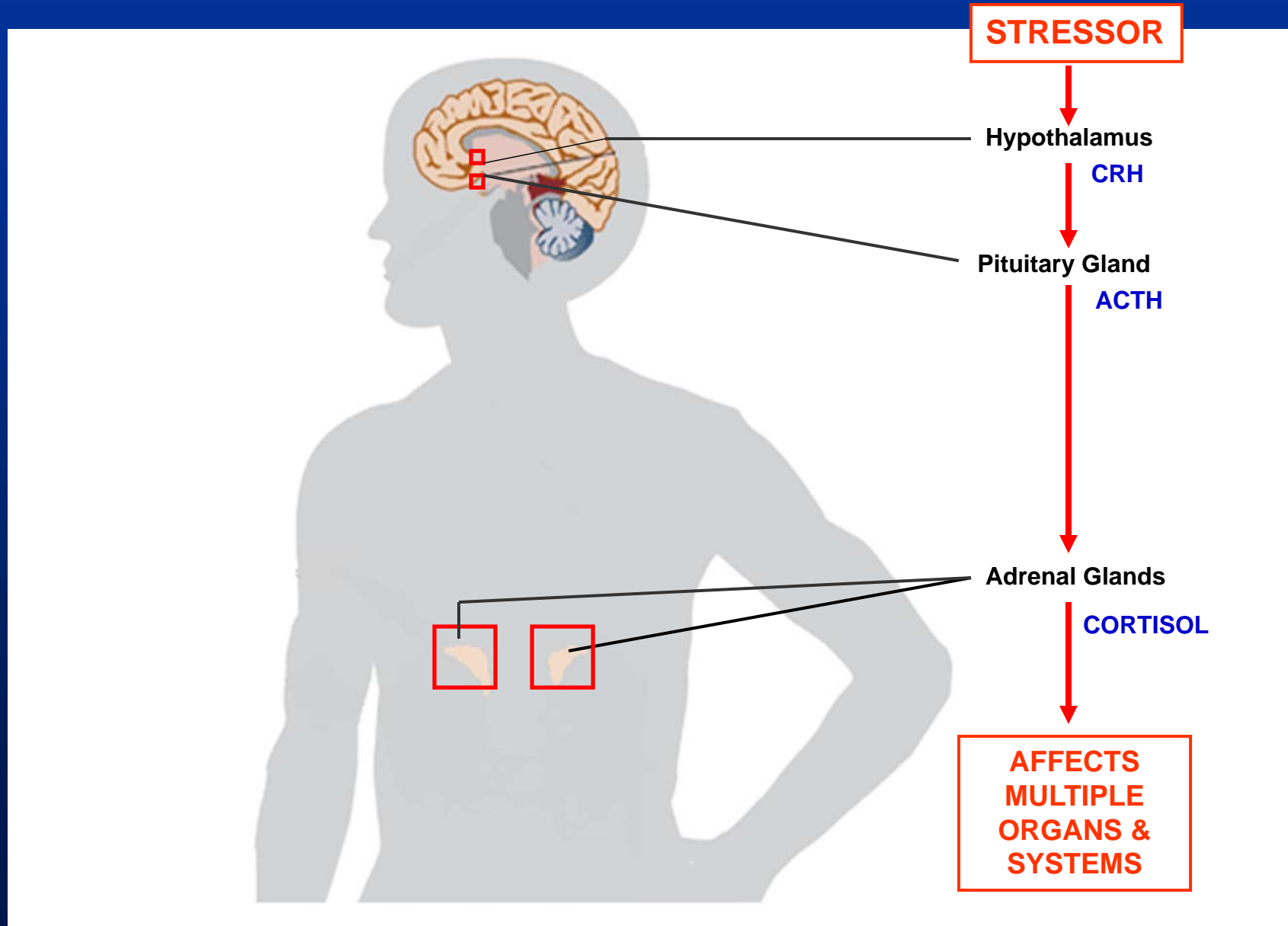


How could your neighborhood affect your health?



- Air pollution, toxics, physical hazards, crime
- Access to healthy food
- Safe places to exercise
- Ads, role models, & peer pressure for risky behaviors
- Social networks & support
- Stress, fear, anxiety, despair
- Blacks, Hispanics, & Whites of similar income levels live in different kinds of neighborhoods

How does stress get into the body?



Prevailing approaches to health disparities

- Reducing medical care disparities
- Informing and urging people to behave better

Find a way to keep your stress level down. What works for me is making a ton of money & having practically free health care.



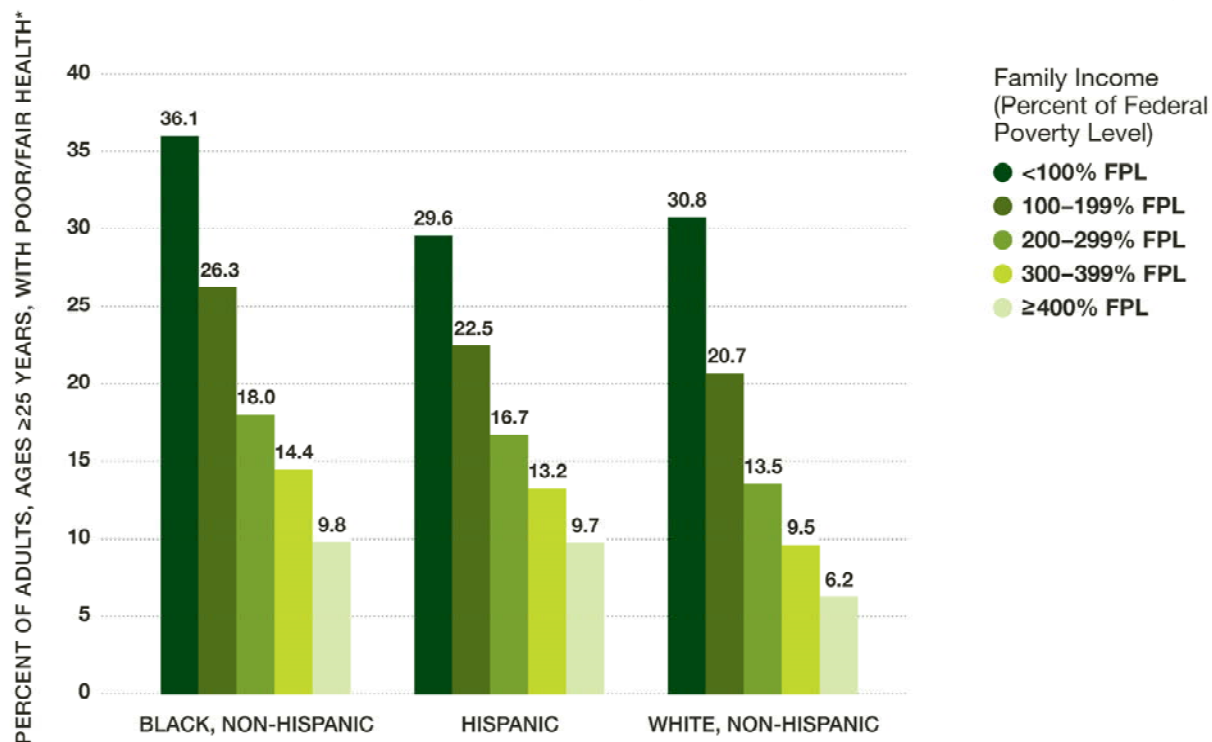
Where has this gotten us?

- Poor health performance overall, compared with other affluent countries
 - Wide and persistent health disparities by race and social class
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Unequal chances to be healthy

Income Is Linked With Health Regardless of Racial or Ethnic Group

Differences in health status by income do not simply reflect differences by race or ethnicity; differences in health can be seen within each racial or ethnic group. Both income and racial or ethnic group matter.



Prepared for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation by the Center on Social Disparities in Health at the University of California, San Francisco.

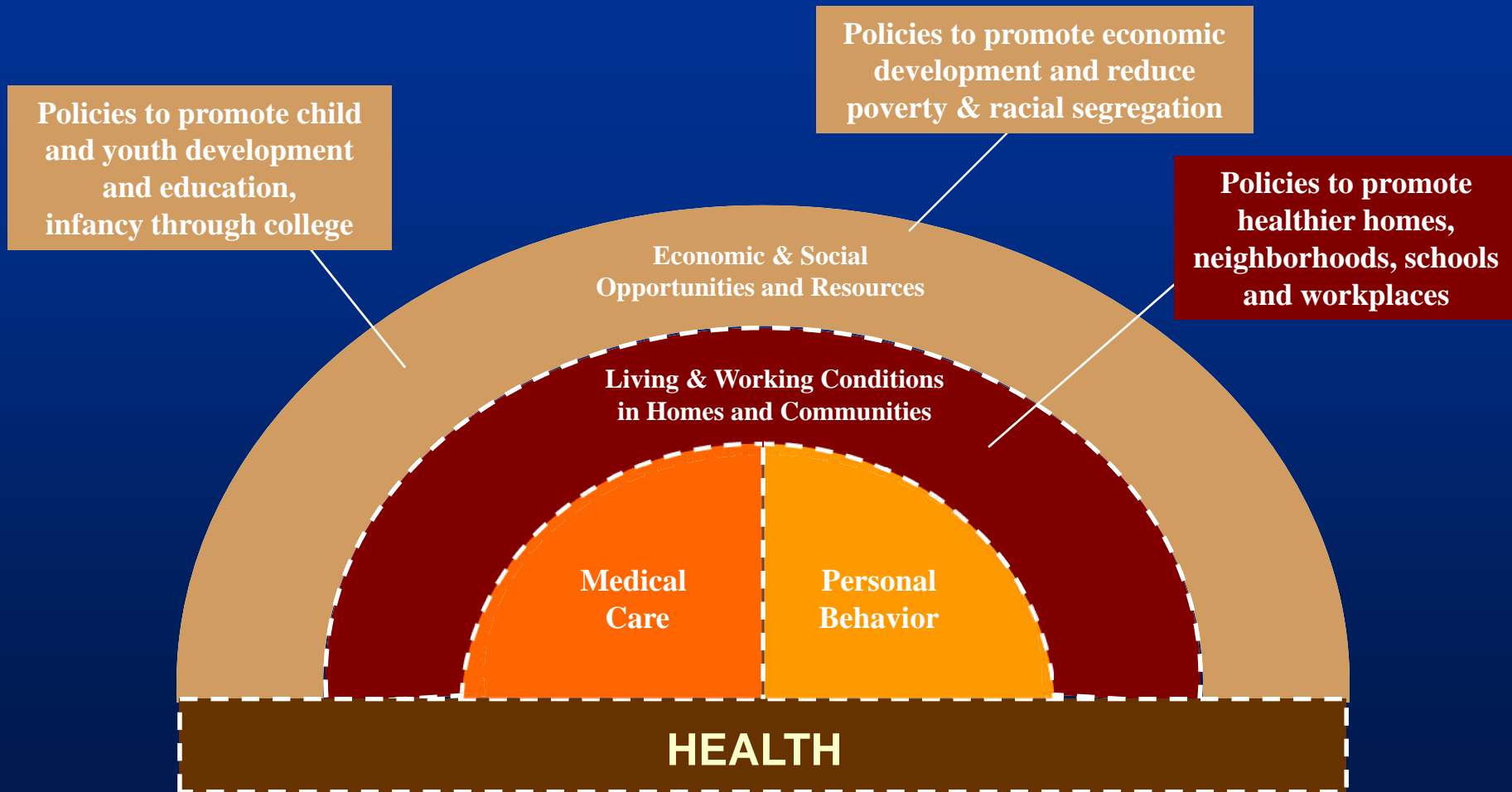
Source: National Health Interview Survey, 2001-2005.

*Age-adjusted

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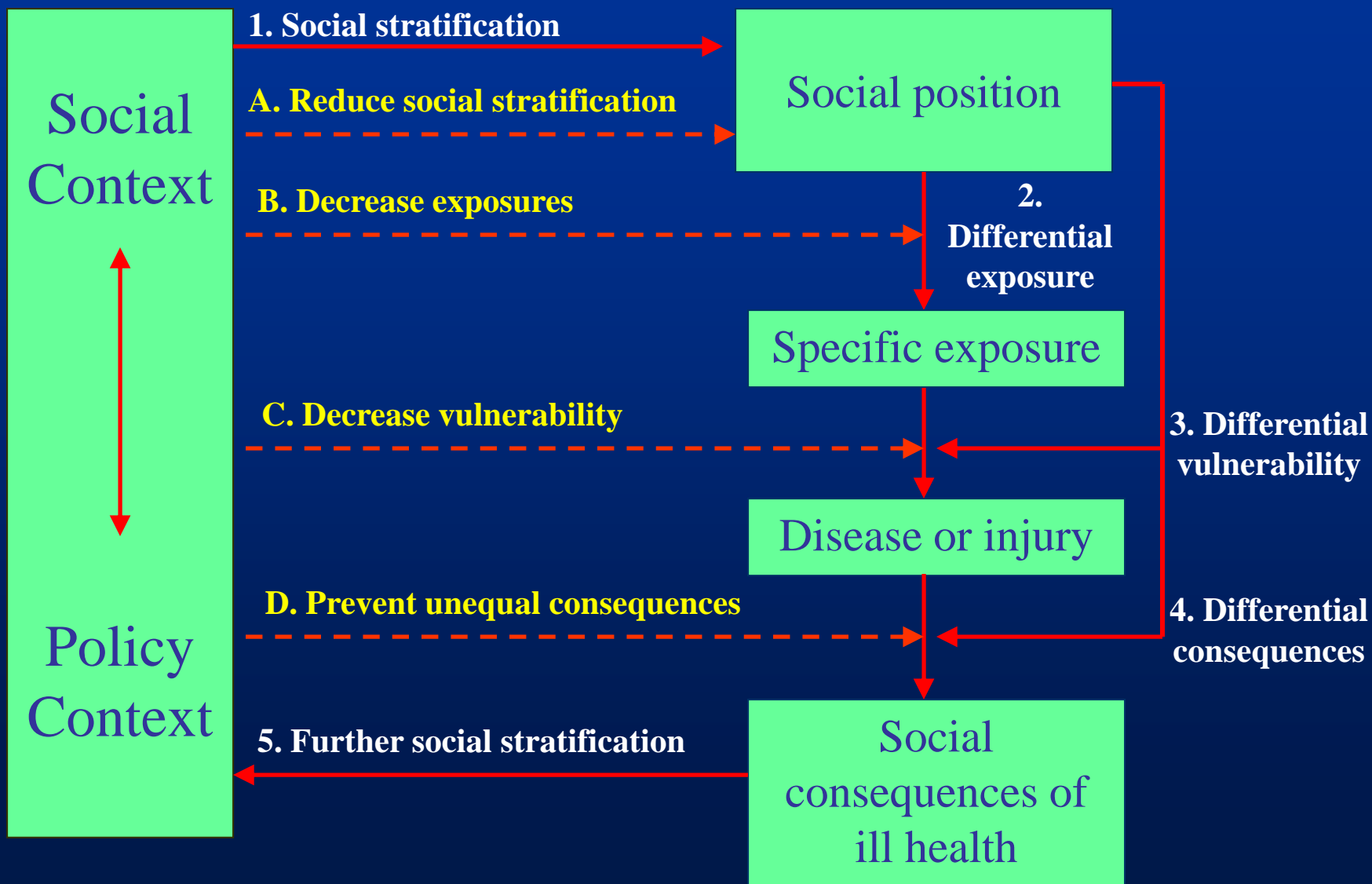
www.commissiononhealth.org

Widening the focus: Seeking the causes of the causes



SOCIETY

INDIVIDUAL



How could these concepts be useful in environmental health research and action?

- Lack of clarity about “health disparities” can lead to misuse of resources intended to address equity
 - Also could happen with environmental justice efforts, although starting from far more solid ground
 - A trap: “If it is avoidable, it is unjust”
 - Imagine 2 affluent communities with different rates of health problem X, suspected by the affected community to be due to a toxic exposure. Is that an environmental justice issue?
 - No. It’s a public health issue, but not a justice/equity issue.
 - “Unjust” implies avoidable but not vice versa

Better consideration & measurement of social position & social environment can improve environmental health research & action

- Will improve estimates of environmental factors' health impacts
 - Consider not only differential exposures at multiple levels and across the life course, but also
 - Vulnerability to health damage if exposed, and
 - Social & economic consequences of health damage
 - Will improve effectiveness of interventions
 - Why some groups are systematically more likely to be at risk
 - Understanding how both socioeconomic disadvantage & structural racial discrimination can create, exacerbate, & perpetuate health disparities across lifetimes & generations
 - Address exposure, vulnerability and social consequences
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