

Health System Scenarios

Possible Futures for Health and Health Equity in the USA, 2017–2030

The United States faces a health crisis. The country spends almost one-fifth of its GDP on healthcare, yet of industrialized countries has one of the least healthy populations. It also ranks poorly on health equity, with significant disparities by race, income, and geography, caused by differences in healthcare access, behavioral risk factors, exposure to environmental hazards, and the social determinants of health. How might the United States try to improve health outcomes? Here are three possible scenarios.

Marketplace



A new federal framework for regulating and funding health-care markets is enacted. Changes to Medicare and Medicaid narrow eligibility and reduce coverage. Small and medium-size businesses reduce healthcare benefits. Medical debt and bankruptcies rise and safety net hospitals experience increases in uncompensated care. Meanwhile the use of healthcare products and services by those who can afford them grows. Health inequity increases and threatens the health of all.

Conference Room



An unhealthy population and the rising cost of care contribute to a slumping economy. Corporate leaders and insurance companies demand that politicians implement regulations and policies that reduce healthcare costs by incentivizing holistic approaches to health and well-being. Stakeholders around the country experiment with approaches to respond to the root causes. Both health and health equity gradually improve.

Kitchen Table



Civil unrest and local grassroots activism are fueled by marginalized and vulnerable people who are unable to access the resources they need to be healthy. Activists and organizers give voice to their concerns and to demand action. Local multi-sector collaborations drive local action. Health and health equity improve—but only in places with effective local leadership.