

Critical Health Literacy and the unequal journey from evidence to action

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Outline:

- Challenges of translating evidence into action
- Why that matters
- From health literacy to critical health literacy
- CHL for reflection and action
- CHL as a shared responsibility
- CHL in times of uncertainty
- CHL for effectiveness research
- What does this look like!



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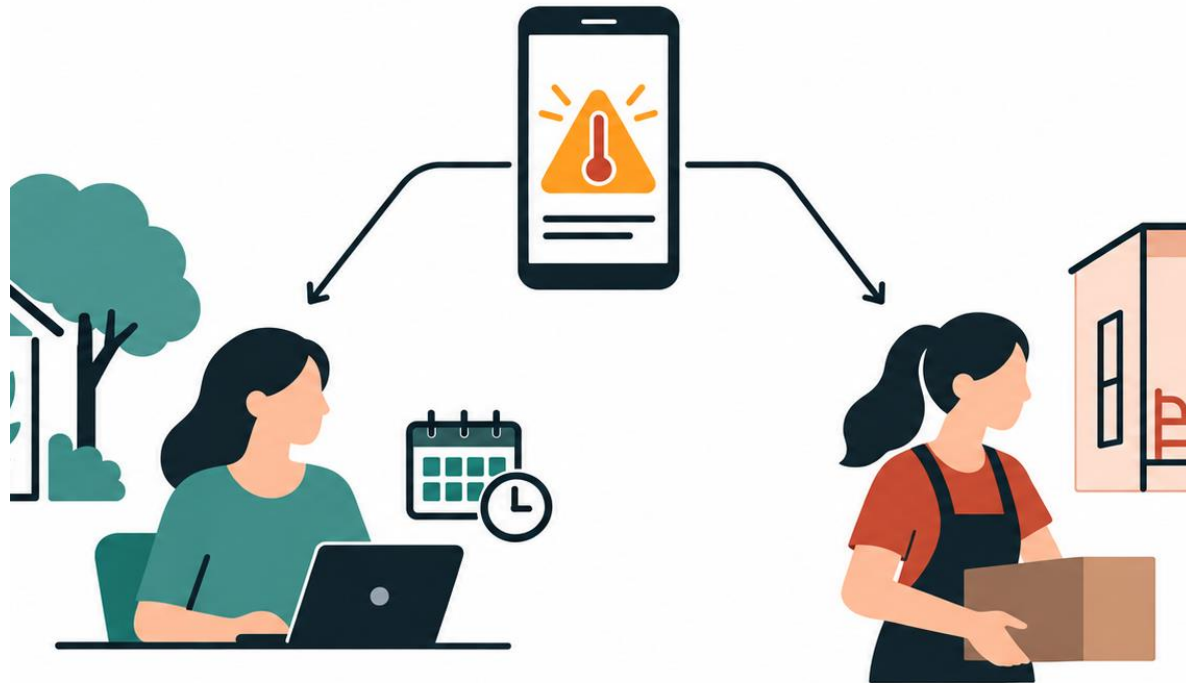
Why Evidence Is Not Enough: Power, Politics, and a Strategy Shift for Public Health

[JONATHAN C. HELLER](#)

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The same evidence, unequal possibilities



Globally

- 2000–2019 studies show approximately 489 000 heat-related deaths occur each year ¹
- 45% of these in Asia and 36% in Europe ¹
- The negative health impacts of heat are predictable and largely preventable ²

Finland

- 400 people died from heat-related causes during Finland's prolonged 2018 heatwave ³
- Adults with lower socioeconomic status accumulated significantly more factors that increased their exposure, sensitivity or reduced their capacity to adapt ³

1. Zhao et al, 2021 Global, regional, and national burden of mortality associated with non-optimal ambient temperatures from 2000 to 2019: a three-stage modelling study <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34245712/>

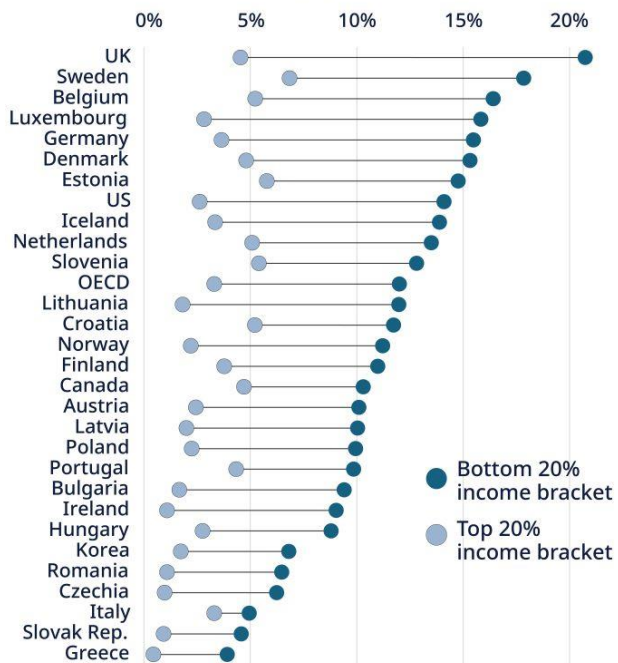
2. Heat-health action plans: guidance, second edition. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2026. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

3. Päivärinne V, Lipponen AH, Kollanus V, Tiittanen P, Karvonen S, Lanki T. Socioeconomic disparities in heat vulnerability among adults in Finland. Sci Rep. 2025 Jul 1;15(1):20611.doi: 10.1038/s41598-025-04599-9. PMID: 40595992; PMCID: PMC12219567.

Why this matters

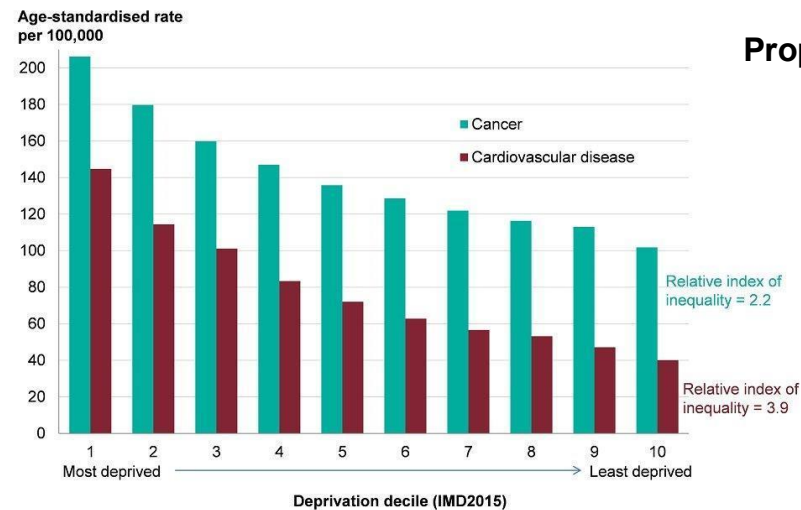
People on low incomes experience worse mental health

% with moderate or severe symptoms of depression, 2019



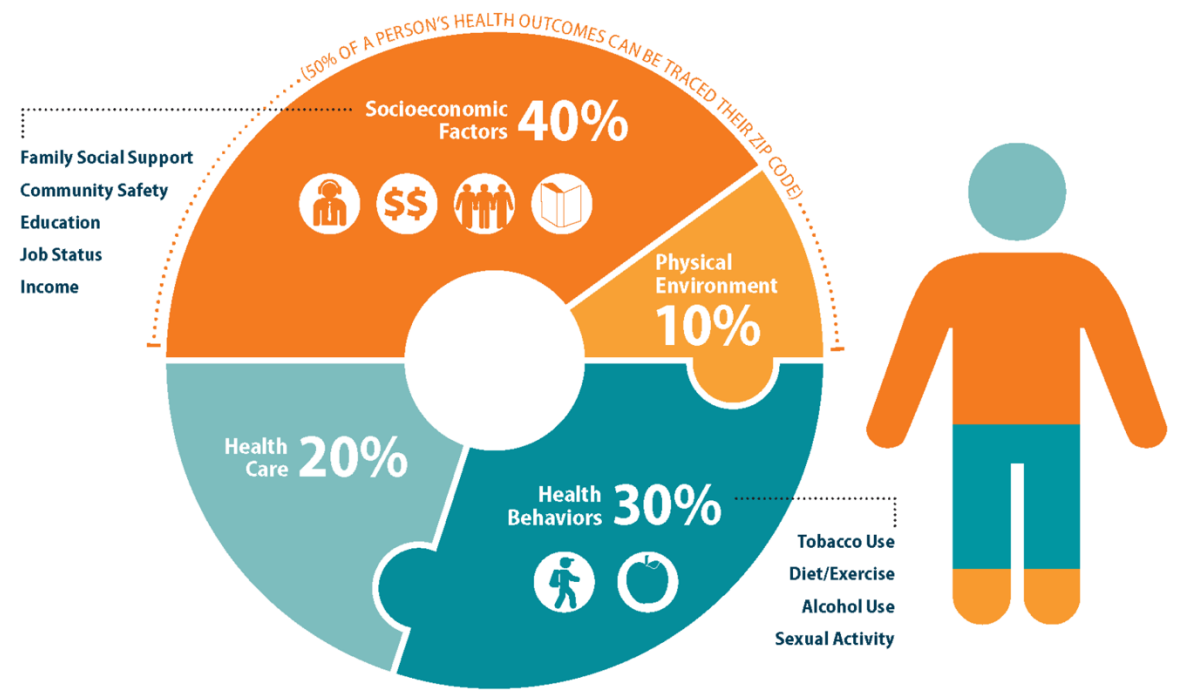
OECD estimates based on country surveys

1



Cancer and CVD according to deprivation decile

2



Proportionate contribution towards health outcomes

3

- https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/understanding-and-addressing-inequalities-in-mental-health_56adb10f-en.html
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-profile-for-england-2018/chapter-5-inequalities-in-health>
- <https://nhchw.org/social-determinants-of-health/>

From health literacy to critical health literacy

46%

reported limited health literacy
across 17 European countries ¹



Low health literacy has
been linked to poor
general health, increased
hospital admissions, low
vaccination uptake and
reduced life expectancy

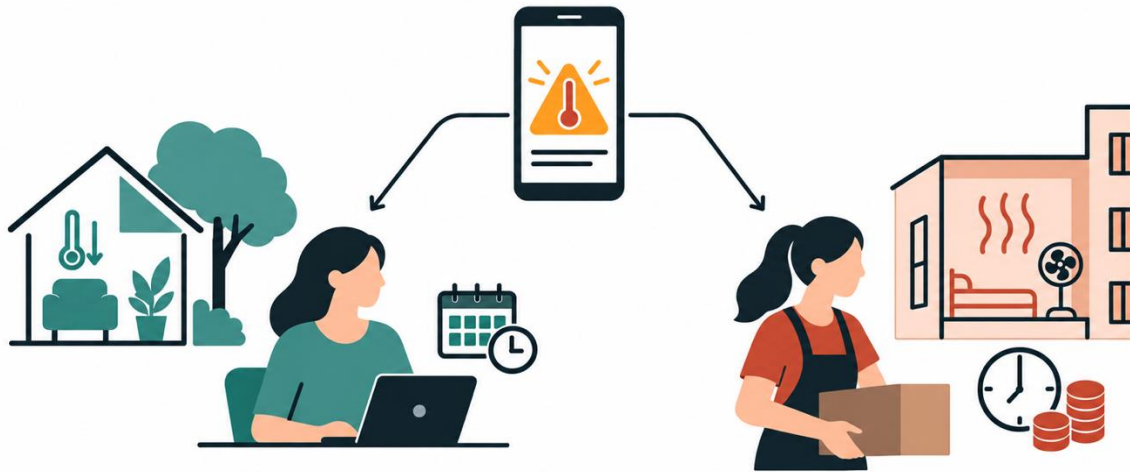
- Functional health literacy
- Interactive health literacy
- Critical health literacy ²

CRITICAL HEALTH LITERACY

“The ability to **reflect** upon **health determining factors and processes** and to apply the results of the reflection into **individual or collective actions** for health in any given **context**.” ³

1. Pelikan JM, Link T, Straßmayr C et al. Measuring comprehensive, general health literacy in the general adult population: the development and validation of the HLS19-Q12 instrument in seventeen countries. Int J Environ Res Public Health 2022;19:14129.
2. Don Nutbeam, Health literacy as a public health goal: a challenge for contemporary health education and communication strategies into the 21st century, Health Promotion International, Volume 15, Issue 3, September 2000, Pages 259–267, <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapro/15.3.259>
3. Abel T, Benkert R. Critical health literacy: reflection and action for health. Health Promot Int. 2022 Aug 1;37(4):daac114. doi: 10.1093/heapro/daac114. PMID: 36047637; PMCID: PMC9434639.

Reflection to individual and collective action



01

SENSE MAKING

Both interpret the warning in the context of their own lives

02

REFLECTION

Why do the same recommendations create such different options?

03

CONNECTION

Housing, work, time and money link personal experience to wider determinants

04

ACTION

Personal protection matters, alongside collective and institutional change

The critical move is not asking Leena to cope better. It is asking what must change around her.

Critical health literacy as a shared responsibility



63% of European local adaption plan considered vulnerable populations
43% consider vulnerable populations when developing adaptation responses
7% considered them in monitoring and evaluation
4% mentioned their participation in development of adaptation policy ¹

1. EU Covenant of Mayors (2023) Embedding Equity Considerations in Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Planning (SECAP), Implementation and Monitoring Processes

Critical health literacy in times of uncertainty

DOMAIN OF UNCERTAINTY	CHL CONTRIBUTION
Political and geopolitical	Questions power, interests and competing claims; supports collective action
Economic and material	Links personal experience to structural conditions, rights and resources
Environmental and existential	Interprets evolving evidence and reveals unequal vulnerability
Technological	Questions who designs technology, whose interests it serves and who controls it
Information and epistemic	Appraises claims, framing and trustworthiness amid contested evidence
Personal and biographical	Supports agency while recognising constraints and limited choices

What this means for effectiveness research

- Who defines the problem?
- Whose knowledge counts?
- What counts as an effective outcome?
- Who can convert the intervention into benefit?
- What enables action after findings are produced?

Gambling Harms example



Mills, T., Grimes, J., Caddick, E., Jenkins, C.L., Evans, J., Moss, A., Wills, J., and Sykes, S. (2023) 'Odds Are: They Win': a disruptive messaging innovation for challenging harmful products and practices of the gambling industry. Public Health 224. 41-44
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2023.08.009>

Gambling products are
designed to be addictive
and hard to resist.

ODDS ARE
THEY WIN

Gambling
companies make
their money
from your losses,
not your wins.

ODDS ARE
THEY WIN



Thank you.

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