Sociomedical Sciences

The Department of Sociomedical Sciences is dedicated to addressing the social forces that influence health. Creating effective programs that improve population health requires accounting for the broad contextual factors that structure people’s choices and actions, and weighing the ethical and political factors that shape policy debates.

Sociomedical Sciences draws upon a diverse range of analytic methods and conceptual frameworks from the social and behavioral sciences and humanities, including anthropology, history, political science, psychology, and sociology. With these tools, faculty and students explore an array of issues including aging, healthcare access, HIV/AIDS, homelessness, immigrant health, mass incarceration, obesity, occupational and environmental health, sexuality, and tobacco and drug use. Our scholarship considers the critical importance of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in determining health vulnerabilities.

Examples of our work:

- A unique doctoral program that partners with Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences to train the next generation of scholars and researchers in the social sciences and public health.
- The development of culturally sensitive books to empower adolescents in Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana and Tanzania, enabling them to make a healthier transition through puberty.
- The creation and evaluation of a community-based health program in Puerto Rico to prevent HIV transmission through engaging hard-to-reach substance users in a continuum of care.
- Use of natural experiments to investigate whether lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals living in areas of high structural stigma, prejudice, and discrimination—for instance, states without legal protections—have an increased risk of morbidity and mortality.
- Use of daily diaries administered on smartphones to describe how changes in mood, stress, and support influence sexual risk-taking, substance use, and medication adherence.

MISSION

Sociomedical Sciences improves population health by analyzing and addressing the social, political, historical, cultural, psychological, and economic forces that influence health outcomes. Our faculty prioritize action-oriented research that advances the theory and practice of public health, empowers communities, and informs public policy.

HISTORY

Early in the 20th century, the field of public health was focused more intensively on understanding germs than the social forces that create disease. But in 1968, Columbia University’s School of Public Health became the first in the country to offer a graduate degree in the social sciences with a focus on health, fulfilling the promise from earlier in the century and helping to return the field to the questions that matter.
The department is led by Lisa Metsch, PhD, a medical sociologist and expert on HIV prevention among marginalized populations. Our faculty includes internationally recognized researchers and scholars and inspiring, award-winning teachers who bring an extraordinary breadth and depth of social science expertise to bear on pressing national and global public health issues. Our combined analytic perspectives create an environment where innovation flourishes. Faculty regularly publish in the most influential journals and speak to audiences outside of academia through program development and policy advocacy. Our faculty and students are engaged in public health research in Harlem/Washington Heights; in Miami, Florida; and at diverse sites around the globe, including Brazil, South Africa, Tanzania, and Vietnam.

Research Centers

- The Harlem Health Promotion Center has developed an innovative program for adolescents with HIV/AIDS that was honored by the New York City Department of Health.
- The Center for the History and Ethics of Public Health is analyzing the ethical and policy debates over how to regulate e-cigarettes in the context of the long history of tobacco control. The Center is one of six World Health Organization Collaborating Centers for Bioethics, and the only one specifically devoted to public health ethics.
- The Center for the Psychosocial Study of Health and Illness is using key insights from sociological theory to design an intervention to re-engage people living with chronic illness who are currently not engaged in outpatient care.
- The Center for the Study of Culture, Politics, and Health is partnering with Hanoi Medical University in Vietnam to design and implement policy-relevant social science research and training. The Center is the academic home for the journal Global Public Health.
- The Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion is studying the debates over calorie labeling regulations and developing lessons learned to inform the design of effective messaging strategies for future health campaigns.
- The Center for the Study of Social Inequalities and Health is studying the effects of structural stigma and discrimination on physical and mental health outcomes.
- The Society, Psychology, and Health Research Lab is conducting research to examine the efficacy of health promotion programs delivered by clinic-based healthcare navigators and designed to increase engagement in HIV care among HIV-positive gay men and youth.

Our students

Graduates go on to leadership positions in government, community-based and non-governmental organizations, health care organizations, universities, think tanks and research consultancies, foundations and philanthropies, and media organizations as well as top-tier institutions of higher education across the country and around the world. Alumni hold posts at the Centers for Disease Control, Human Rights Watch, Open Society Institute, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, RAND Corporation, the Corkery Group, McCann Erickson, the Advisory Board Company, and the National Association of City and County Health Officials.

BY THE NUMBERS

| 2016–2017 |  
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| Master’s Students | 210 |
| Doctoral Students | 40 |

Number of full-time faculty members: 24
Number of academic degree programs: 4

Our students