Throughout 2022, The Root Cause Coalition (TRCC) conducted a series of online, 1,000-person, nationally representative surveys to explore Trends, Attitudes and Perceptions (TAP) about issues related to health equity. This 2nd annual TAP report focuses on public perception of major issues related to the social determinants of health (SDoH). A few of the issues related to health equity we explored this year include 

- health equity
- how the home environment impacts health and well-being
- mental health
- maternal health
- gun violence
- food allergies
- the impact of digital device usage in the lives of Americans
- COVID-19

The data from these surveys offers a snapshot as to how Americans are thinking about these issues and helps TRCC and its members strategically collaborate with one another to educate and advocate for the advancement of these issues among policymakers, partners and others.

This year, the Coalition had a number of TRCC member collaborators on individual surveys, which helped strengthen and focus a number of topics explored. Special thanks to TRCC members the Hayward Institute, the Children’s Hospital Association, Acenda Integrated Health, and Food Allergy Research & Education for their research input and expertise on a number of issues.

These data points help validate and support the ongoing effort and need for increased advocacy and policy that addresses health disparities and health equity, as well as the continuing need to enhance awareness and education of these issues among critical audiences. Of course, each survey represents a moment in time that can be impacted by individual’s personal lives, media coverage and other experiences, but overall the findings bring to light many of the health equity challenges and opportunities in front of us today.

What follows are key takeaways and trends from the various reports.

**TRCC’S TAP TAKEAWAYS**

1. **Social Determinants: a societal issue that starts at home**

   Most Americans believe it is important for multiple sectors, from individuals to Congress, to address social determinants of health. Fifty-nine percent of people indicate that “society as a whole” has an obligation to address social determinants of health.

   More than 50% of those surveyed say it is very important for individuals and communities to address social determinants. More than 40% say that it is very important for the government and government agencies, with nearly 50% indicating that state and local governments need to address social determinants.

   While many respondents felt that addressing social determinants starts close to home with the individual and community, more than 80% say that the government should invest in programs that improve social factors influence health and well-being.
The public continues to struggle with terminology to describe issues related to social factors that influence health and well-being. Nearly half of Americans are unfamiliar with the term ‘social determinants of health.’ When social determinants are further defined as conditions in which people are born, live, work, play, worship, and age, 87% either wholeheartedly agree or somewhat agree that these conditions impact a person’s health. Black individuals, those making more than $80,000 a year, parents, and those people living in urban areas were more familiar with social determinants of health and other terms associated with these conditions (e.g., vulnerable populations, health equity and health justice) than other demographic groups surveyed.

Most Americans agree that the conditions in which people are born, live, work, play, worship, and age impact a person’s health. Higher income earners, college educated, parents, and urban residents are more likely to wholeheartedly agree that these conditions impact a person’s health and quality of life.

Twenty-one percent of people surveyed say they have been personally affected by one or more these issues, including healthcare services; good quality, nourishing food; affordable housing; job opportunities; or clean water and air. Twenty-six percent say that their family and/or close friends have been negatively affected by social determinants.

When considering what language resonates with Americans about SDoH, terms including health equity, vulnerable populations, health justice, and root causes of health outcomes stand out as terms that Americans say are most related to social determinants of health.

TRCC has also identified several key issues that are important to address when considering social determinants. These include: including healthcare services; good quality, nourishing food; affordable housing; job opportunities; and clean air and water. Americans are split when it comes to which of these issues is most important to address.

COVID, the current economic climate and the war in Ukraine have each impacted how Americans view their current financial situation. Nearly one-third of Americans say they feel extremely anxious about their personal financial situation, with 64% expressing varying degrees of anxiety. Only 8% say they are not anxious at all. Females, lower income earners and parents report feeling more anxiety about their personal financial situations.

Two out of five Americans say their personal financial situation is somewhat, or much worse, than it was a year ago. This is particularly true for women, lower income earners and people in rural areas.

Nearly nine in 10 Americans think about the cost of items and services they purchase at least some of the time. Parents, and those who are under 45 years-of-age, are more likely to think about the cost of items or service all the time. More than 80% of Americans say that the increased cost of goods and services have
impacted their daily life choices. Lower income earners are more significantly impacted by the rising cost of food in their daily life choice. While gas prices have trended downward, more than half of Americans say that gas price increases have the greatest impact on their daily life choices, followed by the cost of public transportation and the price of food.

These issues shine a glaring spotlight on the reality of rising costs: people are needing to make tradeoffs about basic needs. More than half say that the increased cost of goods and services has greatly impacted their ability to pay for gas; nearly four in 10 say it has greatly impacted their ability to buy food. Across the board, parents report a more significant impact on their ability to do any activities as a result of rising costs, including buying medication, buying food, heating or cooling their home, paying rent, and other activities.

These daily challenges are having a negative impact on American health and well-being. More than 60% of Americans say that the increased cost of goods and services has impacted either their mental or physical health.

4. People know their home environment affects them; what to do about it is another question

The majority of Americans understand and believe that one’s home can affect an individual’s health. Seventy percent of those surveyed say that a person’s health can be affected by their home and those who are under 45 years-of-age, higher income earners, parents, college-educated, and living in urban areas are all more likely to think about it often.

Those who are over 65 years-of-age and non-parents are significantly more likely to not think about it at all. More than one-third say they never think about it. Some know about issues, yet don’t take action for a variety of reasons. For example, the majority (57%) report cost as the barrier to influencing the health of their home environment; 38% don’t feel they have any control because they rent, followed by a lack of knowledge about how to make any changes. Twenty-two percent say they can take action, but aren’t, while another 15% say they want to but don’t believe they can.

Lead in water and in paint, along with the quality of water inside the home, are top concerns related to a healthy home environment. This is a particular concern among Black individuals, those in the Midwest, and those living in rural areas.

Overwhelmingly, individuals say they themselves have the greatest ability to influence the way their home impacts their health, followed by landlords among renters. Government policies and regulations related to housing are on the lower-end when presented with a list of influencers.

Trusted sources about the health impact of environmental factors in homes is robust and accessible. More than eight in 10 feel at least somewhat comfortable they could access this information. Trusted sources vary widely, however, with friends and family and healthcare providers being among the most trusted; government agencies and utility companies are not far behind. Unsurprisingly, among the least trusted source is social media.
As health inequities and the stress and anxiety of everyday living continues to rise, the need to focus on mental health of adults, children and other family members has become an increasingly prominent and critical issue.

Among those who expressed worries about mental health, having a house to live in and enough money to meet basic needs are the top cited factors that contribute to mental well-being.

Families are seriously concerned about the mental health of children. More than half believe that children’s mental health is worse off than two years ago – and the vast majority want policymakers to prioritize addressing the unique mental health needs of children.

Mental health also remains a significant concern for individuals and their families. Roughly one-third of Americans (31%) worried a lot about their mental health during COVID-19, with even higher rates among females, parents and those under 45 years-of-age.

Mental health concerns are connected to changes in behavior and other actions. Among those who worried about their mental health, nearly four in 10 (38%) experienced changes in their behavior, 37% had relationship changes with family and friends and one-third (33%) changed their diet/eating patterns.

More than 40% of Americans are currently seeking treatment for mental health issues, or have sought treatment for these issues in the past. Roughly 75% say they are at least somewhat familiar with mental health services. And more than half say they have relatively easy access to mental health services.

There are significant gaps in understanding about maternal health as well as experiences with, and attitudes about, this critical issue. One-third report being entirely unfamiliar with the term ‘maternal health,’ with lowest levels of familiarity among whites, non-college educated, non-parents, and those more than 65 years-of-age.

When provided with the World Health Organization’s definition of maternal health (the health of women during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum period six weeks following childbirth) fewer than one-third of Americans believe access to quality maternal health care is adequate. Nearly one-quarter of females surveyed in the United States believe access to quality maternal care is inadequate.

The rationale for why maternal care is sometimes or entirely inadequate is multi-faceted. One-third say that the biggest reason is because it’s unaffordable. Nearly one quarter of Black individuals (24%) say it depends on your race/ethnicity – a significantly higher percentage compared to whites (11%) and Hispanics (7%).
Americans, however, are mixed on whose responsibility it is to improve access to quality maternal care. Responses ranged from the President (15% ranked as top responsibility), state and local governments (14%), Congress (12%) and hospitals (11%). Significantly more parents than non-parents believe the President has the most responsibility for addressing this issue. At the other end of the spectrum, among those over age 65, only five percent say the President has the most responsibility, and that the individual has the most responsibility to seek out better care (17%).

Eighty-five percent of individuals say they are at least somewhat supportive of federal government programs that provide food and nutrition assistance to lower income individuals and families. More than half (51%) say they are very supportive; this is especially true for lower income individuals earning less than $40,000/year (57%) as well as urban residents (59%). Nearly 40% of those earning less than $40,000/year (38%), females (35%), and non-college educated (33%) have personally benefited from these programs.

Familiarity with specific programs is mixed, however. Nearly 80% are either somewhat or very familiar with the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Black individuals, those under 45 years-of-age, parents and urban residents are more likely to be very familiar with WIC. It is not surprising, then, that more than six in 10 Black individuals and nearly seven in 10 parents know someone who participates, or has participated, in WIC; this compares to just less than half of the general population. When provided with an overview of what WIC does, more than half of Americans (51%) report being extremely supportive, and only three percent are not supportive.

Gun violence has become an increasingly urgent issue over the past several years. Nearly nine in 10 individuals say that gun violence in the United States is at least a somewhat significant issue; more than half (51%) say it is very significant.

Tragically, nearly one-quarter of Americans (24%) report that they or someone close to them has been affected by gun violence. The numbers are even greater for specific demographics: 40% of Black individuals, 37% of parents, 32% of those under 45 years-of-age, and 32% of those living in urban areas.

About one in three Americans is less certain about feeling safe while going about their daily routines compared to the rest of those responding. Females, Hispanics, and those under 45 years-of-age tend to be more neutral about their individual safety than other demographic groups; whites (36%) feel very safe compared to Hispanics (19%).
Among those who feel somewhat or very unsafe, 20% say that neighborhood violence was their top reason for feeling this way; car traffic and related hazards (17%) and neighborhood gun violence (15%) are the next two reasons. The pandemic has only heightened concerns about gun violence: since the pandemic, two in five say that feel less safe in their neighborhood as a result of gun violence.

**Nearly three-quarters (74%) believe there are actions society can take to help prevent gun violence.**

Top-cited actions include improved relationships between communities and law enforcement (78% said it was very important), followed closely by local policies to create safer neighborhoods (74%) and opportunities to engage youth after school (74%). Women are more likely to say improving mental health treatment, interrupter programs and gun violence education are very important to preventing gun violence. For Black individuals, younger adults, parents, and those affected by gun violence, having better paying jobs is an important way to reduce gun violence.

People from households with food allergies are twice as likely to report food insecurity. Households with people of color are more likely to be eating and living with someone who has a food allergy; they are also more likely to report food insecurity.

Americans also lack basic knowledge about food allergies and how to deal with them safely. More than four in 10 incorrectly believe a food allergy that has caused only mild reactions is a mild food allergy. More than one-third don’t realize that food allergies are a disability (and nearly half report they are unsure). Eighty-three percent of Americans don’t know that the food manufacturer is responsible for placing food allergen warnings such as “may contain” or “made in a facility” on their product labels. More than half incorrectly believe the FDA is responsible for these warnings. In addition, more than half of individuals surveyed (with another one-third unsure) incorrectly believe that allergen-free labeling such as “peanut-free” or “milk-free” is regulated by law.

Americans with food allergies have trouble avoiding allergens. More than half of households with food allergies say it has been sometimes difficult to avoid allergens when shopping for groceries over the past two years. This is true across food security levels and incomes. Nearly half of households with food allergies report at least some difficulty avoiding allergens when eating out, with 12% finding it always difficult. People of color are more likely to report having trouble avoiding food allergens when shopping.
The COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly shifted significant portions of our professional and personal lives to online. In addition, broadband is now regularly used for school, work and telehealth services. As a result, having affordable, high-speed internet services is becoming essential for meeting daily needs.

Among online survey takers, the majority spend more than 10 hours a week online. Slightly more than 90% of Americans say they access the internet at home; another 42% selected other locations such as the library, community center or at school – with 18% accessing the internet at a friend or family member’s home. Only four percent of American say they don’t have access to the internet at home, and 80% of Americans say it is very easy to access the internet when needed.

Of those who have difficulty accessing the internet, and a small sample compared to the general survey population, 21% say that the high cost of the internet is a barrier to accessing the internet at home, and another 16% say they don’t own a computer or they don’t know how to use the internet.

Sixty-seven percent of survey takers access the internet using a mobile phone connected to the internet, with 56% using a laptop or portable computer.

Americans most often say they use the internet for personal emails, casual browsing or social media. Perhaps influenced by COVID-19, more than 30% of Americans say they shop for basic home goods and groceries online, and more than 25% say they use the internet for online medical appointments and ordering medications. Those under 45 years-of-age, making more than $80,000, college educated, parents, and those in urban areas were more likely to use the internet to order groceries or buy goods online. Those under 45 years-of-age, parents and those living in urban and rural areas were more likely to use the internet for social media. Those under 45 years-of-age, making more than $80,000, and parents are more likely to use the internet for online medical appointments and finding a service provider. Nearly 90% of those more than 65 years-of-age would rather see a medical professional in person. Eighty percent say they can usually find what they are looking for in their primary language.

These findings, of course, would undoubtedly be different if the survey was conducted via telephone or in-person. However, the findings still yield interesting data points and demographic distinctions even among those who had internet available to take this survey.

In the surveys on mental health (conducted in December 2021), public perspectives about SDoH (May 2022), and rising costs and daily trade-offs (June 2022), there were a series of questions about how hopeful people are feeling. The feeling of being hopeful or unhopeful will of course vary and is dependent on how a number of factors influencing their decision in a given period of time. But there were several points worth noting.
Four in 10 Americans say we are moving in the wrong direction when it comes to addressing social determinants of health. Fewer than half of Americans believe we are moving in the right direction on any of the issues that define social determinants of health including education, health and healthcare, social and community context, neighborhood and environment, and economic stability.

When surveyed about personal finances, almost 40% say they are very or somewhat hopeful that their personal financial situation will improve over the next six months. Slightly more than 40% say they are somewhat or very hopeful; just over 20% say they are neither hopeful nor unhopeful.

While the need to address these issues is an increasing reality, more than half of Americans (53%) say they are more hopeful, while one-quarter say they’re neither more nor less hopeful. Blacks, those under 45 years-of-age, those earning $80,000 a year, college educated, and parents all feel more hopeful than other respondents we surveyed.

PILLARS OF FOCUS FOR THE ROOT CAUSE COALITION

The Root Cause Coalition’s three pillars of advocacy, education and research guide the work of the Coalition. The research conducted this past year underscores the interconnectedness of these three major areas of focus. For The Root Cause Coalition, that means providing the right educational tools to members so they can advocate for policies that address the many issues that support health equity. Research has shown that there is a need for thoughtful change and engagement at all levels. This public insight research has been conducted with an eye for leading with data and science, ensuring that education and advocacy efforts are evidence driven.

The Coalition supports the development and implementation of policies that address the social determinants of health, lower healthcare costs and improve health outcomes. With this in mind, the Coalition established the Equity Legislation Monitor (ELM) to identify and track relevant legislation on key equity issues introduced in Congress. Key areas of focus for the ELM include digital equity; diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice; environment and climate change; housing; maternal health; nutrition and food security; and payment models. These areas of focus align with TRCC’s Mission and 8-point-call-to-action, as well as priorities of our member organizations. Many of the surveys conducted this year support areas of focus consistent with the Equity Legislation Monitor (see link to ELM in list of references).
ABOUT THE ROOT CAUSE COALITION

Founded by AARP Foundation and ProMedica in 2015, The Root Cause Coalition is a nonprofit, member-driven organization comprised of more than 90 leading health systems, hospital associations, foundations, businesses, national and community nonprofits, social service organizations, health insurers, academic institutions, local governments, and policy centers. Our common goal is to achieve health equity for every American.

CONTACTS

Barbara J. Petee
President
bpetee@rootcausecoalition.org

Tom Dorney
Director
tdorney@rootcausecoalition.org

Alexandra Lewin-Zwerdling
Senior Advisor, Research and Communications
alexandra@rootcausecoalition.org

This report was developed using the surveys listed below. Methodology is included within each report’s release.

Mental Health: Public Insights
rootcausecoalition.org/post/mental-health-public-insights-from-trcc

A look back at COVID-19 behaviors and attitudes

Gun violence
rootcausecoalition.org/post/majority-of-americans-believe-gun-violence-is-a-very-significant-issue

Maternal health
rootcausecoalition.org/post/one-third-of-americans-are-unfamiliar-with-the-term-maternal-health

The connection between home and health
rootcausecoalition.org/post/americans-recognize-the-connection-between-home-and-health

Reality of health inequities

Public perceptions of social determinants of health
rootcausecoalition.org/post/root-cause-coalition-may-research-release

Food allergies
rootcausecoalition.org/post/households-with-food-allergies-are-twice-as-likely-to-report-food-insecurity

Digital device usage
rootcausecoalition.org/post/digital-device-usage-and-availability-among-online-survey-respondents

Equity Legislation Monitor
rootcausecoalition.org/equity-legislation-monitor