

# Reducing Social Inequalities in Health (SIH): Working together Toward a More Equitable, Healthier and Resilient Society

## HIGHLIGHTS

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For ministries and organizations to be better positioned to collaboratively design new ways to reduce social inequalities in health (SIH), there is a need to clarify the pivotal role of reducing social inequalities across all levels of government and cross-sectoral efforts in preventing negative impacts on population health, and the potential contribution of multiple sectors to improving the health and well-being of the Québec population.

## Highlights

The health of the population is closely tied to underlying social factors. Poverty, which involves the intersection of multiple forms of social inequalities, has repercussions that often extend beyond health to impact other social determinants of health in a negative downward spiral. The rise in social inequalities undermines the health status and well-being of the population, harms economic growth, and creates the potential for a breakdown in social cohesion.

Reducing social inequalities in health (SIH) is only possible through concerted action involving numerous sectors to address the many social determinants of health such as housing and income. SIH must be taken into account by all sectors, ministries, and organizations with a minimum objective of not (inadvertently) exacerbating these inequalities when new policies are implemented.

Québec's experience is an excellent example of the positive role public policies can play in promoting a more equitable society, and as a result, a healthier and more resilient population. Certain tools, like the *Politique gouvernementale de prévention en santé*<sup>1</sup> (PGPS), the Québec government's intersectoral policy of emphasizing prevention and early intervention to improve population health, includes a cross-cutting objective of reducing SIH and provides many examples and opportunities of how, working together and focusing on prevention, we can be more effective and achieve greater population health gains.

To address the complex challenge of reducing SIH, there are three key findings to consider:

<sup>1</sup> [Politique gouvernementale de prévention en santé - Publications du ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux](#) (in French)





### Examples of Québec policy initiatives for reducing social inequalities

- [The National Strategy to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion](#) and the [Government Action Plan to Foster Economic Inclusion and Social Participation 2017-2023](#)
- [The 2015-2020 Government Sustainable Development Strategy](#) (in French)
- [The 2018-2022 Government Strategy to Ensure the Occupancy and Vitality of Territories](#)
- [The Government Strategy for Gender Equality Toward 2021 – Together for Equality](#)
- [The Strategy for Children from Birth to Age 8 – It’s All About the Children](#)
- The [2017–2022 Government Action Plan for the Social and Cultural Development of the First Nations and Inuit: Do More, Do Better](#)
- The [Politique nationale de lutte à l’itinérance – Ensemble pour éviter la rue et en sortir](#) (in French) [Québec’s “National policy to reduce homelessness – Together to prevent and exit homelessness” ]

Québec also relies on intersectoral action across many wide-reaching programs such as the Prescription medication insurance program through which all Québec residents receive permanent prescription medication insurance coverage to be able to afford often costly prescription medicines. In addition, there is the evidence-based Integrated Perinatal and Early Childhood Services program (also known as Services intégrés en périnatalité et pour la petite enfance - SIPPE), which aims to provide support to disadvantaged families from pregnancy, through infancy and into early childhood to promote healthy child development and a strong start in life. Other programs from a number of sectors include Accès Logis Québec to improve access to affordable housing, student financial assistance, and the wage subsidy for older workers.

*The PGPS: a complementary lever.* By adopting the PGPS in 2016, Québec launched a wide-scale strategy spanning a decade as a complement to build upon and further strengthen existing initiatives.

The PGPS is the result of a commitment by 15 government ministries and organizations under the leadership of the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) to act on a set of factors to improve the health status and quality of life of the population and reduce SIH. This inter-ministerial action plan sets out the concrete actions of each sector and the roles and responsibilities of each of the participating ministries and organizations.

The PGPS policy offers ministries and organizations opportunities to establish and maintain a dialogue on issues related to social inequalities and to develop potential solutions together. It provides a means of navigating the design and implementation of solutions while benefiting from the respective input of all involved and the synergies created by intersectoral efforts. It also supports ministries’ and organizations’ pursuit of enhanced solutions that benefit all.

In concert with the other levers, the PGPS can help achieve more equitable tax policies or even support education policies that promote the success of youth from across all socio-economic and social groups.

The PGPS can also help enhance the range of measures promoting access to high-quality educational childcare for children from disadvantaged areas, support organizational policies in workplaces, and even improve housing quality.

The PGPS can also improve or supplement existing local sectoral initiatives.

Without seeking to modify the planned objectives and trajectories of participating ministries and organizations, or project leaders in other sectors, an intersectoral partnership within the PGPS framework aims more specifically to help optimize and synergize the positive effects of various policies and programs, and mitigate any potential negative effects or harms to the health of various populations sub-groups, as well as ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits and potential harms across population sub-groups. Achieving these results relies on the PGPS’s cross-cutting nature, particularly the emphasis on reducing poverty and SIH.

The PGPS targets four main categories of factors that influence health: developing individual competencies and skills from early childhood, organizing healthy and safe communities and territories, improving living conditions to promote health, and strengthening prevention within the health and social services system.

Achieving these targets and objectives of the PGPS requires the participation of numerous ministries and organizations at regional and municipal levels and the cooperation of the non-governmental sector. A particular emphasis is working with those responsible for creating social policy across a number of key areas that can influence SIH, including those responsible for early childhood, youth, families, seniors, Indigenous Peoples, people living with disabilities, immigration, education, housing, health and social services, social assistance and the fight against poverty and social exclusion, sports and recreation, municipal affairs, housing, buildings, public safety, and culture, as well as the participation of economic and environmental sectors, including those responsible for policies aimed at taxes, business, bio-food, the labour market, transportation, and the environment.

*The convening and facilitator role of the MSSS.* The MSSS is responsible for leadership, coordination, monitoring, and mobilization related to the PGPS through its Bureau de coordination et de soutien [Coordination and Support Office] and involvement in different sectors of its organization.

Different opportunities for collaboration between the ministries and organizations and the MSSS may prove beneficial at any point in a project's development. Whether the project is in its design, implementation, assessment, or review phase, the MSSS can act as a facilitator and provide support.

While the impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic will persist in all sectors of government activity for the coming years, the PGPS provides an excellent opportunity to hasten recovery and achieve an ambitious vision of a Québec society that is more equitable, healthier and resilient to face ongoing and future challenges.

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*The French version entitled Réduire les vulnérabilités et les inégalités sociales : tous ensemble pour la santé et le bien-être and is also available on the web site of the Institut national de santé publique du Québec at: <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/publications/2781>*

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