

What is meaningful access to relevant resources (“meaningful access”)?

The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) defines meaningful access to relevant resources as *the degree to which a person can meet needs particularly important for her or his situation in ways that are not overly onerous, and are not degrading or dangerous*. The need for meaningful access to relevant resources is universal, but what makes access meaningful is different for everyone.

“Resources” refers to material goods and services people need. What is “relevant” depends on an individual’s circumstances, preferences, culture, and community.

Why is meaningful access important?

Meaningful access allows people to fulfill their needs in ways that don’t create other challenges to their physical or emotional wellbeing. Lack of meaningful access may have significant long-term impact on people’s wellbeing, particularly if needs are met through onerous, degrading or dangerous ways.

What are barriers to meaningful access?

Barriers differ across settings. Residents in rural areas may have limited access to resources due to lack of transportation.¹ However, geographic proximity to a given resource is not sufficient for meaningful access. A resource also needs to be linguistically, economically and physically available and relevant. Residents in low-income urban areas can have limited access to resources because of racial and economic segregation.² Discriminatory treatment, even in small behaviors (e.g., longer wait times, rude/dismissive treatment by staff, etc.), limits access even when a person qualifies for use of the resource and the resource is readily available. An individual’s past experiences, as well as information she/he receives from family and friends, can also hinder meaningful access.^{3 4 5}

Related Terms, Concepts & Definitions:

ACCESS: A person’s ability to receive services because personnel, supplies and ability to pay for these services are all available.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE: Delivery of services that are respectful and responsive to the beliefs and practices of culturally and linguistically diverse people.

DISPARITY: A difference that is closely linked with social, economic and/or environmental disadvantage, commonly seen in health status.

INEQUITY IN ACCESS: When race or income predict service availability and utilization rather than need.

NAVIGATION: Service providers and individuals working together to overcome barriers to accessing resources.

SERVICE INTEGRATION: Provision of seamless services that address people’s multiple and complex needs.

What are the health and other implications of the lack of meaningful access?

The consequences of not having meaningful access often go well beyond the immediate effects of not having a need met. Because the resources individuals need to function and to thrive are numerous and subjective, these consequences vary. Here are some examples of how lack of meaningful access can impact wellbeing.

- 🌱 People who live in “food deserts” often have greater access to fast food restaurants and convenience stores than to grocery stores with affordable and nutritious food. This exacerbates an individual’s risk for obesity and decreases her/his financial resources.⁶
- 🌱 Residents of low-income urban areas and those in more rural areas receive worse health care (e.g., limited referrals to standard screenings) when compared to residents in large city suburbs. This can help explain the disproportionate rate of cancer among these residents.⁷

- ✿ Racial and ethnic minorities have greater trouble finding relevant medical care where they are treated respectfully. This can result in decreased utilization of medical services, which in turn may be one factor that explains why minorities experience a number of chronic diseases (e.g., obesity, diabetes, heart disease) at significantly higher rates than White individuals.⁸
- ✿ Homeless youth report a number of barriers to obtaining resources, such as negative experiences with providers, fear that they will be reported to the police or child protective services, and being too young to consent to care.^{9 10} As a result, youth often secure resources by engaging in high-risk and illegal behavior.¹¹
- ✿ People with multiple challenges are often turned away from resources whose rules prohibit them from engaging in behaviors that are considered dangerous, furthering their exposure to degrading or dangerous circumstances. For example, shelter rules prohibit intoxicated individuals; therefore, these homeless individuals must return to the streets and fend for themselves, increasing the risks that they will be taken advantage of, assaulted, or even killed.¹²
- ✿ Even for youth who attend school, education may not be meaningfully accessible due to overcrowded and under-resourced schools, bullying, discrimination, community violence, immigration status, and language barriers.^{13 14} This can result in dropping out and data clearly indicate that individuals who have left high school earn significantly less than, and are not as healthy as, those who have graduated.^{15 16}
- ✿ High-performing minority youth are more likely to attend under-resourced colleges and universities than similarly qualified White youth. In these settings, youth are at an increased risk of not graduating. If they do graduate, they earn less and take on a more substantial economic burden compared to youth attending better resourced universities.¹⁷

How is meaningful access related to other Domains of Wellbeing?

For comprehensive wellbeing, meaningful access to relevant resources must be experienced along with social connectedness, stability, safety, and mastery. For example:

- ✿ **Meaningful Access and Social Connectedness:** People often learn about resources through their social circles. People whose friends and family are connected to resources have a greater likelihood of having meaningful access to those resources. Social connectedness may be one factor that explains employment disparities among White and Black adults.¹⁸ For example, 70% of jobs held by White employees were acquired through their social connections to their White peers - peers with more access to resources than racial minorities.¹⁹ Meaningful access to resources can also enable social connectedness by putting individuals in physical contact with others (e.g., a workplace, a classroom, a food pantry). This, in turn, increases access to additional resources via those new social connections.²⁰
- ✿ **Meaningful Access and Stability:** When an individual lacks resources, such as health insurance, mental health services, or permanent housing, it tends to undermine both resource stability (i.e., financial and employment stability) and positive psychological outcomes.²¹ A cycle may develop where not having meaningful access to resources further destabilizes the little stability that exists. These cascades of instability are more often seen among low-income individuals and have been shown to have a greater and more detrimental impact than among higher income individuals.²² On the other hand, stability can help to further meaningful access. A family who has achieved residential stability may begin to establish continuity of care at a local health clinic, or the children in the family may begin to attend the same school on a regular basis which provides access to even more resources (e.g., extracurricular activities).

*This fact sheet is one of a series on the Full Frame Initiative's Five Domains of Wellbeing — **social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery and meaningful access to relevant resources** — the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have. The Full Frame Initiative's mission is to change systems so that people and communities experiencing poverty, violence and trauma have the tools, supports and resources they need to thrive.*

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Endnotes

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