

What are upstream approaches?

A Primer

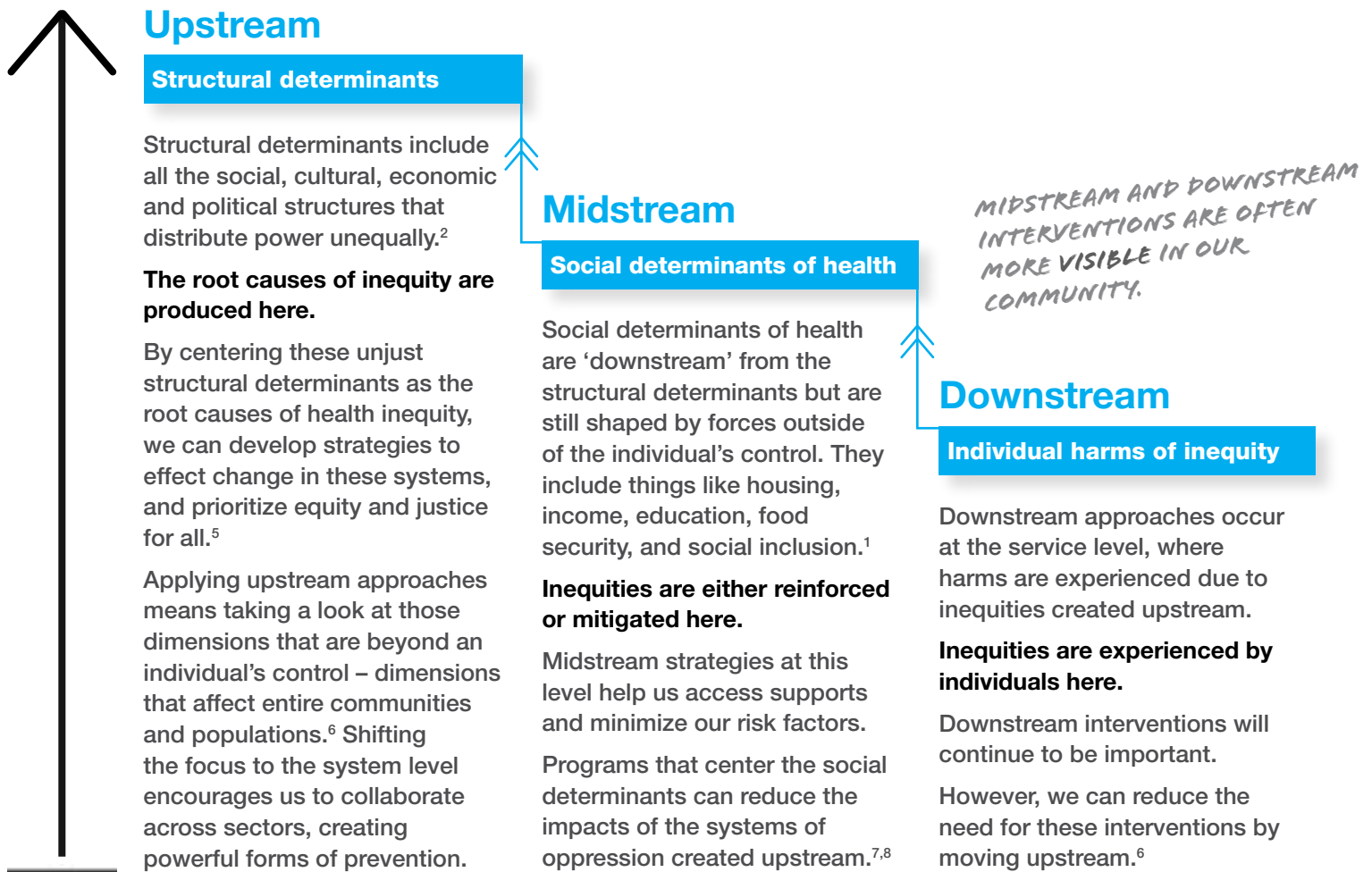
Think about the most powerful forces in society that distribute wealth, power, resources and opportunities, advantaging some over others. We call these forces **structural determinants**. These forces are not inherently fair and just. In fact, structural determinants create systems of oppression that profoundly affect people's lives. This includes things like racism, colonialism, patriarchy, classism and ableism (among others).¹

Collectively the impact of these social and political systems is referred to as **structural violence**. Structural violence is synonymous with social injustice and frames health inequities as an act of violence.²

Upstream approaches focus on social justice by acknowledging these often unseen systems as the root causes of inequity within and between communities. Upstream approaches work to influence and transform these systems in order to build brighter communities where everyone has access to the same opportunities.^{3,4}



Moving upstream



Why upstream approaches?

- Intervene at the root causes of inequity, dismantling forms of structural violence
- Address many issues at once with fewer resources, bringing different sectors together for a common goal
- Transform unjust systems in ways that sustain those gains over time
- Contribute to a more just society where all of us are able to thrive



What is needed for upstream work?

Critical consciousness refers to our ability to look deeper, apply critical thinking skills to current problems, and generate innovative solutions.

Being “critically conscious” inspires collaboration through a framework of reflection, action, and motivation.⁹

Upstream work is challenging. Transforming these systems requires ongoing vigilance, scrutiny, and reflection. However, simply increasing our awareness of structural violence as the cause of health inequities is a powerful first step.⁹ It changes how we see things.

Through critical consciousness, collaboration, and a willingness to change structures that cause harm, upstream approaches help to create the equitable social conditions that help people thrive.

What level are we working at?

HOW CAN YOU MOVE UP THE CONTINUUM AT YOUR ORGANIZATION?



Upstream examples

- Ensuring political structures and institutional practices support fairness and opportunity for all (e.g., living wage/basic income, housing policies).
- Developing macro-level policies and governance structures to promote equity and justice, at the population level
- Developing pro-equity policies (i.e., Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression; Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)).^{6,7}



Midstream examples

- Enacting micro-level policies and decision-making at local, community and organizational levels that address the social determinants of health
- Organizing programs that improve social, economic and physical conditions (e.g., high school completion programs; stigma-reduction training; eviction prevention programs; participatory budgeting; creating safer spaces for those experiencing systems of oppression, etc.).^{6,7}



Downstream examples

- Providing specialized services (e.g., shelters, food banks, income supports) that respond to the immediate needs of individuals and families who are experiencing harms (i.e., homelessness, poverty, mental health and substance use health challenges, chronic disease, etc.)
- Offering interventions that aim to reduce the symptoms of systemic issues but have minimal impact on the bigger picture.^{6,7}

How can we influence the root causes upstream?

Influencing the social, cultural, political and economic forces that create systems of oppression may seem difficult, but working upstream is within reach. Consider a few examples:

Participatory budgeting

This gives power back to the community by inviting them into the conversation to decide how money is spent.¹⁰



Stigma reduction

Changing the language around substance use and using person-first language can shift how people think and act.¹¹



Shared decision-making

Inclusive governance propels social change (e.g., a youth-serving organization should include youth on their board).¹²



Interested in learning more?

Upstream Approaches Community of Interest

Check out our online resource page for more infographics, templates, and toolkits you can use at your organization to increase your awareness of upstream approaches.¹³

Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council

This website includes helpful videos and infographics about upstream prevention.¹⁴

Ontario Hospital Association: Moving Upstream

A health bulletin outlining the differences between levels of intervention.¹⁵

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Find more resources
online at [EENet.ca](https://www.eenet.ca)



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