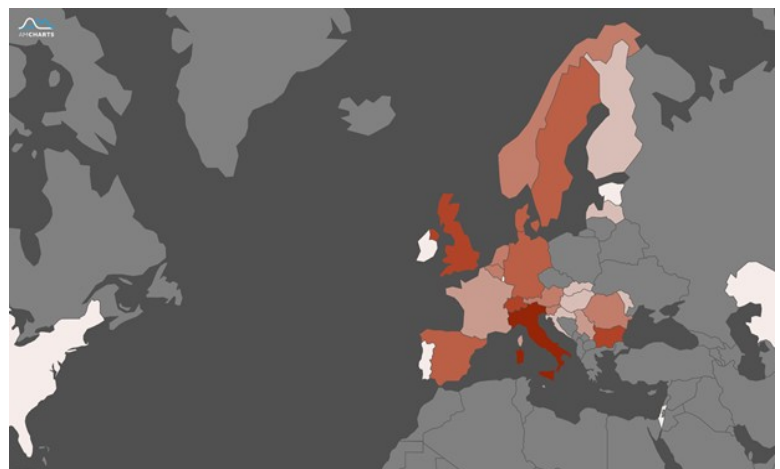


What are the major threats to public health in Europe the next decade?

Introduction

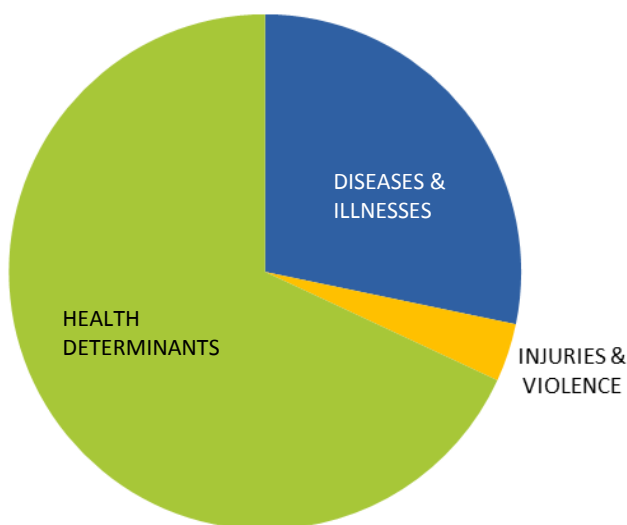
Members of the European Public Health Association (EUPHA) were asked what they believe the major public health threats in Europe in the next decade will be. For this, they were invited to identify the main public health issues that, in their opinion, could pose a threat to children and young persons (0-19 years), adults (20-60 years), and the elderly (60+ years). The questionnaire was sent to members of all national public health associations in October 2016. The respondents² have a background in public health, medicine, healthcare management or health economics and work in thirty different European countries (see map).



Map highlighting the countries in which respondents work, with darker shades of orange indicating higher prevalence and lighter shades lower prevalence.¹

Results

In total, 2365 possible threats to public health were identified by the respondents. Answers were provided using open-ended questions on which content analysis was undertaken to identify key themes. **A majority (68%) of the threats mentioned consist of health determinants**, including individual lifestyle factors and choices, existence of social and community networks, living and working conditions, and general socioeconomic, cultural and environmental conditions, as defined by Dahlgren & Whitehead.³ Surprisingly, only **28% of the threats concern (communicable and non-communicable) diseases and illnesses** and only a small fraction (**4%**) injuries and violence.



Distribution of all the identified public health threats.

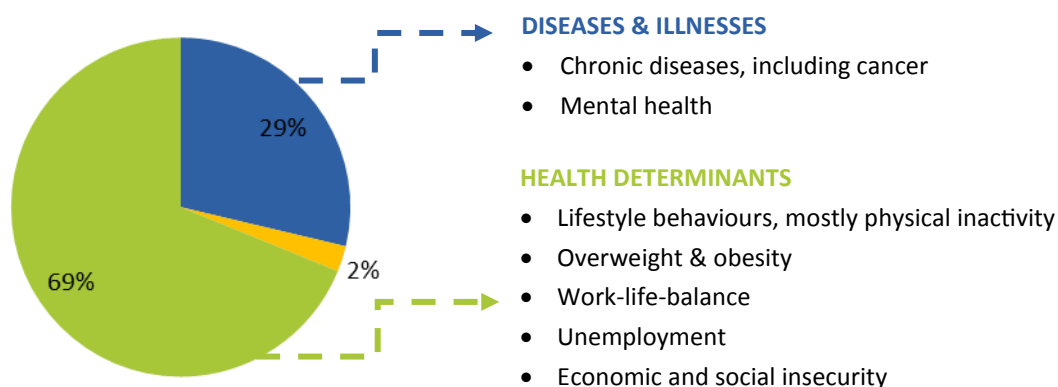
Public health threats and/or problems for YOUTH the coming decade

For **youth**, the threats to public health most often mentioned are obesity and overweight, mental health, drug abuse, and (other) lifestyle behaviours, including physical inactivity. Other important issues are (traffic) injuries and violence. A threat specifically mentioned for this group is 'addiction to new media'.



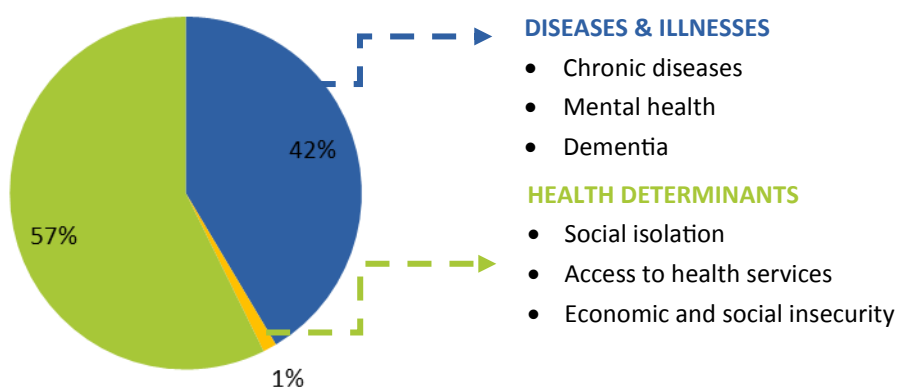
Public health threats and/or problems for ADULTS the coming decade

In **adults**, the public health threat most often listed is chronic disease. Similar to those listed for youth, adults are also expected to experience problems related to obesity and overweight and mental health. For the adult group, cancer, work-life-balance issues, unemployment, and economic and social insecurity were thought to be future threats as well.



Public health threats and/or problems for ELDERLY the coming decade

For the **elderly**, social isolation and access to health services are deemed most threatening. Other major future issues mentioned are chronic diseases, mental health, in particular dementia, and economic and social insecurity.



Conclusions

Gaining a better insight in the development of future public health issues allows to promote a more effective and well-founded (re)distribution of resources for primary and secondary prevention. Moreover, like in the recently started TO-REACH project,⁴ the identification of knowledge gaps regarding future public health problems, will facilitate prioritising the public health research agenda.

In order to face future public health threats, health systems and public health professionals should be resilient and should easily adapt to these upcoming threats. In that respect public health professionals could best be defined as all professionals that monitor, study and interpret the health concerns of entire communities and promote healthy practices and behaviours to ensure that populations stay healthy.⁵ Furthermore, public health professionals should be prosilient⁶ and proactive.

The responses to the questionnaire can greatly help the public health associations and their professionals, not only for validation of the threats mentioned, but also to seek alliances with associations in other EU countries that face the same problems. Research efforts, best practices and successful interventions can be interchanged for strengthening their endeavours to effectively face (future) public health threats.

The results also clearly emphasise the importance of a European approach to public health, as many – if not all – of the listed threats can be targeted through shared policy measures, exchange of good practices and sharing of knowledge of evidence-informed interventions. As a pan-European organisation, EUPHA is uniquely qualified to facilitate this exchange of best practices, assist in formulating policy changes, taking into account their moral implications, and monitor the (resulting) development in our many member countries.

Overall, across all age groups, the biggest threats to public health the next decade are:

- ◇ mental health
- ◇ obesity & overweight
- ◇ chronic diseases
- ◇ economic and social insecurity
- ◇ access to health services
- ◇ social isolation

Other reoccurring issues that reflect issues the European region and the World are currently dealing with:

- ◇ fear of terrorism
- ◇ migration (including the integration of migrants)
- ◇ climate change
- ◇ addiction to new media (for youth)

To combat threats to public health, collaboration is needed on a European level, including shared policy measures, exchange of good practices and sharing of knowledge of evidence-informed interventions. The new role of public health professionals is to be proactive and prosilient.



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Notes

1 Countries and number of respondents: Italy 32; United Kingdom (UK) 18; Switzerland 17; Bulgaria 16; Denmark 12; Spain 11; Sweden 11; Germany 10; Netherlands 9; Austria 8; Belgium 7; Norway 7; Romania 7; Slovenia 6; France 4; Malta 4; Serbia 4; missing 4; other EU countries 4 (i.e. one of each from Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal); other non-EU 4 (i.e. one from multiple countries and one of each from Israel, Kazakhstan, U.S.A.); Croatia 3; Finland 3; Hungary 3; Latvia 2; Republic of Moldova 2; Slovakia 2.

2 The input from 210 respondents are included in the results.

3 Dahlgren G., Whitehead M. Policies and strategies to promote social equity in health. *Background document to WHO-Strategy paper for Europe (No. 2007: 14)*. Institute for Futures Studies, 1991.

4 The TO-REACH project website is available at www.to-reach.eu.

5 As defined by the European Public Health Association (EUPHA). Available at <https://eupha.org/who-we-are>, section 'our definition of public health professionals'.

6 'Prosilient' meaning anticipating resilience.

7 The EUPHA questionnaire on future threats to public health was an initiative of the EUPHA Advisory Working Group and the initiative was lead by Auke Wiegiersma.



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