

NQF Health Equity Program: Social Risk Initiative 2.0

The evidence is growing that individuals' social risk factors impact their health and healthcare, according to recent work conducted by the National Quality Forum (NQF) and reports from [National Academy of Medicine](#) and the [HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation](#).

Determining the impact of social risk factors on the quality and outcome of care is important to patients. It is also important to providers. Social risk factors can impact Medicare payments for providers who care for communities and populations that face significant social risk factors, such as income, education, social support or neighborhood deprivation.

Measuring the impact of social risk factors is an important focus of health policy as federal accountability programs currently assess financial incentives and penalties on providers based on certain patient care outcomes. For example, one federal program may withhold payment to providers based on the rate of their patients' readmissions to hospitals and other acute-care facilities. Readmission rates could be higher for patients that confront significant social risks.

NQF 2015-2017 Social Risk Trial

NQF self-funded a two-year trial to risk adjust certain healthcare performance measures for social risk factors, such as a person's level of education. During the trial, NQF considered risk adjustment for 303 measures. Of the measures reviewed, 93 measures included clinical or some other form of risk adjustment. Of these, 65 measures had a conceptual basis for social risk adjustment, and 17 measures were NQF-endorsed with social risk adjustment.

The trial revealed challenges in obtaining data on social risk factors, including data granular enough to accurately reflect individuals' social risk. NQF also found that measure developers used different methods to test the effect of risk adjusting measures for social factors, which could have limited the impact of those factors. NQF issued a [report](#) of its findings from the trial, including potential approaches to adjust and stratify social risk data to provide greater transparency of healthcare disparities. NQF's [Disparities Standing Committee](#) provided oversight and evaluation of the trial. This work enhanced the development of NQF's Roadmap to Achieving Health Equity and Eliminating Disparities and resulted in the establishment of the [NQF Health Equity Program](#).

NQF's Social Risk Initiative 2.0

In July 2017, the NQF Board of Directors approved a new 3-year initiative, allowing NQF to continue to include social risk factors in outcome measures submitted for endorsement. As part of this initiative, NQF will explore unresolved issues that surfaced in the social risk trial, including:

- **Conceptual basis:** NQF will identify a preferred methodology to identify the link between factors that signify a conceptual basis to risk adjustment a measure for social factors and the empirical data to substantiate the relationship.
- **Empiric analyses:** NQF will work with the new [NQF Scientific Methods Panel](#) to reduce measure developers varied approaches to risk adjustment and develop guidance on:

- Risk factor selection
 - Significance, model performance and effect size (e.g., inclusion of significant risk factors)
 - Consideration of providers (including hospitals, physicians, plans) caring for populations at high or low extremes of social risk
 - Modeling approaches that may provide greater transparency for underlying differences.
- ***Social risk factor availability and selection:*** NQF will explore alternative data sources, including use of commercial data sets and community-level data, and will provide greater guidance to the field on how to obtain and measure advanced social risk factors.
 - ***Implementation and impact:*** NQF will explore the impact of social risk adjustment on reimbursement and access to care, including the impact of implementation of measures in value-based purchasing on providers caring for populations at extremes of social risk. These efforts may inform NQF requirements for developers to consider the impact of risk adjustment on the financial penalties faced by providers.
 - ***Disparities reduction strategies tied to measurement:*** NQF will consider potential opportunities to reduce disparities as part of the measure endorsement and selection processes.

Through the 2.0 Initiative, NQF Standing Committees will continue to consider if a measure includes the appropriate social and clinical factors in its risk model. Staff will highlight risk adjustment in the preliminary analysis of each measure. Additionally, NQF's Scientific Methods Panel will review outcome measures and provide guidance on the appropriateness of the risk adjustment methods.