



# What Is Public Health?

**John Coggon**

*John Coggon is a Professor of Law, Centre for Health, Law, and Society, University of Bristol, UK.*

*This article summarises the ideas and arguments made in a discussion paper produced for the UK Faculty of Public Health: [John Coggon, What Is Public Health?](#) (London: Faculty of Public Health, 2023).*

- Many examples are available of thoughtful and carefully-constructed definitions of public health. However, these mean relatively little standing alone. They have to be unpacked, whether by the author of the definition, a reader of the definition, or just through the ways they may be seen to play out in practice.
- In this paper there is no value seen in seeking to advance a new definition of public health. Rather, the discussion is presented against a small number of influential, existing characterisations. Most notably, reference is made to Donald Acheson's framing, which has been employed (amongst others) by the UK Faculty of Public Health. This describes "public health as the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health and wellbeing, through the organised efforts of society."
- From such characterisations, we can observe that 'public health' is not a single thing. It refers to different aims, methods, and approaches. It is value-laden, complex, dynamic, multi-layered, responsive, and evolving.
- To find deeper clarity and meaning, we can explore the question 'what is public health?' through three forms of critical or philosophical inquiry:
  - First, by examining the meanings and implications of the terms, 'public' and 'health';
  - Secondly, by looking at the ways the phrase 'public health' is used in practice;
  - Thirdly, by considering the assumptions and reasoning found in different critical arguments about the proper scope and remit of public health.
- Ultimately, actions speak louder than words. When asking 'what is public health?', the prize is not in finding the 'true' or best single definition, but in

understanding how best to recognise and realise health as a collectively-shared value in society.

- To do so in a way that is rigorous and worthy of respect, we need to focus on three things:
  - The aims to be met in the name of health conceived as a shared value;
  - The appropriate means of meeting those aims; and
  - The question of whose responsibilities are at play in relation to a given instance of 'public health' concern.

*The full discussion paper is available [here](#).*