

How To Spot A Systemic Problem

A simple guide that can be used to understand if a problem or issue is systemic or not.

A useful rule of thumb is that you don't necessarily need every category to score 'yes', but truly systemic issues will usually show evidence across **Structure + Persistence + Interdependence**, with **Feedback** and **Transformation** providing additional confirmation.

Test Category	Question	If YES, likely systemic	If NO, likely not systemic
Structure	Is there a part of the system that creates, reinforces, or maintains the problem?	The issue is linked to policies, incentives, structures, processes, funding models, governance, norms, or behaviours embedded in the system.	The issue is primarily caused by a one-off event, isolated failure, or individual behaviour.
Structure	Would the problem remain if the current people involved were replaced?	The issue would likely continue because it is driven by structures, incentives, or norms.	The issue is mainly driven by particular individuals or leadership.
Structure	Are there formal system drivers?	Laws, policies, regulations, governance arrangements, funding mechanisms, or procedures contribute to the issue.	No identifiable formal structures are contributing to the problem.

Structure	Are there informal system drivers?	Cultural norms, expectations, traditions, social pressures, professional incentives, or unwritten rules contribute to the issue.	The issue exists independently of social or cultural dynamics.
Structure	Does the system reward or tolerate the behaviour causing the problem?	Existing incentives unintentionally encourage the issue or discourage alternatives.	Incentives are already aligned with solving the problem.
Structure	Does resource allocation contribute to the problem?	Funding, staffing, time, attention, or power are distributed in ways that sustain the challenge.	Resources are not a significant driver.
Persistence	Does the problem persist over time?	The challenge has existed for years and repeatedly reappears despite efforts to address it.	The challenge is temporary, new, or linked to a specific incident.
Interdependence	Does it affect multiple stakeholders?	Different actors experience or contribute to the issue (e.g. communities, practitioners, organisations, funders, regulators).	The problem affects only one organisation, team, or individual.
Interdependence	Does the problem have multiple interacting causes?	Several factors reinforce one another (e.g. funding incentives, regulations, behaviours, capacities, power dynamics).	There is a single clear cause that can be addressed directly.

Interdependence	Would solving it require action from multiple actors?	Addressing the issue would likely require a combination of policy, operational, financial, behavioural, technological, or advocacy changes.	One actor could solve the issue independently.
Feedback	Are there feedback loops that keep the problem going?	The issue becomes self-reinforcing over time and is resistant to change.	Once addressed, the issue is unlikely to reoccur.
Transformation	Would solving it require changing how the system works?	The solution requires changes to structures, incentives, governance, processes, or relationships.	The solution only requires fixing a specific project, process, or incident.
Overall Assessment	How many of the tests above are answered "Yes"?	If most answers are "Yes", the issue is likely systemic and suitable for systems-focused intervention.	If most answers are "No", the issue is more likely operational, technical, organisational, or project-specific.