How Social Factors Create Inequities in Health

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More Likely to Die of Covid-19 Compared to Whites

Cumulative mortality rates calculated through March 2, 2021; of more than 520,000 U.S. death, these are the numbers of lives lost groups:

- Indigenous: 5,477 (3.3)
- Latino: 89,071 (2.4)
- Black: 73,236 (2.0)
- Pacific Islander: 830 (2.6)
- Asian: 17,747 (1.0)
- White: 299,915 (1.0)

Challenges with Equity begin Early in life, and Despite Progress over time, they are Strikingly Persistent
Life Expectancy, 1950-2018

White | Black
--- | ---
1950 | 69.1
1960 | 70.6
1970 | 71.7
1980 | 74.4
1990 | 76.1
2000 | 77.3
2010 | 78.8
2018 | 78.7

NCHS, Health United States Chartbook, 2019
Massive Loss of Lives

Over 200 Deaths Every Day

Levine et al., Health Affairs, 2001
Making Sense of Racial Inequities
There are large Inequities in Health by Socioeconomic Status (SES) in the U.S. and elsewhere
Relative Risks of All-Cause Mortality by Household Income Level: U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics

P. McDonough, Duncan, Williams, & House, AJPH, 1997
There are Large Racial/Ethnic Differences in Socioeconomic Status
### Median Household Income and Race, 2018

Racial Differences in Income are Substantial:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 dollar</th>
<th>1.23 dollar</th>
<th>73 cents</th>
<th>59 cents</th>
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<td>Whites</td>
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U.S. Census Bureau, Semega et al., 2019; * For 2017; US Census Bureau, ACS, 2017
Large racial gaps in income markedly understate the racial gap in economic status.
Median Wealth and Race, 2016

For every dollar of wealth that Whites have,

- Blacks have 10 cents
- Latinos have 12 cents
- Other Races have 38 cents

Dettling et al., FEDS Notes, Federal Reserve Board (SCF), 2017
What Low Economic Status Means
We are in the same storm but in different Boats
Added Burden of Race
Life Expectancy at Age 25 Based on Level of Education

Overall 6.4-year gap

5-year gap overall

Age 70

White

Black

5.3-year gap

Overall 0-12 years College graduate

Blacks with a college degree have a lower life expectancy than Whites with only a high school degree.

Why Does Race Still Matter?

Could **racism** be a critical missing piece of the puzzle to understand the patterning of racial disparities in health?
Racism Defined

• Racism: an organized system that,
  -- categorizes and ranks
  -- devalues, disempowers, and
  -- differentially allocates opportunities/resources
• The development of racism is typically undergirded by an ideology of inferiority in which some population groups are regarded as being inferior to others
• This leads to the development of
  -- negative attitudes/beliefs (prejudice and stereotypes) to out-groups, and
  -- differential treatment (discrimination) by individuals and social institutions

Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Williams 2004
The House that Racism Built

Racism as a societal system

Social Forces
- Political
- Legal
- Economic
- Religious
- Cultural
- Historical Events

Structural or Institutional Racism (e.g. Segregation)

Williams, Lawrence, Davis, Vu, ‘Understanding how Discrimination Can Affect Health,’ HSR, 2019
Racial Segregation Is …

• One of the most successful domestic policies of the 20th century

• "the dominant system of racial regulation and control" in the U.S

John Cell, 1982
How Segregation Works

Segregation is like a burglar at mid-night. It slips into the community, awakens no one, but once it shows up, valuables disappear:

• Quality Schools
• Safe playgrounds
• Good jobs
• Healthy environment
• Safe housing
• Transportation
• Healthcare
Racial Differences in Residential Environments

In the 171 largest cities in the U.S., there is not even one city where whites live in equal conditions to those of blacks.

“The worst urban context in which whites reside is considerably better than the average context of black communities.”

Sampson & Wilson 1995
Neighborhood Opportunity Index

1. **Institutions**: number & quality of schools, early childhood centers
2. **Influences shaping norms and expectations**: (high school graduation rate, adults with high skill jobs)
3. **Economic Resources**: income, home ownership, employment, public assistance
4. **Environmental Quality**: air, water, soil pollution, hazardous waste sites
5. **Resources for health**: green space, healthy food outlets, walkability

Acevedo-Garcia et al, Health Affairs, 2020, Diversitydatakids.org
Segregation is the central driver of the Large Racial/Ethnic Differences in SES
Residential Segregation and SES

A study of the effects of segregation on young African American adults found that the elimination of segregation would erase black-white differences in:

- Earnings
- High School Graduation Rate
- Unemployment

And reduce racial differences in single motherhood by two-thirds.

David Cutler & EL Glaeser, Quarterly J Economics, 1997
Inequities by Design

• Racial inequities in SES that matter for life & health do not reflect a broken system.

• Instead, they reflect a carefully crafted system, functioning as planned – successfully implementing social policies, many of which are rooted in racism.

• They are not accidents or acts of God.

• Racism has produced a truly “rigged system”.
Racism as a societal system

Social Forces
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Structural or Institutional Racism (e.g. Segregation)

Individual Discrimination

Williams, Lawrence, Davis, Vu, ‘Understanding how Discrimination Can Affect Health,’ HSR, 2019
Individual Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination are an added source of Toxic Stress
The House that Racism Built

Racism as a societal system

Social Forces
- Political
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Cultural Racism
(e.g. Stereotypes, Stigma, Implicit & Explicit biases)

Structural or Institutional Racism
(e.g. Segregation)

Individual Discrimination

Williams, Lawrence, Davis, Vu, ‘Understanding how Discrimination Can Affect Health,’ HSR, 2019
Negative stereotypes about race remain deeply embedded in our culture.

Negative Stereotypes Trigger Racial Discrimination.
Racial Bias in Medical Care
Race of MD & Newborn Survival

- Study of 1.8 million hospital births from 1992 to 2015
- When cared for by white doctors, black babies are 3 times more likely than white newborns to die in the hospital
- Disparity cut in half when black babies are cared for by a black doctor
- Biggest drop in deaths in complex births and in hospitals that deliver more black babies
- No difference between MD race & maternal mortality

Brad Greenwood, et al. PNAS, 2020
"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

Martin Luther King, Jr