



MT. SINAI

HEALTH CARE FOUNDATION

Racism and Health Inequities: A Primer

What is racism?

Racism is a system of **structuring opportunity** and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call “race”), that:

- **Unfairly disadvantages** some individuals and communities,
- **Unfairly advantages others**

Racism operates at four levels:

1. Internalized
2. Interpersonal
3. Institutional
4. Structural

Racism can be *intentional* or *unintentional*.

How does structural racism cause health inequities?

1. **Neighborhood conditions:** Historical and present-day policies have largely concentrated Black people in environments with limited opportunities for healthy living. The practice of red-lining, for example, barred Black people and other people of color from accessing mortgage capital, thereby denying them opportunities to purchase homes and generate a financial “nest egg.” The resulting devaluation of property within neighborhoods within the urban core is a primary driver of perpetual deterioration of the housing stock, which in turn has contributed to astronomically high rates of childhood lead poisoning in Cleveland.
2. **Socioeconomic status:** Historical and present-day structural racism has created barriers to educational attainment and has reduced economic opportunity for Black people. “Mandatory minimum” prison sentences, for example, have contributed to the mass incarceration of Black people and other people of color, relative to their white counterparts who possess and use illicit drugs at equal rates. Incarceration forecloses on opportunities to attain self-sustaining employment and is a primary driver of single-parent households, a predictor of poor economic outcomes among families. In the U.S., White families have a net worth that is ten times greater than Black families on average. Socioeconomic status is connected to any number of health outcomes, ranging from the incidence of critical and chronic disease to life expectancy. It is important to note that race often dictates social class, but it is not a proxy for it.
3. **Toxic stress:** The effects of racism across all four levels (listed above) can accumulate in the body over time and harm the health of Black people across the life course. In this way, racism is a *direct* cause of poor health, as the chronic stress from poor neighborhood conditions, poverty, lack of opportunity for social advancement, and verbal and physical racial harassment can cause significant “wear and tear” on the body among those that experience it. Toxic stress has been attributed to a range of health issues including infant mortality as well as increased risk of heart disease, obesity, depression, and substance use disorders, among others.

Structural racism



Unfair conditions



Health inequities