

Systemic Racism and Health Equity

Executive Summary



Authors

Paula Braveman, Center for Health Equity, University of California, San Francisco

Elaine Arkin, Independent Consultant

Dwayne Proctor, Missouri Foundation for Health (At the time of his work on this document,

Dwayne Proctor was with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation)

Tina Kauh, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Nicole Holm, Center for Health Equity, University of California, San Francisco

Internal Advisors

Alonzo Plough, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Awale Osman, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

External Advisors

Gail Christopher, CEO, National Collaborative for Health Equity

Gilbert Gee, Professor, Community Health Sciences, Fielding School of Public Health, UCLA

Jamie R. Riley, Director of Race and Justice, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

Foreword

This is the executive summary of the sixth report in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) series examining the links between health equity and issues critical to achieving equity. The report aims to explain the concepts of systemic and structural racism and their connection with health equity; draw attention to ways to address them, including the courageous actions led by people of color against formidable obstacles that have produced important gains; and stimulate discussion of these issues among wide segments of the public in multiple sectors, not only health.

The full report is available [here](#). It includes a deeper discussion of the issues introduced here, more definitions, a list of organizations that can provide additional resources, and extensive references, which are not included in this executive summary.

Definitions

Systemic racism is racism that is pervasively and deeply embedded in systems and structures such as laws, written or unwritten policies, and widespread, deeply rooted, established practices, beliefs, and attitudes that produce, condone, and perpetuate widespread unfair treatment of people of color. Systemic racism includes structural racism, which is embedded in the structures—such as laws and policies—that form the scaffolding of systems.

Racism is a system of power relationships and thought that relegates people of color to inferior status and treatment, denying them access to society's benefits and justifying this with beliefs about their innate inferiority. Racism is not always conscious or intentional; often it is systemic or structural—that is, **built into systems, laws, policies, and pervasive, deep-rooted practices, beliefs, and attitudes that produce, condone, and perpetuate unfair treatment.**

WHY ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC RACISM IS ESSENTIAL—AND DIFFICULT

Systemic racism is so embedded in systems and structures that it often is viewed as the natural, inevitable order of things. It can affect any system—for example, political systems, economic systems, legal systems, criminal justice systems, social service systems, and healthcare systems. It is a result of both historical and ongoing injustices and their legacies. Slavery—explicitly supported by laws—endured for 250 years in the United States and was followed by almost 100 years of Jim Crow laws designed—and often enforced by terror—to restrict the rights of Black people. While civil rights legislation in the 1960s made it illegal to discriminate, enforcement has been inadequate. The passage of new anti-racism laws, while essential, will not address systemic racism without vigorous and sustained enforcement.

Although racial discrimination is no longer legal, racial inequities persist because of deeply rooted, unfair systems that sustain the legacy of former overtly discriminatory practices, policies, laws, and beliefs. At times, these systems and structures operate unintentionally, but nevertheless effectively, to produce and sustain discrimination and put people of color at a disadvantage within society. It often can be traced to deliberate acts of racial discrimination, such as laws mandating residential segregation. Once in place, however, systemic racism is often self-perpetuating, with persistently damaging effects on health even after the original explicitly discriminatory measures are no longer in place.

Systemic racism is the hidden, deadly base of the iceberg. Many instances of racism are overt, so that their harm can be easily seen and identified as unjust. Systemic racism, however, is often invisible to those who are not its victims. When injustice is not seen by those privileged because of the color of their skin, it can more easily be ignored and persist, producing enduring harm, including to health.

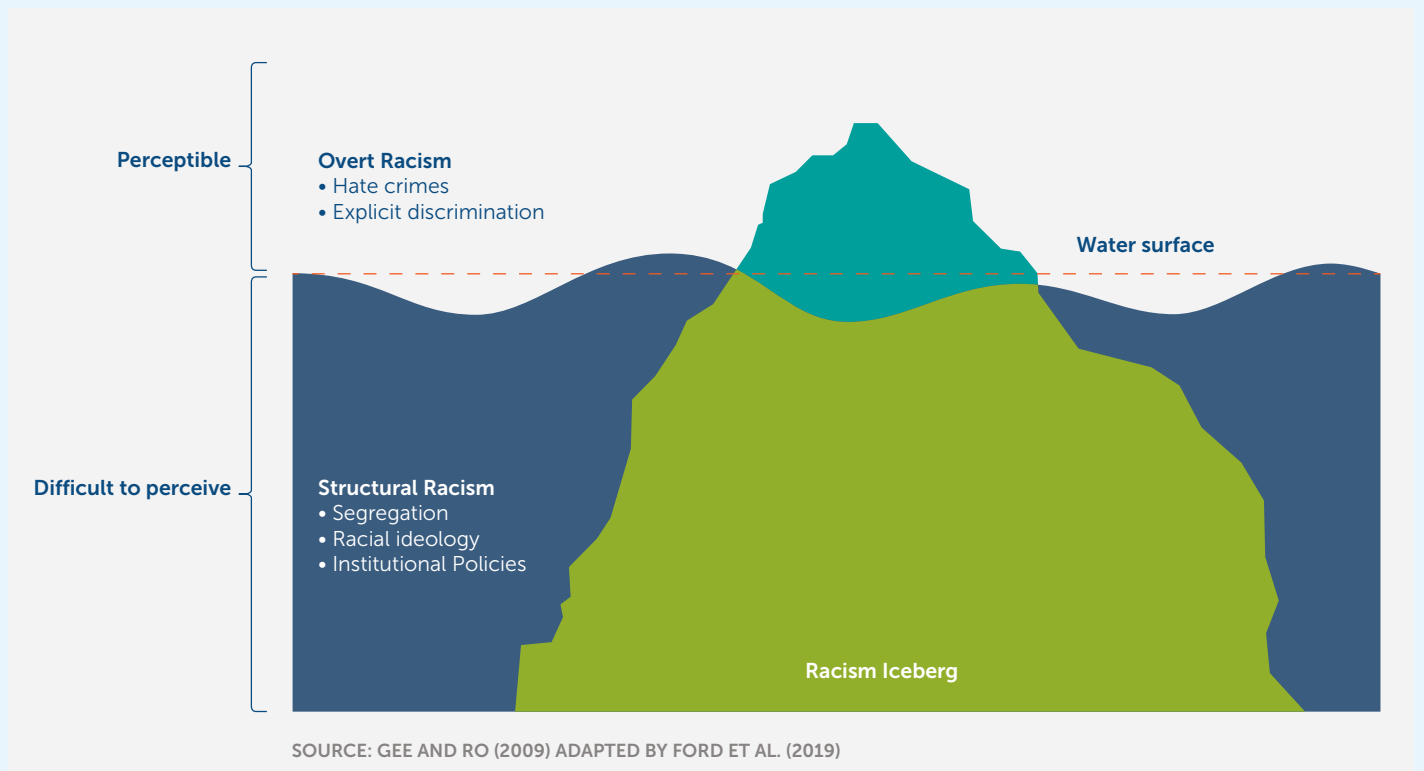
Figure 1 on page 3, originally from Gee and Ro (2009) and adapted by Ford et al. (2019), depicts systemic racism as the hidden base of an iceberg. The visible part of the iceberg, the part we see, represents the overt racism that manifests in blatant hate crimes and explicit discrimination—the explicitly

racist treatment that is relatively easy to recognize. The base of the iceberg, the much larger part we usually do not see, represents systemic racism. It consists of the societal structures (laws, policies, institutions, practices, norms, and attitudes) that impose and perpetuate barriers to opportunities that promote good health and well-being. The opportunities that are denied, for example, include access to well-paying jobs with benefits, safe neighborhoods with good schools, and high-quality healthcare.

Systemic racism is the more dangerous part of the iceberg. It systematically disadvantages people of color in multiple domains that affect health in ways that are more difficult to recognize than explicit interpersonal racism. It may be seen as the way things have always been done and assumed to be unchangeable. Systemic racism damages the health both of people of color and the entire society in which it operates.

FIGURE 1

The racism iceberg, with systemic racism as the hidden base



10 EXAMPLES OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

(These are discussed further in the full report, along with examples of efforts to address them.)

1. Disenfranchisement: voter suppression and gerrymandering.

Voter suppression and gerrymandering affect health indirectly by depriving people of influence over the policies that affect them—for example, policies shaping economic opportunity, environmental injustice, biased policing and sentencing, access to education and healthcare, and transportation.

2. Racial residential segregation.

Residential segregation was created and has been perpetuated by systemic racism. Because of segregation, Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites with similar incomes to live in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage and limited opportunities for upward mobility.



3. Discriminatory public and private lending policies.

Racial disparities in wealth and homeownership are the product of multiple forms of systemic racism, including redlining and predatory financial services. Wealth is a powerful determinant of health.

4. Under-resourced schools and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Obstacles to homeownership and wealth mean lower property taxes, making schools in segregated areas often poorly resourced. Disparities in education translate into disparities in income, wealth, and health throughout life.

Like many discriminatory structures, the school-to-prison pipeline is not based on written policies explicitly instructing school personnel to treat children of color more harshly. Nevertheless, the effects are profoundly discriminatory and rooted in policies and entrenched attitudes reflecting systemic racism.

5. Widespread and entrenched racial discrimination in employment.

Racial discrimination in employment produces disparities in earnings, which can affect health in multiple ways. Discriminatory attitudes may be so embedded in recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices that people of color may not be fairly considered for their abilities.

6. Environmental injustice.

Lack of political power makes segregated communities targets for disposal of hazardous materials, and poverty and discrimination make people unable to move from environmentally unsafe homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods.

7. Systemic injustice in criminal justice.

Systemic racism includes not only laws and written policies but also unwritten policies and norms that guide routine practices—for example, profoundly biased policing and sentencing resulting in mass incarceration and police killings of men of color.

8. Race-based forcible displacement policies: Native American boarding schools and internment of Japanese Americans.

Removal of Native American children from their homes to force assimilation placed them in distant, harsh boarding schools. During World War II, Japanese Americans were forcibly interned in remote camps with poor living conditions; many people lost their homes, lands, businesses, and/or careers. Adverse health outcomes have been documented for both these forcible displacement policies.

9. Systemically inequitable access to and quality of healthcare.

Widespread racially discriminatory policies and practices affecting access to quality healthcare continue to be important contributors to racial disparities in health.

10. Insufficiently disaggregated data obscuring needs of disadvantaged populations.

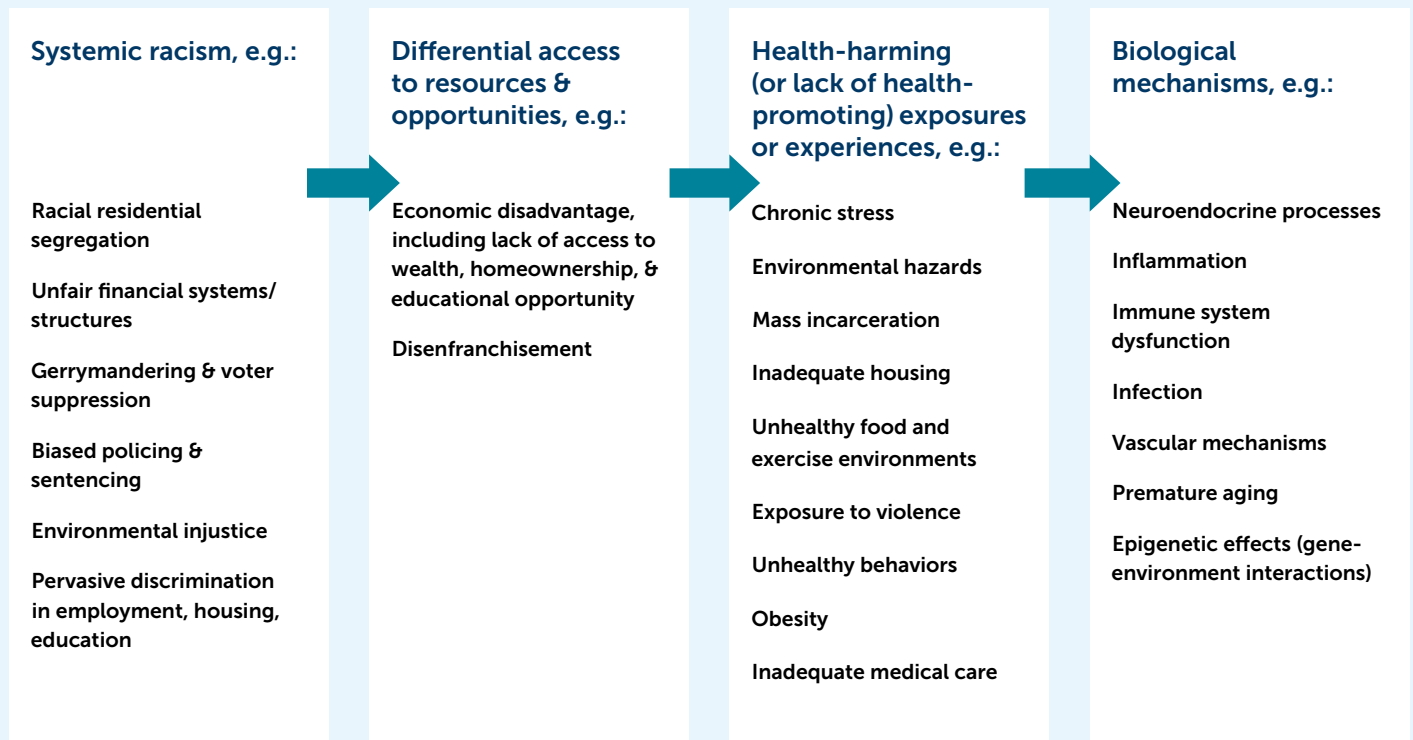
When official statistics fail to include information about marginalized groups, these groups can become invisible, adding to the likelihood that policies and programs will not address their needs.

HOW SYSTEMIC RACISM UNDERMINES HEALTH EQUITY

Extensive research indicates how diverse experiences and exposures produced by systemic racism contribute to racial/ethnic disparities in health by setting in motion different sequential causal chains whose complexity and length often make it difficult to detect the underlying but unseen causes. Figure 2 depicts in greatly simplified form a series of sequential general steps (represented by boxes) through which systemic racism is thought to produce racial disparities in health, listing examples of factors often involved at each step. On page 8, we list (and discuss in the full report) four important and overlapping pathways that follow this general sequence of steps.

FIGURE 2

How systemic racism harms health: an often long and complex sequence of steps



-
- Systemic racism can harm health by disenfranchising and disempowering people.
 - Systemic racism can harm health by placing people at economic disadvantage.
 - Systemic racism can lead to poorer health among people of color by increasing their exposure to health-harming conditions and limiting their access to health-promoting resources and opportunities.
 - Systemic racism can lead to poorer health among people of color of all economic levels by exposing them to race-based unfair treatment, producing chronic stress.



ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC RACISM

Addressing systemic racism is crucial to advancing health equity and achieving a more just society. It will not be easy, given how widespread and deeply entrenched systemic racism remains in our nation. We can learn much from the past about approaches that hold promise for moving us toward a more equitable and healthy society for everyone. Courageous efforts led by people of color can shine a bright light on the path forward. These efforts include the mass demonstrations in the 1950s and 1960s that led to groundbreaking civil rights legislation. It is important to understand that the historic achievements were hard-won; they were the products of years of struggle, with nonviolent activists—including Fannie Lou Hamer, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., former Representative John R. Lewis, Rosa Parks, and so many others—often facing arrest and both police and mob violence. Below we note (and discuss in the full report) several general approaches to addressing systemic racism:

- Enact new laws and policies that counter systemic racism.

Laws and policies created racial inequities; laws and policies can eliminate them.

- Prevent voter suppression through new laws, lawsuits, and witnesses at polling sites, and by providing transportation and/or water and food to prospective voters facing long lines to cast their ballots.
- Enforce existing anti-discrimination laws. Deeply rooted policies, practices, and beliefs allow *de facto* discriminatory practices to continue even after laws and policies have been changed. The impact of attempts to dismantle systemic racism has too often been curtailed because of inadequate enforcement and intentional or unintentional procedural barriers.
- Identify and eliminate harmful existing laws, policies, and practices that enable and perpetuate systemic racism, regardless of their intent, and enforce these changes.

-
- Organize and advocate. Advocacy is needed to build and sustain public support and keep pressure on leaders to address systemic racism. Organizing is essential to mobilize people to take action that will be noticed.
 - Enact and defend affirmative action measures to address centuries of exclusion of people of color from employment, promotions, and admissions to schools and universities. Affirmative action involves consideration to qualified candidates who previously would have been rejected based on their race/ethnic group. In response to challenges to affirmative action initiatives, many institutions have reframed their efforts (often under the banner of diversity, equity, and inclusion) as pursuing greater diversity to the benefit of everyone.
 - Repair and reduce the damages caused by systemic racism.
 - Truth and reconciliation. There can be no reconciliation or healing without truth. The truth about slavery, White supremacy, and historical and ongoing violations of rights must be told—in schools, houses of worship, and public and private forums. Resistance to teaching about racism must be reversed.
 - Reparations for African Americans are essential for justice, given the incalculable harm and suffering caused by centuries of slavery and ongoing violations of rights. Reparations could take many forms—for example, by investing in education from pre-kindergarten through college for all Black children or making reparations to build wealth. Although repairing and reducing the damages caused by systemic racism will not eliminate it, countering its ill effects is an important aspect of pursuing justice and health equity.
 - Elect and support strong, committed leadership at federal and state levels. Federal and state levels are particularly crucial because they are the venues where laws are made.

ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC RACISM: MOVING FORWARD

Systemic and structural change will not come easily. It will require changing systems, laws, policies, and practices in ways that will be effective, endure over the long term, and affect many people. Piecemeal, time-limited programs will not produce lasting change. It is far easier to enact initiatives that mitigate the harmful effects of systemic racism while leaving the unfair systems and structures in place, or that focus on short-term improvements rather than sustained or fundamental change. Structures that have the effect of disadvantaging people of color, regardless of intent, must be dismantled.

Moving forward will require mutually reinforcing strategies in multiple sectors and places, at levels from local to national. No single strategy alone is likely to be effective. Effective approaches will activate and support people to vote; learn; speak out to their children, families, friends, and co-workers; organize in their neighborhoods, towns, and states and nationally; and support, join, and become leaders of organizations pushing for change. Strategies that matter will be nimble, seeking opportunities to address systemic racism wherever it exists and where public attention is being drawn.

Moving forward will require awareness and commitment from individuals, nongovernmental organizations, and government, including at the national level, to stay the course over the long term. It will require the strong and enduring commitment of leaders—for example, in government, business, health and healthcare, education, environment, housing, transportation and climate change. It will require vigilance over time to ensure enforcement of policies to dismantle systemic racism, and to detect and actively oppose any new efforts that would exacerbate systemic racism.

Moving forward will require continuing and deepening research on systemic racism, revealing the horrifying harms it has caused and continues to cause. Ongoing research is essential both to guide actions and to build and maintain political will, which is crucial to changing unfair systems and structures. To build political will, the research findings must be used to educate the public and policymakers about what systemic racism is, the damages it has inflicted and continues to inflict, why dismantling it must be a priority, and how living in a more equitable society will enhance everyone's lives.





University of California
San Francisco

ucsf.edu



Robert Wood Johnson
Foundation

rwjf.org
