

The Impact of Structural Racism on Mental Health



Central East (HHS Region 3)

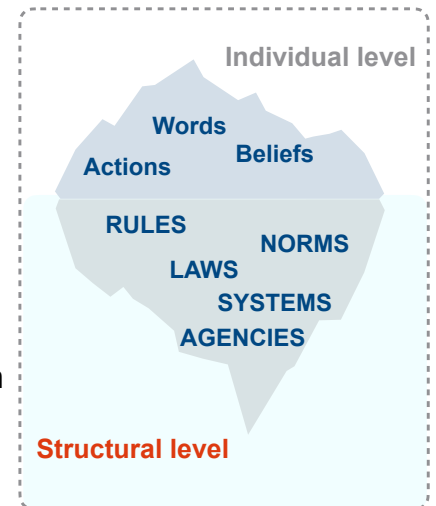
MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

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WHAT IS STRUCTURAL RACISM

Structural racism refers to the macrolevel policies, practices, systems, and institutions that reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups.^{1,2,3,4} Consider an iceberg: the tip represents interpersonal racism, which are easily visible actions, words, and beliefs that take place at the individual level. The rest of the iceberg, submerged, represents structural racism; the inequitable rules, laws, and norms embedded in culture and society. Structural racism is often perpetuated by institutions at the foundational core of a society—government agencies, judicial systems, education systems, and health care systems, among others—which, due to their power and roles, create an environment of social legitimacy to racial inequity.⁵



STRUCTURAL RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States has well-documented racial and ethnic inequalities. Structural racism is comprised of “mutually reinforcing inequitable systems”², where institutions build upon and bolster each other to result in the inequitable and discriminatory distribution of resources.³ Examples of the ways structural racism manifests include:^{2,3,4}

JUSTICE

Virtually all aspects of the criminal justice system contain racial bias which leads to unequal outcomes. This includes over-policing of BIPOC neighborhoods, police-involved shootings and threat of violence, and excessive incarceration rates.

HOUSING

Residential racial segregation (or “redlining”) occurs when institutions and agencies selectively deny access to housing. Residential segregation is linked to adverse health outcomes such as depression, chronic disease, and increased homicide rates.

ENVIRONMENT

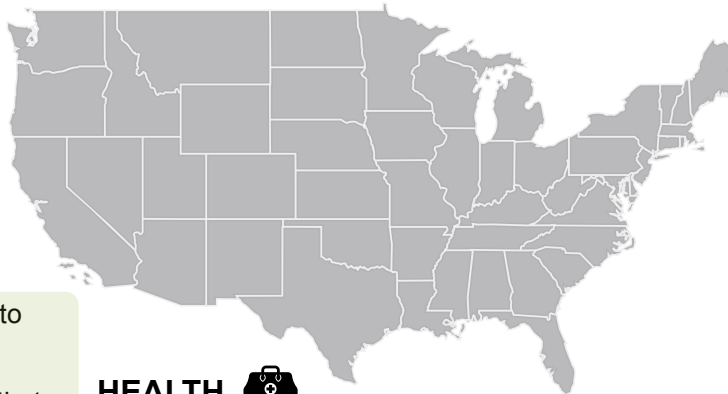
Environmental racism refers to when Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are directed into neighborhoods that experience poor environmental conditions such as contaminated land or water, severe air pollution, or higher rates of natural disasters.

HEALTH

People who experience racism have higher rates of illness, and it is considered one of the key contributing factors to the onset of disease or illness. Racism also increases disparities in accessing health care services and can lead to higher rates of substance use and poor nutrition.

EDUCATION

Structural racism in education includes reduced access and availability of resources, over-policing of schools and the criminalization of normal child behaviors, and curricula omitting the history and contributions of BIPOC people.



Any one of these systems can increase stress and initiate or exacerbate stressors elsewhere. This means that structural racism can negatively harm people far beyond its direct impact in one area of life. Furthermore, these persistent inequities are intergenerational, and can cause compounding historical trauma.

SAMHSA

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

IMPACT OF STRUCTURAL RACISM ON MENTAL HEALTH

Structural racism is a driving force behind inequities in mental health and the negative consequences of racism and discrimination begin at a young age.^{5,6,7} Racism and discrimination directly increase rates of:^{1,5,6,7}

- Trauma
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Psychological stress
- Emotional stress
- Poor sleep
- Negative affect
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Suicidal thoughts

Racism can also undermine positive mental health aspects and protective factors such as resilience, hope, and motivation.⁸

In mental health care, structural racism presents itself in many ways. It dictates who can access care, how a person will be treated in care, and how an individual is able to pay for care. Segregated neighborhoods also have fewer and less resourced treatment facilities and trained personnel.^{1,4,5}

Mental health providers can misdiagnose or underdiagnose issues due to lack of cultural competence. There may be language differences between the provider and the client, stigma around BIPOC and mental health, as well as cultural differences that lead to the provider not recognizing the descriptions of symptoms of a mental health issue.^{5,6}

Discrimination in health care has caused over 30% of Black, 23% of Indigenous, and 20% of Hispanic people to avoid medical care¹

Black males are more likely to be misdiagnosed with schizophrenia compared with White males⁵

BIPOC youth are more likely than White youth to be referred to the justice system instead of specialty health care⁶

Asian Americans are less likely to use mental health services than any other racial or ethnic group⁶

NOTES

1. Mensash et al. 2021. Racism and Mental Health Equity: History Repeating Itself. *Psychiatric Services in Advance*. <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ps.202000755>

2. Bailey et al. 2017. Structural Racism and Health Inequities in the USA: Evidence and Interventions. *The Lancet*, 389 (10077), 1453-1463. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)30569-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)30569-X/fulltext)

3. Gee & Ford. 2011. Structural Racism and Health Inequities: Old Issues, New Directions. *Du Bois Review*, 8(1), 115-132. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4306458/>

4. Bailey et al. 2020. How Structural Racism Works — Racist Policies as a Root Cause of U.S. Racial Health Inequities. *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

5. Mental Health America. 2021. Racism and Mental Health. <https://www.mhanational.org/racism-and-mental-health>

6. American Psychiatric Association. 2017. Mental Health Disparities: Diverse Populations. <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts>

7. Williams. 2018. Stress and the Mental Health of Populations of Color: Advancing Our Understanding of Race-related Stressors. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 59 (4), 466-485. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6532404/>

8. Bhui et al. 2018. The Impact of Racism on Mental Health. The Synergi Collaborative Centre <https://synergicollaborativecentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/The-impact-of-racism-on-mental-health-briefing-paper-1.pdf>

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