

A Certain Mission in Uncertain Times: Advancing Healthcare as a Civil Rights Issue

“Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” are essential to the American Dream. Every family within the United States has a chance to flourish in happiness, but some families’ pursuits are far more challenging than their privileged counterparts. Families with more challenging paths have poor access to quality social determinants of health which significantly impacts health outcomes. Health outcomes include life expectancy, morbidity, and functional limitations. Health is distributed within the interconnectedness of the social determinants of health (SDOH). Each determinant exchanges a range of impact with another determinant to impact health outcomes. The five social determinants of health are Economic Stability, Education, Healthcare, Neighborhood, and Social Context. Each SDOH is a core component of the environment in which we live. The environment has the most significant effect on an individual’s likelihood of achieving quality health outcomes within the United States. Public policy must reflect the science of Public Health which focuses on prevention rather than treatment. Clinical-care contributes to only 20% of a person’s lifespan and quality of life, while preventative health behaviors, socioeconomic factors, and physical environment combine for the remaining 80%.¹

America has a long-standing tradition of racial discrimination. This tradition of discrimination continues to disproportionately create wealth within the white population while simultaneously diminishing the health and prosperity of racial and ethnic minorities. Through comprehensive civil rights policies and economic development, the health of racial and ethnic minorities can continue to improve in the United States. From the abolition of slavery to current Fortune-100 diversity efforts, the upliftment of racial and ethnic minorities is an enduring struggle to alleviate the burden of institutional racism. Racism contaminates each social determinant of health within the United States. As the U.S. becomes a more racially progressive society, minorities live longer and better quality of lives.

The institution of slavery subjected African Americans to inhumane conditions which led to poor mental and physical health. Slave owners and politicians strategically enacted legislation that prevented slaves from earning income, traveling, gaining an education, consuming nutritious food, integrating into society, and receiving quality healthcare. Slaves were tortured and executed if they broke any of the laws that were implemented to limit their survival. In 1850, the estimated average number of years an African American lived was a devastating 21.4 years.² The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the most significant civil rights law passed since the 13th Amendment that dismantled chattel slavery in 1865. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, African Americans gained the legal protection from discrimination in public spaces, federally funded programs, and employment. This new legal protection provided more access to vital contributors to health such as jobs, transportation, grocery stores, and social networks.

Imagine life as a recently laid-off salesman with ten years of experience. The new jobs he applies to reject him because he was unable to afford a college education. As a result, he will not be able to afford any health insurance for his conditions. Education is a significant tool for building a healthy life because it provides access to information, opportunity, and a network of professionals. Without education, it is more

¹ Magnan, Sanne. "Social Determinants of Health 101 for Health Care: Five Plus Five." *National Academy of Medicine*. N.p., 17 Aug. 2018. Web. 20 Aug. 2018.

² https://geriatrics.stanford.edu/ethnomed/african_american/fund/health_history/longevity.html

difficult to earn a living wage and be considered for career opportunities due to lack of literacy or training. The Civil Rights Movement and the Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 gave African Americans access to historically white schools with more funding and opportunities that were unavailable to African Americans before desegregation. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) provided education to disenfranchised African Americans before desegregation. Today, there are 102 HBCU's that continue to serve as international-influencers and pillars within the community.

Economic stability entails the income and wealth that a family has generated. As a family's income and wealth grow, so does their quality of life. Incentives provided by the overarching economic principles of capitalism organically create a competitive market for resources that can lead to inequality if greed is not mitigated. American families that inherit wealth from their previous generations are more likely to obtain higher education and access to quality food and healthcare.

The attributes of neighborhoods are a predictive indicator of a family's health outcomes. Adequate transportation, housing, and safety are vital in preventing morbidity and sustaining a healthy lifestyle. If a public housing complex contains mold, the tenants of the complex are more susceptible to chronic lung disease. When gun violence is rampant in an inner-city, residents are at risk of suffering from anxiety. Without public transportation, some hard-working employees would not be able to afford the commute to work.

Food is the fuel that keeps our mind and bodies moving. Hunger and access to healthy food option is still a challenge for systematically disadvantaged Americans. Food deserts plaque the inner-city. Residents of the inner-city then have to settle for overpriced healthy food or cheap junk food. Underserved families have to decide if they would like to sacrifice nutrition for the ability to pay other expenses.

They say "your network is your net-worth." This holds true due to the impact of community and social context. Their support systems, community engagement, determine a family's community and social context, and levels of discrimination faced. If all of the women in a family decide to practice Law, it should come of no surprise if the next daughter attends law school. We are socially-influenced by our parents, siblings, and friends. We share a combination of their perceptions and experiences which can lead to varying results depending on their backgrounds.

Healthcare is now the most significant industry within the United States economy. However, not everyone has access to quality healthcare or healthcare coverage. Under the fee-for-service payment model, only patients with private insurance can afford expensive treatments. Underinsured patients risk bankruptcy as a result of rising healthcare costs. In 2016, over 4 million African Americans were uninsured in the United States.³ A persistent gap exists between the outcomes of African Americans and White Americans. As of 2011, White Americans on average live 3.7 years longer than African Americans.⁴ The United States will have to eradicate institutional racism to establish health equity for racial and ethnic minorities.

³ <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/state-indicator/rate-by-raceethnicity/?dataView=1¤tTimeframe=0&selectedDistributions=black&selectedRows=%7B%22wrapups%22:%7B%22united-states%22:%7B%7D%7D%7D&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>

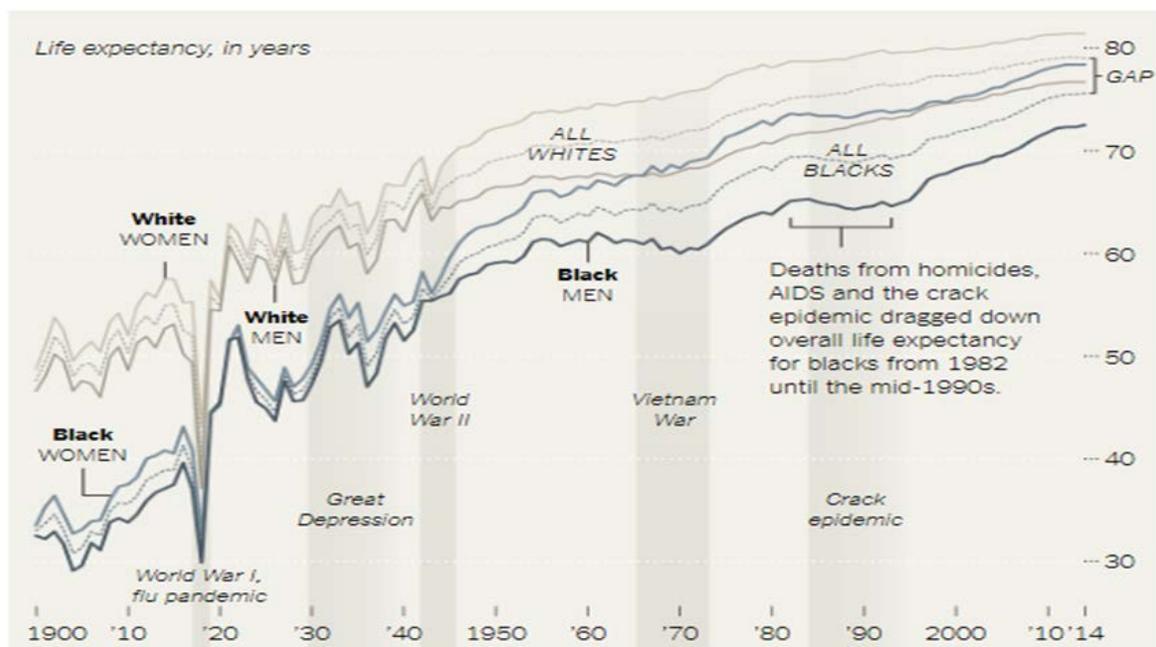
⁴ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr63/nvsr63_03.pdf

Appendix



Closing the Gap

Two decades of steady improvements in the health of black Americans have narrowed the gap between black and white life spans to 3.4 years, a record low.



Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; National Center for Health Statistics; National Vital Statistics System

By The New York Times