

# Social Inequalities in Health: The Case of Racial/Ethnic Inequities

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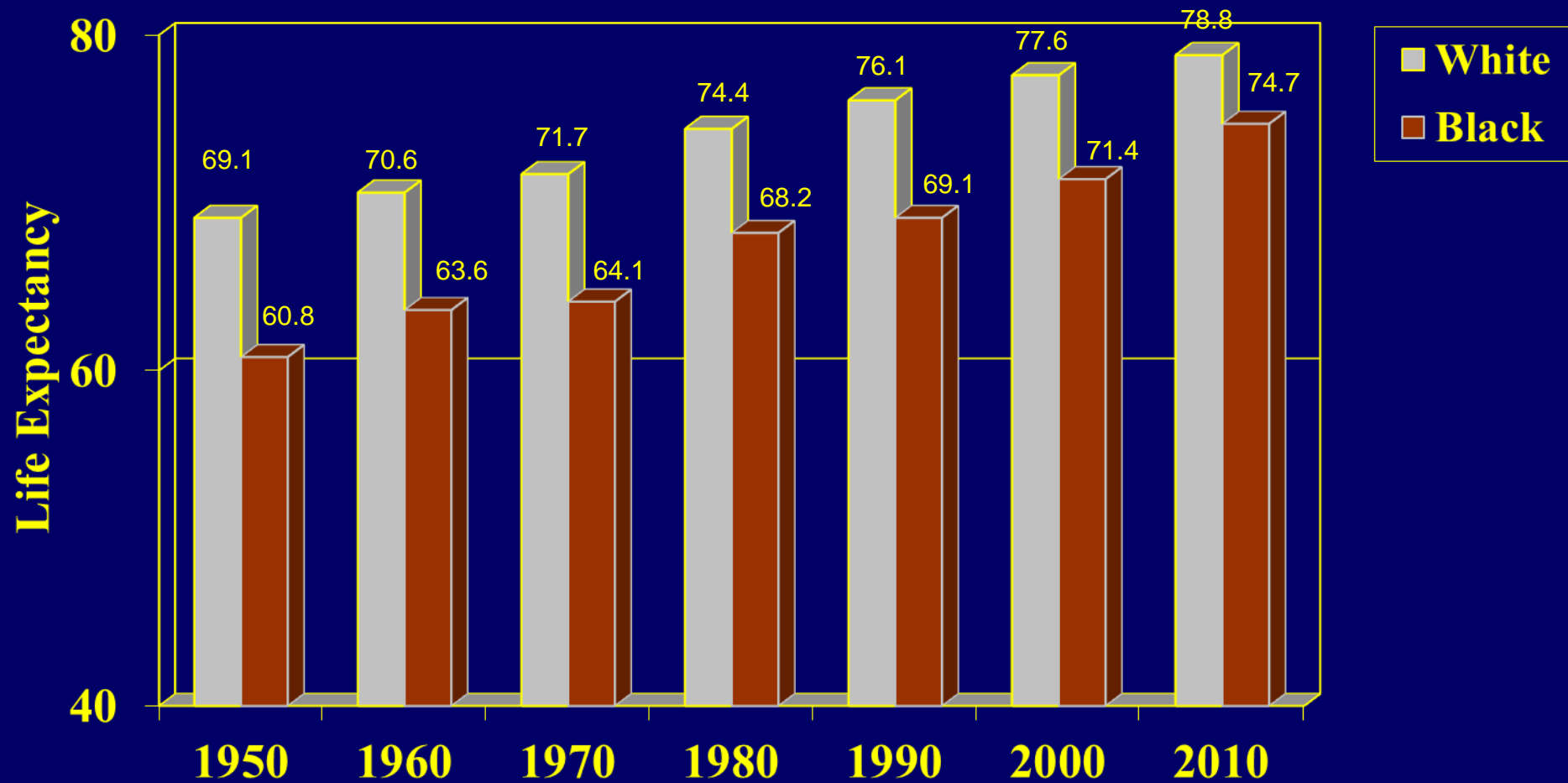
Harvard University

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Racial Inequities In Health Have  
Existed for a Long Time

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# Life Expectancy Lags, 1950-2010

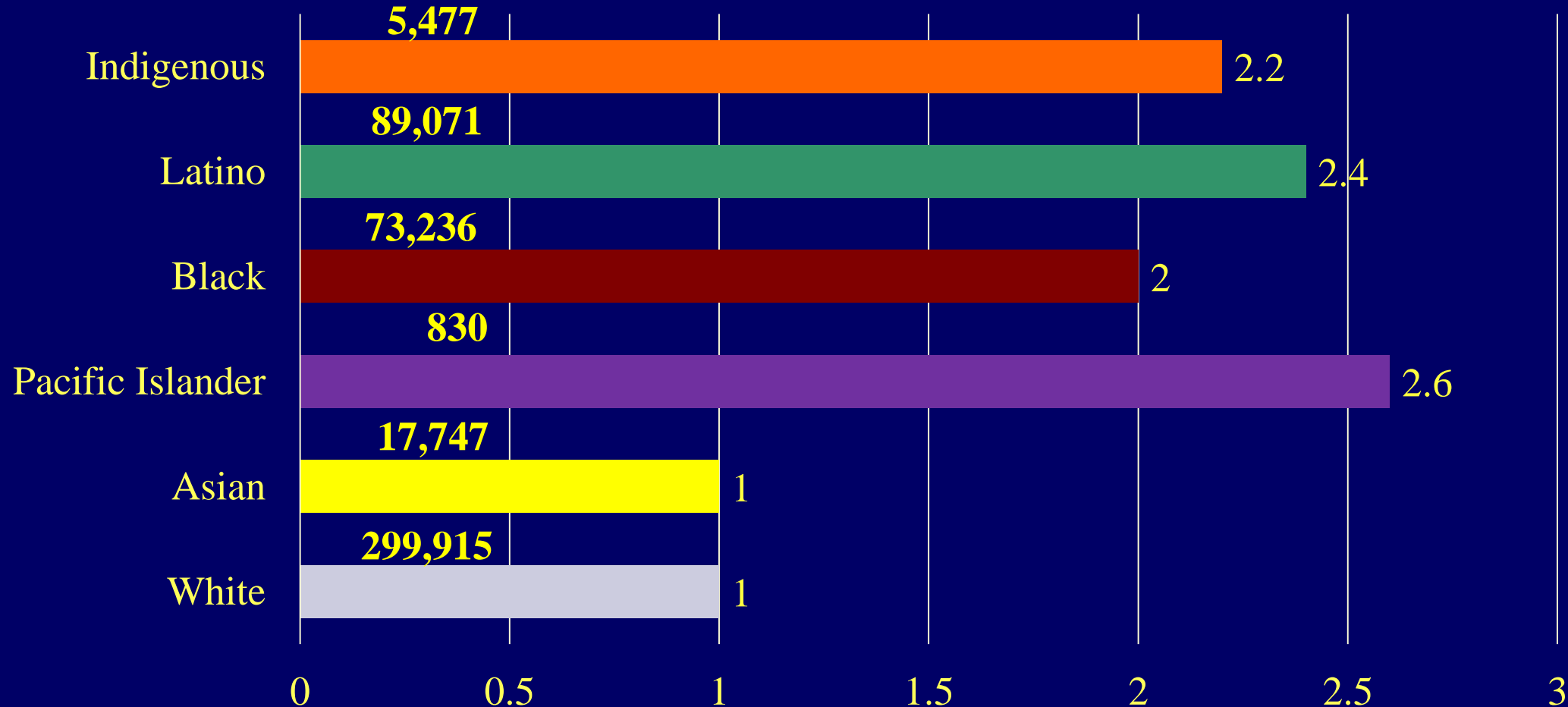


Source: NCHS, Health United States, 2013

# And Covid-19 Has Made These Inequities Much Worse

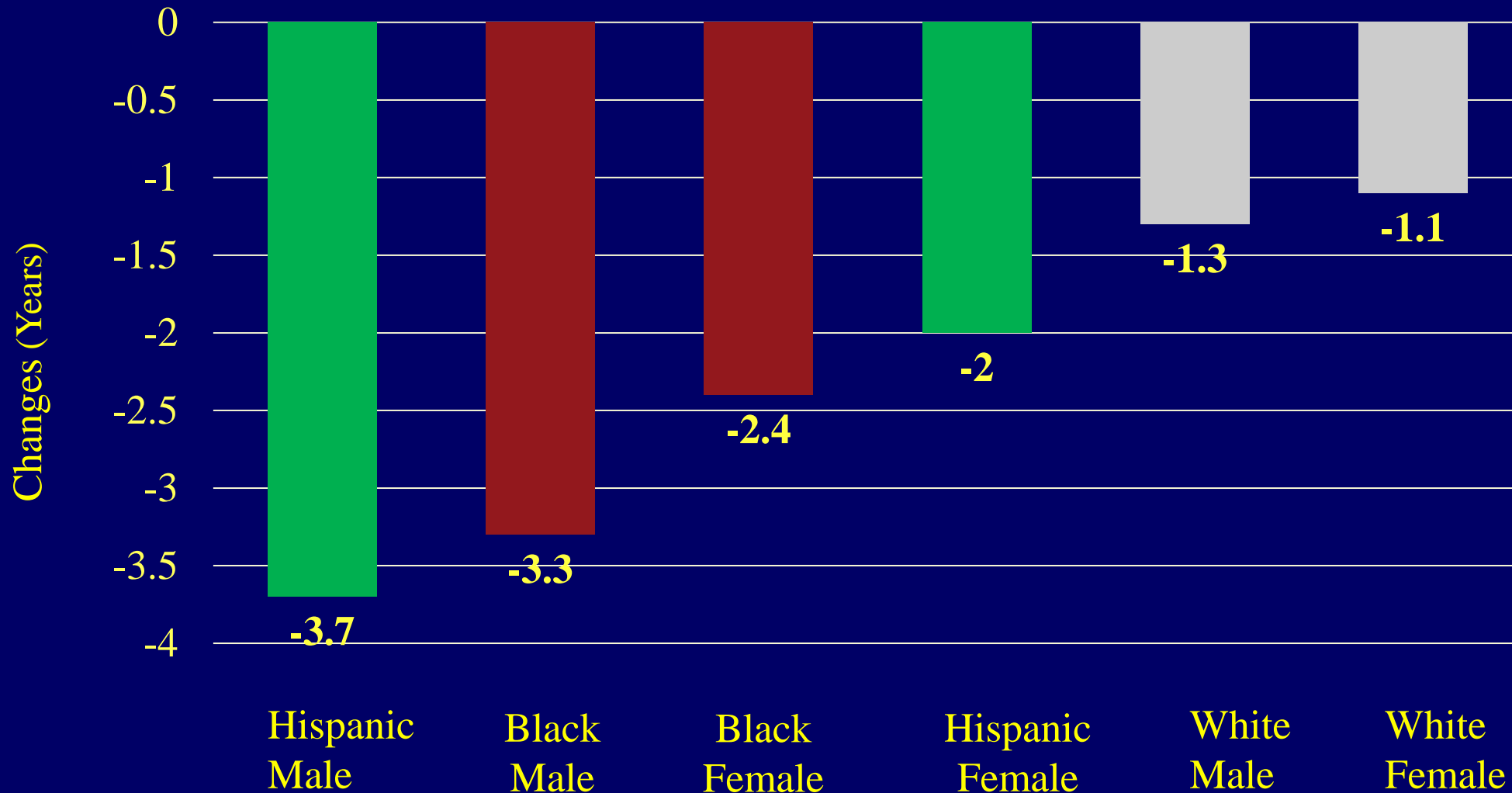
## Death Rates for Other Races Compared to Whites

Age-adjusted ORs; Deaths through March 2, 2021, 2021; (> 520,000 U.S. deaths)



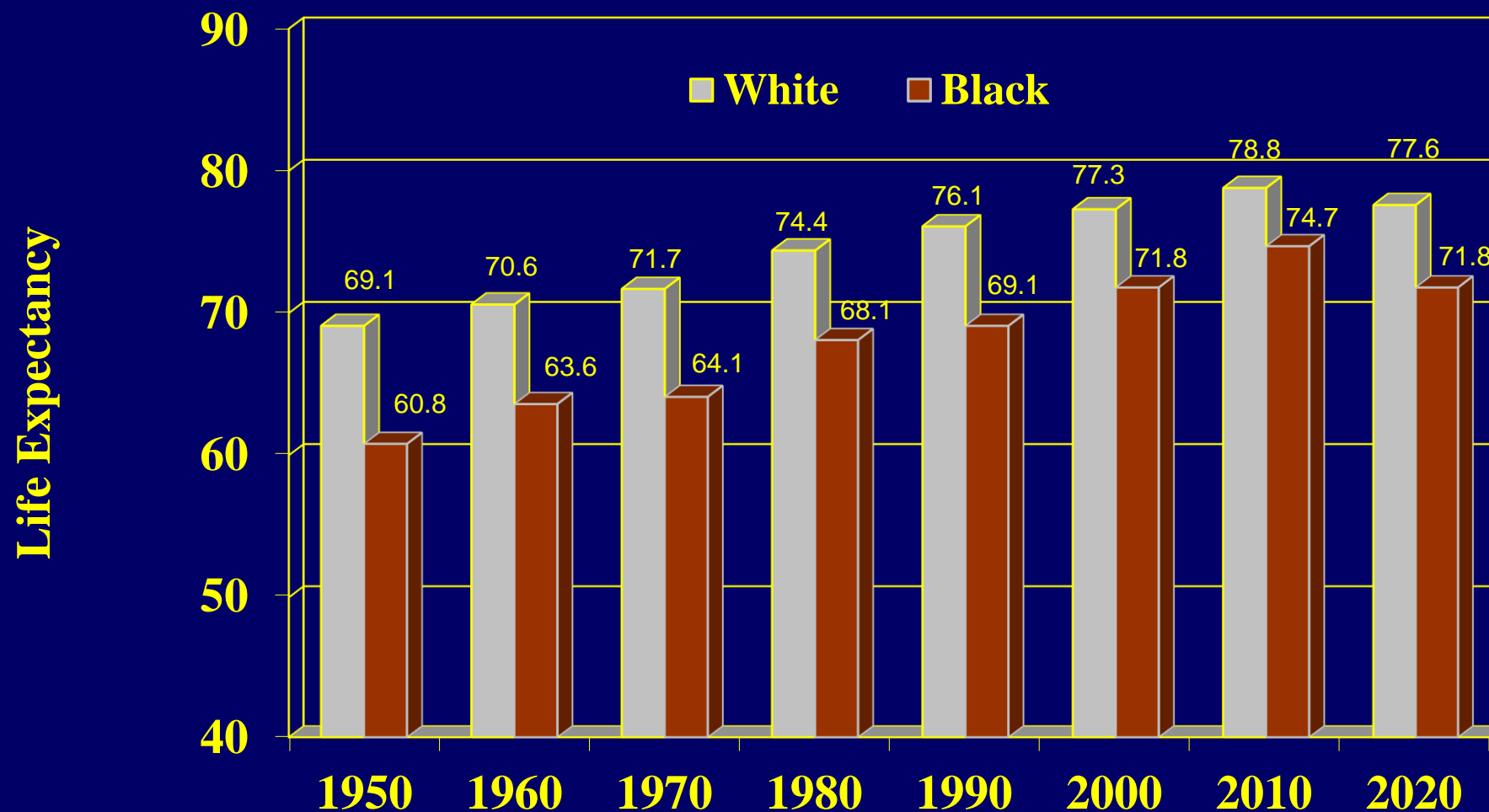
# Decline: Life Expectancy at Birth, 2019-2020

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# Life Expectancy by Race, 1950-2020

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What Drives these Large Racial Inequities  
in Health?

# Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic Status (SES), (whether measured by income, education, occupation, poverty or wealth) is a central determinant of the distribution of valuable resources in society





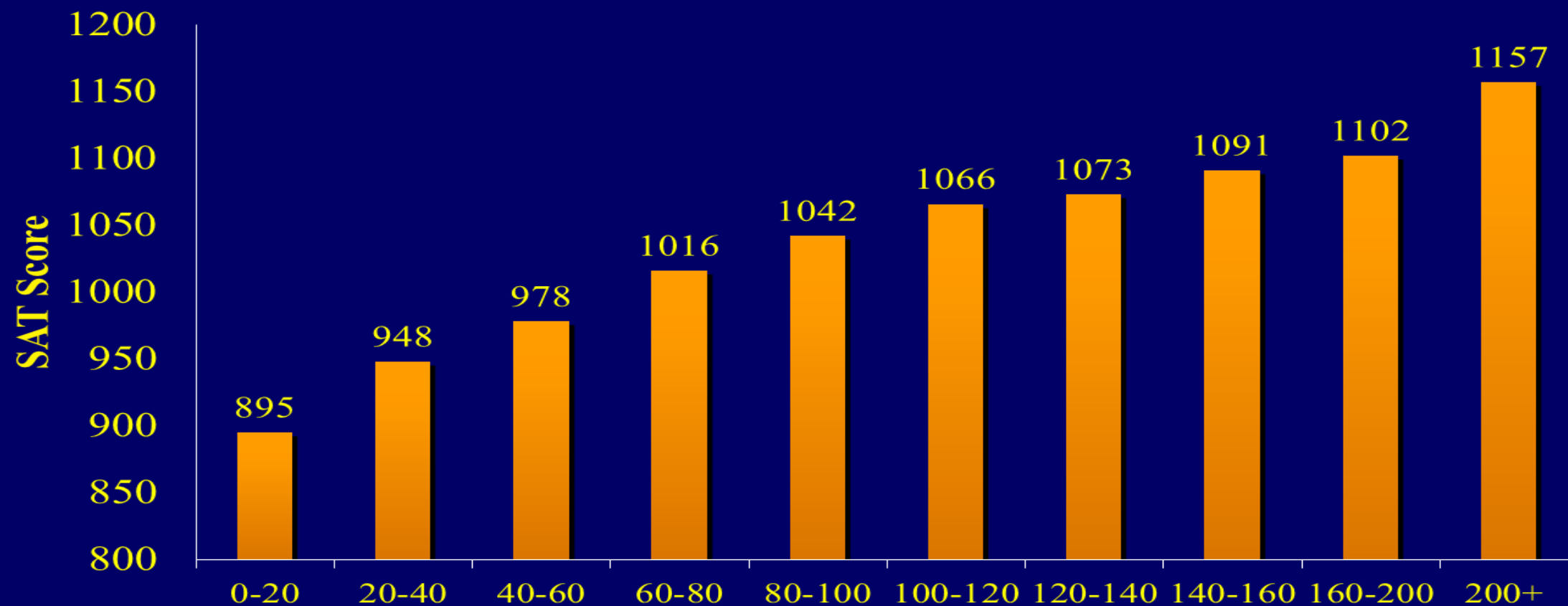
SAT = Scholastic Aptitude Test

OR  
Student Affluence Test?

# SAT SCORE by Family Income

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## SAT Score (Math & Reading Only)



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Race/Ethnicity is strongly related to SES

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# Median Household Income and Race, 2018

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Racial Differences in Income are Substantial:

**1 dollar**



**Whites**

**1.23 dollar**



**Asians**

**73 cents**



**Hispanics**

**59 cents**



**Am Indians\***

**59 cents**



**Blacks**

# Reducing Racial Inequity in Income is on a Treadmill: A Lot of Talk: Little Progress

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- In 1978, Black households earned 59 cents for every dollar of income that White households earned
- In 2018, the gap is still 59 cents to the dollar



Large racial gaps in income markedly  
understate the racial gap in economic status

# Median Wealth and Race, 2016

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For every dollar of wealth that Whites have,



Blacks have 10 cents



Latinos have 12 cents



Other Races have 38 cents





# What Low Economic Status Means

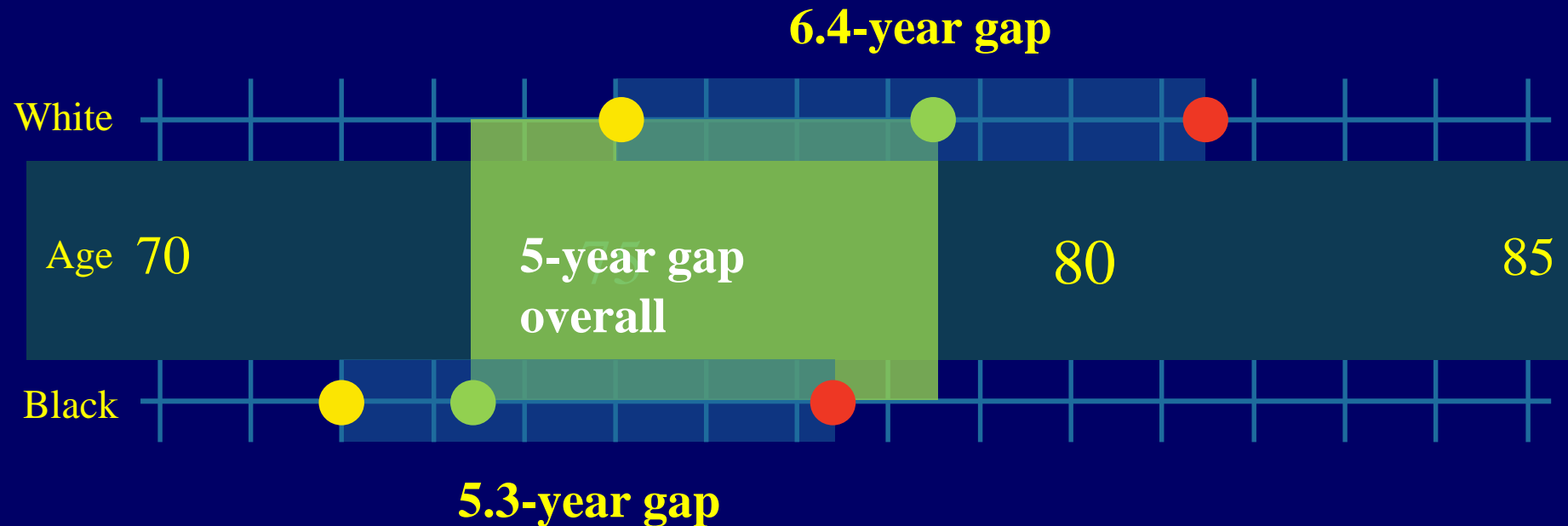
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## We are in the same storm but in different Boats



# **Added Burden of Race**

# Life Expectancy at Age 25 Based on Level of Education

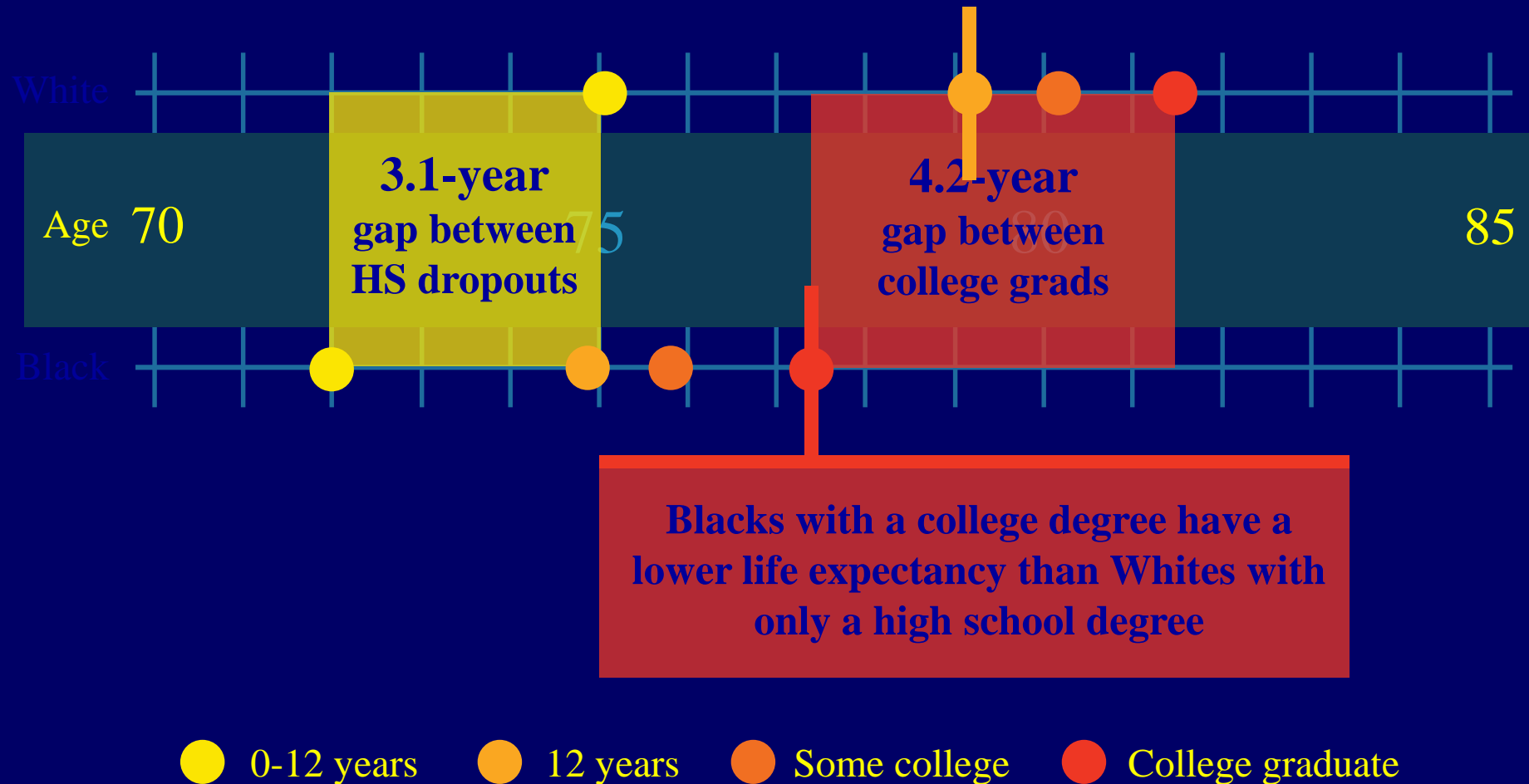


● Overall    ● 0-12 years    ● College graduate

Murphy, NVSS 2000; Braveman, Cubbin, Egerter, Williams, Pamuk, *AJPH*, 2010; NLMS 1988-1998

# Life Expectancy at Age 25

## Race Still Matters



# Why Racial Inequality Exists

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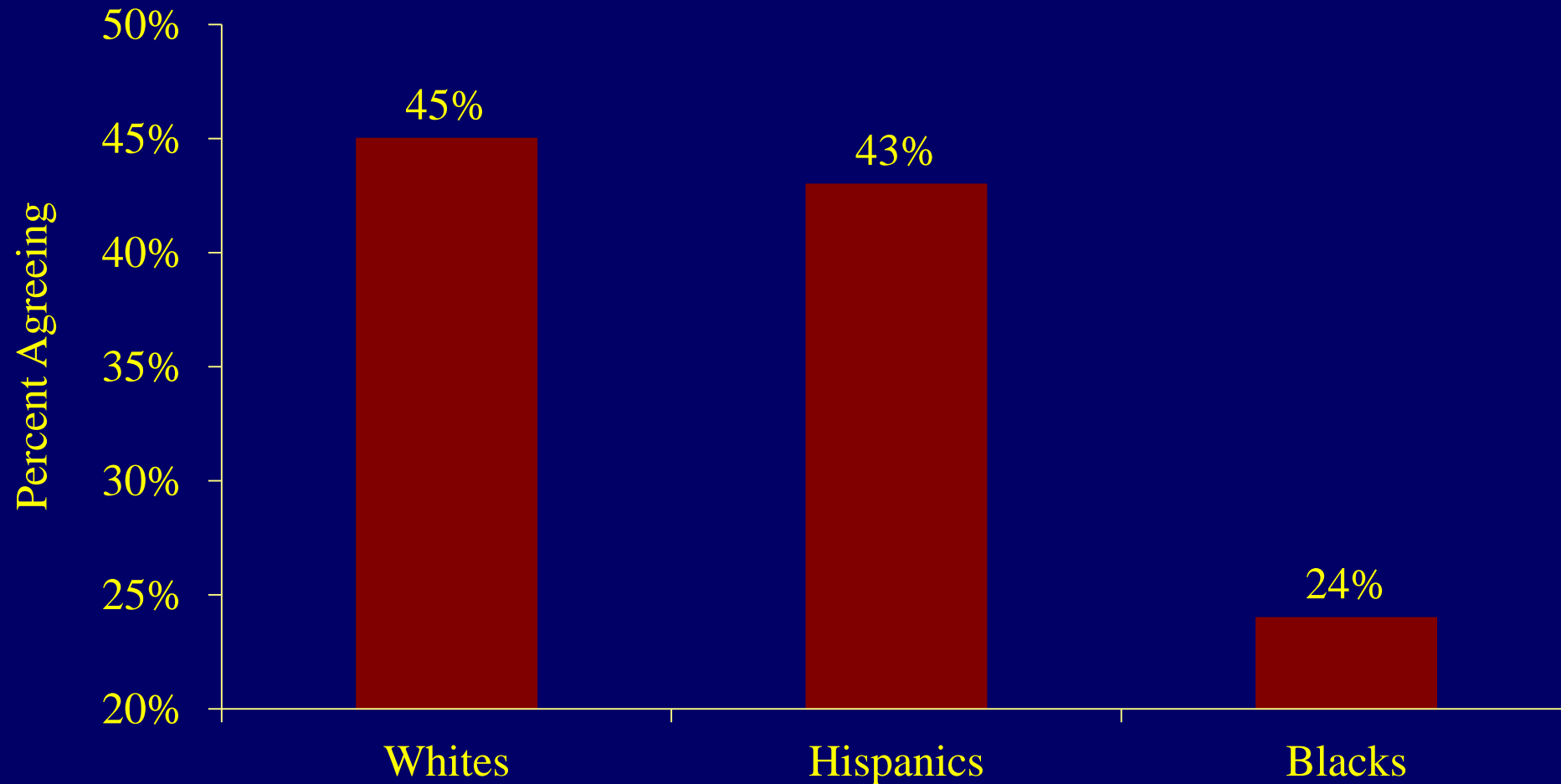
What does America Think?



# Solution to Inequality: More Effort

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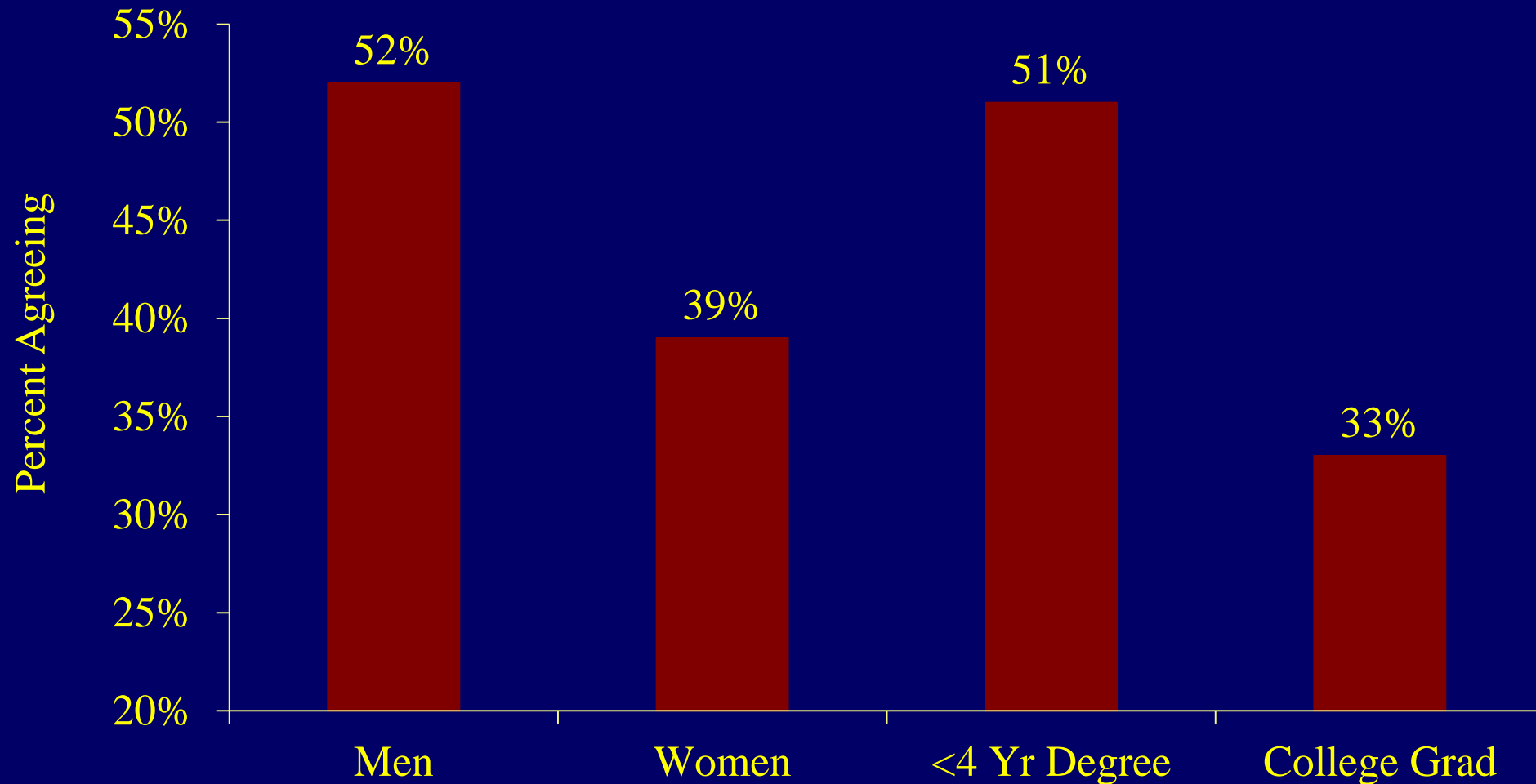
Blacks would do as well as whites if they only tried harder



# Solution to Inequality: More Effort, Whites

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Blacks would do as well as whites if they only tried harder



*What does Scientific Research Clearly  
Say?*

*Racism and Racial Discrimination are  
alive, well, pervasive and thriving in  
America*



## The House that Racism Built

Racism as a  
societal system



Social Forces

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

# Racism Defined

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- 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



## The House that Racism Built

Racism as a  
societal system

Social Forces

- Political
- Legal
- Economic
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- Cultural
- Historical  
Events

Structural or  
Institutional  
Racism (e.g.  
Segregation)

# US: Centrality of Segregation in Creating Racial Inequities

## VIEWPOINT

### Racial Residential Segregation: A Fundamental Cause of Racial Disparities in Health

DAVID R. WILLIAMS, PhD, MPH<sup>a</sup>  
CHIQUITA COLLINS, PhD<sup>b</sup>

#### SYNOPSIS

Racial residential segregation is a fundamental cause of racial disparities in health. The physical separation of the races by enforced residence in certain areas is an institutional mechanism of racism that was designed to protect whites from social interaction with blacks. Despite the absence of supportive legal statutes, the degree of residential segregation remains extremely high for most African Americans in the United States.

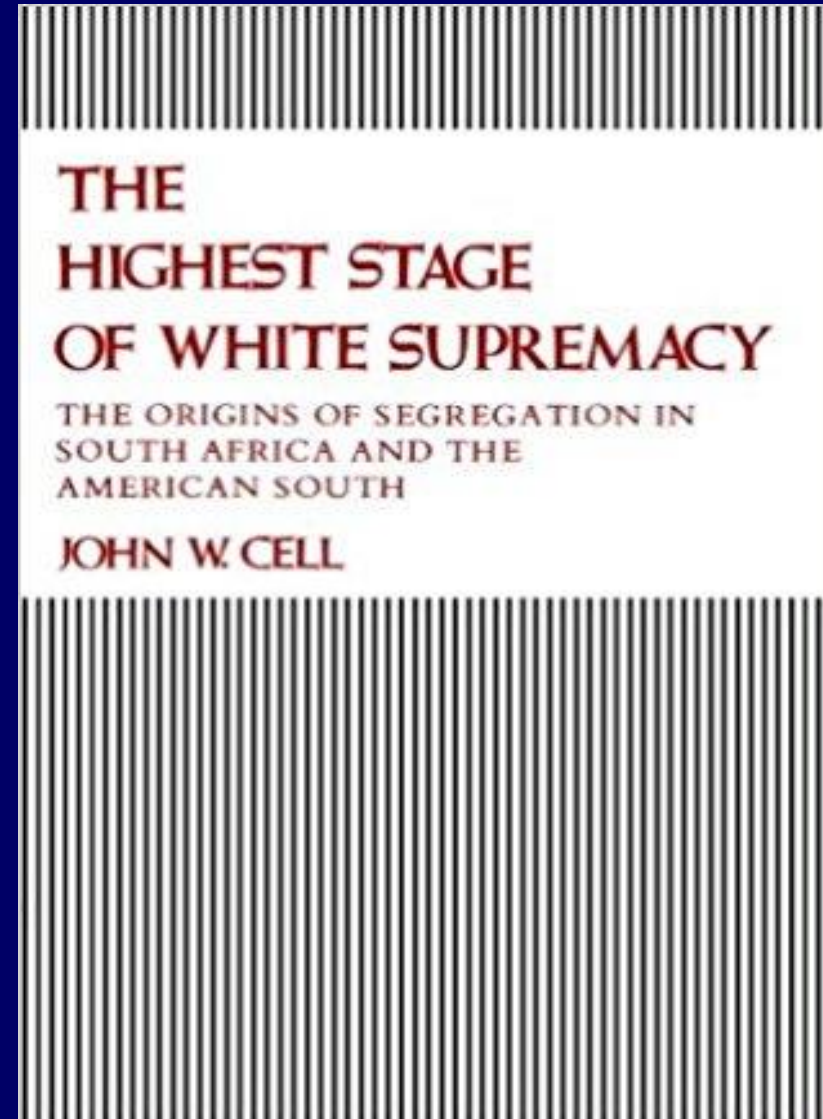


- Segregation refers to restricted residence to particular areas based on race
- It includes the forced removal and relocation of indigenous peoples
- Reflects institutionalized isolation & marginalization of racial populations

# Racial Segregation Is ...

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- One of the most successful **domestic policies** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- "the dominant system of racial regulation and control" in the U.S



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John Cell, 1982

# How Segregation Works

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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



Pixabay.com



# Racial Differences in Residential Environment

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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.”



# Neighborhood Opportunity Index

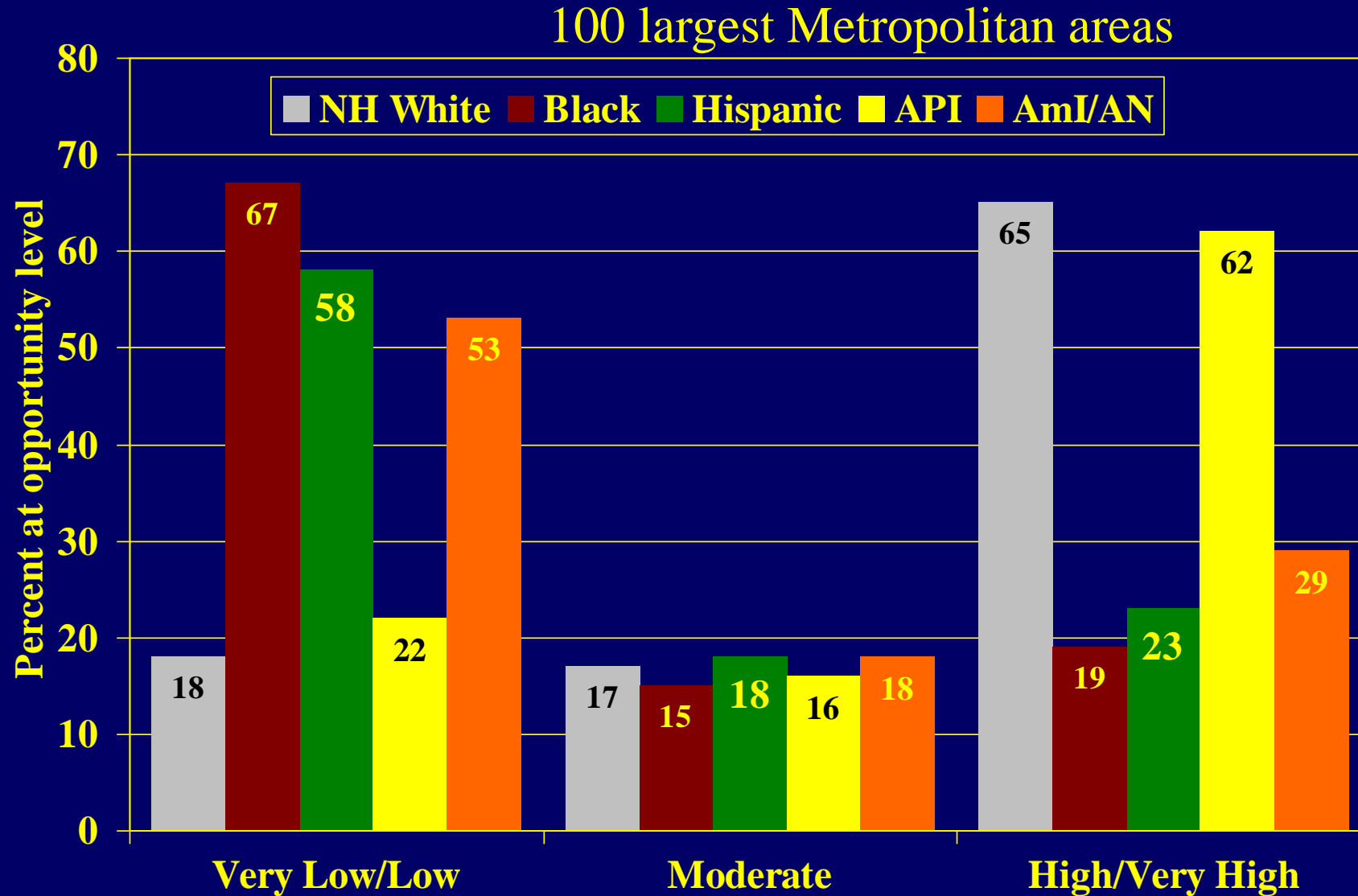
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1. **Institutions:** number & quality of schools, early childhood centers
2. **Influences shaping norms and expectations:** (high school graduation rate, adults with high skill jobs)
3. **Economic Resources:** income, home ownership, employment, public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





# Percentage of Children at Neighborhood Opportunity Level



*Segregation is the central driver of the  
Large Racial/Ethnic Differences in SES*

# Residential Segregation and SES

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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



# An Intergenerational Study

- Inequity usu. studied in one generation
- Intergenerational analysis, linking parents & kids, US pop, 1989-2015
- Black boys have lower earnings than white boys in 99% of Census tracts in America (controlling for parental income)



- **Why?** They live in neighborhoods that differ in access to opportunity
- Black boys do well in neighborhoods with good resources (low poverty) *and* good race-specific factors (high father presence, less racial bias)
- **The problem:** there are essentially no such neighborhoods in America

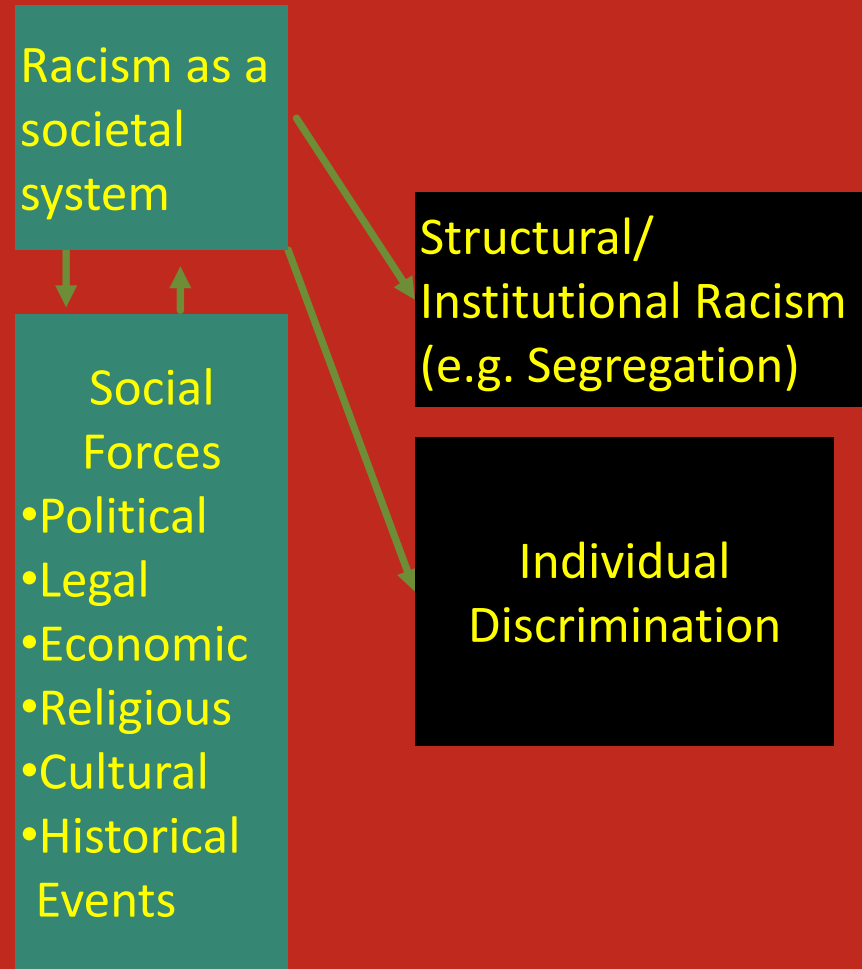
# Inequities by Design

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- 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”
- 



## The House that Racism Built



## *Individual Discrimination*

Experiences of discrimination are  
an added source of Toxic Stress



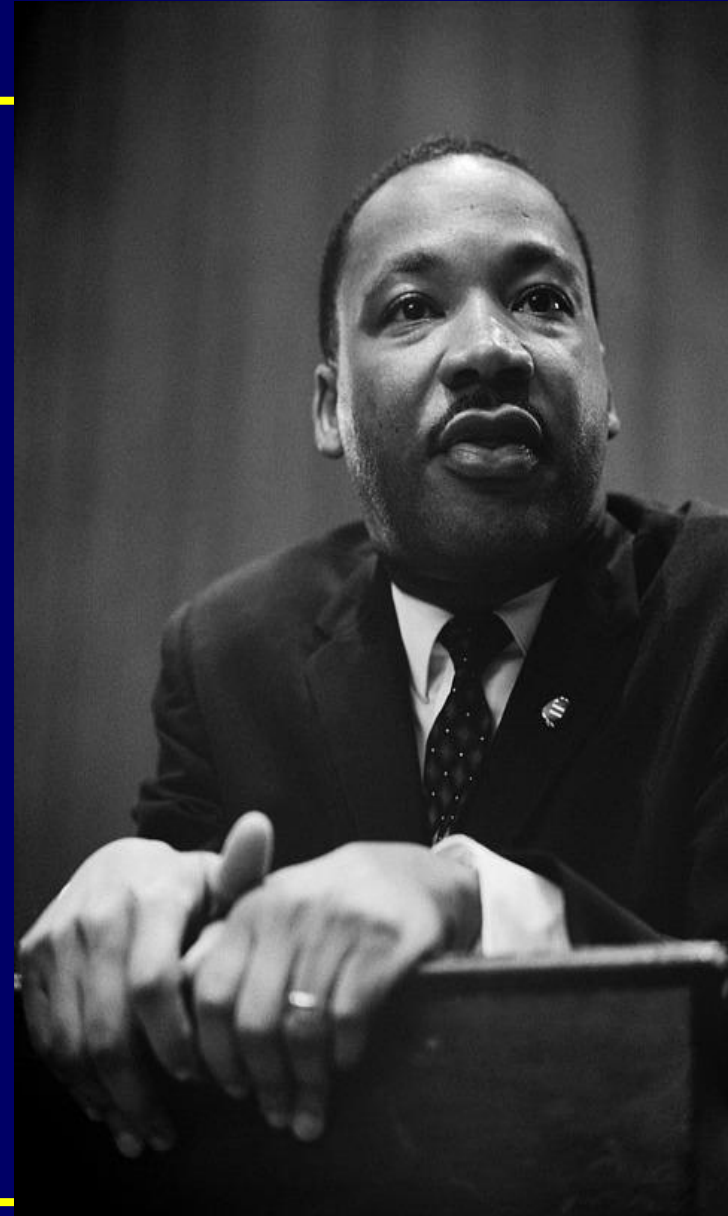
# MLK Quote

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“... Discrimination is a hellhound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives declaring that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as the truth in the society dominating them.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. [1967]

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# Every Day Discrimination

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In your day-to-day life how often do these happen to you?

- You are treated with less courtesy than other people.
- You are treated with less respect than other people.
- You receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores.
- People act as if they think you are not smart.
- People act as if they are afraid of you.
- People act as if they think you are dishonest.
- People act as if they're better than you are.
- You are called names or insulted.
- You are threatened or harassed.



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What do you think was the main reason for these experiences?

# Everyday Discrimination is Associated With:

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- coronary artery calcification
- inflammation (C-reactive protein)
- inflammation (IL-6)
- blood pressure
- lower birth weight
- cognitive impairment
- poor sleep
- mortality
- visceral fat
- shorter telomere length
- arterial stiffness
- incident CVD events



Tene Lewis

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Sources: Lewis et al., Psy Med, 2006; Lewis et al., Brain Beh Immunity, 2010; Lewis et al., J Gerontology: Bio Sci & Med Sci 2009; Earnshaw et al., Ann Beh Med, 2013; Barnes et al., 2012; Lewis et al, Hlth Psy, 2012; Barnes et al., J Gerontology: Bio Sci & Med Sci, 2008; Lewis et al., Am J Epidemiology, 2011; Hailu et al, Ann Epi, 2020; Bromfield et al, Hlth Psych, 2020; Everson-Rose et al, AJE, 2015; Kershaw et al, Hlth Psych, 2016

**Hidden Ways in which Stressors  
linked to Race and Racism Adversely  
affect Health**

# Worry About Safety of Children

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- Study of black women found that most live with a heavy burden of stress due to concern about the racism their children might experience
- Over 70% were very concerned:
  - that their children might be harmed by the police
  - that their children might get stopped in a predominantly white neighborhood



# Police Stops and Mother's Health

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- A study of over 3,000 mothers in 20 cities (Fragile Families Study)
- 23% of urban youth are stopped by the police by the age of 15
- Mothers of youth who were stopped by the police are more than twice as likely to report both depression- and anxiety-related sleep difficulties.



Unsplash.com

# Police Violence and Health

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- Frequent media reports of incidents of police violence directed to black, Latino, and Native American communities
- These are stressors that negatively affect health of larger community
- Recent national, quasi-experimental study:
- Police killings of unarmed blacks lead to declines in mental health among blacks in general population for 3 months after event
- No effect on whites



Consequences of the cumulative exposure to  
discrimination and other stressors

*“Accelerated Aging”*

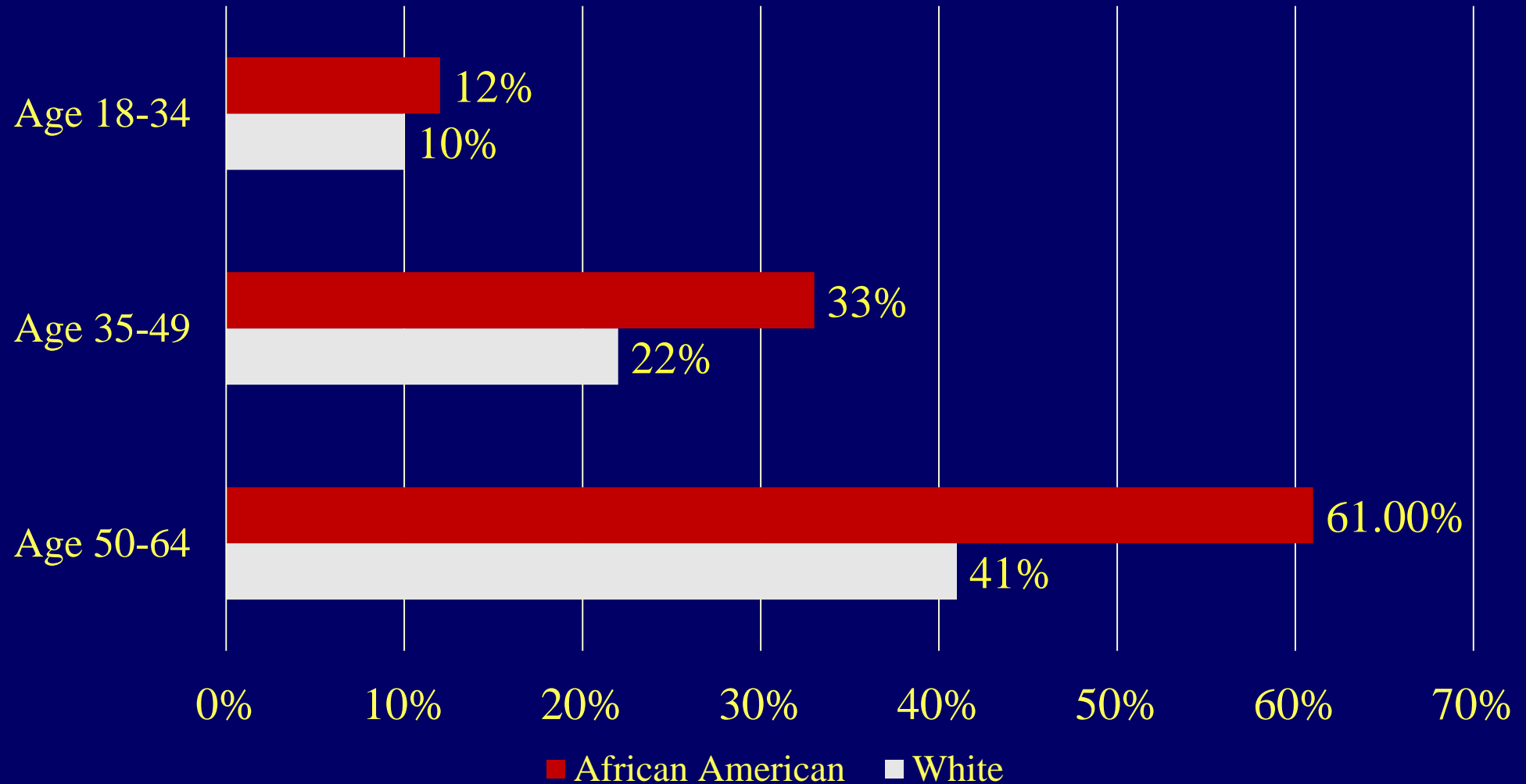
*“Premature Aging”*

*Biological “Weathering”*

*Earlier Onset of Chronic Disease*

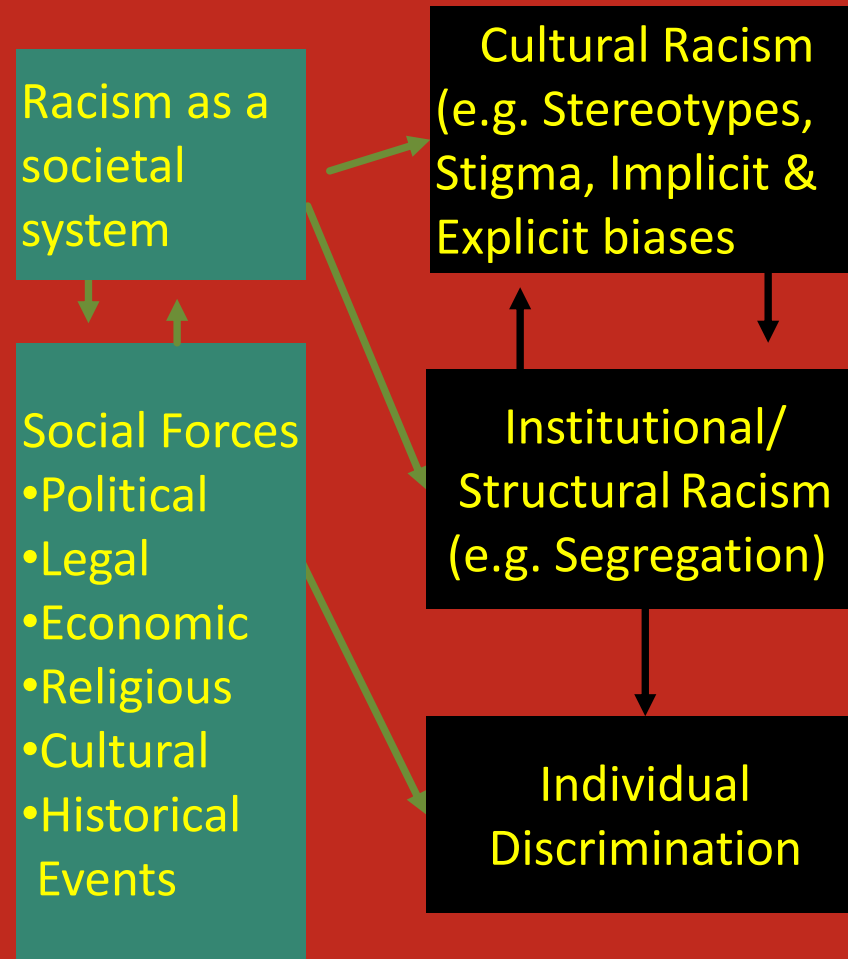
# Earlier Onset of High Blood Pressure

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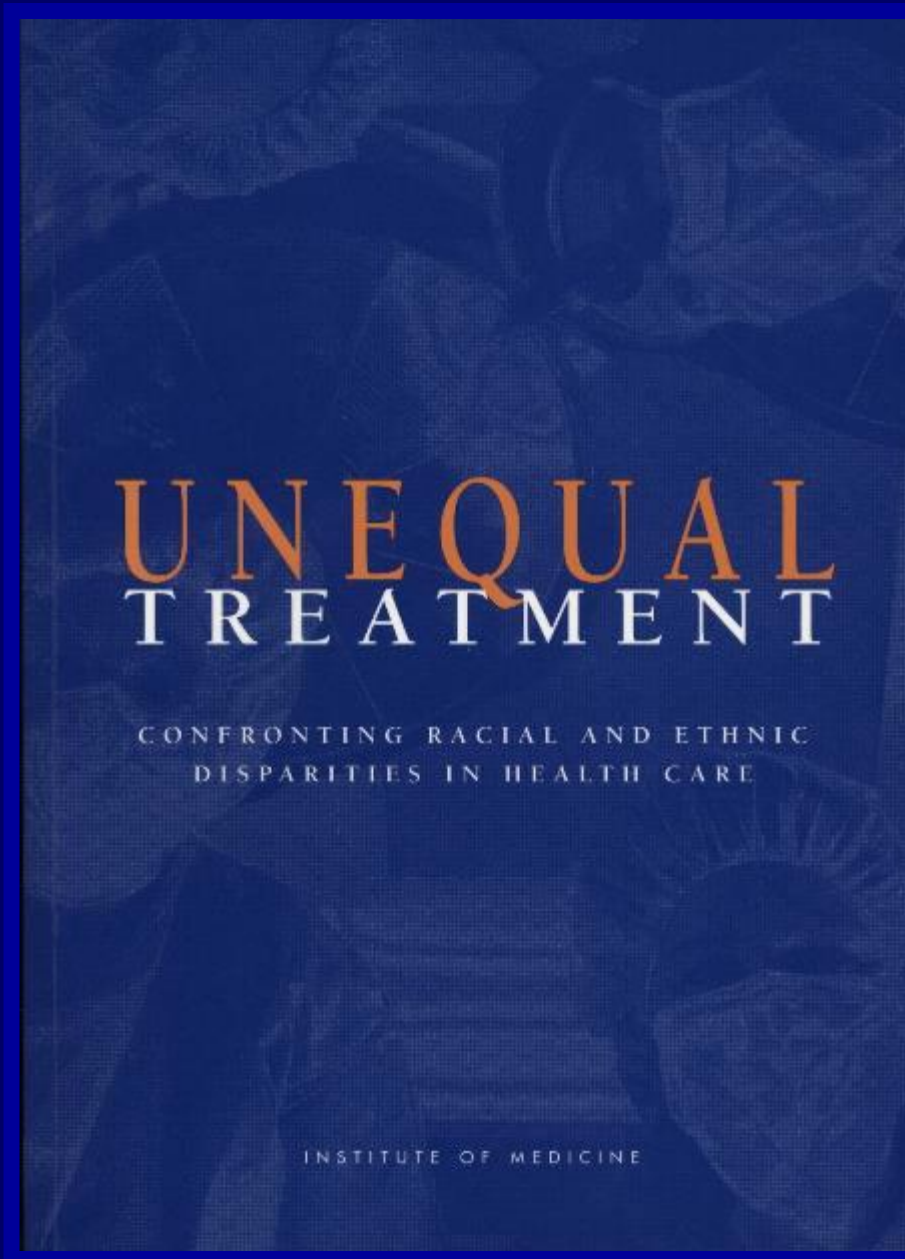
## The House that Racism Built



Negative stereotypes about race  
remain deeply embedded in our culture

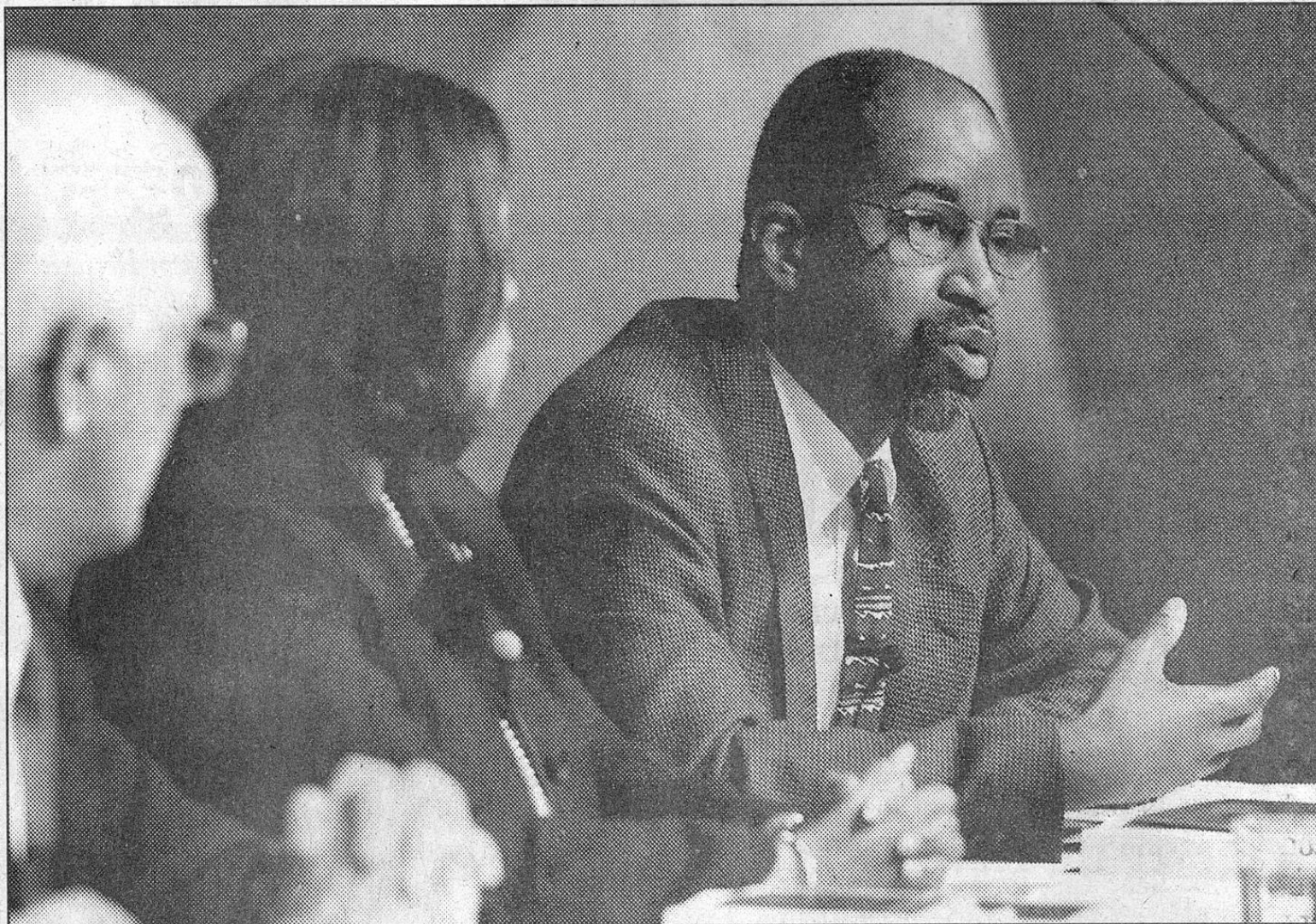
These Stereotypes Trigger Racial  
Discrimination that Reduces Access to  
Societal Resources





# Racial Bias in Medical Care





BY SUSAN WALSH—ASSOCIATED PRESS

**David Williams, a University of Michigan professor, right, says: “We have a health care system that is the pride of the world, but this report documents that the playing field is not even.”**



# Race of MD & Newborn Survival

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- Study of 1.8 million hospital births Florida 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

What Can We Do?

# Strategy Number 1

## Building More Health into the Delivery of Medical Care



# **Building More Health into the Delivery of Medical Care**

Ensuring Access to Care for All



# Building More Health into the Delivery of Medical Care

Diversifying the Workforce to meet the Needs of  
all Patients

# Physician Race & Health Care

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- A RCT of 1,300 Black men
- Recruited from barbershops and flea markets
- Given a coupon for a free health care screening at a Saturday clinic for
  - blood pressure,
  - body mass index,
  - cholesterol,
  - diabetes
- Men randomized to see black doctors or not
- \$50 incentive for clinic attendance
- Free Uber rides if need for transportation



# Black Doctors and Black Health

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## Men who saw a Black Doctor

- ✓ 29% more likely to talk about other health problems
- ✓ 47% more likely to do screening for diabetes
- ✓ 56% more likely to get a flu vaccine
- ✓ 72% more likely to do screening for cholesterol



# Progress (or lack thereof) in Medicine

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- In 2014, there were 27 fewer African American males in the first year of Medical School than there had been in 1978 (36 years earlier)
- In the mid-1960s, 2.9% of all practicing physicians in the US were black
- In 2019, 5% of MDs were black (6% were Hispanic; 0.3% Indigenous)



MS Online Pictures; Photo by Unknown Author

# Building More Health into the Delivery of Medical Care

Provide Care that Addresses the Social context

# Care that Addresses the Social context

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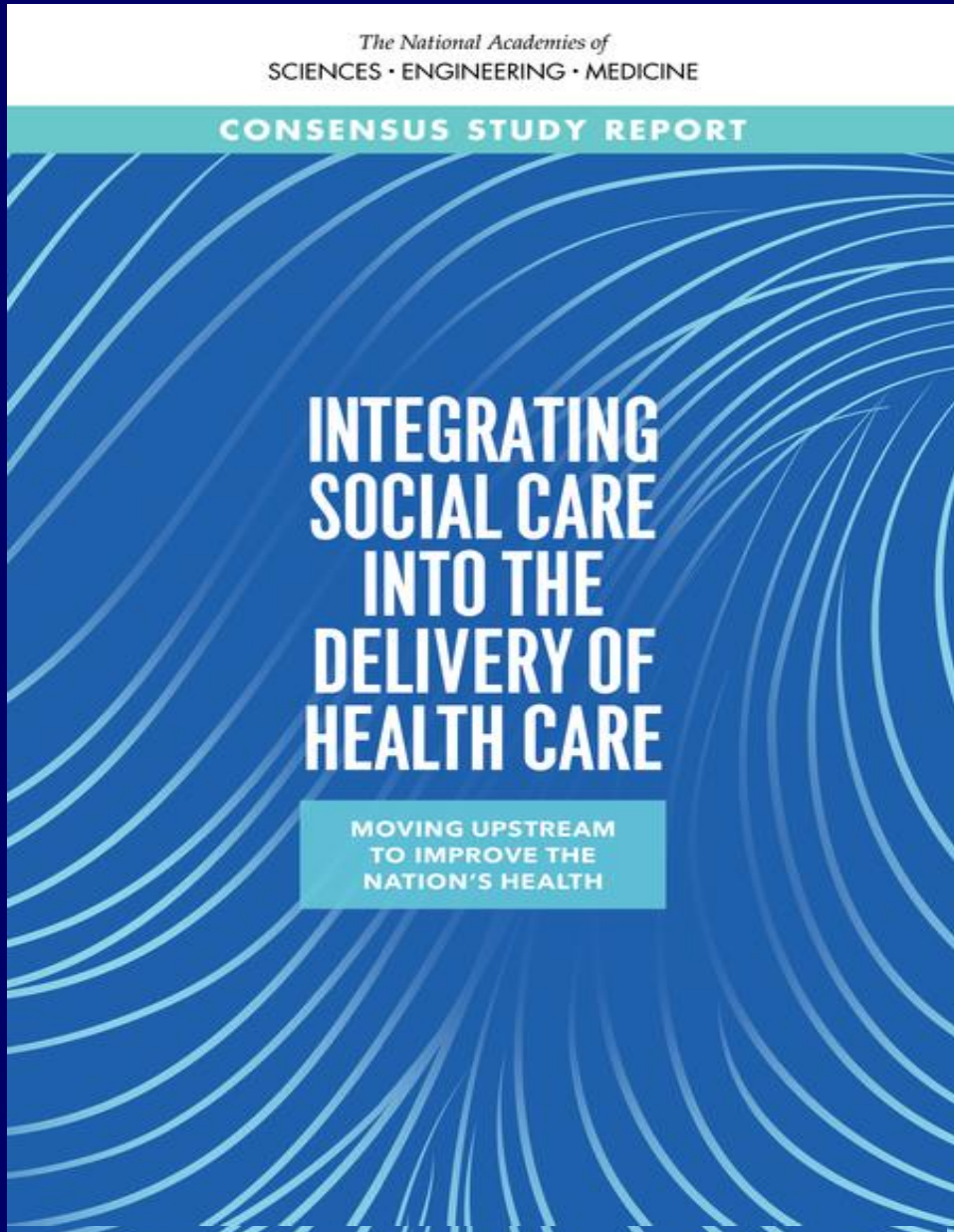
*Why treat illness  
and send people  
back to live in the  
same conditions  
that made them sick  
in the first place?*

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# Recent Report: National Academy of Medicine

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Many opportunities for health care systems and professionals to address the social needs of patients

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# Medical Legal Partnership

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- Enables MDs to refer to unique specialists: on-site attorneys
- Most low-income persons face legal issues that affect their quality of life and their management of disease
- Adding lawyers to medical team can screen and assist families for these social problems that affect care
- Stressors addressed: unhealthy housing, immigration, income, food, education access, disability, family law
- Child with asthma, in moldy apartment, will not get well, regardless of meds, if conditions not improved





# Strategy Number 2

Identifying and Supporting Protective  
factors and Resilience Resources

# Discrimination, Social Ties, Biomarkers

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- 331 Black adolescents in 9 rural counties in Georgia
- **Discrimination** assessed at age 16, 17, and 18
- Stably high levels of discrimination as a teen linked to higher biomarkers (overnight cortisol, epinephrine, norepinephrine, SBP, DBP, CRP, BMI) at age 20
- **Social support: 11 item caregiver emotional & instrumental support and 4 item measure of peer support**
- High social support (caregiver and peer) erased the negative effect of high discrimination on biomarkers



# Religion & Discrimination: A Balm in Gilead?

- Prospective analyses of the National Study of Black Americans found that multiple aspects of religious engagement:
  - religious attendance
  - church-based social support
  - seeking religious guidance in everyday life
- reduced the negative effects of experiences of discrimination on mental health



Uhsplash.com

Moving Further Upstream:  
Implementing Policies to Reduce Social Inequities in  
Health



## There's More to Health than Health Care



# Strategy Number 3

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Create Communities of Opportunity to minimize, neutralize and dismantle the systems of racism that create inequities in health



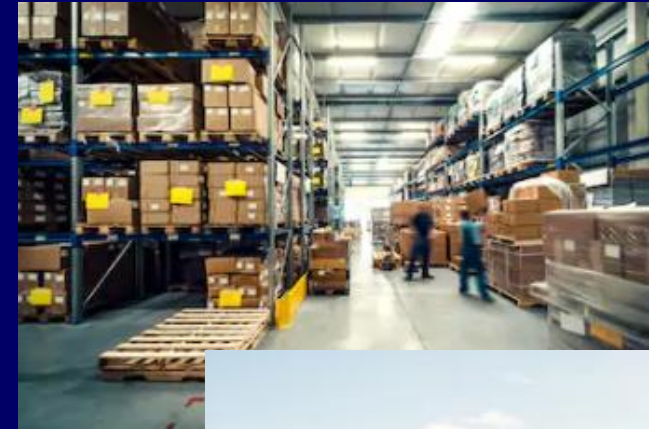


# Reducing Inequities

## Address Place-Linked Determinants of Health

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- Enrich the quality of neighborhood environments
- Increase economic development in poor areas
- Improve housing quality and the safety of neighborhood environments



# Communities of Opportunity

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- Invest in early Childhood
- Reduce Childhood Poverty
- Enhance Income and Employment Opportunities for Youth and Adults
- Improve Neighborhood and Housing Conditions
- Enhance economic opportunities to build strong families/reduce disparities in marriage
- Raise Awareness levels of Racial Inequities and Build Political Will to Address them





# Carolina Abecedarian Project (ABC)

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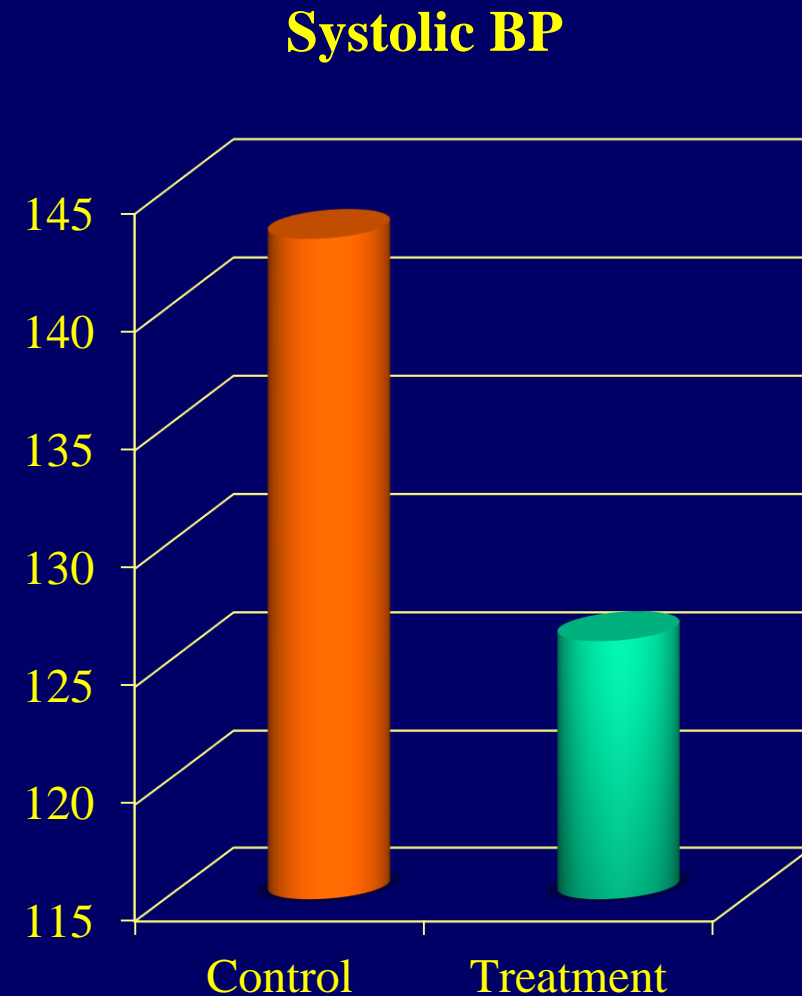
- 1972-77, economically disadvantaged children, birth to age 5, randomized to an early childhood program
- 80% of children Black
- Program offered a safe and nurturing environment, good nutrition and pediatric care
- At age 21, fewer symptoms of depression, lower marijuana use, more active lifestyle, and better educational & vocational assets
- In mid-30's, lower levels of risk factors for CVD & metabolic disease. Effects stronger for males



# Carolina Abecedarian Project (ABC)

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- Example: systolic BP 143 mm Hg in male controls vs. 126mm Hg in the treatment group
- One in 4 males in control group met criteria for metabolic syndrome compared to none in the treatment group
- Lower BMI at zero to 5 yrs equals a lower BMI in their 30s



# Communities of Opportunity

Improve Neighborhood and Housing  
Conditions

# Moving to Opportunity

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- The Moving to Opportunity Program randomized families with children in high poverty neighborhoods to move to less poor neighborhoods.
- 10 to 15 years later, movers had lower levels of obesity, severe obesity & diabetes risk (HbA1c)



Unsplash.com

A Striking Example  
of Neighborhood  
Transformation:

Atlanta's East Lake,  
district



[purposebuiltcommunities.org](http://purposebuiltcommunities.org)

# Implementing the Purpose Built Model



Strong local leadership. A proven national model. Best in class partners.

# East Lake Meadows - 1995

## Safety

- 18x national crime rate
- 90% of families victims of a felony each year
- \$35 million a year drug trade

## Housing

- 100% public housing
- 1400 residents in 650 apartments
- 40% of units unlivable

## Employment

- 13% employment
- 59% of adults on welfare
- Median income of ~\$4,500

## Education

- One of lowest performing schools in Georgia
- 5% of 5<sup>th</sup> graders meet state math standards
- 30% graduation rate



# Villages of East Lake - Present

## Safety

- 73% reduction in crime
- 90% lower violent crime

## Housing

- High-quality, privately managed housing
- Mixed-income (50% public housing, 50% market rate)
- 1400 residents in 542 apartments

## Employment

- 75% employment in public housing, remainder in job training, elderly or disabled
- Median income of ~ \$15k in public housing households

## Education

- ~1500 in Pre-K through 10<sup>th</sup>
- 98% meet or exceed state standards
- A top performing school in Atlanta and the state



# Principles of Purpose Built Communities

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- Address all challenges faced by poor communities simultaneously
- (work across silos of education, housing, public safety, child care, employment, and nutrition)
- Comprehensive, integrated, place-based solutions
- Independently run, cradle-to-college high-quality education
- Quality mixed-income housing
- Affordability for low-income households
- Services: employment, social services, workforce development, recreation, wellness



# Benefits of Inclusive Policies

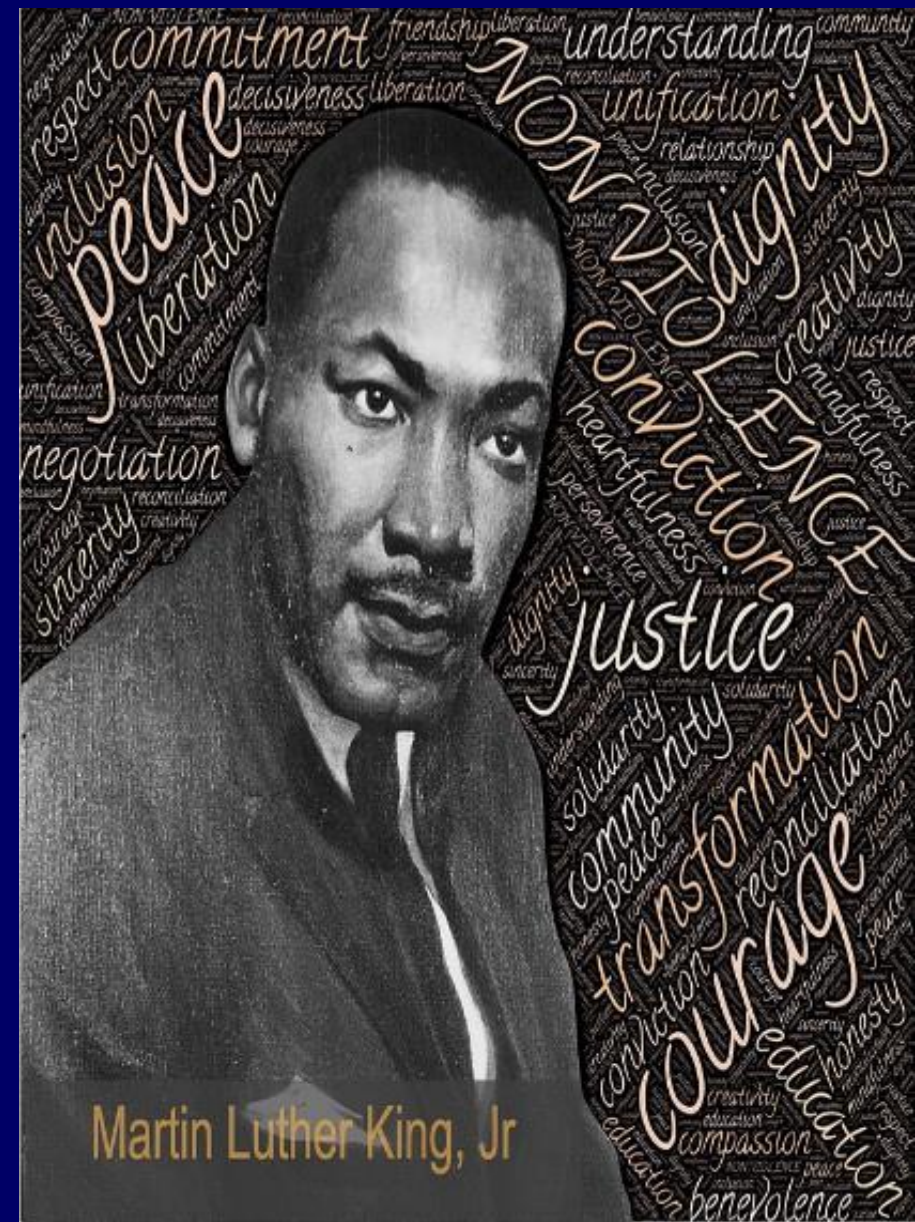
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- The creation of communities of opportunity to reverse racial injustice will be beneficial to people of all races
- Policies that benefit communities of color will improve conditions for everyone, including many poor and working class whites



MS Online Pictures

"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."



“It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad *people*, but for the *appalling silence* and indifference of the *good people*...

Martin Luther King





The time has come for us to build a healthier  
America, where:  
Every child can develop normally, free from poverty,  
abuse and neglect



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures

# We can build a healthier America where:

Every child can be ready for academic success when they begin school, and have access to school environments that support academic, emotional, and physical well-being



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures



We can build a healthier America where:  
Everyone can breathe clean air that is free from tobacco  
and other pollutants



Photo Source: MS Online Pictures



We can build a healthier America where:  
Everyone has access to and can afford to obtain  
nutritious food



Photo Source: MS Online Pictures

We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone has the opportunities to be physically active



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures

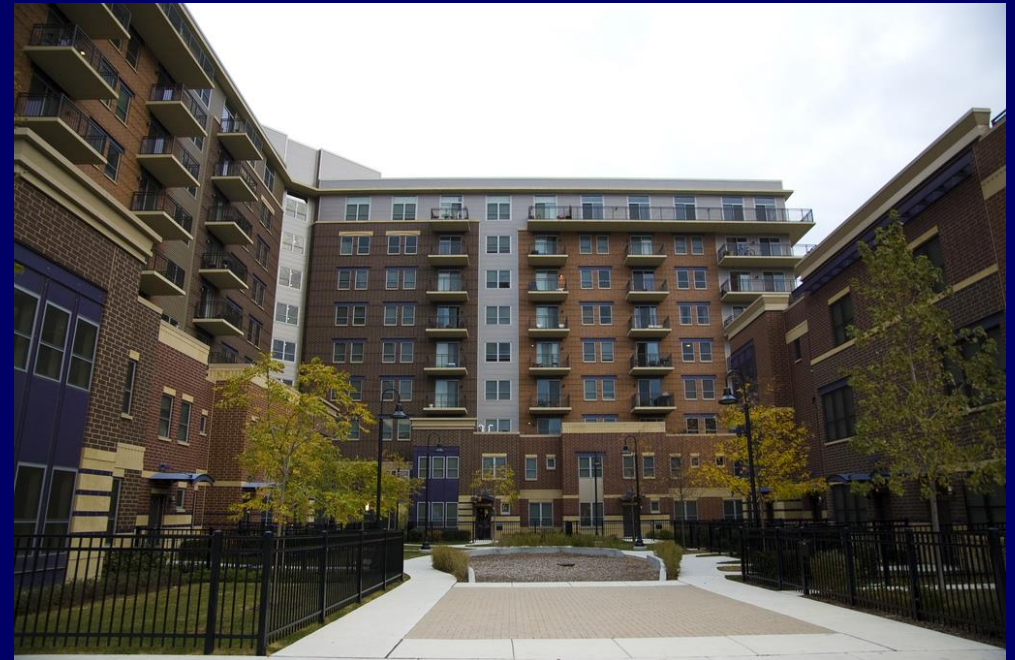


We can build a healthier America where:  
Everyone can live in well-maintained  
neighborhoods, that are safe and that have access  
to appropriate goods and services



# We can build a healthier America where:

## Everyone has access to high-quality, affordable housing



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures



# We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone has access to reliable, safe, affordable  
and accessible means of public or private  
transportation



Photo Source: MS Online Pictures

# We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone has received the training and skills to  
create business opportunities or to obtain a decent  
job that pays a living wage



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures

# We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone can work in healthy occupational environments, free from physical or chemical exposures that are harmful to health



Photo Source: MS Online Pictures



We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone has access to high-quality medical care



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures

# We can build a healthier America where:

Everyone has equitable opportunities and is  
hopeful and optimistic about the future



Photos Source: MS Online Pictures

# We can build a healthier America



Photo Source: MS Online Pictures

# Yes, Together, We Can!