Talking Points
Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

How to Talk about How Systemic Racism and Health Inequities Impact Public Health

As you begin and sustain conversations with local groups and leaders about racial/ethnic justice and creating a resolution to declare racism a public health crisis, there are four considerations to frame how system racism impacts public health.

First, find and highlight local data on health outcomes disaggregated—broken down—by race/ethnicity, income, and education level. Look for local and regional data on various health outcomes that are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, income, and education level. Consider heart disease, asthma, infant mortality, low birthweight, flu vaccinations, adverse childhood experiences, pedestrian injuries and deaths, and premature death. Again, data disaggregation is critical because averages can obscure significant racial and economic disparities.

Second, briefly explain the social determinants of health literature and the various social, environmental, and economic risk factors associated with poor health outcomes. Our zip code is a better predictor of our quality and length of life than our genetic code because the places we live, learn, and work play an important role in our health.

Third, frame inequities in health outcomes within the historical context of systemic inequities in social and economic conditions in your community. Look for local and regional data on various social and economic outcomes that are disaggregated by race/ethnicity and income. Consider high school completion, homeownership, housing cost-burden, transportation cost-burden, median household income, poverty, single-female households, children living in poverty, seniors living in poverty, food security, broadband access, crime, and transit access. Data disaggregation is critical because averages can obscure significant racial and economic disparities.

Fourth, frame inequities in social and economic conditions within the context of systemic barriers to access and opportunity. Although many oppose explicit racism, many are unaware of

the multifaceted ways in which racism is weaved into public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations today. You will also need to find and highlight past and present policies that perpetuate inequities in social, economic, and health outcomes.

Ultimately, beyond sharing local data on social, economic, and health inequities, there must be an accurate retelling of local and national history, recognizing the role racism has played in the evolution of unequal neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.

After all, racist practices created unequal neighborhoods, and the social and economic conditions of our neighborhoods are a better predictor of our quality and length of life than our genetics.

"It is now well established that health outcomes are influenced by the conditions of the environments in which people are born, grow, live, work, play, and age. These social determinants of health are the structural, economic, cultural, and political factors that order relationships, assign social status to members of different populations, distribute money and power, and build or disrupt communities. They largely exist outside of any one person's control and "are mostly responsible for health inequities." Social determinants are established and maintained by institutional structures that systematically distribute resources and power in ways that cause certain populations to experience deeply entrenched disadvantage (…) over generations. Typically, this disadvantage is traced to sociopolitical constructs—many of which intersect and reinforce each other—such as race and ethnicity, sex and gender, disability, socioeconomic status and societal class, or geography," said Samantha Weber and Matthew Penn, legal and public health analysts with the CDC's Public Health Law Program.

For further exploration on each of these "four framework considerations," please utilize the _Salud America!_ "[Guidebook: Framing Health Inequities in the Context of Systemic Racism](#)"

Cities Can Create a Resolution to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

After the murder of George Floyd and a global pandemic brought social and racial injustice to the forefront of public health, local leaders began exploring formal resolutions declaring racism a public health crisis and committing to actions to combat racial inequities.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, government employees, elected officials, public health and racial justice advocates, and other local leaders in large and small cities across the country worked together on the language and strategic actions to include in the resolutions before putting the resolutions up for a vote in their respective jurisdictions.

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"These statements are a first and important step to narrative change in that they illuminate the structural nature of inequality, creating space for dialogue and collaboration, and spurring changes across all sectors of government to shrink racial health gaps," according to Healing Through Policy: Creating Pathways to Racial Justice brief.

Some succeeded with strong commitments to action.

For example, the following are 10 of 16 declarations that included more than 10 strategic actions, according to an analysis conducted by the American Public Health Association (APHA):

- Canton City Council (Ohio)
- Minneapolis City Council and Mayor (Minnesota)
- Cuyahoga County Council (Ohio)
- Governor Whitmer/Michigan state at large
- Riverside City Council (California)
- Ypsilanti City Council (Michigan)
- Hennepin County Commissioners (Minnesota)
- Fayetteville City Council (Arkansas)
- Kansas City Council (Missouri)
- Orange County Board of Commissioners (North Carolina)
- Milwaukee Common Council (Wisconsin)

For example, Cleveland, Columbus, Franklin County, Denver, and Indianapolis have passed resolutions and stated commitments to:

- Always promote and support policies that prioritize the health of all people, especially people of color by mitigating exposure to adverse childhood experiences
- Encourage racial equity training among all community partners, grantees, vendors and contractors
- Identify clear goals and objectives, including periodic reports to assess progress and capitalize on opportunities to further advance racial equity
- Systematic, data-driven focus on poverty, economic mobility, and other factors that impact the social determinants of health
- Continue, with urgency, the review of policies and procedures for the purposes of eradicating implicit and explicit racial bias and develop instead policies and procedures that build racial equity
- Collect data, disaggregated by race, on department staffing, procurement, contracting, and recipients of government intervention; that departments present the data to the Council and make this data publicly available via their websites, with the intention of incorporating racial equity into the analysis of governmental action and strengthening the city's commitment to analyze and address racial disparities
- Support the establishment of a working group

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Since then, numerous national groups have compiled resources to help local leaders succeed in adopting a resolution to declare racism a public health crisis and to commit to action.

The resources help guide local leaders in understanding social and structural determinants of health; recognizing and dismantling harmful policies and narratives; and developing and implementing resolutions to promote racial healing and advance health equity.

With these resources, policymakers can explore discriminatory civil, criminal, and public policies and commit to some form of reparative or restorative justice by enacting policy and system change and dedicating infrastructure to action that can promote meaningful systemic change to create equitable neighborhoods, schools and workplaces so that that all people can live healthy lives.

"These resolutions and formal statements are an important first step in calling attention to racism in a way that can drive resource allocation and changes to law and policy," according to the Network for Public Health Law.

Using an Action Pack to Help Create a Resolution to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

Salud America! developed an Action Pack to support advocates in urging their city leaders to adopt a similar resolution with a commitment for action.

To ensure this effort is as inclusive, equitable, and powerful as possible, community advocates and social justice organizational leaders could provide input and guidance on using this Action Pack to urge city leaders to pass a resolution to declare racism a public health crisis and commit to action to address the ways governmental institutions discriminate through policies and practices.

The Action Pack provides a strong introductory email, talking points, sample resolution, and social media messages to reach out to city leaders and build support.

The Action Pack also includes examples to strengthen commitments within the resolution.

Strengthening Commitments within a Resolution to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

According to Healing Through Policy: Creating Pathways to Racial Justice, proposed policies and practices to address racial injustice and improve health equity include:

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Narrative Change:
- Executive orders, resolutions, ordinances, and declarations that advance equity.
- Mapping, data collection, and analysis efforts to understand and address inequities.
- Racial impact assessments, frameworks, and other systems to achieve accountability.
- Redesigning public spaces to equitably honor our shared history.
- Creating curricula that are respectful, inclusive, and honor the diverse communities in which children attend school.

Racial Healing and Relationship Building:
- Resolutions, dialogue models, racial healing circles, and restorative justice practices aimed at understanding historical harms and repairing relationships.
- Training and capacity-building for practitioners, educators, and service providers around overcoming bias and healing.
- Local truth commissions that promote racial healing.
- Acknowledgement, public apologies, and commitments to redress by localities for their role in slavery and/ or advancing systemic racism.

Separation:
- Zoning innovation for health and equity.
- Displacement and eviction protections to preserve the right to housing.
- Equitable transportation and planning to improve access to opportunity.
- School integration to promote social justice and social mobility.

Law:
- Endorsement and implementation of 21st Century Policing recommendations and other comprehensive police reforms.
- Diversion of police funding to support alternatives to policing and prevention programs.
- Reclassification of violations, decriminalization, and bail, probation, and fees reform to address racial and socioeconomic biases.
- Immigrant-friendly policies and practices to promote equitable opportunity
- Voting rights protection and expansion.

Economy:
- Income and asset strategies to promote economic mobility of individuals and families.
- Equitable investment and development that builds on community assets.
- Compensatory redress to rectify historical policies that economically disadvantage communities of color.

Check out their expanded descriptions and implementation examples in their policy brief.

According to the Blueprint for Changemakers from ChangeLab Solutions, specific actions to dismantle racism could include:

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- Ensure racially and economically mixed neighborhoods through land-use planning, housing regulations, rental assistance programs, or school siting policies.
- Prevent housing and job displacement from driving racial and income segregation by enacting land use or affordable housing finance regulations.
- Confront negative stereotypes and reduce racial prejudice and discrimination through school policies and curricula that educate children about the harms of historical oppression and the value of equality and inclusion.
- Prevent biased policy decision-making and implementation through protocols that require equity analysis o through staff training on equity, bias, and cultural sensitivity.
- Ensure equal and unbiased law enforcement and criminal justice through policies on policing practices and through training, legal system protocols, and sentencing guidelines.
- Improve neighborhood value through community development or neighborhood revitalization, including investment in housing, open space, transportation networks, food systems, and school facilities while protecting priority populations from displacement.
- Reduce housing instability by preserving, protecting, and expanding the supply of quality affordable housing through property tax incentives, rental subsidies, rent stabilization, good cause eviction policies, condominium conversion protections, inclusionary zoning, density bonuses, expedited permitting, or property acquisition.
- Increase the income of the poorest individuals through supplemental income, including Social Security, disability insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and tax credits, as well as through increased wages, including an increased minimum wage.
- Provide supplemental income to support healthy living through nutrition assistance, wage subsidies, Medicaid, or housing subsidies.
- Subsidize preschool for children from low-income families.
- Expand the coverage and frequency of public transportation, especially in poor areas.
- Provide universal high-quality early childhood education focused on child development, in addition to primary and secondary education.
- Make schools safe, equitable places to learn, and avoid unfairly penalizing students who live in poor neighborhoods or who are experiencing health, learning, or psychosocial challenges – for example, by implementing trauma-informed school discipline or restorative justice policies.
- Increase access to safe, secure, fairly paid work and year-round work for low-income families through direct job creation, apprenticeship programs for those with barriers to employment, or fair-chance hiring for job seekers with criminal records.
- Include mental health care in health care delivery.
- Involve underserved communities in the initiation, drafting, and implementation of policy solutions to local issues related to health equity, through community-based participatory research, inclusive and representative community engagement, participatory budgeting, or public deliberation.

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- Create structures for collaboration among local governments, community-based organizations, and health care institutions to act on the social determinants of health.
- Make government protocols and decisions available to the community, and ensure that policies include clear roles, responsibilities, and evaluation processes to hold government responsible for successful implementation.

Additionally, consider pushing decision-makers to invest in better data collection and data disaggregation and to publicly measure and track improvement on various health and social outcomes, such as income inequality, disparities in multiple physical and mental health conditions, disparities in injury and premature death, population housing cost-burdened, population transportation cost-burden, high school graduation rates, adverse childhood experiences, and more.

The Need to Understand and Talk about "Critical Race Theory" as You Work on a Resolution to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

Discussing racial equity and anti-racism can result in some backlash because there is a great divide in our country regarding if and how to examine structural racism in American history and institutions.

For example, in September 2020, President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning federal contractors from addressing "divisive concepts" and "harmful ideologies" related to racial/ethnic and gender discrimination in employee trainings.

Although a federal judge temporarily blocked the executive order in December, and President Joe Biden revoked the executive order on his first day in office in January 2021, the nation was already divided on the concepts of systemic racism, such as critical race theory.

Thus, it is important to understand what critical race theory is, particularly as misinformation dominates news stories and as conservative lawmakers push to restrict what schools teach about race and racism.

Critical race theory is a framework for understanding how systems, laws, regulations, and procedures can lead to different outcomes by race.

It does not attribute racist motives to individuals or groups of people, and it does not blame individuals today for what people did in the past.

Critical race theory focuses on how various social institutions, such as the criminal justice system, education system, labor market, housing market, community and economic

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development, and healthcare system, can lead to exclusion, harm, or unfair burdens among certain racial/ethnic groups, whether intentional or not.

For example, although single-family zoning is currently considered a product of classism rather racism, because it bans affordable housing types, it systematically excludes low-income families from housing options in higher-opportunity neighborhoods. This subsequently excludes families of color that have historically been denied access to opportunities to build wealth.

"Scholars working in this tradition generally contend that U.S. legal and societal structures operate in ways that solidify racial inequality, even if these law and institutions, and the individuals who populate them, do not consciously embrace racist ideas," according to Pen America, a literary and human rights organization that works to protect free expression.

In the first 10 months of 2021, 66 separate anti-critical race theory bills were introduced in 26 states to stifle teaching about race and sex in schools, universities, and state agencies, according to Pen America.

These bills are problematic for numerous reasons, according to Pen America.

Many bills are vague and come with legal requirements. Teachers are unclear and fearful how to move forward, which could spur them to change how they teach historical and current events, or face discipline.

Moreover, whether intentional or not, many conservative leaders have confounded and branded critical race theory with efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion.

However, because critical race theory has never actually been taught in K-12, many bills include language that is vague and ambiguous to ban schools from training that teaches divisive concepts, like racism and sexism and to prohibit teachers from teaching race or sex stereotyping concepts.

This could result in schools overreacting to ensure compliance with new laws, which could result in justification to avoid teaching or avoid taking a stance on certain issues, like the genocide that killed millions of Jews.

For example, the anti-critical race theory bill that was signed into law in Texas (39.7% Latino) in September 2021 states, "a teacher may not be compelled to discuss a particular current event or widely debated and currently controversial issue of public policy of social affairs."

In response to questions and concerns about the new law, the executive director of curriculum and instruction for one school district in Texas advised teachers the following, "make sure that if you have a book on the Holocaust that you have one that has an opposing, that has other perspectives," according to the *Washington Post*.

They have since apologized for suggesting there is more than one side of the Holocaust, but confusion and fear about the law persist.

"Teachers in Texas are on edge, fearful their lesson plans could be interpreted as unlawful by parents who dispute history or facts," said Clay Robinson, a spokesperson for the Texas State Teachers Association, according to the *Washington Post*. "They don't want to jeopardize their careers, but at the same time they want to teach the truth."

You can learn more about anti-critical race theory bills that have passed, are pending, or have been denied through this bill tracking spreadsheet developed by Pen America.

It is important to understand anti-critical race theory bills because these conversations are also happening at the local level among elected leaders and school administrators.

"The teaching of history, civics, and American identity has never been neutral or uncontested, and reasonable people can disagree over how and when educators should teach children about racism, sexism, and other facets of American history and society," according to Pen America. "But in a democracy, the response to these disagreements can never be to ban discussion of ideas or facts simply because they are contested or cause discomfort. As American society reckons with the persistence of racial discrimination and inequity, and the complexities of historical memory, attempts to use the power of the state to constrain discussion of these issues must be rejected."