

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine, I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about racism as a public health issue.

In the 1930s, public welfare expanded to better the lives of Americans. Well, some Americans. Driven by the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed the New Deal, which included a series of financial reforms which made mortgages more accessible.

This may sound great — we want everyone to have the security of owning their own homes! But in order to decide mortgage rates, a U.S. federal agency started color-coding neighborhoods based on who it considered trustworthy.

Middle-class white neighborhoods were outlined in green, while areas with poor white people, immigrants and Black Americans were outlined in red.

This is called redlining. Time and again, people in redlined neighborhoods were denied home loans.

Which forced them to live in subpar housing in areas with under-resourced schools, unreliable transportation and other poorly maintained resources.

And segregation laws made it nearly impossible for non-white Americans to move out of these neighborhoods. So over the years, they were kept in poverty, without the taxes or funding to repair infrastructure.

All of these factors — the housing, the schools, the lack of generational wealth — had an impact on people's health.

Take the old redlined neighborhoods of San Francisco. Tests from 2008 to 2012 showed that nearly 12 percent of children living there had above-average levels of lead in their blood — a result of cheap, lead-based paint from the 1940s. And lead can cause serious damage to the brain and nervous system, especially in young children.

And redlining is just one example of how racism leads to health inequity, which is when an uneven distribution of resources between different groups of people impacts their health.

Like to treat diabetes, people need healthy food, quality health care and well-maintained places to exercise — none of which are free. But compared to white Americans, Latinx Americans are more likely to live in poverty, to be uninsured and to work in industries where employers don't offer health care.

And when we look at the statistics, the impact of these differences is clear. According to a 2019 American Diabetes Association report, Latinx Americans were 66% more likely than white Americans to develop Type 2 diabetes — a health difference that studies say isn't just based on genetics.

So racism affects our physical health. But it can also impact our mental health...which then affects our physical health.

Research published in the American Journal of Public Health shows that Black Americans experience higher rates of chronic stress due to ongoing encounters with racism. And chronic stress can cause accelerated aging and increase the risk of premature death or illness like heart disease.

That's on top of the increased levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder that Black Americans already face due to police violence. In 2016, Black Americans were twice as likely as white Americans to be killed by law enforcement.

Indigenous Americans, meanwhile, were three times as likely.

Indigenous Americans also experience much higher rates of substance misuse, depression and suicide. According to the Indian Health Service, an agency under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this could be the result of ongoing poverty and other factors rooted in inequity.

Even as recently as 2019, the average life expectancy of an Indigenous American person was 5 and a half years lower than any other race.

These statistics may feel overwhelming, but they highlight a need for racial equity, which is when racial identities no longer determine how people fare in society.

And in fact, in 2021, over 200 U.S. state and local governments declared racism a public health crisis.

Of course, the next step is actually following through. Like distributing resources according to need, working with community leaders and creating public health solutions that involve sectors like criminal justice, education and social services.

Unhealthy housing, police violence, poverty... racial inequity is a root cause in all of these issues, each of which have an impact on communities of color. That's what makes racism one of the biggest public health issues of our time. And to make sure our communities are healthy, we need to work together to address these systemic problems.

Thanks for watching! This video is a part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public

Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit APHA.org.

### **Selected sources**

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