

# MKE Elevate Issue Brief: RACISM AND HEALTH EQUITY

This category includes: Racism and other forms of discrimination, health equity (e.g., elimination of health disparities)



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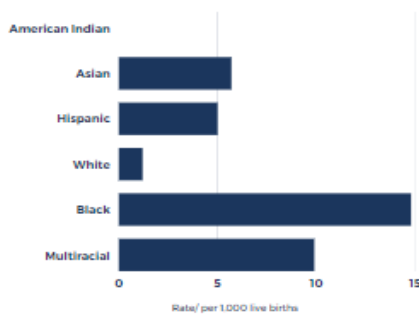
## Scope and Scale of the Problem

*“Racism is a system—consisting of structures, policies, practices, and norms—that assigns value and determines opportunity based on the way people look or the color of their skin.” - CDC*

Poor health and poverty are inextricably linked. <sup>1</sup> In 2020, Milwaukee County received one of the lowest health rankings at 71 of 72 counties, with white people outliving their Black counterparts by **nearly 14 years** and a Black infant mortality rate **three times higher** than that of white infants. These disparities were only furthered with the onset of the pandemic when the Black community made up **52% of COVID related deaths** while only being 26% of the county’s population. <sup>2</sup> These disparities are by design and have come as a result of poverty, education and housing segregation, disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates, and an overabundance of other hardships rooted in racism. In fact, the poverty rate was **five times higher** for Black Milwaukeeans when compared to white community members. <sup>3</sup>



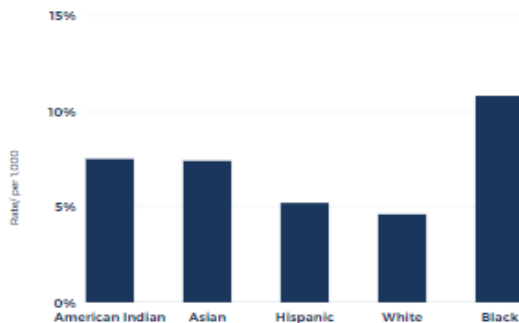
### Infant Mortality Rate in 2021



Data Source: City of Milwaukee Vital Statistics Office



### Percentage of Childhood Testing with Elevated Blood Lead in 2019



Data Source: City of Milwaukee Health Department

## Equity Impact

In Milwaukee, residents of color experience higher rates of poverty, food insecurity and inadequate housing than white residents. This translates to racial health disparities in diseases outcomes, life expectancy, and overall quality of life. Racism is a driving force in creating barriers to health equity and denying opportunities for all Milwaukee residents to reach their full health potential.

In the **2022 Community Health Assessment**, recent data shows:

- Infant mortality rates are **3 times higher** among babies born to Black women than their White counterparts.
- **82%** of victims of gun violence in Milwaukee are Black men.
- Blood lead levels were **twice as high** among Black children than their white counterparts.
- The premature death rate for Black Milwaukeeans is **68.98% greater** than the overall death rate for the county.
- **Life expectancy** of Black residents is 70 years, compared to 77 years and 80 years for white and Hispanic residents, respectively.

The combined effects of racism and discrimination have created a public health crisis that disparately impacts of communities of color. Further efforts and policies in Milwaukee are needed to reduce disparities and work toward achieving health equity.

## Community Buy In

### Did this issue come up in the Priority Issue Survey, Photo Voice, or Fall Meeting activity?

Yes – The results of the **MKE Elevate Priority Issue Survey** show that **22% of respondents** thought racism was one of the top five issues in Milwaukee, with **12%** selecting health equity as a top five issue.

In the **\$100 mock activity**, racism and health equity was ranked **1st out of 10** issues, with **21%** of the mock budget allocated to it.

**Throughout the MKE Elevate fall meetings, community members were asked to discuss why they believed racism was an issue in Milwaukee.**

**The following quotes were taken directly from community members.**

*“Milwaukee is still at the point where we need to talk specifically about racism.”*

*“[Racism] is an important issue because health and race are intertwined.”*

*“It’s not a question of should we do something; it’s how do we not?”*

### Are there clear implementation partners?

Yes – The following groups and organizations focus on health equity and reducing health disparities across Milwaukee county:

- Institute for Health & Equity
- Medical College of Wisconsin
- Milwaukee County Office of Equity
- Milwaukee Health Department Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)
- Healthier, Safer, More Prosperous Milwaukee
- Wisconsin Center for Health Equity
- MKE Black Grassroots Network for Health Equity
- Black Health Coalition of Wisconsin

## We have the ability to make change in the next five years

### Are there evidence-based PSE strategies we could implement?

Yes – Health equity is achieved through changing the policies, systems and environments that have created inequities. All efforts must involve ownership of harms inflicted and a demonstrated commitment to change.

Some examples of strategies to advance health equity in Milwaukee include the following:

- Creating structural mechanisms that drive new resources to chronically under-resourced communities.
- Engaging and building trust with community groups that work with people most impacted by health and racial inequities, and identifying sources of funding to support their work.
- Building upon existing racial justice work by continuing outreach and education, moving public health, elected officials, and others toward a deeper understanding.

### Is someone already working on this issue?

Yes – In alignment with the work being done by local community organizations, the Milwaukee Health Department’s 2022-2027 strategic plan employs an anti-racist approach in creating a healthy environment for the entire city.

### Could more be done if MKE Elevate takes on this issue?

Yes – Health inequalities are complex and reach across many different sectors. A coordinated effort is needed to achieve health equity.

### Is there political will to address this issue?

Yes – The City and County have worked to train its employees on racial equity, create a diverse and inclusive workforce, and take further steps to address this crisis. It remains crucial to focus on eliminating racist policies and practices and dismantling health barriers to create a community in which everyone can thrive.

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## Resources

### Is there staffing to support an action team?

Yes – MHD is in the process of hiring a Public Health Strategist focused on Health Equity.

### Is there funding available currently or possibly in the future?

Uncertain – Many funders are now prioritizing racial equity and health equity, however is it unclear if funds would be available for stand alone efforts vs integrating a racial equity lens into other health topics.

## Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> [Key Facts: Poverty and Poor Health | Health Poverty Action](#)
- <sup>2</sup> [Milwaukee County Passes Ordinance to Achieve Racial Equity and Improve Health Outcomes](#)
- <sup>3</sup> [As National Spotlight Shines on Milwaukee, its History of Systemic Racism Should be Front and Center | ACLU of Wisconsin \(aclu-wi.org\)](#)



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