

# How Social Factors Create Inequities in Health

David R. Williams, PhD, MPH

Florence & Laura Norman Professor of Public Health  
Chair, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
Professor of African & African American Studies and of  
Sociology

Harvard University

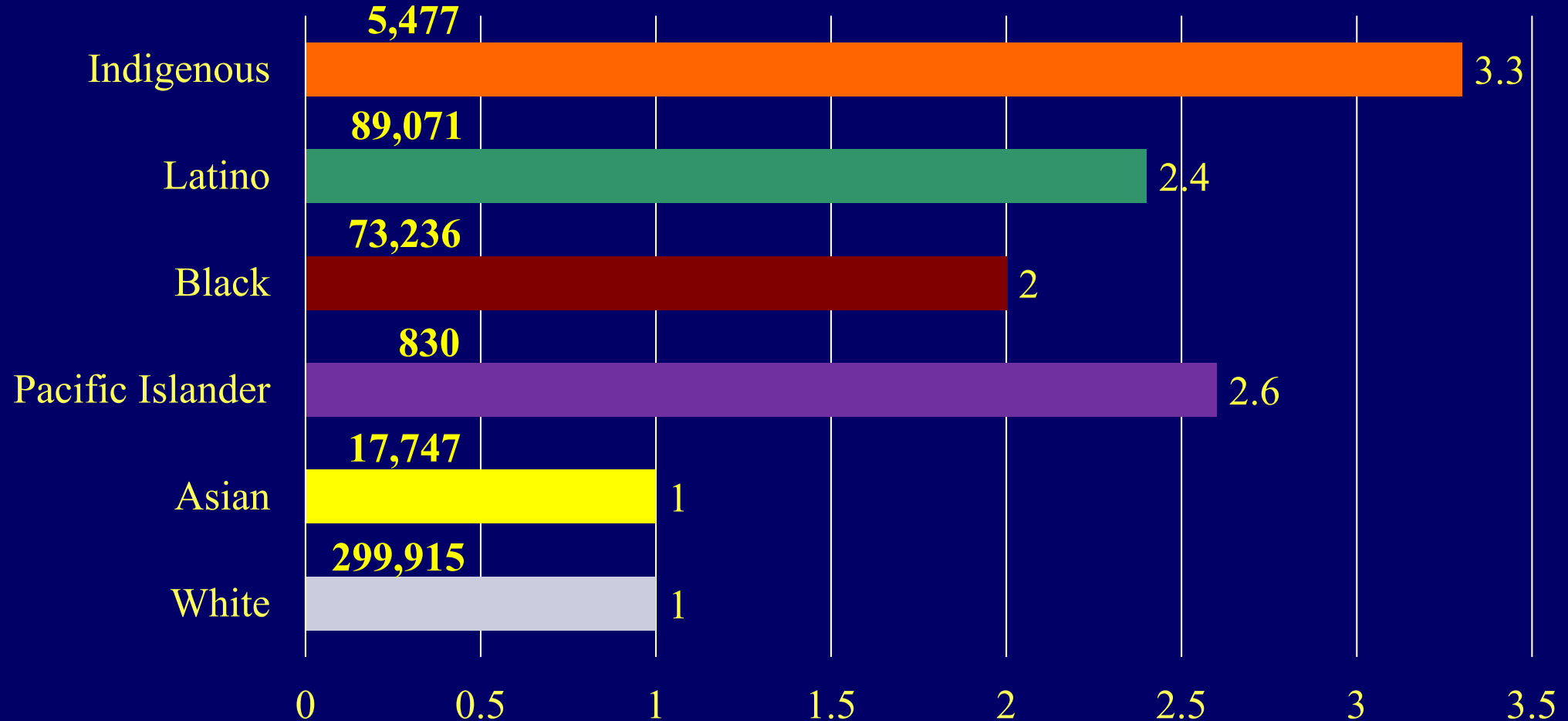


NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MEDICINE

*The National Academies of*  
SCIENCES • ENGINEERING • MEDICINE

# More Likely to Die of Covid-19 Compared to Whites

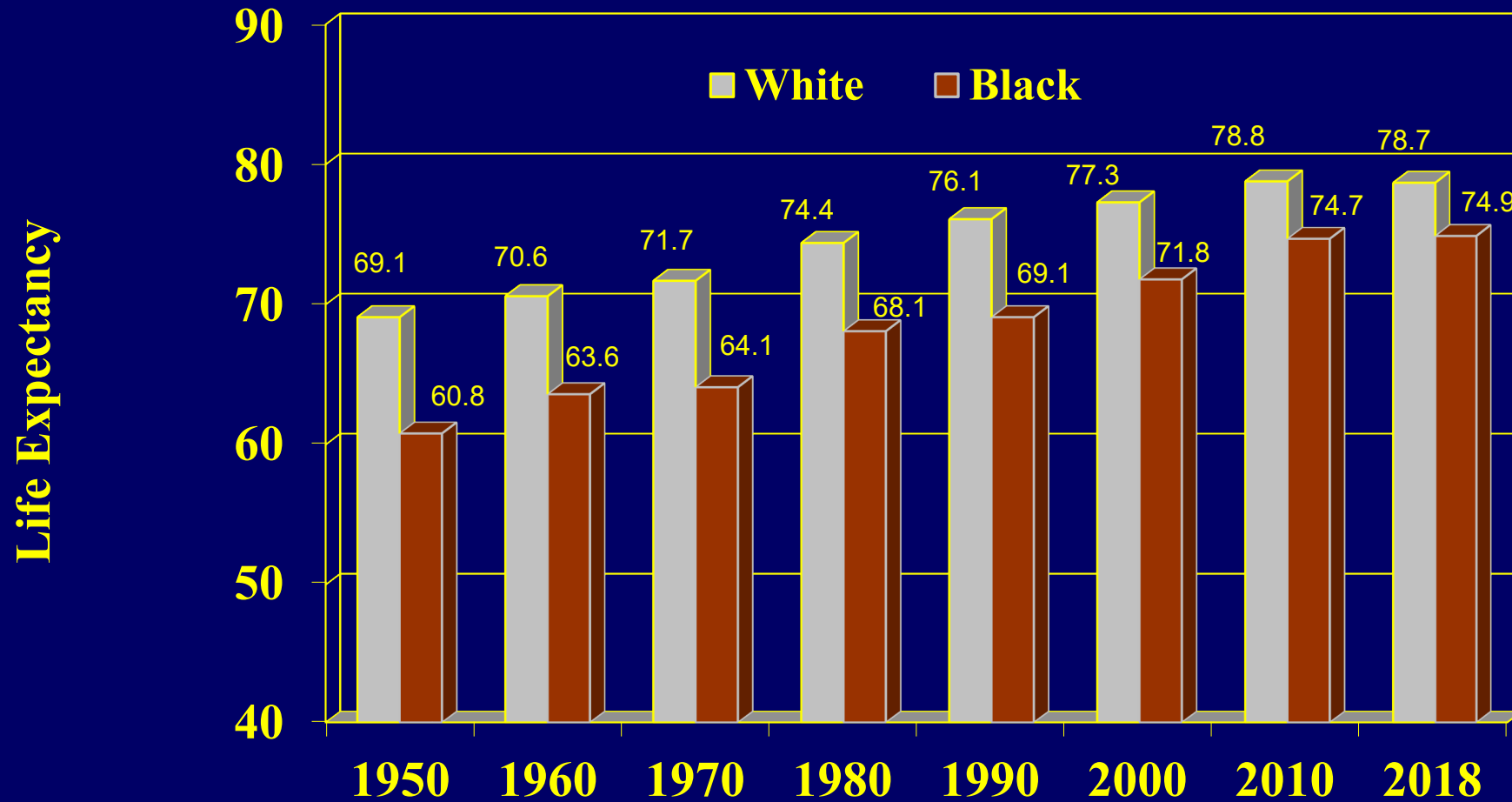
Cumulative mortality rates calculated through March 2, 2021; of more than 520,000 U.S. death, these are the numbers of lives lost groups:



Challenges with Equity begin Early in life, and  
Despite Progress over time, they are Strikingly  
Persistent

# Tragedy: Life Expectancy, 1950-2018

---





# Massive Loss of Lives

---



Over 200 Deaths Every Day

---

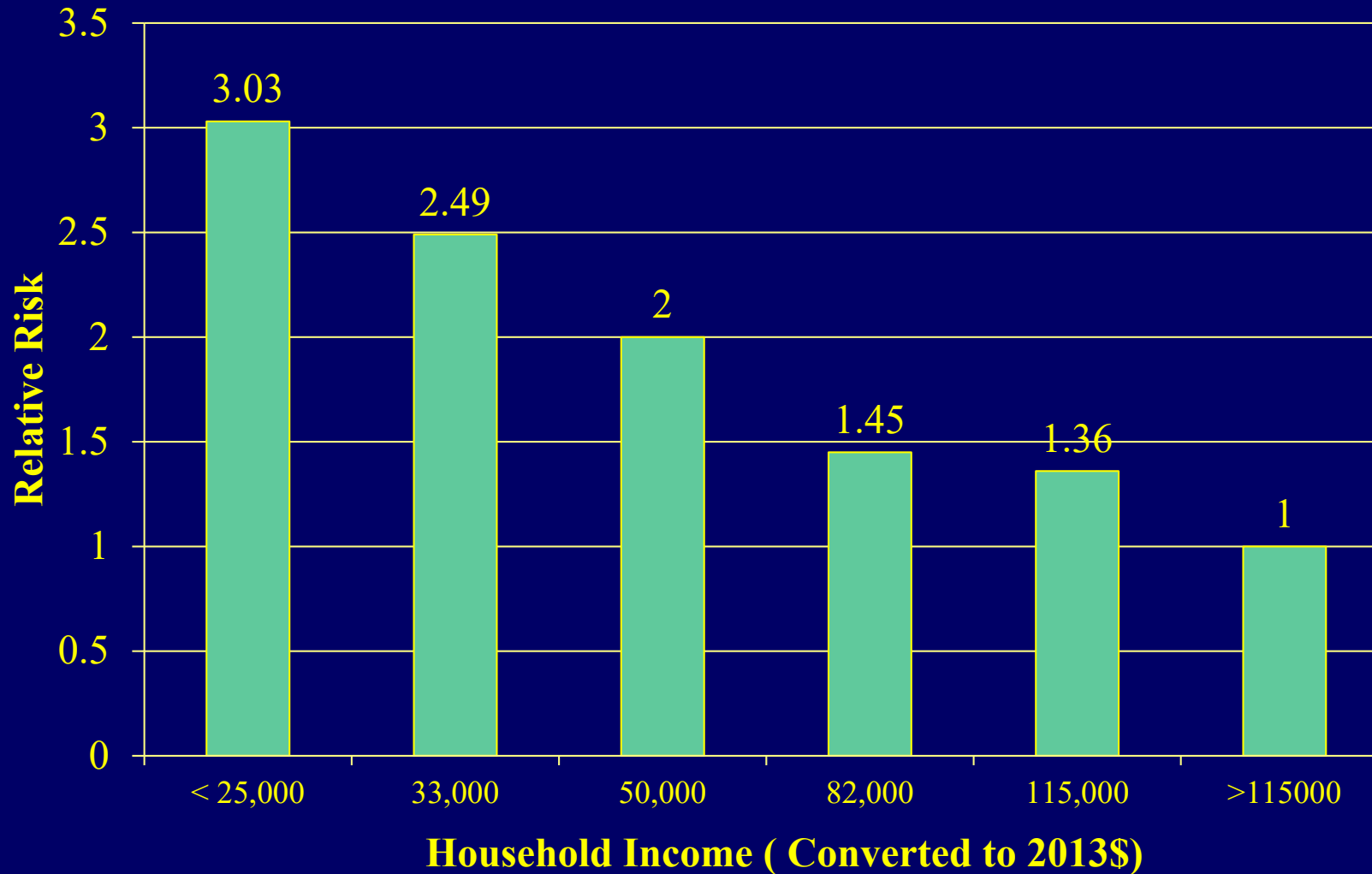
Levine et al., Health Affairs, 2001

# Making Sense of Racial Inequities

There are large Inequities in Health by  
Socioeconomic Status (SES) in the U.S. and  
elsewhere

# Relative Risks of All-Cause Mortality by Household Income Level: U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics

---





There are Large Racial/Ethnic Differences in  
Socioeconomic Status

# Median Household Income and Race, 2018

Racial Differences in Income are Substantial:

1 dollar



**Whites**

1.23 dollar



**Asians**

73 cents



**Hispanics**

59 cents



**Am Indians\***

59 cents



**Blacks**

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

# Median Wealth and Race, 2016

---

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

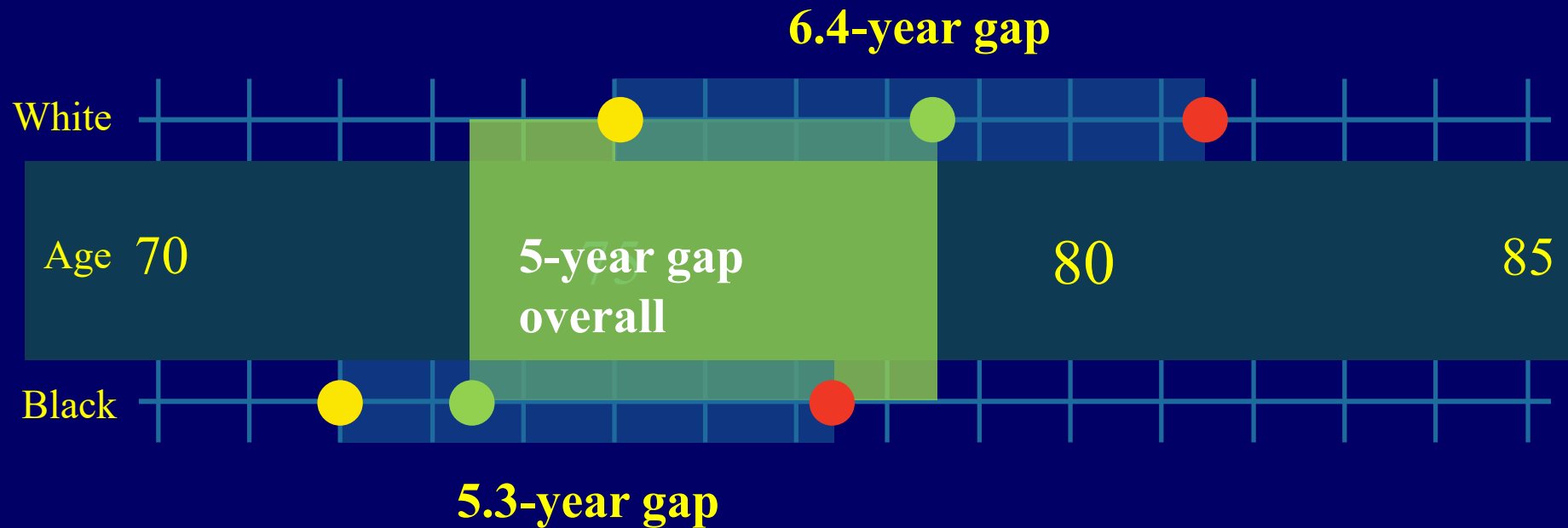
---

We are in the same storm but in different Boats



# **Added Burden of Race**

# Life Expectancy at Age 25 Based on Level of Education

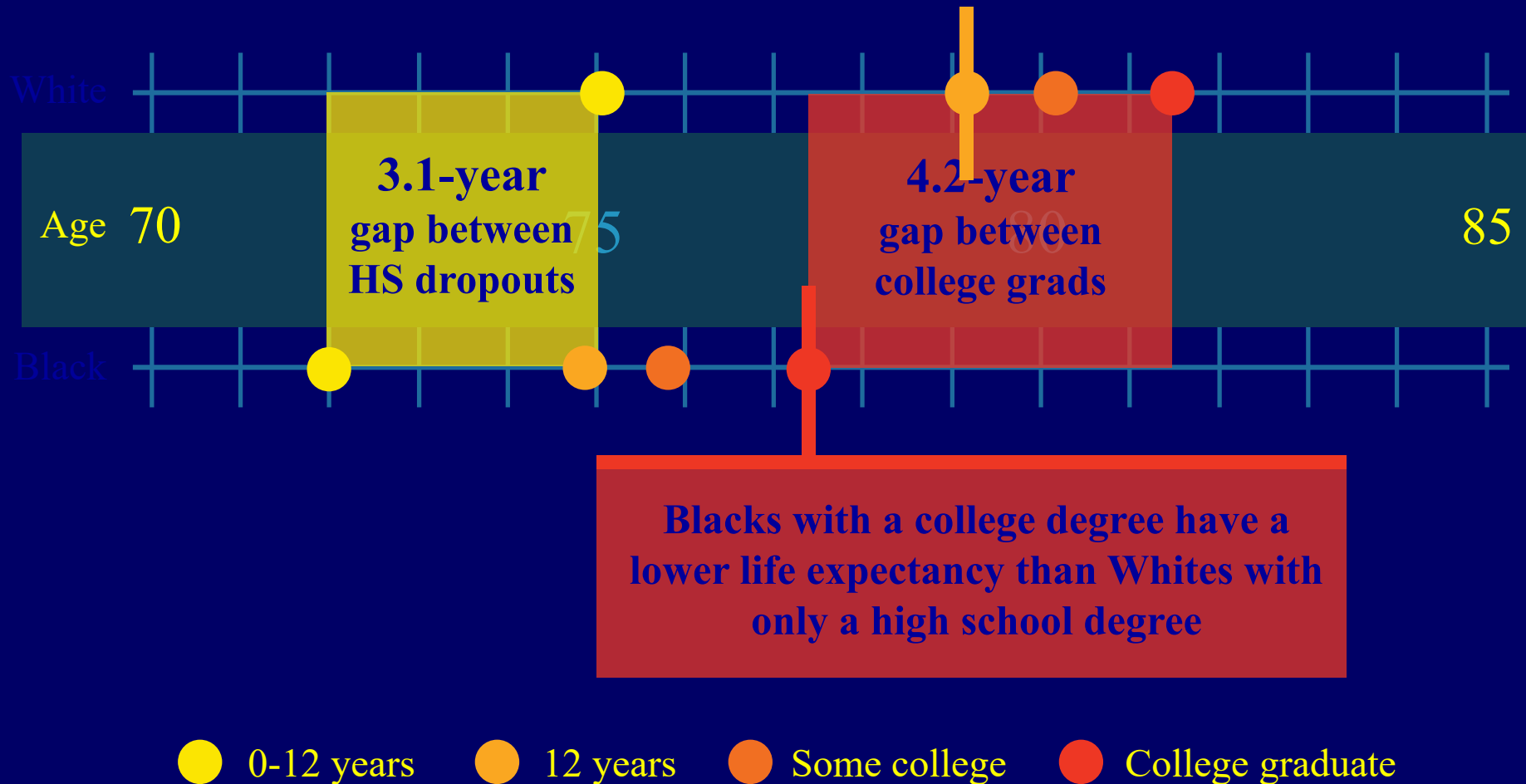


● Overall ● 0-12 years ● College graduate



# Life Expectancy at Age 25

## Race Still Matters



# Why Does Race Still Matter?

---

Could racism be a critical missing piece of the puzzle to understand the patterning of racial disparities in health?

---

# Racism Defined

---

- 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

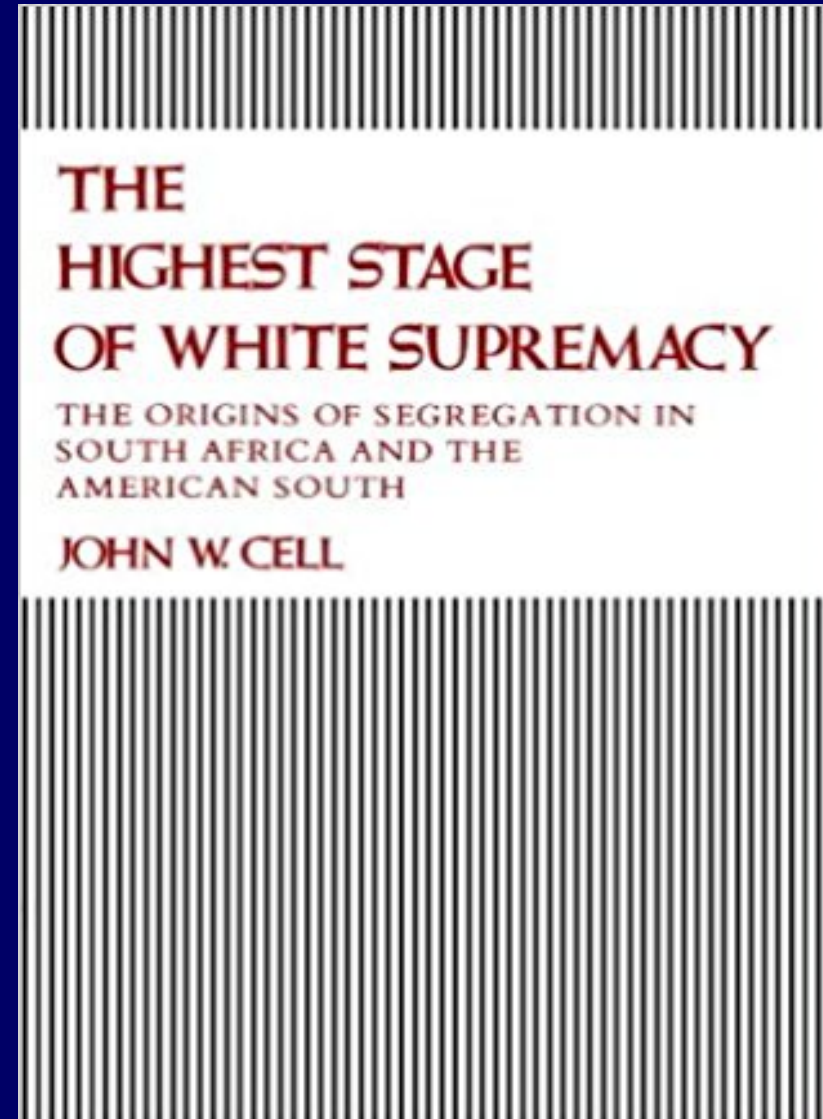
- Political
- Legal
- Economic
- Religious
- Cultural
- Historical Events

Structural or Institutional Racism (e.g. Segregation)

# Racial Segregation Is ...

---

- 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



---

John Cell, 1982

# How Segregation Works

---

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 Environments

---

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.”





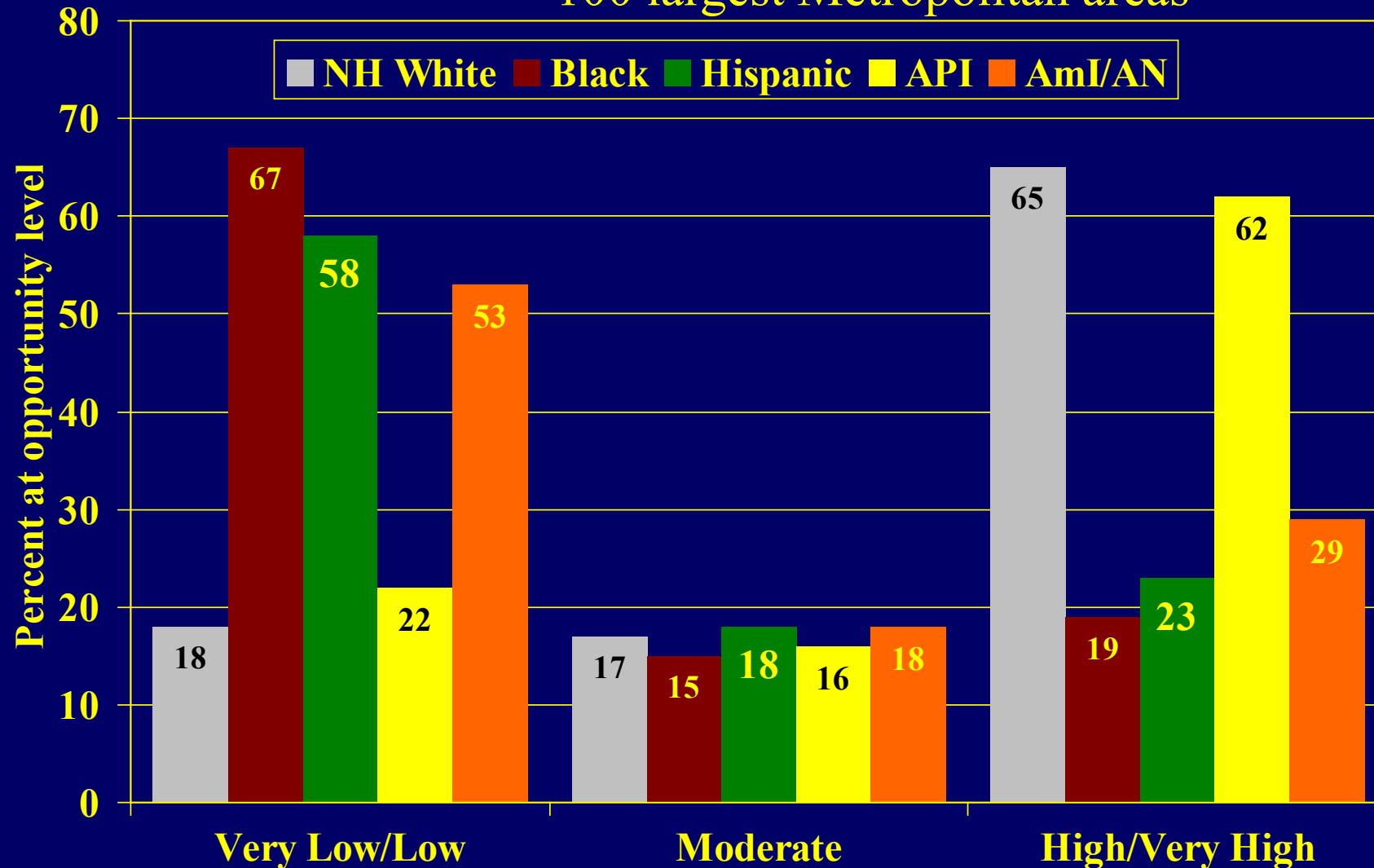
# Neighborhood Opportunity Index

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

100 largest Metropolitan areas



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

# Residential Segregation and SES

---

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



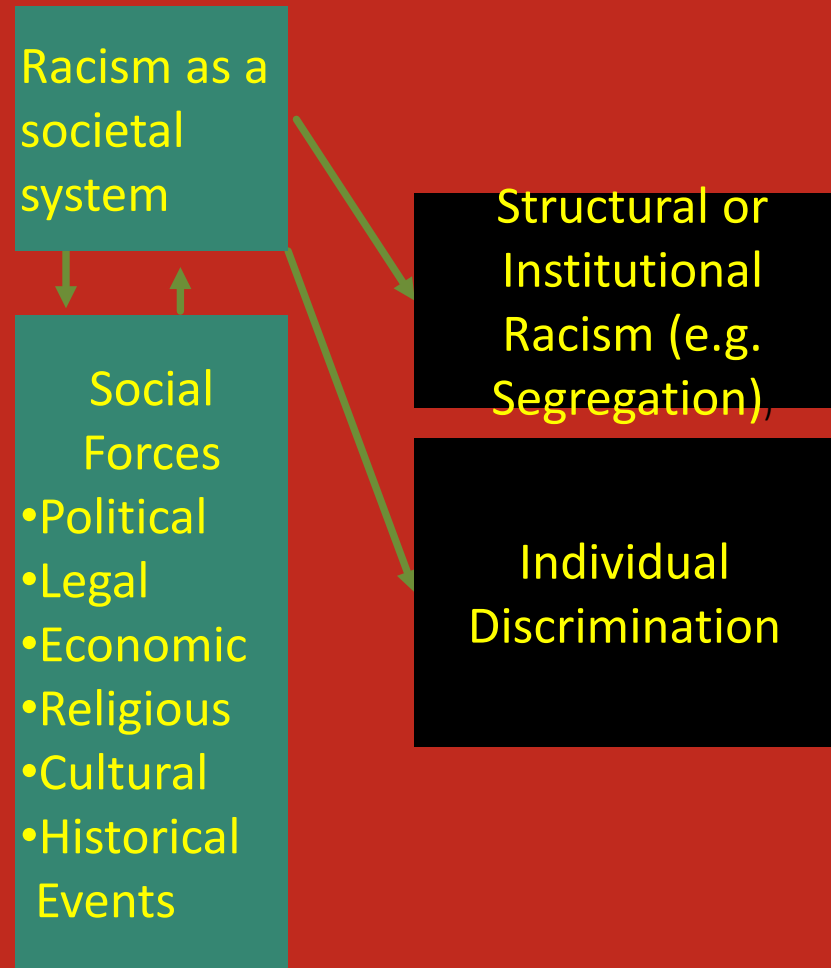
# Inequities by Design

---

- Racial inequities in SES that matter for life & health 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

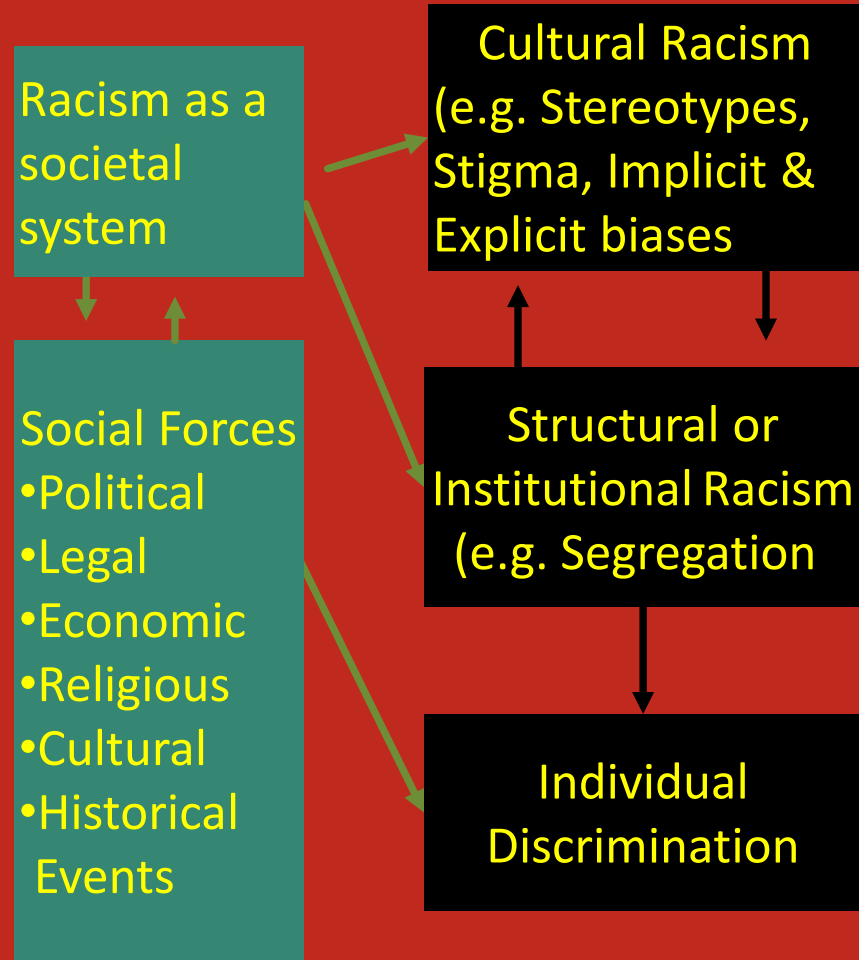


## *Individual Discrimination*

Experiences of discrimination are  
an added source of Toxic Stress



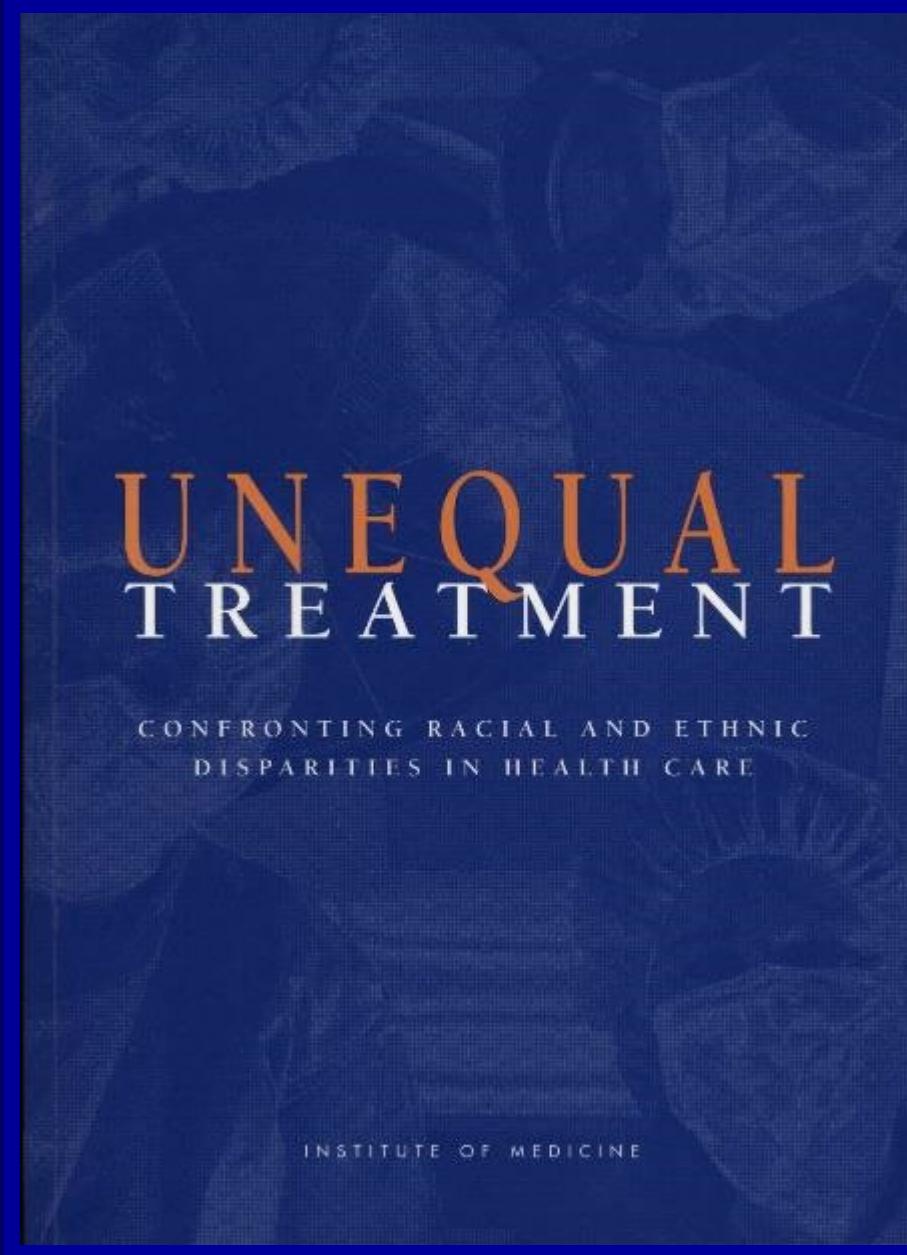
# The House that Racism Built



Negative stereotypes about race  
remain deeply embedded in our culture

## Negative Stereotypes Trigger Racial Discrimination





# Racial Bias in Medical Care

# Race of MD & Newborn Survival

---



- Study of 1.8 million hospital births 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



