

# This Is America: Disparities and Determinants of the Health of Black Americans

February 1 kicks off both Black History Month and American Heart Month in the United States, so what better time to talk about the health of Black Americans? It's no secret that being Black in the United States is [bad for your health](#).

What factors contribute to the clear differences in health between Black and white Americans? Why is it important to consider them when treating patients? Being able to value, answer, and understand these questions will make you a more compassionate, well-rounded healthcare provider.



## Health Disparities

You've probably heard this term thrown around, whether in school or even on the news. But what are health disparities? [The CDC](#) defines health disparities as "preventable differences in the burden of disease [...] or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations." Health disparities are directly related both to the historical and present unequal distribution of resources among different groups, including economic and political resources or inequities in access to or quality of healthcare. Health disparities can and do exist among people of differing ages, sexual orientations, and gender identities; however, disparities related to race and ethnicity are some of the most historically steadfast.

In the US, Black people often face a higher burden of certain health conditions compared to other racial groups, and experience high rates of premature death compared to white people. Black communities often face higher rates of poverty, limited access to quality education, and inadequate housing. These socioeconomic factors contribute to disparities in health outcomes, as individuals with fewer resources may struggle to maintain a healthy lifestyle and access timely medical care.

## Social Determinants of Health

Chances are, if you've heard the term "health disparities," you've also heard of social determinants of health. The two go hand in hand; the CDC defines [social determinants of health](#), or SDOH, as the "nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes." We've already established that certain groups, particularly Black Americans, experience a variety of differences in their health compared to non-Black people; SDOH are basically the reasons why these differences exist. Factors like poverty, discrimination, lack of access to healthy food and exercise, and inadequate healthcare resources can significantly impact health outcomes, and are great examples of SDOH in the United States. Addressing these social determinants is crucial for promoting health equity. Let's look at a few of these a little more closely.

## Education

Health disparities can also be directly related to differences in the education of populations. As the CDC reports, dropping out of school is associated with multiple health problems. This is due

to a number of complex factors, but put simply, higher levels of education make people more likely to understand health information needed to make good health-related decisions. So how does this relate to Black communities? The connection is an old one founded in [systemic racism](#), with effects that are still being widely felt even today. In 2019, the National Center for Education Studies [reported](#) that of the 4.7 million K-12 students enrolled in private schools, 66% were white, and only 9% were Black. Research consistently shows that private school students [perform better](#) on standardized tests in almost all subjects, and are more likely to graduate from high school and college. In short, white students across the nation are getting more, and statistically better, education than Black students.

This effect, however, is not unique to private schools. In the United States, public schools are funded largely by local property taxes. Discriminatory housing policies and practices established in the 1900s continue to result in homes that are undervalued by [nearly a quarter](#) of their actual worth, and place disproportionate burdens on Black homeowners. Therefore, Black communities are statistically more likely to have low property values that, even when taxed at ridiculously high rates, are [unable to generate](#) anywhere close to the amount of public school funding that white communities are. The result: public schools with predominantly Black student bodies receive, on average, significantly less funding than schools in other districts. This comes with higher levels of teacher turnover, poorer performance on standardized testing, higher rates of dropout, and lower rates of graduation—aka, lower health literacy and poorer health. As a final point, it's important to note that these differences are also experienced by Black students who pursue higher education; historically Black colleges and universities in the US are also [chronically underfunded](#).