



February 16, 2023

Road Map Bulletin: When Health Care Alone Can't Fix Health Outcomes

Happy Thursday, Mount Sinai Community –

One of the greatest challenges we face as a health care system is how much our patients' health outcomes have already been determined long before they come to our clinics, offices, or hospitals.

The fact is that for many of our patients—especially those who come from low-income communities or communities of color—even the best possible health care cannot fully mitigate health problems caused by external factors, such as exposure to lead pipes or diesel fuels from trucks on nearby highways.

For example, did you know that [Black people are five times more likely to be poisoned by lead than white people](#)? Or that [Puerto Rican Americans are nearly two times more likely to have asthma than non-Hispanic white Americans](#)? Both of these disturbing statistics are due, in large part, to a phenomenon called **environmental racism**. Mount Sinai's [Institute for Exposomic Research](#) is taking the lead on a national level in exploring how environmental exposures affect health, and health equity, and translating that knowledge into strategies for prevention and treatment.



For some understanding of environmental racism and the negative health outcomes it can cause for specific populations, we chatted with **Hazel Rogers, MPH, Assistant Director of the Office for Diversity and Inclusion** and a graduate of Mount Sinai's [Administrative Fellowship Program](#).

Q: What is environmental racism? How would you explain it to someone who has never heard the term before?

A: Environmental racism is any practice or policy that disproportionately impacts neighborhoods with lower socioeconomic status—which often have more residents of color—with the result that these communities face more environmental hazards and toxins compared to affluent areas, which typically have more white residents. These harmful inequities are caused by systemic issues, including intentional neglect of certain communities, regulations that only protect more wealthy areas, redlining, and government and corporate decisions to prioritize more affluent areas' concerns.

Q: What are some of the negative health outcomes that you've seen as a result of environmental racism?

A: Unfortunately, across the country, we have all witnessed how your ZIP code can define your health and perhaps even predict your life. Although New York City is diverse, specific ZIP codes still struggle with environmental racism. For example, deaths from heat strokes and heat exposure are [more likely to occur](#) in Black and Latino communities due to poor air quality and inadequate access to cooling and air conditioning. The reality is that in New York City, extreme temperatures are distributed unequally – and low-income residents and people of color feel the greatest burden of high temperatures. Additionally, due to environmental racism, African Americans tend to live where there is greater exposure to air pollution, which, according to [a study by the American Lung Association](#), means “African American communities suffer a greater risk of premature death from particle pollution than those who live in predominately white communities.”

Q: How can we address this problem on all levels, from big picture structural changes, to actions our Health System can take, to the individual patient-provider relationship?

A: It is essential that we as a health care system focus on gaining the community's trust, especially from those who are heavily impacted by environmental racism. That will allow us to create programs that educate and empower our communities to learn more about this topic and address its impact. On the Office for Diversity and Inclusion team, we are in the development stages of creating an environmental health enrichment program with exactly that goal and building a youth-focused climate change program that supports Mount Sinai's environmental and social governance goals.

Q: It's clear we need large-scale changes, but what are steps that people experiencing environmental racism can take today to improve their health outcomes?

A: One way people who are impacted by environmental racism today can improve their health outcomes is by being proactive and remembering that every choice makes a difference and affects your quality of life. For instance, when cleaning your homes, you can use safer, non-toxic products to minimize the chemicals that you are

inhaling in their home. To reduce the burden of high temperatures, individuals should ensure that they have a good ventilation system in their homes. You can also be more proactive about your health by focusing on the food that you eat and concentrating on purchasing fresh produce.

Q: What sort of research is being done on this topic that you find most compelling? Where should people who are passionate about this topic go to learn more?

A: I would encourage people who want to learn more to read [Where can I learn more about environmental racism?](#) from *Earthbeat* and [Public Health Resources for Understanding Environmental Racism](#) from *Public Health Degrees*. A local organization that is doing great work in this space is [WE ACT for Environmental Justice](#), which is a movement of hundreds of your fellow New Yorkers and people around the country who are taking action to improve the environment and health of their community.

Q: Are there any stories you can share, from your experience, of the impacts of environmental racism?

A: Although COVID-19 happened three years ago, we cannot forget how this disease disproportionately affected lower-income communities compared to affluent communities, largely due to environmental racism. Higher rates of air pollution in certain communities created higher rates of pre-existing health conditions, and individuals who suffered from these comorbidities were more at risk of contracting COVID-19 and becoming seriously ill.

There are parallels between environmental racism and health impacts. COVID-19 and environmental racism exacerbated pre-existing problems like underlying socioeconomic, political, demographic, and cultural conditions. I saw this personally when I co-managed the COVID-19 vaccine distribution with Maytal Rand, Director of Operations at Mount Sinai Morningside. On the operational end, I was able to directly see how environmental racism impacted those who wanted to access the vaccine, and we had to advocate to ensure the state allocated enough doses to ensure we reached every surrounding ZIP code.

All the best,

Angela and Shawn

To suggest a topic, highlight a coworker, or provide feedback on the Bulletins, send us an email at RoadMap@mountsinai.org

Join Us for an Upcoming Event

Black History Month Film Series: Celebrate the month through cinema as we highlight a variety of films and documentaries exploring the civil rights movement, the experiences of individuals with disabilities, and the LGBTQ+ community at the intersection of race. Click the registration link to view exact room locations for the screenings below.

- **Thursday, February 16** | *Moonlight* | Mount Sinai Brooklyn | [Registration Link](#)
- **Tuesday, February 21** | *Just Mercy* | Mount Sinai West | [Registration Link](#)

Paint Reflections Night - Thursday, February 23, 6:30 pm – 8 pm | [Registration Link](#)

Enjoy an evening of art and reflection with your colleagues as you recreate an image using the supplies of your choice and reflect upon the meaning of the month.

Zoom link will be provided to those who register prior to the event

Chats for Change: Racism x Hair: Chats for Change is a production of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai's Racism and Bias Initiative. Join facilitators Alia Barnes, MPH, and Jennifer Meyer, LMSW, MPH, on February 21, 2023, for this discussion. The Crown Act is federal legislation that prevents race-based hair discrimination in the workplace. Hair discrimination is rooted in systemic racism that continues to persevere in predominantly white spaces. Although the Crown Act was passed in 2019, hair discrimination remains prevalent in the medical community, experienced by both patients and health care professionals. Join us as we discuss the implications of hair discrimination in our work and educational environment.

[Road Map for Action](#)

[Past Bulletins](#)