



### Health Disparities Defined

Health disparities definitions vary (Carter-Pokras & Baquet, 2002), but they all address differences in health status between one population group in comparison to a more advantaged group and most address issues of social justice and equity. Representative definitions include:

- Differences in the incidence, prevalence, mortality and burden of diseases and other adverse health conditions that exist among specific populations in the United States (NIH, 2011),
- Differences in health outcomes that are closely linked with social, economic, and environmental disadvantage (Office of Minority Health, 2011)
- Health inequalities that are considered unnecessary, avoidable, and unfair/unjust (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organization, 2008)

*Health disparities* is a term most often used in the United States.

### Milestones in the History of Health Disparities

In 1985, in response to concerns about the health status of Blacks and other minority populations, the Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health (the Heckler Report) was released. It documented significant disparities in the burden of illness and mortality experienced by Blacks and other minority groups in the US population and introduced the concept of excess deaths to illustrate how many lives could have been saved if health care were the same between groups. The report proposed a national agenda to reduce health differences through efforts to improve minority access to high quality health care, expand health promotion and education outreach, increase the number of minority health care providers, and improve data collection to better report on minority health issues.

In 2000, Congress passed the Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act (Public Law 106-525) to address "the significant disparity in the overall rate of disease incidence, prevalence, morbidity, mortality or survival rates." The Act creat-

ed the National Institute on Minority Health and Health and Health Disparities at the National Institutes of Health.

In 2002, the Institute of Medicine released its congressionally requested report on disparities in health care: *Unequal treatment: Confronting racial and ethnic disparities in health care* (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson).

### Health Disparity Populations

Blacks and other racial/ethnic minority populations were the initial focus of health disparities.

Health disparity populations includes a wide range of populations where there is evidence of systematic social or economic discrimination and exclusion that has adversely impacted health such as racial/ethnic group, socioeconomic status, gender, age, sexual orientation, and geographic location (Office of Minority Health, 2011).

Populations represented by APA's Public Interest Directorate's offices and programs can be considered health disparity populations.



## Causes of Health Disparities

Health disparities is caused by a complex interaction of multiple factors including individual, genetic and environmental risk factors (Olden & White, 2005).

Pervasive structural inequities and social determinants of health are believed to be the primary cause of health disparities (OMH, 2011; World Health Organization, 2011).

## Health Disparity Health Priorities

The 1985 Secretary's report identified six areas of health concern. They were cancer, cardiovascular disease and stroke, chemical dependency related to cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, homicides and accidents, and infant mortality.

Although there are common areas of health disparities and concerns across groups, morbidity and mortality often varies by individual population groups. For example, HIV/AIDS is experienced disproportionately by the Black population.

APA's health disparities initiative will begin its focus on stress, obesity and substance abuse. These conditions are closely associated with a number of chronic diseases, are disproportionately experienced by and/or have disproportionate consequences on racial/ethnic minority and other health disparity populations.

For more information on how APA is addressing health disparities, please contact us at:

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