

Black Americans suffer more from heart disease: The AHA wants to change that

23 November 2020, by Dennis Thompson Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—The Black Lives Matter movement put racism in the United States under the glare of the public spotlight in 2020. And at its recently concluded annual meeting, the American Heart Association pledged to fight racial disparities in heart health and boost the life expectancy of all Americans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that systemic racism plays a large role in the kind of health an American can expect to enjoy, AHA President-Elect Dr. Donald Lloyd-Jones said during a recent HD Live! interview.

"Obviously, the events of 2020 with COVID have uncovered tremendous health disparities in this country—communities of color, [rural communities](#) having much worse outcomes than the majority population," Lloyd-Jones said. "These things aren't new, but they've certainly been brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic."

In response, the AHA appointed an advisory

committee to dig deep into the roots of systemic racism in the United States, and how it affects people's health.

"These are things that are built into policies, built into society, that disadvantage certain communities and certain people," Lloyd-Jones said.

The AHA committee found that while [death rates](#) from [heart disease](#) and stroke declined overall across America over the past two decades, people from minority groups often didn't share in those gains:

- Blacks continue to experience the highest death rates due to [heart](#) disease and stroke.
- Blacks experience a nearly 30% higher death rate from heart disease and a 45% higher death rate from stroke compared with whites.
- Black and Hispanic/Latino patients are significantly more likely to die while being treated in a hospital than white patients, even when controlling for socioeconomic status.

Lloyd-Jones noted that the health effects of systemic racism are apparent in his hometown of Chicago, where he serves as chair of preventive medicine for the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

The communities with the lowest and highest life expectancy in Chicago are located eight miles apart, Lloyd-Jones said, and between those eight miles there's a 17-year difference in life expectancy.

"When you look at the things that are different about those communities, it is entirely about safe streets and whether you can go out and actually participate in physical activity, access to healthy foods, access to a stable health system where you can actually get preventive care and not just an

emergency room," Lloyd-Jones said.

"Your zip code shouldn't determine your life expectancy. That's not right. That's not fair," he continued.

At its [annual meeting](#), the AHA committed itself to a multipronged effort at combatting structural racism, starting with an internal review of its own policies and the research it promotes.

"The American Heart Association funds somewhere between \$100 million and \$200 million in cardiovascular research every year," Lloyd-Jones said. "We want to make sure those research programs are designed in such a way that they reflect the diversity that's needed so we get important answers across the spectrum, and that we develop new programs that can also drive to greater health equity."

The AHA also plans to throw its weight behind reform efforts.

"People know us and trust us, and we need to use that power to get better policies in place so everyone has an equal chance at a longer, healthier life," Lloyd-Jones said.

The association has specifically committed to:

- Drive advances in research and discovery.
- Raise awareness, empower people and engage communities to improve their cardiovascular and brain health.
- Advocate relentlessly to improve health care quality and ensure access to health care for all.
- Innovate new solutions to achieve equitable [health](#) for all.

More Information

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APA citation: Black Americans suffer more from heart disease: The AHA wants to change that (2020, November 23) retrieved 11 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-black-americans-heart-disease-aha.html>

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