

Police violence and racism are public health emergencies

Statement from Physicians for a National Health Program

The horrific murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police has sparked protests nationwide. Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP), an organization of more than 23,000 doctors who support Medicare for All, denounces police brutality and racism in all forms; demands immediate steps to ensure racial justice at all levels of government; and calls for racism and racial health inequity to be treated as public health emergencies.

“The murder of Floyd,” said Dr. Adam Gaffney, president of PNHP, “is yet the latest example of the pervasive racism that sickens our nation. It is emblematic of the deeply entrenched system of institutionalized racism that afflicts both our criminal justice and health care systems.”

Police violence is a public health emergency.

Police violence is a leading [cause](#) of death for young men of color. Black men in particular face a 1 in 1,000 chance of being killed by police, and are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than are white men. Over-policing in communities of color and sentencing disparities mean that in the U.S. — which has the highest rate of incarceration in the world — Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is [5.1](#) times that of whites.

Mass incarceration imposes a particular threat to health during the COVID-19 pandemic given crowding and poor access to health care in these facilities. PNHP has previously joined other groups in [calling](#) for immediate actions to safeguard the health of prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic, including early release.

Racism is a public health emergency.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep inequalities in our health system, as Black Americans are more than [twice](#) as likely (and in some states [seven times](#) as likely) to die from the virus than whites.

“Racial inequities have, for too long, been tolerated and accepted as normal in this country,” stated Dr. Susan Rogers, president-elect of PNHP. “The overt brutality displayed by police makes this clear, but these inequities extend to health care, housing, and education.”

Compared to whites, people of color are more likely to be uninsured, face barriers to care, and suffer and die from preventable health conditions like [diabetes](#), [heart disease](#), and [cancer](#). Black families are also [three](#) times more likely to live in poverty compared to white families, and [twice](#) as likely to be food insecure, factors known to contribute to poor health.

PNHP is committed to fighting all forms of racial inequity, including the structural racism that puts Black people at substantially higher risk of police violence and incarceration, and a broken health care system that denies patients of color the right to health and health care.

