

# The Connecticut Health Divide: How Racism Contributes

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Easton will hold its annual town meeting on Monday, April 26. As usual, the meeting will afford residents an opportunity to be heard on topics of keen local interest, foremost being the town's proposed budget. But this year's agenda will also tackle issues of broader concern that have roiled our nation, state, region and local communities, including Easton. Among them is the issue of racism and the link between racism and health.

The cumulative evidence on Connecticut's racial and ethnic health divide is extensive and ever growing in the unfolding narrative of the COVID pandemic. A plethora of studies and reports have documented how Blacks and Latinos, and other minority groups have historically experienced higher rates of infectious and chronic disease, injury, premature death and disability, and acts of violence.

A recent Connecticut Health Foundation publication, <https://www.cthealth.org>, provides ready examples of the stark differences in health status among Connecticut residents by race and ethnicity:

- The infant mortality rate for babies born to Black women in Connecticut exceeds

the national rate. Babies born to Black women in Connecticut are nearly twice as likely to be underweight and over four times as likely to die before their first birthday.

- Asthma, a chronic and controllable condition, is the leading cause of preventable hospitalizations for children of color in Connecticut. Black youth are 5.5 times more likely to wind up in an emergency department (ED) due to asthma and 4.5 times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma than white counterparts. Hispanic youth are 3.5 times more likely to require ED visits related to their asthma and 4.5 times more likely to be hospitalized due to asthma than Connecticut's white youth.
- Diabetes, another chronic and controllable condition, has had a devastating impact on Blacks and Hispanics in Connecticut. Blacks and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as whites to have diabetes and even more so to suffer severe complications including amputations.
- The death rate for cancer in Black men is significantly higher than other groups in Connecticut, most notably for prostate cancer.
- Residents of color in Connecticut have a lower life expectancy with Black residents dying at a faster rate than whites.

## Disproportionately Bad Health Outcomes

And the list goes on if you endeavor to do the research. There is really no disputing that gross health disparities exist and continue to cause disproportionately bad health outcomes for people of color. But acknowledging these disparities falls short. We need to understand the causes and specifically, how racism contributes to disparate health outcomes for Black and Latino and other people of color in our state and local communities.

For it is more than socioeconomic factors that determine health. While higher income and education do correlate with better health outcomes generally, these factors fail to fully explain the profound disparities in health experience by race and ethnicity. Other factors related to discrimination have been identified through research and provide more insight. Prominent among these is the research documenting implicit bias in medical care that can result in differential treatment.

As one example, a study of racial disparities in cardiovascular care revealed that Black patients with heart problems received less beneficial interventions than white patients to a significant degree. The other major factor contributing to health disparities, supported by scientific research, is the toll of discrimination on the physical and mental health of those who routinely experience “everyday discrimination” and overt and subtle forms of racism. The stress of experiencing continuous discrimination has been associated with an array of adverse health outcomes including depression, anxiety, hypertension, breast cancer and premature birth or low birthweight babies.

Dr. David Williams is a research scientist and one of the most acclaimed scholars on the issue of racism and health. In a talk titled “How Racism Makes Us Sick” [https://youtu.be/VzyjDR\\_AWzE](https://youtu.be/VzyjDR_AWzE) he explains the concepts of stress and allostatic load. (Allostatic load is “the wear and tear on the body” which accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress.). Williams also synthesizes the research on discriminatory practices in the health care system that can lead to unequal treatment for people of color.

Although race and ethnic health disparities have been a prominent concern of public health for decades, COVID has brought the issue to an unprecedented level of consciousness in our nation and state. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of color in Connecticut, and particularly Black and Latino residents, underscores the entrenched nature of health inequities and reflects the reality that many people of color live in crowded housing, have low incomes, work in jobs that increase their exposure to COVID, and have pre-existing health conditions that increase their risk of

severe illness and death from COVID.

A recent publication “Towards Health Equity in Connecticut: the role of social inequality and the impact of COVID-19” <https://ctdatahaven.org/reports/> provides an in-depth profile of these issues based on statewide, regional and local data from urban, suburban and rural towns across the state including Fairfield County.

Taken together, these disturbing facts and trends are the reason why so many national, state and local leaders have coalesced around the issue of racism and health, declaring it a public health issue of crisis proportions. On April 8, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced a new initiative on racism and public health. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, declared racism a serious public health threat and described CDC’s intensified efforts to address racism as a fundamental driver of racial and ethnic health inequities in the United States.

“What we know is this: racism is a serious public health threat that directly affects the well-being of millions of Americans. As a result, it affects the health of our entire nation. Racism is not just the discrimination against one group based on the color of their skin or their race or ethnicity, but the structural barriers that impact racial and ethnic groups differently to influence where a person lives, where they work, where their children play, and where they worship and gather in community. These social determinants of health have life-long negative effects on the mental and physical health of individuals in communities of color,” said Walensky, who also announced a new CDC website, “Racism and Health”.

There is action in Connecticut as well. The Connecticut General Assembly is considering proposals to “Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis” in our state and to establish a Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health (Senate Bill No. 1 and House Bill No. 6662). Proponents assert that by recognizing the significance of systemic racism on public health these bills represent an essential first step toward corrective action to assess and change the way our state government works, embed anti-racism principles in

state level decision making processes, and facilitate anti-racist policy making at all levels.

The proposed Commission on Racial Equity in Public Health would review and analyze ethnic/racial health disparities in Connecticut, including the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic on people of color, facilitate the development of an executive level statewide strategic plan with broad community input and mandates to report on its findings to the Connecticut General Assembly, and support studies on health care workforce diversity, and trainings on implicit bias and cultural humility for students in health programs.

At the local level 20 towns/cities in Connecticut have made declarations and/or passed resolutions declaring racism a public health crisis or major concern since June 2020. Many of these municipalities are now actively engaged in efforts to address systemic racism through education and policy change.

## Easton Resolution on Racism and Public Health

Easton was one of the first towns in Fairfield County to take action, followed by neighbors in Bridgeport and Westport. The resolution passed by the Board of Selectmen on August 20, 2020 titled “Easton Resolution on Racism and Public Health” states that “the Board of Selectmen of Easton acknowledges that racism is a growing public health concern affecting our town and all of Connecticut” and avows to support action at all levels, local, state and national, including promoting racial and health equity in policies and enhancing educational efforts about racism and its harmful effects.

On March 4, 2021, the Easton Board of Selectmen decided to withdraw the town resolution on racism and public health and put it out for public comment, providing opportunity for discussion with a broader representation of citizen input. Easton residents who want to participate may express their views on the resolution at the Annual Town Meeting on April 26 followed by a vote on the issue at the town

referendum on May 4.

Easton may not be a community where the effects of racism are pronounced. But Easton is a community where issues of discrimination, diversity and inclusion are no less important. By upholding a resolution that acknowledges the impact of racism on our collective health, Easton could take an important step toward positive action at the local level while joining a growing movement in Connecticut and the nation to reckon with systemic racism.

*Elaine O’Keefe has lived in Easton for 25 years. She is a former public health professional who worked in local health departments and at the Yale School of Public Health for nearly 40 years combined. She continues to serve on several health-focused boards and is a member of the Easton Diversity and Inclusion Task Force.*

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## Exploring Historical and Present-Day Racism

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The Easton Public Library and Christ Church Easton are co-hosting a free Zoom screening of the award-winning documentary, “Traces of the Trade,” on April 29 at 7 p.m.

By uncovering her family's story, the filmmaker reveals this country's slave trade history, focusing on the centrality of enslavement in the economic growth and expansion of the United States. The film exposes the White/Black divide and history of racial injustice in the North: how white 19th Century landowners, merchants, banks, shipbuilders, and others secured their financial wealth through enslavement of Africans and African Americans as an economic resource.

"This screening is in keeping with the library's growing efforts to raise awareness of today's ongoing systemic racism," Library Director Lynn Zaffino said. "Understanding our history is the first step toward achieving equal opportunity and justice for all Americans."

The Rev. Allyson "Ally" Brundige, Christ Church's Priest-in-Charge, supports Zaffino's comments. "Christ Church is an all-inclusive church where we welcome with love all peoples and seek to build the beloved community, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a society that is not silent about present-day racism, economic exploitation and violence, but is actively committed to loving one another and joining God's justice-seeking and love-bearing work in the world."

Registration for Zoom viewing is required to receive a Zoom link and can be found on the Easton Public Library's calendar:

[https://www.eventkeeper.com/mars/xpages/xp\\_newpopevent.cfm?zeeOrg=EASTONPL&EventID=6652091&sw=1600](https://www.eventkeeper.com/mars/xpages/xp_newpopevent.cfm?zeeOrg=EASTONPL&EventID=6652091&sw=1600)

You can reach Zaffino or Brundige for more informationL

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## Year in Review 2020: Social Justice

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Eastonites joined with other Americans calling for social change following the horrific death of George Floyd, 46, during a police arrest on May 25 in Minneapolis. Protests in response to Floyd's brutal death and to police violence against other Black Americans spread quickly across the United States.

More than 300 community members turned out for the June 8 Vigil for George Floyd on the Morehouse Road playing fields. Wearing masks and staying socially distanced, some carried signs while others lit candles. Some just sat and listened. Easton residents Devon Wible, Tara Gottlieb and Sarah Lehberger organized the vigil.

Speakers included First Selectman David Bindelglass, Easton Police Chief Rich Doyle, state Rep. Anne Hughes and residents Lila Estime and Wiley Mullins. Doyle recited some

of the message he released condemning the killing of Floyd. Chief State's Attorney Richard J. Colangelo Jr., who is chairman of the Easton Police Commission, also released a statement decrying the officers' actions as "reprehensible, heart-wrenching, and criminal."

### *Vigil for George Floyd: A Moment or a Movement?*

Easton celebrated Juneteenth with music, history lessons, and socially distant picnicking. The goal was to bring together the community to meet neighbors and learn about the history and traditions of Juneteenth.

### *Juneteenth Celebration Highlights Historic Importance of the Day*

The Easton, Redding and Region 9 Boards of Education created Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committees, Barlow alumni and students formed Social Justice Clubs, and the Board of Selectmen approved the formation of a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force. The task force experienced some differences of opinion and is a work in progress.

### *Easton Responds to Calls for Anti-Racism*

The Easton Public Library stocked books on the topic of racial justice and systemic racism and chose "Small Great Things" by Jodi Picoult as its 2021 One Book/One Town Community Read. The novel, published in 2016, includes themes of race, privilege, prejudice, justice, and compassion.

## *Library Announces One Book/One Town Community Read*

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# Articles from the Courier 8/24/20 – 8/30/20

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In case you missed it: Check out these articles posted in the Easton Courier in the past week, from Monday, August 24 to Sunday, August 30.

Don't forget to subscribe to email notifications. It's free, and you control the frequency. You can enter your email address

here: <https://eastoncourier.news/subscribe/>. You control your notification preferences.

Op-Ed: Patience, Caution and Flexibility Needed as Some Schools Reopen Next Week

Hughes Writes Open Letter to Colleagues on Systemic Racism

Sunday Nature Walk: Birds in Our Own Backyard

The Apple Barn - A Slice of Easton History

A Message from First Selectman Bindelglass

Easton Responds to Calls for Anti-Racism

Two Firefighters Injured Responding to House Fire

Greiser's Does the Pandemic Pivot — Again

Mambert Road: Old Percy

Church Community Still Available Even at a Distance

Why Our Emotions Are So Valuable

Unclear About Long-Term Care Insurance? You Have Lots of Company

Letter: Shaban Led, Hughes Blamed

Michelle McCabe Endorsed by NARAL Pro-Choice CT

Sherwood Farm Preserves the Past, Embraces the Future

Aquarion Water Diversion Zoom Public Meeting Is Wednesday, Aug. 26

Easton Police Log August 17 - August 23

Articles from the Easton Courier 8/17 - 8/23

Get Ready for a Dazzling Display!

A Message from First Selectman Bindelglass

Board of Selectmen Meeting of Aug. 20

# Hughes Writes Open Letter to Colleagues on Systemic Racism

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This open letter was written by state Rep. Anne Hughes, D-135th District, and other members of the Connecticut legislature asking them to add their names to this call for action to address issues of systemic racism.

*Dear Colleagues,*

*Today, on this 65th anniversary of the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till and the subsequent acquittal of his murderers, we are yet AGAIN reeling from the latest violent evidence of systemic racism and the terrorism it wreaks, reverberating from Kenosha, Wisconsin and across the country. We are beginning to understand the outrage, exhaustion, and numbness of Black, Brown and Indigenous Americans to this legacy of systemic racism.*

*Our all too familiar pattern of police violence and systemic inequality under the law played out again tragically this week in Kenosha. Jacob Blake, a Black man, was shot in the back seven times by police though he has been charged with no crime. Meanwhile, an armed white teen, encouraged to vigilante violence by the president, Fox News, and white supremacists in our society, obtained an illegal long gun, crossed state lines, and arrived in Kenosha.*

*Though he shot three people—killing two—he was initially allowed to walk past police and return home unharmed. There could be no clearer example of the outrages committed under our two-tiered system. Black and Brown people are routinely assumed to be criminals, terrorized, and too often killed as a result of interactions with the police. By contrast, white people are accustomed to deference and protection when dealing with law enforcement. This latitude means white people are much less likely to even be viewed as criminals, making the interactions with police exponentially more survivable.*

*This is the very definition of systemic racism on spectacular display, occurring with numbing frequency, throughout our country. Inaction of policymakers is deadly. We see our own pattern of systemic racism here in Connecticut. White UConn student Peter Manfredonia, an armed and dangerous fugitive from justice, was apprehended unharmed to be charged with multiple murders and kidnapping.*

*In stark contrast, we saw the police killing of unarmed teen Jayson Negron, and the fatal police shootings of Jose Soto, Mubarak Soulemane, Alphonso Zaporta, Anthony Vega Cruz, Kyron Sands, Juan McCray, Zoe Dowdell—all men of color—just in the past few years in Connecticut. No officers have been charged in these deaths. This is the two-tiered system of policing and justice that sparked outrage 65 years ago when Emmett Till was lynched and runs through our history to the present day.*

*This is a failure of our public institutions, government, justice system, and of the culture we inhabit which consistently values white people, property and privilege over Black, Brown and Indigenous lives. The public outcry and demands for systemic change across the towns, cities and streets in our state did not start with the historic Civil Rights March on Washington 57 years ago today, nor did it start with the death of George Floyd on May 25 and the subsequent public protests. And it did not end with the Police Accountability Bill we indeed passed in Special Session in July.*

*May we never grow wearily accustomed to the ‘wildfires’ of systemic racism and white supremacy that our system perpetuates and the violence and trauma it inflicts on our communities. Let us resolve to fight these fires and dismantle these systems, while acknowledging that, though nearly two generations have passed since Dr. King delivered his I Have a Dream speech on this date, there is still much*

*work to do. As policymakers we must place those most harmed by systemic racism at the center of our efforts to reimagine and rebuild better public systems, institutions and public services that finally serve and protect everyone.*

*It is time to honor the lives of Emmett Till, Jayson Negron, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and so many more by dismantling the deadly systems built on white privilege and racism we have sustained for too long. As policymakers, we are renewing our commitment to the hard work we have begun but remains unfinished. This is why as part-time legislators we must work full-time and even stay in Session until we enact meaningful policy changes that ‘at last...,’ stop the killing and build the equitable systems that live up to Dr. King’s vision.*

*Respectfully,*

*Representative Anne Hughes*

*Representative David Michel*

*Representative Jillian Gilchrest*

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# 'We Must Focus on Protecting Black Lives'

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On Monday night I spoke at the community vigil for George Floyd. As part of my message, I said that Black Lives Matter, and also stated that blue lives and all lives matter. While I believe that all life is sacred, black lives specifically are at risk in our country because of systemic racism and police brutality, so we must focus on protecting black lives.

Saying that blue lives and all lives matter was insensitive, because the way some have used those phrases has made them into rallying cries for continued racism. I hope it was clear that I was in no way disregarding the systemic racism that has led to the senseless murder of countless black men and women. I apologize for my poor choice of words, and to those offended by them. I am listening, and I am learning.

The vigil was a powerful event where our citizens challenged each of us to reflect on how we can sacrifice for the greater good and practice humility when we make mistakes. I know that we have a difficult road ahead of us as we fight for equity and justice, and I believe that we can overcome these challenges to create a better future for our town, state, and country by working together.