

Introduction to the Special Issue on Race at the Forefront

Racial categorization is a foundational factor in the stratification of the United States. Indeed, the inaugural U.S. census collected data on race in 1790. Social scientists now largely consider race to be a social construct, fluid and dependent on local classification; however, persistent racial stratification is manifest in inequities at multiple levels. Structural racism is manifest in persistent economic inequality, including enormous income and wealth disparities. The continued documentation of disparities and use of statistical controls for race—treating race as just another variable-- are not adequate to motivate public policy adjustments necessary to redress structural racism. Racial equity requires a new approach to research.

Guided by the tenets of critical race theory, the Collaboration on Race, Inequality and Social Mobility in America (CRISMA) was launched at Washington University in St. Louis as an applied, interdisciplinary research initiative that seeks to address the impacts of inequality and structural racism on disparities in academic achievement, social and economic mobility, mental and physical health, and mortality. Critical race theorists argue that researchers, practitioners and policy makers must recognize the fundamental role of racism in nearly all aspects of American life and that the only way to address racial inequities is to undermine systematic oppression. Therefore, CRISMA scholars believe it is critical to provide a proper sociohistorical lens to contemporary racial inequities across multiple outcomes. CRT also encourages the elevation of the scientific gaze, incorporating the role of racism in the power, structure and systems that have been wielded to reify white supremacy (Hicken, Kravitz-Wirtz, Durkee, & Jackson, 2018). As such, the development of appropriate practice and policy solutions necessary to disrupt the systems of oppression require placing race at the forefront and embracing radical changes needed to disrupt historical and contemporary systems of oppression.

CRISMA hosted its inaugural conference on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis in March 2019 in order to convene influential, interdisciplinary emerging and senior scholars to share their work related to the development of innovative solutions needed to address racial inequities related to social, economic and health outcomes. The goal of this volume is to provide a synthesis of findings presented at the conference. The articles in this special issue of the Journal on Race, Inequality and Social Mobility in America have the potential to move us toward a more nuanced, impactful research agenda necessary to not only advance our understanding racial inequities but also provide solutions that could be effective in addressing deeply entrenched, historical inequities.

The first section of the special issue focuses on racial inequities in socioeconomics. This includes but is not limited to addressing inequities in social services, wealth and educational quality. Good health is essential to people's abilities to attend to their familial roles, to strive toward upward social mobility, and to be a productive citizen. The next section of this issue focuses on health and synthesizes papers that provide a nuanced understanding of the association between racism and health. Although radical solutions are needed to adequately address the full scope and depth of racial health inequities, health scholars at the CRISMA conference also provided ways to build the capacity of existing structures, enhancing experiential knowledge and promoting natural networks in order to extend critical health services. Lastly, in order to promote higher quality research related to reducing racial inequities across a broad array of outcomes, it is important to consider the development of new measurement strategies and methodological approaches is a crucial ingredient in the design of appropriate solutions to inequities. Therefore, this volume will include a number of innovations that scholars have been developed in order to elevate the critical gaze of multiple fields. For example, racial segregation is one of the most

influential aspects of systematic racism. While there are a number of reliable ways to estimate levels of racial residential segregation, there is less known about how individuals' perceptions of segregation as well as people's level of comfort with different racial compositions. Another related factor is access to different mortgage products. Knowledge of these two areas is critical in the development of policies and practices that can eliminate, or at least ameliorate, racial residential segregation.

This volume will conclude with future directions and discuss some of the broad practice and policy implications of the work covered in this volume. By applying appropriate context and a historical lens to racial economic inequities, research can accurately frame the impact of racism's legacies on contemporary inequities across a range of outcomes, enabling informed efforts to achieve equity, develop inclusive policy, and disrupt racism's role in the production of inequality.

References

Hicken, M. T., Kravitz-Wirtz, N., Durkee, M., & Jackson, J. S. (2018). Racial inequalities in health: Framing future research. *Social Science & Medicine*, 199, 11–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.12.027>