

Public Health As It Relates to Racial Equity & Social Injustice

A Position Statement from

Saving Our Legacy, African Americans for Smoke Free Safe Places – The SOL Project

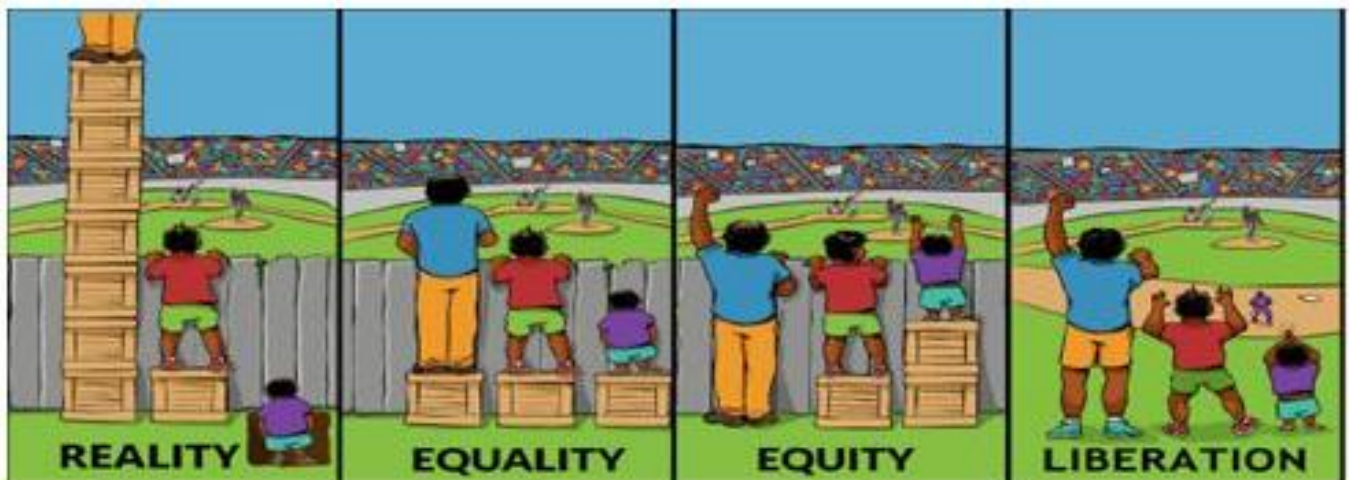
“Racism is America’s original public health crisis. From slavery to Jim Crow, from lynching to the War on Drugs, racism targeting African Americans has ravaged our country from its inception. Racism has been legally sanctioned, brutally enforced, engrained into the fabric of our daily life, and either supported or largely ignored by most White Americans”.

*~Harold Goldstein, DrPH
Executive Director, Public Health Advocates*

Juneteenth is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. Dating back to 1865, it was on June 19th that the Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. Note that this was two and a half years after President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation - which had become official January 1, 1863.

Although we are celebrating the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth, racism still enslaves African Americans. Acknowledging that murder of Black people has been legal, enforced, supported, or largely ignored by most, including White Americans, can no longer be overlooked. Racism is a negative outcome that impacts social determinants of health just as much as housing, education, healthcare access, food insecurity, and employment) and is a barrier to health equity.

To achieve health equity and liberate Black people from the oppression of poor health outcomes, tobacco control and public health advocates must commit to address injustices addressing racism in all forms, including police brutality against African Americans.



Source credit: <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/anetblog/eduspeak/equity-in-education>

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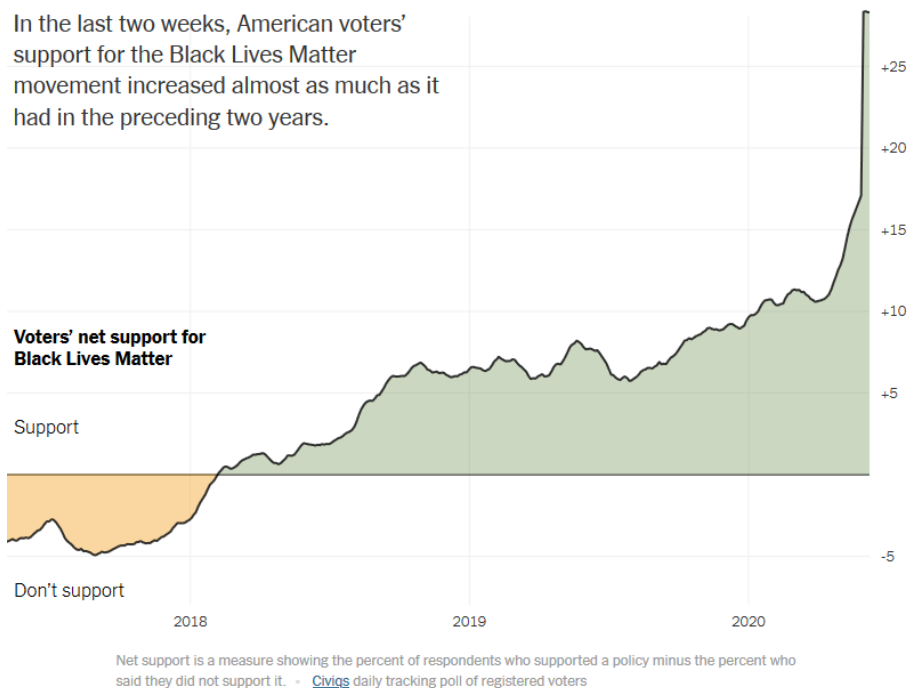
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Saving Our Legacy, African Americans for Smoke Free Safe Places – The SOL Project will continue to support and participate in protests with the goal of educating not only the brutality and death at the hands of those who have taken an oath to “Protect and Serve” our communities, but also by educating decision makers of solutions that can remove power structures which have systematic disadvantages to people of color before and since the Emancipation Proclamation.

As protests continue in cities across the nation, many are experiencing anger, frustration, sadness and sorrow from seeing the same narrative of brutality and murder. Black Americans are bearing the brunt of five crises — *police violence, unemployment, mental health conditions, systematic targeting from tobacco and vape companies and the COVID pandemic*. Public health experts, activists and decision makers would benefit from a coordinated response.

As pointed out in a New York Times article written by Nate Cohn and Kevin Quealy, the Black Lives Matter movement has leaped. Three years ago "Black Lives Matter" was a radical chant that was considered to be "poorly named and divisive". Now it is on Netflix screens and Mayors in almost every city are reiterating it in speeches since the protests ignited anger and outrage across all people of every race and ethnicity over the death of Ahmaud Arbery on February 23rd, and George Floyd on May 25th. In the last few weeks, support among voters is increasing for the Black Lives Matter movement.



<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/10/upshot/black-lives-matter-attitudes.html>

We must reach out, speak up and vote.

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Now more than ever is a time for action. Register to vote and encourage others to do the same, then vote. Our vote counts at the city, county, state and federal level. Our vote gets people elected as our representatives, who act on our behalf when it comes to making or changing laws or systems. We must communicate with our elected officials by calling, emailing or attending council and board meetings or bill hearings. Ask them to vote in favor or against an issue that will benefit or harm the Black community, like police reform.

Police brutality is a public health issue. If we look at illnesses like heart disease and cancer, we look for the causes so we can mitigate the risk factors and thus reduce or eliminate the negative health outcome. We do this through individual behavior, policy and environmental systems change. We must look at police brutality as an unnecessary cause of injury and death to African Americans and look for solutions that change individual police officer behavior as well as changing environmental practices and systems in the justice system that have led to this vile behavior.

Brutality and death at the hands of law enforcement are the unintended consequence of Purchase, Use and Possession (PUP) laws that we see in antiquated tobacco control laws. In 2014, Eric Garner died from a choke hold at the hands of police after being detained for selling loose cigarettes. Fast forward to 2020; 14-year old “Jah” (*last name withheld of minor*) was brutally beaten at the hands of a Sacramento County Sheriff in Rancho Cordova for possession of a little cigar. Now we have George Floyd has been murdered for allegedly attempting to purchase a pack of cigarettes.

PUP clauses within laws:

- Shift blame of underage tobacco use away from tobacco/vape industry to youth.
- Criminalize youth who are the victims of addiction as the result of being targeted by tobacco and vape companies.
- Disproportionately affect African Americans and those living in low income communities.
- Are wrongly used by law enforcement as tactics to detain, criminalize, brutalize and now murder Black people.

Tobacco and Vape industry spokespersons have been meeting with decision and law makers to confuse these terrible circumstances as unintended consequence of tobacco control policies aimed at restricting the sales of addictive flavored tobacco products. In 2016, the state of California removed PUP clauses within state laws and many local municipalities should do the same. In reality, the biggest invisible profiler and killer of Black people is tobacco and vape products. The industry and their front groups argue that Blacks have a right to buy and smoke. Smoking is not a right. Smokers are not a protected class. What the tobacco industry is really doing is keeping Black people enslaved to products that when used as intended, will lead to disease and untimely deaths.

As public health advocates speak to decision makers, we need to reiterate that although it is legal for people to smoke, Black men and boys are not born with a Newport or a Swisher Sweet in their mouths. Our community must understand that there is a highly organized, predatory, and efficient machine that has been in place for hundreds of years to accomplish getting Black folks to claim “ownership” of tobacco products as if they are a part of our culture. There is more advertising for

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menthol cigarettes and flavored little cigars, more lucrative promotions, and the products are cheaper in the Black community. In addition, the industry has continued to seek influence of law enforcement to target and criminally charge for youth purchase, use and possession of these products when the onus should be placed on the retailers for selling to minors or to legal adults for socially providing them.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, South African human rights activist and anti-Apartheid campaigner said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” The key to challenging racist structures and engaging in racial justice work, is to educate yourself and stay committed knowing this isn’t a short-term project, this is a lifelong commitment.

Public Health advocates and the broader community has work to do. In tobacco control, that means helping us by calling on our elected officials to ban flavored tobacco and vape products, including menthol. And for those of us in tobacco control, that means supporting our allies and partners who advocate for social determinants of educational attainment, economic development and racial discrimination/social injustices, like police brutality.

Below are some websites and resources with more information on continuing conversations about race in your sphere of influence.

- Debby Irving and Dr. Eddie Moore Jr.’s 21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge
- The Center for Racial Justice in Education’s resource list for talking about race, racism, and racialized violence with kids
- An excerpt from Peggy McIntosh on White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible Knapsack
- Boston.com’s running list of national and local resources and organizations for those looking to support racial justice
- Start or join a book club to dig into and discuss racism. Boston-area bookstores are sharing anti-racist reading list
- The National Museum of African American History and Culture’s new online portal, “Talking About Race”.

We trust and believe you will join the SOL project as we rise to the occasion and tear down racist institutions, systems and laws and rebuild a society that provides equity and liberation for the Black community and all who have been underserved, underrepresented and over-policed.

In Solidarity,

Kimberly

Kimberly Bankston Lee
Sr. Program Director

Twlia

Twlia Laster
Project Director

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Abdulaziz

Abdulaziz Attassy
Project Coordinator

Richardson

Richardson Davis
Community Engagement Coordinator