“It is time to refocus, reinforce, and repeat the message that health disparities exist and that health equity benefits everyone.”

-Kathleen Sebelius, former Secretary of Health & Human Services
COVID-19 has shed new light on the racial and social injustices that affect society. Health professionals across many fields, including medicine and public health, are seeking to address both the pandemic and health disparities that lead to poorer health outcomes for people of color and those from under-resourced and underserved backgrounds.

This Career of the Month provides basic information about social determinants of health and health disparities, and ways that students can pursue graduate degrees that emphasize addressing these disparities.

A sampling of articles about the pandemic and disparities:

- [www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear](www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear)
- [www.pnas.org/content/117/36/21854](www.pnas.org/content/117/36/21854)
Healthy People 2020 defines a *health disparity* as “a particular type of health difference that is closely linked with social, economic, and/or environmental disadvantage.” Health disparities adversely affect groups of people who have systematically experienced greater obstacles to health based on their racial or ethnic group; religion; socioeconomic status; gender; age; mental health; cognitive, sensory, or physical disability; sexual orientation or gender identity; geographic location; or other characteristics historically linked to discrimination or exclusion.

**Examples:**

- The prevalence of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias is highest among *minority populations*, who are expected to have the highest population growth in the next few decades.
- Adults with very low *food security* have increased risk for cardiovascular disease, yet in a CDC survey, 23% of respondents said they were *worried about having enough money* to buy nutritious meals.
- African Americans aged 18–49 years are *twice as likely to die* from heart disease as whites, and African Americans aged 35–64 years are 50% more likely to have high blood pressure than whites.
Health disparities are health differences between different groups of people. These health differences may include:

- How many people get certain diseases
- How severe the diseases are
- How many people have complications because of the diseases
- How many people die from a disease
- Whether people can get health care
- How many people get screened for a disease

These groups of people may be based on:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Immigrant status
- Disability
- Sex or gender
- Sexual orientation
- Geography
- Income
- Level of education
The CDC defines the social determinants of health as “the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age\(^1\) as well as the complex, interrelated social structures and economic systems that shape these conditions.\(^2\)”

Social determinants of health are linked to a lack of opportunity and to a lack of resources to protect, improve, and maintain health,\(^2\) and taken together, these factors are mostly responsible for health inequities—the unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between populations.\(^1\)

\(^1\)WHO: About social determinants of health
\(^2\)NCHHSTP: Establishing a Holistic Framework to Reduce Inequities in HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STDs, and Tuberculosis in the United States
# Social Determinants of Health

## Table: Social Determinants of Health

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## Health Outcomes

Mortality, Morbidity, Life Expectancy, Health Care Expenditures, Health Status, Functional Limitations
HEALTH AND HEALTH DISPARITIES IN THE NEWS

- NIMHD Director Statement in Support of NIH Efforts to Address Structural Racism – MAR 2021, NIMHD.NIH.gov
- New center to reframe how we research health disparities – MAR 2021, MPRNews.org
- Root of some health disparities may be buried in technology – MAR 2021, HealthLeadersMedia.com
- AHA Journal raises the bar for health disparities research – FEB 2021, MedPageToday.com
- New fellowship will equip doctors to advance U.S. health equity – FEB 2021, AMA-ASSN.org
- How CVS Health is addressing black maternal health disparities – FEB 2021, PatientEngagementHit.com
- Medical students need to learn about health disparities to combat future pandemics – APR 2020, AAMC.org
HPA creates a list of health- and medicine-related courses every semester, and there are always a few that focus on health disparities and social determinants. Here are a few from recent years:

- Born in the U.S.A.: Culture and Reproduction in Modern America (GSS 420)
- Ethics and Public Health (CHV 331)
- Health and the Social Markers of Difference (GHP 403)
- Medical Humanities (ANT 235)
- Mortality at the Margins: Race, Inequality and Health Policy in the United States (GHP 409)
- Political Bodies: The Social Anatomy of Power & Difference (AAS 302)
- The Politics of Race and Health in America (POL 334)
- Race and Medicine (ANT 403)
- Social and Economic Determinants of Health (SOC 366)
PRINCETON LEADERS ADDRESSING HEALTH DISPARITIES
FROM THE CENTER FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Sanyu Mojola, PhD
Sociology

Keith Wailoo, PhD
History

João Biehl, PhD
Anthropology / GHP

Ruha Benjamin, PhD
African American Studies
The Master of Public Health (MPH) is an entry level degree for individuals interested in studying the health of communities and populations (see HPA information about Public Health). Use the ASPPH Academic Program Finder to search for programs with an emphasis on Health Disparities and Minority Health.

- **MPH in Sociomedical Sciences**, Columbia Mailman School of Public Health (New York, NY)
- **MPH with certificate in Health and Health Disparities**, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (Baltimore, MD)
- **MPH with a Health Equity, and Social Justice concentration**, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill, NC)
- **MPH in Global Health and Health Disparities**, Colorado School of Public Health (Denver, CO)
- **MPH with Health Equity and Criminal Justice concentration**, Touro University California (SF Bay Area, CA)
- **MPH with a Sociocultural Diversity and Health emphasis**, UC Irvine (Irvine, CA)
15 credit core curriculum plus:

- Community-driven Research and Environmental Justice
- Introduction to Social Epidemiology
- Community-led Capstone Project, Part I
- Foundations of Health Equity, Social Justice and Human Rights
- Leading for Racial Equity: Examining Structural Issues of Race and Class
- Leadership in Health Policy for Social Justice
- Summer practicum experience
- Community-led Capstone Project, Part II (MPH Culminating Experience)
PUBLIC HEALTH PROFESSIONALS PROFILES
FROM THE ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & PROGRAMS OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Paula Kamara, MPH
Melissa Leon, MPH
Jeffrey Lin, MD/MPH
Maryann Koussa, MPH
Medical schools may cover health disparities many ways, including: within the required curriculum, through electives, as certificate / concentration areas, through a dual degree. Here are a few programs that illustrate these differences:

- **MD/PhD, Health/care Disparities Research Program**, Boston University School of Medicine (Boston, MA)
- **MD Health Equity, Advocacy, and Policy Track**, Emory University (Atlanta, GA)
- **MD with a concentration in Health Disparities**, University of South Florida (Tampa, FL)
- **MD with a Health Equity and Advocacy curricular thread**, Feinberg SOM at Northwestern (Chicago, IL)
- **MD, Global Health & Disparities pathway**, University of Michigan Medical School (Ann Arbor, MI)
- **MD, Leadership in Health Disparities Program**, Stanford Medicine (Stanford, CA)
PRINCETON ALUMNI DOCTORS ADDRESSING HEALTH DISPARITIES

Dan Kelly, MD, MPH
Princeton Class of ‘03

Glenn Wakam, MD
Princeton Class of ‘11

Céline Gounder, MD
Princeton Class of ‘97

Owen Garrick, MD, MBA
Princeton Class of ‘90
These titles and more are available online through the Princeton University Library.

Also recommended: Anti-Racist Resources in STEM, created by Grace Simmons ‘22
- Association of Schools and Programs in Public Health: [www.aspph.org/study/minority-health-health-disparities/](http://www.aspph.org/study/minority-health-health-disparities/)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/index.html)
- [www.publichealthonline.org/careers/](http://www.publichealthonline.org/careers/)
- [www.healthypeople.gov/](http://www.healthypeople.gov/)