

STRUCTURAL RACISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is structural racism?

The term *structural racism* is used to describe the ways in which history, ideology, public policies, institutional practices, and culture interact to maintain a racial hierarchy that allows the privileges associated with whiteness and the disadvantages associated with color to endure and adapt over time.

What is the structural racism framework trying to address?

A structural racism lens or framework explains the big picture of racial disparity—the chronic gap between Americans of color and whites when it comes to jobs, housing, health, education, and other indicators of well-being. It examines how and why racial minorities experience the most severe and most intractable disadvantage in a nation where everyone is meant to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

What is race and how do we understand it?

Race is a social construct—it was invented and given meaning by humans. It is best understood in social and political terms: it is a yardstick for allocating power, and for distributing society's material benefits and burdens. There is no biological or scientific basis behind the concept. America's racial system favors its majority population's European ancestry, culture, and physical features over those of people from other regional backgrounds. "Whiteness" is a highly valuable social resource that confers unearned privilege on its possessors, while "color"—and especially the "blackness" of those of African origin—carries stigma.

What about ethnicity? How does it relate to race?

Ethnicity refers to social characteristics that groups of people may have in common—language, religion, regional background, culture, foods, etc. Ethnicity is revealed by the way one behaves, the traditions one follows, the language one speaks at home, and so on. Race, on the other hand, describes categories assigned to demographic groups based mostly on observable physical characteristics, like skin color, hair texture, and eye shape. Race and ethnicity can overlap or they can diverge. For example, people with dark skin and African features can be ethnically American, Caribbean, or African; or, individuals with Hispanic ethnicity may be of African, European, or indigenous American ancestry.

The significance we attach to either race or ethnicity depends on social context. Either labeling system can be misused as a basis for social hierarchy and inequality. In Northern Ireland where virtually the entire population is white, Catholic or Protestant ethnicity is a highly significant marker. Race is the dominant marker in America. While many Americans can choose to embrace, disguise, ignore, or even transcend their ethnicity, racial labeling removes this option for many others. People of color are not able to opt out of the racial classification system because it is a deep-rooted, universal identifier sustained through institutional policies, values, and social stereotypes.