

# Structural Racism and Health Equity Language Guide

The American Heart Association strives to use consistent language to help audiences understand important information about health and science. This guide is provided as a reference about the health impacts of race, racism and equity. It includes definitions of common terms and examples of how they are used. This guide was developed using leading language guides, as well as information from organizations, government entities, academics, researchers, historical references, expert feedback and media reports. (References are linked, footnoted and listed at the end of this document.) Because language is continuing to evolve, this guide will be continually updated. If you have questions, contact our [Office of Health Equity](#).

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## race and ethnicity

### Definitions:

*Race* is a social construct not rooted in biology. Official racial designations have changed over time. The U.S. Census Bureau defines race as a person's self-identification with one or more social groups, including white, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, or another race.

*Ethnicity* also is a social construct not rooted in biology, referring to the social characteristics people may have in common such as language, religion, regional background, traditions and culture. Examples include *Hispanic*, *Haitian*, *Korean* and *Cherokee*.

**Usage:** When discussing race and ethnicity, **it's always best to be specific**. Lumping different groups of people together can come across as vague, offensive or dismissive. However, grouping people broadly is sometimes the best option when it helps expose disparities. AHA writing about broad groups of people should:

- Shine a light on inequities
- Not shame, blame or offend
- Be accurate and in context
- Be understandable by the intended audience
- Be in step with common usage
- Use consistent language

Issues involving race and ethnicity call for thoughtful consideration, precise language and an openness to discussions with people of diverse backgrounds about how to be sensitive, respectful, appropriate and accurate. Some basics:



- Avoid generalizations and labels; race and ethnicity are one part of a person's identity.
- Strive to accurately represent the world or a community and its diversity. Omissions can render people invisible and cause anguish.
- Consider carefully whether to identify people by race. Include racial or ethnic information only when clearly relevant to the communications. Drawing unnecessary attention to race or ethnicity can be interpreted as bigotry.

The terms below for referencing races and ethnicities are based largely on guidelines set forth in the AP Stylebook<sup>1</sup>, the most common guidance for consumer news and web content. **Whenever communicating about race and ethnicity, defer to the sources, authors or audiences for preferred terms. If you don't know, ask.**

**African American:** Acceptable for an American Black person of African descent. Black also is acceptable, but only as an adjective. (Example: *Black people*, not *Blacks*.) *African American* and *Black* aren't necessarily interchangeable. Follow an individual's preference if known. This is extremely important because the painful legacy in America affects some Black people's feelings of connectedness. If preference is not known, use *Black*. Specificity is best: Americans of Caribbean heritage, for example, often prefer *Caribbean American*. Another example of specific language: *Minneapolis has a large Somali American population because of refugee resettlement.*

**American Indian or Alaska Native, Native American, Indigenous American:** These are acceptable in general when referring to two or more people of different tribal affiliations. Use the term preferred by the source, author or audience, as appropriate. (Some sources prefer Native People.) The Census Bureau defines *American Indian or Alaska Native* as a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintain tribal affiliations. For individuals, use the name of the tribe. If the name isn't known, try to determine it. *He is a Navajo commissioner. She is a member of the Nisqually Indian Tribe.*

Some tribes and tribal nations use *member*; others use *citizen*. If in doubt, use *citizen*. In Alaska, Indigenous groups are collectively known as *Alaska Natives*. *First Nation* is preferred by some tribes in Canada. Do not use *Indian* as shorthand for *American Indian*. Avoid words such as *wampum*, *warpath*, *powwow*, *teepee*, *brave*, *squaw* and "*off the reservation*," which are disparaging and offensive. Also avoid the casual use of *tribe*, such as describing a group of friends this way.

**Asian American:** Acceptable for an American of Asian descent. When possible, follow the person's preference or refer to a person's country of origin. For example: *Filipino American* or *Indian American*. Given Asia's size and diversity, regional references also

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press Stylebook. [www.apstylebook.com](https://www.apstylebook.com). Published 2020. <https://www.apstylebook.com/race-related-coverage>



may be acceptable. *Southeast Asian* is a common term, encompassing regions south of China, east of the Indian subcontinent and northwest of Australia. *South Asian* refers to a region defined in geographical and ethno-cultural terms, consisting of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. *East Asian* includes China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Mongolia, Macao, South Korea and North Korea. [Language describing Asian people, communities and populations](#) continues to evolve.

**biracial, multiracial:** Acceptable when relevant to describe people with more than one racial heritage. Usually more useful when describing large, diverse groups than individuals. *Multiracial* can encompass any combination of races.

**Black:** Capitalize when referring to people, communities, populations or culture. Use as an adjective, not a noun: Say *Black people*, but not *Blacks*. Recent widespread use of capitalized *Black* recognizes the common understanding that the term reflects a shared identity and culture. While *African American* also is acceptable for Black Americans of African descent, the terms are not necessarily interchangeable. Also use *Black* in racial, ethnic and cultural differences outside the U.S. Avoid dated and offensive terms such as *Negro* and *colored*, unless they are part of a formal name of an organization or a quotation in which the term is appropriate and essential.

**Chicano, Chicana:** A term that Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest sometimes use to describe their heritage. Use only if it is a person's preference.

**Hispanic:** A person from — or whose ancestors were from — a Spanish-speaking land or culture. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as *Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican* or *Mexican American*. *Latino, Latina* or *Latinx* are sometimes preferred. Follow the person's preference. It is acceptable to use these terms and *Hispanic* interchangeably when generally referencing Hispanic and Latino people as a larger group, as there is no universal convention. However, because Hispanic and Latino people [can be of any race](#), comparing health or other issues with white or Black people may require more detail for clarity. Examples: *Hispanic people had higher blood pressure than white and Black people who are not Hispanic, researchers found.* For general usage: *We're celebrating the accomplishments of Hispanic people this month.*

**Indigenous:** Capitalize when referring to original inhabitants of a place. *Aboriginal people welcomed a new era of Indigenous relations in Australia. Bolivia's Indigenous people represent 62% of the population.*

**Latino, Latina, Latinx:** A person from – or whose ancestors are from – Latin America. Use a more specific identification when possible, such as *Cuban, Puerto Rican,*



*Brazilian or Mexican American. Latino is the masculine form of the word, and Latina is the feminine form; in Spanish, all nouns are one or the other. For groups of females, use the plural Latinas; for groups of males or of mixed gender, use the plural Latinos. Some people prefer the gender-neutral term Latinx, which has grown in popularity but still is not used or preferred on a large scale. According to AP style, Latinx should only be used for quotations, names of organizations or descriptions of individuals who request it and should be accompanied by a short explanation as needed per audience. Example: *Hernandez prefers the gender-neutral term Latinx*. It is acceptable to use these terms and Hispanic interchangeably when referencing Hispanic and Latino people as a larger group, as there is no universal convention. However, because Hispanic and Latino people can be of any race, comparing health or other issues with white or Black people may require more detail for clarity. Examples: *Hispanic people had higher blood pressure than white and Black people who are not Hispanic, researchers found*. For general usage: *We're celebrating the accomplishments of Hispanic people this month*.*

**Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders**: People having origins in any of the original people of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa or other Pacific Islands.

This population also includes people who reported entries in the Census such as Pacific Islander; Polynesian entries, such as Tahitian, Tongan, and Tokelauan; Micronesian entries, such as Marshallese, Palauan, and Chuukese; and Melanesian entries, such as Fijian, Guinean, and Solomon Islander.

**non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic white**: Acceptable for professional audiences as adjectives but not nouns. Say *non-Hispanic Black people* or *non-Hispanic white people*, not *non-Hispanic Blacks* or *non-Hispanic whites*. These terms are commonly used in research and data comparing health or outcomes of different races and ethnicities, because Hispanic and Latino people can be of any race. If needed for clarity with consumer audiences, breaking it up can make it easier to read. Example: *The study found Hispanic people fared better than white and Black people who aren't Hispanic*.

**White, white**: Uppercase *White* to describe people and populations in professional copy, but lowercase *white* in consumer copy. While this is an inconsistency organizationally, it keeps the AHA consistent with industry standards for each audience. The American Medical Association, the style followed by our journals and other medical writing, uppercases *White*. The AP Stylebook, which AHA and other consumer content follows, lowercases *white*. Uppercasing *Black* is now common usage, but there is not universal agreement about whether to capitalize *White*; there is valid support for both lowercasing and uppercasing. Use as an adjective but not a noun. *White people* or *white people*, not *Whites* or *whites*. Avoid *Caucasian*, which originates from pseudo-science race classifications described in this article.

## racial equity, racial inequity

**Definition:** *Racial equity* would occur when a person is no more or less likely to experience society's benefits or problems because of skin color. *Racial inequity* is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing. For example, in the U.S., Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and other people of color are more likely to live in poverty, be imprisoned, drop out of high school, be unemployed, and experience health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

## racism, racist

**racism, racist** Prejudice or discrimination against individuals or groups based on beliefs of racial superiority or the belief that race reflects inherent differences in attributes and capabilities. Racism is the basis for social stratification and differential treatment that provides advantage to the dominant group<sup>2</sup>. Racism appears in different forms

(defined later in this document).

**Usage:** The AHA should not shy away from these words as appropriate, but we must carefully consider facts and context. Our communications should start with fact-based, sensitive language rooted in this important point: Racism persists throughout society and is detrimental to people's health and well-being. When discussing structural racism, strive to include references to historic practices and systems, and how they still harm health and well-being.

Some use the term *racist* to refer to anyone who benefits from *systemic racism* and doesn't actively work to dismantle it. Avoid this use unless essential in a direct quotation; if used, explain it.

Avoid *racially charged*, *racially motivated* or *racially tinged*, euphemisms that convey little meaning. Use *racist* when truly applicable. Example: *Mississippi has a history of racist lynchings*, not *a history of racially motivated lynchings*.

Deciding whether a statement, action, policy, etc., should be described as *racism* or *racist* often is not clear-cut. Such decisions should include discussion with colleagues and/or others from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In general, avoid using *racist* or any other label for a person. Avoid repeating derogatory terms except when it is crucial to the understanding of an event.

Below are general categories of racism. Not all ideologies, concepts, language and actions fit perfectly into these categories.

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<sup>2</sup> Friske, Gilbert, Gardner. Position Statement- Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism. NASP- National Association Of School Psychologists. Published 2019. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26830.xml>



- **cultural racism** A set of societal beliefs and customs used to deliberately build and maintain a system valuing one race over others. In the U.S., this occurs with white people and whiteness valued over other racial and ethnic groups.
- **individual racism** Actions, beliefs and attitudes of individuals, overtly or covertly, toward a person intentionally expressing prejudice, hate or bias<sup>3</sup> based on race.
- **internalized racism** Acceptance – by people who have suffered the effects of racism – of negative societal beliefs and stereotypes about themselves.
- **interpersonal racism** This occurs in public expressions of racism among individuals, often involving slurs, biases or hateful words or actions<sup>4</sup>.
- **institutional racism** This occurs through policies and practices that, intentionally or not, put a racial group at a disadvantage. These discriminatory treatments or biased policies don't always mention any racial group explicitly<sup>5</sup>.
- **symbolic racism** A prejudiced and coherent belief system about other people. Historically applied by white people against Black people in the U.S., although it is likely held in some measure among other ethnic groups.
- **structural racism, systemic racism** Often used interchangeably, the AHA prefers the term *structural racism*. It is a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations and other norms work in various, often<sup>6</sup> reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. In the U.S., *structural racism* gives privileges to white people resulting in disadvantages to people of color. This system – which includes among other things the justice system, the education system, housing, employment and lack of access to care – has been constructed and reinforced throughout our history, guided by a mindset of white supremacy or white superiority.

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*Other important terms, arranged in alphabetical order:*

### **affirmative action**

**Definition:** Laws designed to address discrimination based on race, gender and national origin in employment, education, government contracts and more. Affirmative action began in the U.S. under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

#### **Rulings**

<sup>3</sup> Potapchuk, M, Associates M, Leiderman S, Center for Assessment and Policy Development, eds. Racial Equity Resource Guide: Glossary. Racial Equity Resource Guide. Published 2009. <http://www.racialequityresourceguide.org/about/glossary>

<sup>4</sup> Talking About Race: Being Antiracist. National Museum of African American History and Culture. Published October 1, 2019. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>

<sup>5</sup> Institute Staff. 11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism. The Aspen Institute. Published August 29, 2017. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/structural-racism-definition/>

<sup>6</sup> Institute Staff. 11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism. The Aspen Institute. Published August 29, 2017. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/structural-racism-definition/>



expanded to include discrimination based on disability and age. The Civil Rights Act paved the way for the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited literacy tests and other discriminatory voting practices, as well as the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which banned discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of property. It is untrue that African Americans are the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action. (White women have benefitted most from affirmative action.)

**Usage:** Be careful because this term is often misused and misunderstood. It has been used in efforts to discredit academic and professional merit of Black and Latino people.

### ally, allyship

**Definitions:** An *ally* is a person who is not a member of a disenfranchised or mistreated group but expresses or gives support to that group. *Allyship* is the proactive practice of working in solidarity and partnership with people enduring structural racism or other systemic discrimination that deprives them of basic rights, equal access and the ability to thrive in society<sup>7</sup>. *Allyship* is a difficult practice undertaken by a person outside the affected group. It requires trusting relationships, consistency and accountability. *Allyship* involves unlearning and re-evaluating systems, practices, policies, norms, traditions, thought processes and language that support structural racism. The ultimate goal is for allies to have a much broader and critical understanding of structural racism and how it can be dismantled<sup>8</sup>.

**Usage:** The term may not be familiar to general audiences, so briefly define if used.

**Examples:** Actions of allyship include advocating for others, sharing growth opportunities, listening, supporting, self-reflecting and changing. This article breaks down how to practice allyship.

### anti-Blackness

**Definition:** Behaviors, attitudes and practices of people and institutions that systemically dehumanize Black people to maintain white supremacy. Anti-Blackness contributes to policies, systems and social norms that comprise structural racism.

### anti-racism, anti-racist

**Definition:** Actively opposing racism by advocating for political, economic and social change. Anti-racism tends to be an individualized approach.

**Example:** *The manager's reassessing of her vendor-selection process is anti-racist.*

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<sup>7</sup> Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit. Beyond Allyship. Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit. Published 2016.

<https://thetoolkit.wixsite.com/toolkit/beyond-allyship>

<sup>8</sup> Gaines J. Be an Ally | Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. [www.edi.nih.gov](http://www.edi.nih.gov). Published March 4, 2019.

<https://www.edi.nih.gov/blog/communities/be-ally>

### apathetic racism

**Definition:** Allowing racism to persevere through passive tolerance, benign ignorance or neglect. Apathetic racism accepts the current structure that creates health disparities based on race.

**Usage:** This term is not widely used, so be sure to explain fully if you use it.

**Example:** Think of current health care policy and system in terms of a cliff analogy. It's commonplace for health care professionals to wait to treat people who have fallen off the cliff. And important safety net programs, by design, are limited to helping cushion the fall of those who are plummeting. As a society, we are failing through apathy to confront the fact that no one ever need be endangered by the cliff in the first place. Current well-intended interventions are predominately focused on building fences at the cliff's edge. What is needed is a greater commitment to address underlying social determinants and societal change required to address systemic racism so all people's life course never brings them close to the cliff's edge.

### bias, implicit bias, unconscious bias

**Definitions:** *Bias* is the result of beliefs, ideas and thought processes every person develops. *Implicit biases* and *unconscious biases* are negative associations people unknowingly hold and are expressed without conscious awareness. *Bias* is generally individualized. Racial and ethnic biases, intentional or not, hurt the health and well-being of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous and other people of color.

**Usage:** It's important to consider and question your biases, and whether and how you are communicating them.

**Example:** A hiring manager may unfairly and even unconsciously overlook a job candidate or an employee for promotion based on the manager's views toward that person's race, ethnicity, education level, geography or even name.

### bigotry

**Definition:** Intolerant opinions and prejudices glorifying one group and denigrating members of another group, often of different races and ethnicities.

### Black, Indigenous and other people of color

**Definition:** Recently used term emphasizing the historic and systemic oppression of Black and Indigenous people in the U.S. and Canada<sup>9</sup>.

**Usage:** Use only if accurate in specific situations. Avoid as a general term for people of color because Latino people may not see themselves in this phrase.

**Example:** *The court ruled that the 1978 law did indeed discriminate against Black, Indigenous and other people of color.*

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<sup>9</sup> Garcia SE. Where Did BIPOC Come From? *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-bipoc.html>. Published June 17, 2020.



## **Black Lives Matter, #BlackLives Matter**

**Definition:** A global movement launched after the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin with a goal to eradicate structural racism and white supremacy and to oppose violence committed against Black people. Although there are many groups that use "Black Lives Matter" or "BLM" in their names, only 16 are considered affiliates of the *Black Lives Matter Global Network*. *The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation*, which provides organizational infrastructure and funding to the affiliate chapters, was founded in 2014 after what is known as the Ferguson uprising over the August 2014 police shooting death<sup>10</sup>.

**Usage:** Either *Black Lives Matter* as a noun or *the Black Lives Matter movement* is acceptable. *BLM* is acceptable on second reference. The American Heart Association supports BLM's advocacy to end police brutality and racially motivated violence against Black people but is not formally involved with the movement.

## **blaming language**

**Definition:** Language that appears to place blame on people, communities or populations for issues or health problems.

**Usage:** Avoid. Keep a sharp eye out for this type of language, which can appear inadvertently based on longtime language practices. Instead, strive to make clear inequity is the reason health disparities exist; these health problems don't "just exist."

**Examples:** Declaring a fact without context can imply people are doing something wrong. Avoid constructions such as: *Black people have higher blood pressure compared to white people*. Instead, say something like this: *Because of societal barriers and systems that have harmed their health for decades, many Black people have higher blood pressure compared to white people*. Regardless of your precise phrasing, it is ideal to pair the cause and the effect.

## **boy, girl**

**Usage:** While technically accurate for anyone under 18, exercise caution with these words. Referring to Black males of any age and in any context as boys can be demeaning and offensive.

**Example:** Don't say this: *Michael, a 15-year-old boy ...* Say this: *Michael, 15.*

## **brown, brown people**

**Usage:** These terms can be broad and imprecise racial, ethnic or cultural references. They're often best avoided in writing but are sometimes used by Hispanic people and others in speeches, presentations and discussions. These terms can be appropriate based on context, messenger and audience. The terms also are appropriate as part of a formal name or direct quotation.

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<sup>10</sup> AP Stylebook: race-related coverage and new terms. Published September 2, 2020. [updates@apstylebook.com](mailto:updates@apstylebook.com)



**Examples:** This usage frequently appears in references to *Black and brown people*, often in quotes: *"We have to stop these discriminatory practices that are hurting the health of Black and brown people," the AHA volunteer said.* In this instance, the context and messenger are appropriate. ... But don't do this: *The study results indicated a lack of access for brown people, the researchers said.*

### colorism

**Definition:** When someone with lighter skin is favored over someone with darker skin to favor Westernized standards of beauty, privilege, etc. Colorism occurs within all races.

### communities of color

**Definition:** A broad term for Black and/or Hispanic, Asian and Indigenous communities.

**Usage:** This is a common term that may be necessary and appropriate in context, but exercise caution because this term can be overly vague and imply every person of color belongs to a single community. Specificity is always best. Other terms that may work instead, if the context is accurate:

- specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal)
- partial listings if known: Black and Hispanic people, and other people of color ...
- underrepresented racial and ethnic groups
- Excluded or historically excluded people
- people of color

**Example:** *The survey was sent to Black, Hispanic and other people who could be at risk for high blood pressure.* The writer used the known facts in this example.

. ... But don't do this: *All communities of color are advocating for this measure.* This usage assumes too much about who comprises communities of color.

### cultural appropriation

**Definition:** This happens when individuals or communities with privileged status adopt or co-opt — usually without acknowledgment — cultural aspects of oppressed or underrepresented people. This has included inventions, innovations, music, art and culture.

**Usage:** Context is important. Imitation also is flattery, but how that imitation is carried out is important.

**Examples:** Widely acknowledged examples of cultural appropriation range from white models wearing Native American headdresses to white musicians who claimed to have invented jazz without acknowledging Black artists.

### cultural representations

**Definition:** Stereotypes, images and narratives reinforced by media, commonly used language, institutions and other mass communications. Black, Hispanic, Indigenous,



Asian and other people of color are often represented in dehumanizing ways through perpetuating and normalizing stereotypes<sup>11</sup>.

**Usage:** Beware of such references slipping into language based on historic usage. When writing about cultural representations, specifics are best.

**Examples:** Avoid references to any group having a “natural” ability, such as for math or music.

## disadvantaged

**Definition:** Not having advantages such as money, resources and opportunities.

**Usage:** Exercise caution with this term because it can have a negative connotation and is often framed as blaming language. However, this term may be necessary and appropriate in context. Don't say *the disadvantaged*. Instead, use specifics about the disadvantages or say *disadvantaged people* or *disadvantaged populations*. Other terms that may work instead, if accurate and in context:

- specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal) and how they are disadvantaged
- *disenfranchised* often is a better option, acknowledging people have been systematically placed at a disadvantage.
- underrepresented groups or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (if race or ethnicity is applicable) and how they are disadvantaged.
- excluded or historically excluded people

**Examples:** Don't do this: *The disadvantaged community lacks access to health care.* This is OK: *Historic discrimination put the community at a financial disadvantage.*

## discrimination

**Definition:** Prejudicial treatment based on race, gender, age, sexual orientation or another group, class or category to which people may belong. Discrimination can be overt and covert, including microaggressions, indirect or subtle behaviors such as comments reflecting negative attitudes or beliefs about a non-majority group<sup>12</sup>.

**Examples:** Hiring, firing, promoting and other workplace decisions; decisions about funding or conducting scientific research.

## diversity

**Definition:** Diversity implies an appreciation of differences that make up a community, nation or other grouping. Diversity is usually discussed in terms of background, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, geography, disabilities, veterans, as well as diversity of job type (physicians, researchers, etc.).

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<sup>11</sup> Fajardo- MDC F. LibGuides: Anti-Racism Teach-In: Glossary. Miami Date College- Libraries. Published November 5, 2020. <https://libraryguides.mdc.edu/c.php?g=1057388&p=7694504>

<sup>12</sup> Friske, Gilbert, Gardner. Position Statement- Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism. NASP- National Association Of School Psychologists. Published 2019. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26830.xml>

**Usage** At the AHA, we reference diversity and inclusion, because including all people goes hand in hand with diversity. In writing for general audiences, diversity is a well-understood term that typically doesn't need definition.

### **equality, equity**

**Definitions:** *Equality* is thought of as each getting an "equal" amount of a resource. *Equity* is the distribution of resources according to the needs of recipients (sometimes not equal). [This illustration](#) helps explain how the terms are different. (Image from the [Interaction Institute for Social Change](#); Artist: [Angus Maguire](#)).

**Example:** Everyone having the right to purchase healthy foods is *equality*. But when trying to obtain those healthy foods, *equity* does not exist because of obstacles such as access, price and availability.

### **excluded people, historically excluded people**

**Definition:** These terms include varied populations that have been excluded from full rights, privileges and opportunities.

**Usage:** Sometimes used to describe a broad group of people facing inequities based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual identity and ability. These terms are acceptable when specific language is not possible. Saying what people are being excluded from makes the term easier for readers to understand.

**Examples:** *Southeast Asians have been historically excluded from the state's politics. ... The measure is intended to help all people who have been historically excluded from access to affordable care.*

### **fair, fairness**

**Usage:** These terms usually are not appropriate in discussions of equity because they are relative. *Fairness* depends on your vantage point. These words also don't acknowledge that structural racism is *unfair*.

### **health care disparities**

**Definition:** Differences between groups in health insurance coverage, access to and use of care, and quality of care. Race, ethnicity, sex, sexual identity, age, education level, disability, socioeconomic status and geography contribute to these disparities<sup>13</sup>.

### **health care professional, health care provider**

**Usage:** Avoid *health care provider* because it can imply people, communities or populations need to be provided for. *Health care professional* is better.

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<sup>13</sup> Artiga S, Orgera K, Pham O. Disparities in Health and Health Care: Five Key Questions and Answers. KFF- Filling the need for trusted information on national health issues. Published March 4, 2020. <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/disparities-in-health-and-health-care-five-key-questions-and-answers/>



## health disparities

**Definition:** When one population experiences a higher prevalence of adverse health outcomes than another or others. Contributors to health disparities include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, age, disability, socioeconomic status and geography.

**Usage:** This is a commonly used and appropriate term.

**Example:** *One factor leading to health disparities is lack of access to medical care.*

## health equity, health inequities

**Definition:** Health equity would be achieved if all people had the just opportunity to be healthy. The AHA's official statement on health equity reads:

*Everyone deserves an optimal and just opportunity to be healthy, giving special attention to the needs of those at greatest risk of poor health and no one is disadvantaged from achieving their potential because of social position or any other socially defined circumstance.*

Achieving health equity requires removing structural, unjust obstacles such as racism, poverty, discrimination and their consequences. Those consequences include powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay; quality education and housing; safe environments; and health care. Health inequities occur when those obstacles block people from leading their healthiest lives. These obstacles disproportionately affect Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, Asian and other people of color.

**Usage:** This is a common term but explain for audiences as needed. In situations where health inequities and structural racism are clearly linked, make sure to communicate them together, ideally with historical context included. *Health equity* is usually written as a singular term because it is a concept. *Health inequities* is usually plural because there are many more specific inequities.

**Example:** *The neighborhood didn't offer access to healthy foods, one of the health inequities residents faced because of structural racism.*

## inner city, urban

**Usage:** Avoid these terms when describing people, communities, populations and culture. The terms are acceptable strictly in a geographic sense, as we use *rural* and *suburban*. Also avoid the term *ghetto*.

## Jim Crow laws

**Definition:** State and local statutes legalizing racial segregation, denying African Americans the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other everyday opportunities. People who tried to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail



sentences, mob violence and murder. The laws existed about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968. The laws were named after a Black minstrel show character.

## Juneteenth

June 19, the traditional commemoration date of the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States. The holiday also has been called *Juneteenth Independence Day* or *Freedom Day*. President Abraham Lincoln first issued the Emancipation Proclamation declaring all slaves free in Confederate territory on Sept. 22, 1862, but the news took time to travel. June 19, 1865, is the date when word of the proclamation reached African Americans in Texas.

**Usage:** Briefly explain the origins of this term for audiences who may be unfamiliar with the term or its significance.

## justice

**Definitions:** The quality of being moral, right and equitable. This word appears often in references to structural racism, including:

- **criminal justice:** Avoid when describing the system of law enforcement, courts and prisons. Instead use *justice system* so as not to imply people within it are criminals
- **education justice:** Ensuring all students have access to equitable educational opportunities for success, and a safe and positive learning environment. Many audiences may not be familiar with this phrase. It's best to show rather than tell. **Example:** *The school in the mostly Latino neighborhood couldn't invest in a new gym because its property tax base was lower than that of neighboring schools.*
- **environmental justice** The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people with respect to development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. **Example:** *Industry air pollution, often based in lower-income areas where Black and Hispanic people live, has been linked to health problems.*
- **health justice** is the condition in which everyone would have an equitable opportunity to access affordable, quality care and resources to stay healthy. Achieving health justice requires finding solutions to improve social determinants of health such as poverty, education, employment and housing.
- **immigrant justice** Ensuring the humane and legal rights of all immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the United States.
- **justice system:** Use this instead of criminal justice system, to make clear that all people in the system are not criminals. This is the system through which crimes are identified and people are arrested, judged and punished. Black and Hispanic people are disproportionately affected by this system. **Statistics show** Black people are disproportionately stopped by police, arrested, killed by police, convicted and sentenced more harshly than white people. Using statistics to illustrate these inequities often is a powerful illustration. **Example:** *Several*



*statistics point to structural racism in the justice system. For example, Black people are stopped 87% more than white people in the city.*

- **racial justice** This would be the systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial justice is the absence of discrimination and inequities, and the presence of systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity.
- **social justice**: A concept in which equity or justice is achieved in every aspect of society rather than some aspects or for some people. A world organized around social justice principles affords individuals and groups fair treatment and an impartial share or distribution of society's advantages and disadvantages.

## leader

**Usage:** Avoid *Black leader*, *Hispanic leader* and similar constructions. These terms imply one person speaks for an entire community or population. When referring to a person in a leadership position, say what the person leads.

## marginalized

**Definition:** Being treated as insignificant or peripheral.

**Usage:** Exercise caution with this term because it can have negative connotations when used in a broad way. However, it may be necessary and appropriate in context. Other terms that may work instead, if accurate in context:

- specific terms for the makeup of the communities discussed, and how they are marginalized.
- partial listings if some populations are known, with language showing how the groups were marginalized (Hispanic and Black people, and other people of color)
- underrepresented groups or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (if race or ethnicity applies)
- disenfranchised
- excluded or historically excluded people

## mass incarceration

**Definition:** The high number of prisoners per capita on the U.S., which includes a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic people. The expansion of the corrections system has been called "the New Jim Crow" based on these extreme racial disparities. The prison population has expanded since the late 1960s amid a "law and order" movement and subsequent arrest rates and sentencing requirements in the war on drugs. [Mass incarceration](#) has hurt the health and well-being of Black and Hispanic communities.



## microaggressions

**Definition:** Everyday and often-subtle verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults that are intentional or unintentional. They communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to Black, Latino, Asian, Indigenous people and other people of color<sup>14</sup>.

**Examples:** Someone referencing all Latinos as from Mexico. Someone interrupting a Black woman and talking over her. [This article](#) explores reactions to microaggressions.

## minority, minorities

**Usage:** Avoid when talking about race and ethnicity, as it is often considered offensive and sometimes inaccurate. Instead, be as specific as possible about race and ethnicity. There are times when *minority* may be unavoidable, such as when it is part of a proper name or when applying for grants that use such language. When the term is used in studies, try to ascertain exactly which populations the researchers are referencing and use those terms instead. Other terms that may work instead, if accurate and in context:

- specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal)
- partial listings if known: Black and Hispanic people, and other people of color
- underrepresented racial and ethnic groups
- excluded or historically excluded people
- people of color

## non-white people

**Usage:** Avoid this term, as it frames the discussion from a white-centric perspective. This term has appeared in studies when comparing white people and everyone else. If other races and ethnicities are not specified, these terms may work instead:

- partial listings if known: Black and Hispanic people, and other people of color
- underrepresented racial and ethnic groups
- excluded or historically excluded people
- people of color

**Example:** *Hispanic patients in the study recovered more quickly, the study found. ... Or, if fewer specifics are known: The people of color in the study recovered more quickly, researchers said.*

## oppression

**Definition:** The unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power by those in authority. Oppression is a central component of structural racism.

**Usage:** Don't hedge or water down the term in proper context. However, exercise caution based on your communication, as it is a sweeping and powerful word.

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<sup>14</sup> Sue DW Ph.D. Microaggressions: More Than Just Race. Psychology Today. Published November 17, 2010.

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race>



**Examples:** This usage works: *Historic oppression of Native Americans led to current health problems for some people.* ... This one does not: *She felt it was clearly oppression when the nurse asked whether she had seasonal allergies.*

## people of color

**Definition:** A broad term describing people who are not white.

**Usage:** This commonly used term is acceptable when appropriate and used in context. However, exercise caution because it can have the connotation of people being lumped together as “other.” Be mindful that some Native Americans say the term does not encompass their sovereign status, and some Black people do not include themselves in this term due to historical treatment that does not apply to other racial demographics. Avoid the acronym *POC*. Other terms that may work, if accurate and in context:

- specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal)
- partial listings if known: Black, Hispanic and other people of color
- underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (assuming representation is in context of your communication)
- excluded or historically excluded people

**Examples** The most specific is always best, when we know the facts: *The legislation would be harmful to Colombian residents in Chicago* ... Better than overly broad terms: *The legislation would be harmful to Black and Hispanic people* ... Acceptable if needed but try to include the known details: *The legislation would be harmful to the health of Black people and other people of color.* ... When those specifics are not known: *People of color were penalized by the legislation.*

## police violence

**Usage:** Use specific language about what happened. For example, it is appropriate to say George Floyd was killed or slain by police in Minneapolis in 2020. Don't use *the death of*, or *the passing of* George Floyd or other terms that soften what happened. Be careful with the word *murder*; it's a legal term requiring a conviction to be accurate.

## prejudice

**Definition:** Irrational or unjustifiable negative emotions or evaluations toward people<sup>15</sup> from other social groups, and a root cause of discriminatory behavior.

Negative prejudices are typically based on unsupported generalizations or stereotypes. **Usage:** Be careful not to confuse prejudice and discrimination; prejudice is a way of thinking and feeling, and discrimination is taking action based on prejudice or bias.

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<sup>15</sup> Friske, Gilbert, Gardner. Position Statement- Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism. NASP- National Association Of School Psychologists. Published 2019. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26830.xml>

## privilege, white privilege

**Definitions:** Privilege connotes access to resources, benefits, and advantages for a dominant social group but not for all. In the U.S., white people are generally unexposed to and protected from many forms of discrimination and have more social and economic privilege. Often, white people don't acknowledge or are unaware of this privilege, which contributes to unequal distribution of wealth, power and opportunity based on skin color<sup>16</sup>.

**Usage:** Exercise caution with the term *white privilege* and use specific explanatory language as needed.

**Examples** Day-to-day examples of white privilege include: Not being followed in a store; being able to drive a car in any neighborhood without being perceived as being in the wrong place or looking for trouble; getting hired despite more-qualified candidates of other ethnicities.

## redlining

**Definition:** When banks and other institutions refuse to offer mortgages or offer worse rates to customers in certain neighborhoods based on race or ethnicity. The practice was formally outlawed in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act, but its effects are still felt today, and it continues in various forms.

## reverse discrimination

**Definition:** The unfair treatment of members of the *majority* group in a workplace based on race, gender, national origin, abilities, sexual orientation or other traits, beliefs or groupings of people.<sup>17</sup>

**Usage:** Avoid this term, instead using *discrimination*, which is accurate in any case, and be specific when discussing such situations.

**Example:** *Susan said she experienced discrimination because she is white.*

## savior language

**Definition:** Language that implies a group, community or population can't solve major problems without help from people or institutions. Often used in reference to white people or white-led institutions, it can occur between other racial groups.

**Usage:** Do not imply the American Heart Association is saving, serving, educating, rescuing or otherwise swooping in because people need our help. Context is important (especially because we often talk about the AHA *saving* lives).

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<sup>16</sup> MP Associates, Center For Assessment And Policy Development. [WWW.RACIALEQUITYTOOLS.ORG/S\\_GLOSSARY](http://WWW.RACIALEQUITYTOOLS.ORG/S_GLOSSARY), 2013. [https://www.racialequitytools.org/images/uploads/RET\\_Glossary913L.pdf](https://www.racialequitytools.org/images/uploads/RET_Glossary913L.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> On behalf of TDL Firm, P.L.L.C. Reverse discrimination in the workplace: What it is and what to do about it | The Devadoss Law Firm, P.L.L.C. Published June 22, 2016. <https://www.fedemploymentlaw.com/blog/2016/06/reverse-discrimination-in-the-workplace-what-it-is-and-what-to-do-about-it/>



**Example:** There is a long history in charity, nonprofits, Hollywood, art and literature advancing the “savior” theme, which reinforces structural racism and white supremacy. Here are some AHA usage examples:

- *Do: Community members, working with the American Heart Association, volunteered to try the nutrition program. Don't: The American Heart Association implemented the free program to teach people in the community about nutrition.*
- *Do: Contact your health care professional. Don't: Contact your health care provider. Provider can come across as savior language.*

### slaves, enslaved people

**Definition:** The term *slaves* denotes an inherent identity of a person or people treated as chattel or property. The term *enslaved people* underlines that the slave status has been imposed on individuals.

**Usage:** *Enslaved people* is generally preferred for the AHA based on our over-arching emphasis of people over condition, although references to *slaves* is acceptable. Context should dictate the best term.

### social exclusion:

**Definition:** A state in which people or groups are assumed to be excluded from social systems and relationships. In most definitions this state is seen to be associated with extreme poverty and disadvantage<sup>18</sup>.

### social determinants of health

**Definition:** The conditions in which people are born and live. The American Heart Association is dedicated to improving the effects of the social determinants of health. The determinants are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources, and are mostly responsible for avoidable differences in health status. The social determinants include:

- race bias
- income instability
- education level and access
- access to healthy foods
- transportation options
- clean, healthy environments
- social support
- employment opportunities and job training

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<sup>18</sup> Popay J, Escorel S, Hernández M, Johnston H, Mathieson J, Rispel L. *SEKN Final Report Understanding and Tackling Social Exclusion Final Report to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health From the Social Exclusion Knowledge Network On Behalf of the WHO Social Exclusion Knowledge Network*; 2008: Page 33, Second Paragraph.

[https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/knowledge\\_networks/final\\_reports/sekn\\_final%20report\\_042008.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/knowledge_networks/final_reports/sekn_final%20report_042008.pdf?ua=1)

- safety concerns

**Usage:** For consumer audiences, it is OK to use simpler and easier-to-understand terms such as *health risks, social health risks, or environmental health risks* in place of *social determinants of health*. (This is similar to how we say *myocardial infarction* for professionals and the simpler *heart attack* for consumers.) Ensure the definition and context are accurate when using simpler language. When using the term *social determinants of health*, always briefly define them. This simple definition is often enough: *The conditions in which people are born and live*. Don't use *social influencers of health*. Do not feel obligated to mention everything about every determinant. This will make your content unfocused and possibly confusing.

**Example:** *Many in the largely Egyptian neighborhood don't have clean water to drink or safe places to exercise. These social health risks have been shown to hurt people's heart health and emotional well-being. ... Many people are dealing with the effects of social determinants of health, or the conditions in which they are born and live.*

### tokenism

**Definition:** The policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort (as to desegregate<sup>19</sup>).

**Example:** Hiring or appointing a Black or Hispanic person to represent ideas and cultures of a community and falsely represent diversity.

### under-invested

**Definition:** This term refers to the fact that neighborhoods, schools, institutions and communities have been historically excluded from equitable distribution of resources.

**Usage:** This term, or a variation, can help ensure we are not using language that places blame on communities or populations.

**Examples:** *These neighborhoods are struggling with access to healthy food because of under-investment. ... Because of a lack of investment, access to healthy foods is a problem.*

### underrepresented

**Definition:** Often an effective term when discussing communities and populations.

**Usage:** As always, specificity and context dictate the best usage, but this term often works well when discussing less-specific groups. Make sure there truly is underrepresentation when using, and when possible say specifically how people are underrepresented.

**Examples:** *Black and Hispanic people are underrepresented in the field of cardiology. ... Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups were considered in these statistics.*

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<sup>19</sup> Webster M. Definition of TOKENISM. [www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com). <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tokenism>

### under-resourced

**Definition:** This refers to communities lacking in income, employment opportunities, educational opportunities, access to care, access to healthy foods, safe places to exercise and other resources.

**Usage:** Use only in a literal sense: When an area lacks resources, be specific about what is lacking if possible. Exercise caution and carefully consider context; some usages can inaccurately imply race or ethnicity.

**Example:** *The community is under-resourced in terms of quality health care.*

### underserved

**Usage:** Exercise caution with this word. It can have negative connotations, as if people need to be served to succeed. It can sometimes support the negative “savior” idea. *Under-resourced* is usually a better option. *Underserved* may be necessary and appropriate in context, often when used specifically.

**Example:** *The community is medically underserved.*

### vulnerable

**Definition:** Susceptible to physical or emotional harm, often in need of help or special care or treatment.

**Usage:** Exercise caution with this term because it can imply some people need someone to save them. However, this term may be necessary and appropriate in context. Other terms that may work instead, if accurate in context:

- specific terms for the communities discussed, such as Iraqi or Chilean (ideal)
- partial listings if some populations are known, with language showing how the groups are vulnerable (Hispanic and Black people, and other people of color)
- underrepresented groups or underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (whichever is correct)
- disenfranchised
- excluded or historically excluded people

**Examples:** Acceptable: *After the surgery, she felt emotionally vulnerable.* Not acceptable: *People in the Lebanese neighborhood are vulnerable.* ... In context, it can work with economic and social vulnerabilities as well: *Historical redlining leaves members of Black communities vulnerable to housing insecurity.*

### white supremacy, white superiority

**Definitions:** Many people think these terms apply only to extremist groups, but they also apply to everyday life. They describe conditions in which white people have overwhelming control of power and material resources, and conscious and

unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement across many institutions and social settings<sup>20</sup>.

**Usage:** Exercise caution and make sure to provide the full context. Some audiences may think only of extremist groups and may not be receptive to communications without full explanations and context.

**Examples:** This supremacy or superiority can be indistinguishable from U.S. culture or norms. For example, definitions of *normal*, *professional* and *effective*, can come from a perspective that white people are superior.

## whiteness

**Definition:** Characteristics and experiences generally associated with being white. Sociologists believe the white perception as “normal” is directly connected to the correlating construct of other races as inferior, foreign, or “other” in society<sup>21</sup>whiteness and normalization of white racial identity throughout U.S. history has created a culture in which non-white people often are seen as inferior or abnormal<sup>22</sup>.

**Usage:** Be careful with language that make white people the “default people” and everyone else as “others.” This language can easily sneak into text because of language historically used.

**Examples:** Research has found discrimination against people who don’t “look white.” ... Using common white experiences or cultural references to describe things that are *normal*, *good* or *bad*. Or, phrasing such as *most people*.

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**Sources:** *This document draws from numerous sources focusing on language, race, racism, health equity and history. Some entries include links and citations Many entries that are not cited include information from various sources and have been edited by experts and to conform to AHA editorial standards. The many used as references for this document include:*

The AP Stylebook, American Medical Association Manual of Style, **American Public Health Association**, The Aspen Institute, **Cato Institute**, **History.com**, Internal Document: AHA Editorial Style Guide, Internal Document: Health Equity Messaging Document, Internal Expertise: Numerous reviews, **Kaiser Family Foundation**, **Katrina Reader Workshop**, **Miami Dade College**

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<sup>20</sup> Cogburn, CD Ph.D. Original Scholarship- Culture, Race and Health: Implications for Racial Inequities and Population Health. *The Milbank Quarterly- A Multidisciplinary Journal of Population Health and Health Policy*. 2019; 97(3). doi: The Milbank Quarterly, Vol. 97, No. 3, 2019 (pp. 736-761)

<sup>21</sup> Cole, NL Ph.D. The Definition of Whiteness in American Society. ThoughtCo. Published November 8, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/whiteness-definition-3026743>

<sup>22</sup> Kunst JR, Dovidio JF, Dotsch R. White Look-Alikes: Mainstream Culture Adoption Makes Immigrants “Look” Phenotypically White. *SAGE journals*. Published November 3, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217739279>



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