

Abstract

Racism, Stress and Health: Why Obama's Class Based Approach Won't Eliminate Racial Health Gaps

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African Americans are sicker than white Americans; they are dying at a significantly higher rate. On most measures of health, African Americans have poorer health status to populations in developing countries such as Barbados, Bahamas, Cuba and Ghana. Slavery, segregation and racism has led to both historical and current deprivation which has manifested itself in embedded racial inequalities in every aspect of American life, such as wealth/income, education criminal justice, environment, housing, employment and food. These social inequalities impact health directly. They also impact individual choices and behavior. Furthermore, the stress of living in a racialized society has significant health impact that affects African American at every class level.

President-elect Obama program for eliminating health disparities is inadequate. First, he focuses on assuring access to health care by expanding insurance coverage. Health care insurance does not assure quality health care. Second, even universal health care does not address removing racial inequalities which are at the root of health disparities. Third, while Obama platform promises to vigorously enforce civil rights law, the civil rights laws of 1964 are inadequate for addressing 21st century discrimination which is covert, negligent, institutional and structural. If President-elect Obama wants to eliminate racial health disparities than all aspects of the executive branch (I.e. health, housing, education, environment, treasury,) must remove any racial gap in not only delivery of services but also in outcomes. Furthermore, he must see that a civil rights law for the 21st century is enacted and enforced.