



# PROMOTING HEALTH EQUITY

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Amani Nuru-Jeter, Ph.D., M.P.H., didn't intend to become a social epidemiologist. She pursued a master's in public health to become more competitive for medical school. Then she interned at the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C. But, as she recalls, "There was a complete disconnect between what I heard policymakers saying and what I heard the community saying."

Nuru-Jeter noticed pronounced racial and socioeconomic disparities in terms of who was being served. The experience prompted her to forgo medical school and focus on health policy, where she could impact entire populations. Today, she is a professor of community health sciences and epidemiology at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health; she is also the director of Evidence for Action, a San Francisco-based organization that supports research into health and racial equity.

Historically, public health focused on things like socioeconomic status and behaviors such as diet, exercise, and smoking. But even when accounting for such factors, "we see stark racial disparities in health, even among those at the highest socioeconomic levels," Nuru-Jeter says. "We know from studies that Black relatively well-off college graduates have higher rates of infant mortality, obesity, and hypertension compared to white high school dropouts." Meanwhile, studies have debunked the idea that racial health disparities are related to genetics.

"My work, and the work of others, has long [shown] the impact of racial discrimination on poor health," she says. Links have been found between racial discrimination and hypertension, cellular aging, depression, and anxiety.

Nuru-Jeter launched the African American Women's Heart and Health Study, spanning multiple East Bay counties, to investigate how racism shows up as a chronic stressor for Black women and impacts their physical and mental health. Meanwhile, she works with local organizations like the Black Infant Health Program and Healthy Black Families (which championed the sugar-sweetened beverage tax in Berkeley) that create strategies to improve the health of Black mothers and families.

Nuru-Jeter hopes to push conversations beyond blaming people for poor health behaviors, such as unhealthy diets. "We're actually having conversations about the root causes of these health inequities, which include structural racism," she says. "Understanding that is the first step in creating solutions."

— KIMBERLY OLSON