

# For Better Youth Mental Health, We Must Dismantle Structural Racism

**By Harolyn M.E. Belcher, MD, MHS, vice president and chief diversity officer; director of the Office for Health, Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity; and senior director of the Center for Diversity in Public Health Leadership Training**

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and this year, particular attention is being paid to youth mental health. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine's Forum for Children's Well-Being began the month with a webinar series, "Responding to the Current Youth Mental Health Crisis and Preventing the Next One." And the Office of the Surgeon General recently published an advisory, "[Protecting Youth Mental Health](#)," a comprehensive, solutions-oriented, multisector resource to support youth mental health. It begins with "What Young People Can Do" to help themselves and includes sections for family members, educators, healthcare organizations, media and social media organizations, foundations, employers, the community, and federal, state and tribal governments.

Leaders of the Forum on Children's Well-Being asked me to interview Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA, surgeon general of the United States, about the advisory during the opening of the May 4 [Forum on Children's Well-Being webinar](#). During that interview, Dr. Murthy recommended reorienting priorities to create accessible space in homes, schools and workplaces for seeking and giving mental and behavioral health assistance. This, he said, would help reduce the stigma of mental illness treatment. He also talked about the importance of addressing feelings of isolation, economic instability and racism as strategies to promote mental health.

We have seen many of our nation's school systems restricting access to discussion and education related to the country's traumatic history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, civil rights, and unjust systems and allocations of resources. Most states have proposed this type of legislation, which may include fines and the withdrawal of state funding if violated. To achieve a place of equity and allow diversity and inclusiveness to improve our systems, it is essential that we inform and educate the next generation about the full historical context of our country, including traumatic experiences of all races. See Chalkbeat's "[CRT Map: Efforts to restrict teaching racism and bias have multiplied across the U.S.](#)" for state-by-state information about these efforts.

Racism impacts victims, perpetrators and society. Rather than limiting access to education and information, schools should be using trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate methods of learning about our history, followed by reflecting on past injustice and ultimately dismantling structural racism. As a society, we must examine and address the role of social media in the dissemination of misleading information, and the ease of access to guns versus mental health services for isolated youth with a history of behavioral and emotional challenges. Revising research priorities to focus on understanding individual risk and the role of structural racism in the U.S., instead of the current emphasis on biomedical research, may benefit us all\* and allow us to avoid headlines such as "[Grief and Anger Sweep Through Buffalo a Day After a Racist Massacre.](#)"

\*Misra, S., Etkins, O. S., Yang, L. H., & Williams, D. R. (2022). Structural Racism and Inequities in Incidence, Course of Illness, and Treatment of Psychotic Disorders Among Black Americans. *Am J Public Health, 112*(4), 624-632.  
<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306631>



