

# Abandon “Race”. Focus on Racism.

## THE PROBLEM

The concept of “race” emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the slave trade; it was used to justify slavery by regarding Africans as biologically inferior.<sup>1-7</sup> The term “race” connotes physical difference.<sup>8-13</sup> Since its introduction it has been used to justify the exploitation, denigration, and decimation of groups of people. Use of “race” is not the only (or the principal) obstacle to addressing racism. It is, however, a significant obstacle because it is irremediably imbued with scientifically unfounded but tenacious notions of biological differences and hierarchy. Use of “race,” even by those who abhor racism, implicitly reinforces those notions.

## OUR PROPOSAL: ABANDON THE TERM “RACE”; SUBSTITUTE ETHNICITY

We should abandon the term “race” as a way of categorizing humans, while retaining the term “racism” as a necessary tool for dismantling it. Instead of “race” we propose that “ethnic group/ethnicity,” which has an intrinsically social connotation, be used. We should retain the terms African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian American, European American/White, Latino/Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, but refer to them as ethnic groups. All of these terms denote geographic ancestry in a particular continent/region and the shared history, language, beliefs, and/or customs that often accompany geographic ancestry.

## FOCUS ON RACISM

While not a biological category, “race” as categorized above—along with Latino/Hispanic “ethnicity”—is a crucial social category for monitoring, understanding, and addressing differences in health.<sup>14</sup> This is true because of racism’s profound influence on health and well-being. Each geographic grouping reflects ancestral origin in a particular continent/region of the globe. These geographic groupings reflect experiences of racism and shared history, and are essential to monitor and study principally because of the racism that some groups face, with major implications for health and well-being. These groupings reflect—albeit roughly—how people are perceived and treated.

Because of the profound impact of racism on health and well-being, we must continue to collect data on these socially constructed categories that have been called “races.” We should not, however, continue to *racialize* people by using that term.

## THIS IS FEASIBLE

In much of Europe today the term “race/racial” rarely appears and official statistics are not reported by “race;” “ethnicity” is used.<sup>15-17</sup> Abandoning “race” and substituting ethnicity was adopted in Europe after World War II, reacting to the genocide of 6 million Jews, who the Nazis regarded as a “race.”<sup>18,19</sup>

Unfortunately, they also ceased collection of routine data on the groups formerly called “races;” they now lack crucial evidence for routine monitoring of racism and its social and health effects. This is an error we must not commit.

<sup>1</sup>Smedley, A. (2007) *Race in North America : origin and evolution of a worldview*. <sup>2</sup>Krieger, N. (1987) *Shades of difference: theoretical underpinnings of the medical controversy on black/white differences in the United States, 1830–1870*. <sup>3</sup>Bailey, Z.D., et al. (2017) *Structural racism and health inequities in the USA: evidence and interventions*. <sup>4</sup>Smedley, A. (1993) *Race in North America : origin and evolution of a worldview*. <sup>5</sup>Hannaford, I. (1996) *Race: the history of an idea in the West*. <sup>6</sup>Hirschman, C. (2004) *The Origins and Demise of the Concept of Race*. Population and Development Review. <sup>7</sup>Smedley, A. and B.D. Smedley. (2005) *Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real: Anthropological and historical perspectives on the social construction of race*. <sup>8</sup>Bhopal, R. (2004) *Glossary of terms relating to ethnicity and race: for reflection and debate*. <sup>9</sup>Merriam-Webster (n.d.) *Race*. <sup>10</sup>Merriam-Webster (n.d.) *Ethnicity*. <sup>11</sup>Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) , “race, n.6”. <sup>12</sup>Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) “ethnicity, n.”. <sup>13</sup>Wikipedia (2021) *Ethnic group*. <sup>14</sup>Williams, D.R. (2001) *Ethnicity, Race, and Health*, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. <sup>15</sup>Aspinall, P.J. (2007) *Approaches to Developing an Improved Cross-National Understanding of Concepts and Terms Relating to Ethnicity and Race*. <sup>16</sup>Farkas, L. (2017) *Data collection in the field of Ethnicity*. <sup>17</sup>Aspinall, P.J. (2001) *Operationalising the collection of ethnicity data in studies of the sociology of health and illness*. <sup>18</sup>Chin, R., et al. (2009) *After the Nazi Racial State: Difference and Democracy in Germany and Europe*. <sup>19</sup>Farkas, L. (2017) *Data collection in the field of Ethnicity*