



## MECHANISMS FOR ADVANCING PUBLIC HEALTH Issue Brief

# State and Local Efforts to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

## Introduction

As the country reels from the death toll and economic fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans must focus on addressing a more persistent and pernicious public health crisis – systemic racism and injustice. Systemic racism causes a higher [COVID-19 death rate](#) for people of color and prevents people of color from achieving their highest level of health. The killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on Memorial Day is just the latest evidence of the urgent need for anti-racism actions to reverse years of systemic racism that threaten the health and lives of people of color in the United States. The link between systemic racism and [poor health outcomes](#) is clear: the racism built into America's laws, institutions, and systems is designed to provide privileged groups with better [access to the conditions needed to be healthy](#) – healthy and stable housing, economic stability, access to affordable healthcare, clean air and water, high quality education, and healthy food – without providing that same access to people of color. And the outcomes are dire – Black people have [lower life expectancy, educational attainment, income, and homeownership](#) than White people across the life span.

In the wake of George Floyd's death, [Minneapolis City Councilwoman Andrea Jenkins sought](#) an emergency declaration that racism is a public health issue. Other communities that recognize the important role of [local government action to combat racism](#) and its toll on public health are also formalizing their commitment to address systemic racism in local resolutions. Generally, city and county resolutions that declare racism as a public health emergency both highlight the racial health disparities within the community and include a commitment to dismantle the systems that create the public health crisis, such as eliminating laws and policies that contribute to or institutionalize systemic racism (like in [housing](#) and [education](#)). The language of these resolutions, alone, cannot repair the health deficit American institutions have left for communities of color. However, these resolutions can jump start critical efforts to assess the barriers to health created by current laws.

## Summary of State and Local Resolutions

The past two weeks have seen a number of jurisdictions call for and issue resolutions (including formal resolutions, declarations, and executive orders) to address racism as a public health crisis. Twenty-four resolutions introduced or adopted since 2019 are included in this assessment. The language of these resolutions falls into six broad categories:

- A **clear declaration** that racism is a public health crisis or emergency,
- Measures pertaining to **organizational policy or practice**,
- Emphasis on **partnerships and collaboration**,
- **Accountability measures**,
- Focus on a **specific issue**, or,
- A **call to action** to other local, state, and national leaders.

While there is variability in the language used, there are common threads of commitment to create accountability for local governments; ensure partnerships with frontline communities that understand the policies that are most beneficial to their communities; revamp workforce development and hiring practices that contribute to health disparities; and prioritize the government's responsibility to promote anti-racist policies.

### **Clear Declaration**

All twenty-four resolutions contain a clear declaration that racism is a public health crisis or emergency, impacting the specific city or county, the community, society, the entire country, or the world. One city, Port Huron, also declared that “social inequities” are part of the public health crisis, connecting racism to the conditions it creates. Two jurisdictions mention the intergenerational effects of racism in their statements, reflecting [an approach](#) that recognizes that racism has been connected to acute and chronic stress, trauma, and other health effects that lead to health inequities over the life course and across generations. For most of these jurisdictions, using the term crisis does not equate to any particular emergency authority. The exceptions are:

- Akron, Cleveland and Summit County in Ohio, which declared their resolutions emergency measures and tied this to establishing a Special Task Force (Akron), working group (Cleveland), or Special Review Committee (Summit County).
- Somerville, MA, which declared a local state of emergency tied to [a set of policy proposals](#) focused on police reforms.
- Boston, MA, which declared a local emergency, mobilizing funding and other resources.

### **Organizational Policy or Practice**


This category contains a broad range of language targeted at improving organizational policies and practices that create or reinforce disparities. The most common references include education or educational activities (18), policy (17), leadership (12), and representation in the workforce (10). There are other commonalities:

- Ten resolutions include some variation of: (a) identifying specific activities to increase diversity and incorporating anti-racism principles across leadership, staffing, or contracting; and (b) providing tools to assist members of government in engaging actively and authentically with communities of color.
- Five resolutions contain all or part of the phrase “educational efforts aimed at understanding, addressing, and dismantling racism and how it affects the delivery of human and social services, economic development, and public safety.”
- Six resolutions commit to creating an “equity and justice oriented” organization or governance structure.

The seventeen resolutions that reference policy all express a commitment to assess existing policy or procedure, or to advocate for new policies that improve health in communities of color. Including language around representation in the workforce is important due to persistent disparities across the U.S. in [employment](#) and [wages](#).

### **Partnerships and Collaboration**

Fourteen resolutions specifically used the words “partnership” or “collaboration.” They either identify specific partners or reference other organizations that are working toward health and racial equity. This is consistent with a [Health in All Policies](#) approach that is based on collaboration across sectors and communities, and movements that affirm that laws



and policies should not be enacted without the representation, participation, and meaningful consideration of the people who will be impacted. Fourteen resolutions contain the phrase “communities of color,” which may be significant in emphasizing the inclusion of marginalized voices and in drawing specific attention to the people who are most impacted.

## Accountability Measures

This category includes any language that references responsibility, oversight, communication, or strategies to support implementation of the resolution. Nine resolutions reference revising existing organizational work plans to include educational efforts to address racism and its effects or developing new plans that are specific to the identified priorities in the resolution. Six resolutions reference reports to the public as a means to assess progress, capitalize on opportunities to achieve racial equity, or inform meaningful action steps. Five resolutions identify a responsible body, like a work group or task force. Five resolutions use the phrase “identify clear goals and objectives,” and two have a specific date identified. Key examples include Akron, OH, creating a Special Taskforce to develop a five-year Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan by June 30, 2021; and Summit County, OH, creating a Special Review Committee that will report its findings and recommendations no later than December 31, 2020.

## Issue Focus

Some resolutions identified specific issues or areas of focus as part of addressing racism as a public health crisis. Nine specifically mention “systemic racism.” Six reference [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) or ACEs, which are linked to chronic illness, substance misuse, and mental health problems in adulthood. Racial and ethnic minorities [are at greater risk](#) of experiencing ACEs. Other references include Black Lives Matter (1), Black Mammamas Matter (2), Racial Equity and Social Justice Law (1), Social Determinants of Health (1), Police or Policing (2), and Data (3). It is interesting that only three resolutions specifically referenced data given the emphasis during COVID-19 on the uniform collection and use of data disaggregated by race, ethnicity and other factors in order to inform policy interventions.

## Call to Action

Fourteen resolutions contain a call to other state, local, and national leaders to also declare racism a public health crisis. In Wisconsin, the City of Madison and Milwaukee County, which issued their own resolutions, have also joined with more than 70 agencies and organizations that have [signed on](#) to the [Wisconsin Public Health Association resolution](#) declaring racism a public health crisis. The systemic conditions that create health inequities will only be dismantled through a common vision and collective action.

## Conclusion

While resolutions declaring racism a public health crisis are relatively new, communities that have addressed racism as a public health crisis have taken positive steps toward addressing systemic racism.

- Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, [one of the first communities to formally resolve](#) to address the negative health outcomes that flow from structural racism in 2019, followed its resolution with an audit of racial and gender equity issues in the County’s workforce, adoption of a Health and Equity Framework, and an [ordinance](#) that directs the county to take concrete actions to address racism in employment, policy development, strategic planning, and communication.
- Anne Arundel County, MD issued both a [resolution](#) and an [executive order](#) condemning racism in 2017. In 2019, the County Administration and the County Health Department declared racism a public health crisis and recently [committed to creating an Office of Health Equity and Racial Justice](#), which is included in the 2021 budget.
- Montgomery County, MD resolved to develop an equity policy framework in 2018, and since then has established a Racial Equity and Social Justice Committee and [taken active steps](#) to establish the framework.

As public attention intensifies, and there is a demand from communities for commitment and action, more jurisdictions can be expected to join the call to declare racism a public health crisis. These jurisdictions should consider specificity in commitment and course of action; partnership, collaboration, and elevating community voices; ways to be accountable to the public; and authorities conferred and resources required. Above all, they should consider whether a declaration will merely be a symbolic action or if will advance meaningful action to dismantle racist systems, structures, and institutions.

The Network will continue to research and analyze state and local approaches to addressing racism as a public health crisis, and to evaluate the outcomes of these efforts. We encourage you to contact the Network for technical assistance on crafting declarations of racism as a public health crisis and implementing strategies to address structural racism and injustice.

## Summary of Actions Taken to Declare Racism a Public Health Crisis

Introduced or adopted as of June 12, 2020, in alphabetical order by state

Jurisdiction	State	Citation	Date	Clear Declaration	Organizational Policy or Practice	Partnerships and Collaboration	Accountability Measures	Issue Focus	Call to Action
State	AZ	<a href="#">Senate Concurrent Resolution 1040</a>	2/3/2020	X	X		X		
City of Goleta	CA	<a href="#">Pending</a>	6/8/2020	X				X	
Denver	CO	<a href="#">Proclamation No. 20-0543</a>	6/8/2020	X	X		X		
Cook County	IL	<a href="#">Resolution 19-4285</a>	7/1/2019	X	X	X			X
City of Indianapolis-Marion County	IN	<a href="#">Proposal No. 182, 2020</a>	6/8/2020	X	X		X		X
Boston	MA	<a href="#">Executive Order Declaring Racism an Emergency and Public Health Crisis in the City of Boston</a>	6/12/2020	X	X	X	X	X	
Montgomery County	MD	<a href="#">Pending</a>	6/9/2020	X	X	X	X	X	X
Somerville	MA	<a href="#">Declaration of a Local State of Emergency</a>	6/4/2020	X	X	X		X	
Flint	MI	<a href="#">Resolution 200233</a>	6/1/2020	X	X	X	X	X	X
Port Huron	MI	<a href="#">Resolution #20-054</a>	6/8/2020	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kansas City	MO	<a href="#">Resolution No. 190679</a>	8/29/2019	X	X	X	X		X
Durham County	NC	<a href="#">Ceremonial Item 20-0267</a>	6/8/2020	X	X	X	X	X	
Leonia Borough	NJ	<a href="#">Resolution No. 2020-124</a>	6/1/2020	X	X	X		X	X

Jurisdiction	State	Citation	Date	Clear Declaration	Organizational Policy or Practice	Partnerships and Collaboration	Accountability Measures	Issue Focus	Call to Action
Akron	OH	<a href="#">Resolution 157-2020</a>	6/8/2020	X	X		X		
Cleveland	OH	<a href="#">Resolution No. 296-2020</a>	6/3/2020	X			X		
Columbus	OH	<a href="#">Resolution 0095X-2020</a>	6/1/2020	X				X	
Franklin County	OH	<a href="#">Resolution No. 0341-20</a>	5/19/2020	X	X	X	X	X	X
State	OH	<a href="#">Senate Concurrent Resolution 14</a>	6/2/2020	X	X		X		X
Summit County	OH	<a href="#">Resolution 2020-174</a>	6/1/2020	X			X		
Allegheny County	PA	<a href="#">Motion 11490-2020</a>	5/5/2020	X	X	X	X	X	X
Pittsburgh	PA	<a href="#">Resolution 2019-2214</a>	12/17/2019	X	X	X	X	X	X
City of Milwaukee	WI	<a href="#">Resolution 190098</a>	7/30/2019	X	X		X		X
County of Milwaukee	WI	<a href="#">Resolution 19-397</a>	5/20/19	X	X	X			X
Madison	WI	<a href="#">Resolution 57483</a>	10/15/2019	X	X	X	X		X
TOTAL				24	20	14	18	12	14

**SUPPORTERS**



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