



Senate Health and Human Service Committee
Proponent Testimony SCR 14, Racism as a Public Health Issue
Presented by Melissa Cropper, President Ohio Federation of Teachers
June 9, 2020

Chair Burke, Vice-Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, I am Melissa Cropper, President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers (OFT) and Secretary-Treasurer of the Ohio AFL-CIO. OFT represents teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, and other support staff in our K-12 schools as well as faculty and support staff in our higher ed institutes and public employees at Franklin County Children's Services.

George Floyd, Jamar Clark, Philando Castile, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and Eric Garner. These are but a few black Americans killed by police. Today, George Floyd's burial is in Houston, Texas. In his memory, OFT is proud to testify in support of this resolution, declaring that racism is a public health crisis. After 400 years of systemic abuse and discrimination of black Americans in this country, there is little doubt that racism has been and continues to be an issue. Six years after Eric Garner said "I can't breathe" in New York, George Floyd uttered the same last words on a corner in Minneapolis.

While the focus is now on the criminal justice system, which needs to be fixed, we also need to understand that the problem extends well beyond criminal justice and, in fact, seeps into every aspect of the work we do in Ohio.

We agree with Governor DeWine's statement last week, "We should all be outraged that in the year 2020, in Ohio and this country, there's still inequality of opportunity and there is still racism."

As a white woman from a small town in rural Ohio, I understand all too well the instinctive bristling that occurs when we hear someone call us a racist or indicate that we have a racist society. It is a term people take very personally because they think it indicates they are evil people who would burn a cross in someone's yard or lynch someone from a tree. The people I know would not do that and would not support other people doing that. In fact, they do just the opposite. They help their neighbors no matter the color of their skin. These are the people who say, "I don't see color. I am color blind." Or "My child's best friend is black, and I treat him like my own so I can't be a racist." I have probably, in fact, made comments like those myself in the past. Because that definition of racism is so narrow, it causes people to become defensive and to then try to justify racist actions they see on the news and ignore the more subtle forms of racism that play out every day.

We must get beyond thinking about racism as just a personal pejorative indicating only the most vile behavior and expand the definition in a way that opens people's eyes, hearts, and minds to the racial inequities that exist in our communities, our state, and our country. We must understand that racism is not just about how we treat people in our daily interactions but also about what we allow to happen and exist without raising questions and demanding change.

Establishing a glossary of terms and definitions concerning racism and health equity is one of the action items within this resolution. For my definitions, I am going to borrow from Ibram X. Kendi, author of [How to be an Antiracist](#). Kendi defines racism as a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities. Of course, since that definition still uses racist quite a bit, it needs to be broken down more.

Let's start with racial inequity. Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximate equal footing. For example, according to the 2018 Infant Mortality Annual Report, the infant mortality rate, in Ohio, for black infants was 13.9 per 1000 births compared to 5.4 per 1000 births for white infants. According to a 2019 Policy Matters Report (Race, Policy, and Ohio - <https://www.policymattersohio.org/blog/2019/11/26/race-policy-and-ohio>), 32% of black Ohioans live in poverty as opposed to 11.5% of white Ohioans, and 36.1% of black Ohioans own houses compared to 71.9 % of white Ohioans. These are examples of racial inequities.

Racist policies, again defined by Ibram X. Kendi, are any measures that produce or sustain racial inequity between racial groups. These could mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. For example, to indicate that black infants are dying at a higher rate than white infants simply because they are black or because of something black people do differently to raise their children, would be a racist idea. We instead need to be examining health policies, wage policies, housing policies, education policies, etc. that are leading to worse outcomes for black children. These policies may not have been intentionally created to impact races differently, but if we do not collect data, examine its impact on different races, and try to determine why there are disproportionate outcomes, then we are indeed being racist in our policies. To end racist policies, we must, as this resolution demands, look at every codified ordinance through a racial equity lens.

This same racial equity lens must be applied in every aspect of the work we do, and each line in this resolution is an important step in making this happen. We all have a responsibility to end racism, not just in the criminal justice system, but also in our education system, our health system, our workplace systems, as well as in our daily interactions, but much of the examination and changes that need to take place will not happen unless you set the example and make it a policy priority of the state by declaring racism a public health crisis and then taking measures to implement the items outlined in the resolution.

Immediately after the murder of George Floyd, the Governor of Minnesota and the Mayor of Minneapolis recognized that 400 years of systemic racism forced people to the streets. This legislature can do no less. Representative Seitz's recent statement about not being bullied into

passing this resolution speaks to why we are in this situation. Black people endured 400 years of slavery and oppression in this country. Black people fought and died for this country since the revolutionary war yet have not benefitted the same as white veterans. It took a black soldier beaten, while in his uniform, by a South Carolina police officer for President Truman to sign an Executive Order ending desegregation of the armed forces in 1948. Black legislators pushing for policies to end the racism they have seen and experienced is not bullying. On the contrary, I would call it both bold leadership and true public service in working against the odds to deliver on the promise they made to Ohio citizens.

SCR 14 speaks for itself and should be passed without delay. We urge you to pass this resolution and begin the work to identify and change the racist policies that are hurting and killing our black Ohioans. Black lives matter.