

Ankita Patil

Margolis Summer Internship 2021 - Reflection Blog

George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, Dion Johnson. America's streets were bleeding while outrage ignited into an uncontrollable fire. Injustice was exacerbated by the disproportionate burden of the novel yet fatal pandemic on Black and Brown individuals. COVID-19 reiterated once again the lasting effects of structural racism and the deadly health and healthcare disparities that are widely present. Medicine and policy have to look outside of the walls of the hospital and into the patient's community to provide equitable care and to understand drivers of health.

Social determinants of health (SDOHs), such as environmental hazards, food security, access to physical activity and social support, are the primary drivers of health outcomes. They shape an individual's health behavior and determine the risk and subsequent prognosis of illnesses. SDOHs and health disparities call for reform on a wider scale, and can be effectively addressed at the health policy level.

I first observed the enormous impact health policy can have from my previous research that focused on evaluating data on the treatment of incarcerated individuals during the COVID-19 outbreak and comparing those accounts to the self-proclaimed mitigation tactics of prisons in preventing the spread of the virus throughout facilities. Human rights continue to be violated as millions of individuals remain incarcerated without adequate and basic utilities and healthcare while carceral facilities conceal the consequences of COVID-19's impact. Health policy can mandate transparency and is one strategy that can be used to bring about significant change. Policy can also enact change outside overcrowded cells and directly at the community level, which is one of the several approaches the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy takes to attain health equity.

Through the Margolis Center and the Margolis Internship Program, I was able to work with passionate mentors and staff, such as Dr. Dev Sangvai and Mr. Ángel Romero Ruiz, to tackle health disparities at the local level, and was given the opportunity to examine racial disparities in stroke incidence within Durham County. I gathered data on stroke trends among White adults and Black adults in eight Durham communities from 2015 to 2017 and analyzed how social determinants of health played a role in the observed differences. It was found that despite living in the same community with access to the same number of resources, racial inequities in stroke incidence were observed, with stroke incidence differences in Black adults being largely greater when compared to White adults. This unique study further supports investigation into the role of social determinants of health by race and provides an understanding of the role of the community and stakeholders on health outcomes.

Margolis identifies opportunities to improve the value of innovation, conducts research that will be impactful on the local and national level, and disseminates emerging promising practices through collaboration. The Center for Health Policy also aims to accelerate and support health system transformation to achieve better population health and promote efficiency, equity, and high-quality care. The Center values its students, and I had unending support from both faculty and interns throughout the dozen weeks. I am grateful for the experience I received from this internship, and I will carry forward with me the life-long skills that I acquired as a Duke Margolis Center for Health Policy intern.