



Spotlight on Public Health

National Public Health Week ([NPHW](#)) is a time to recognize the importance of public health and highlight key issues to improving our nation's health. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed long-standing inequities. It has also revealed the uneven distribution of health, social, and economic risks that people face between and within countries. Health equity cannot be achieved until the wider agenda for social, economic, and political justice are met. Moving forward, as we begin to re-think the global health equity agenda, we must recognize the shortcomings of a one-size-fits all response and consider the complex pathways through which imbalances in power and resources have led to these inequities.

This **Did You Know Newsletter** highlights recent, noteworthy issues related to this year's NPHW 2021 theme, "**Building Bridges to Better Health**," with a focus on equity.

Environmental Hazards and Equity

As [research](#) reveals, the social determinants of health are not equally distributed across all communities. Communities of color are much more likely to experience harmful conditions that influence health, including greater exposure to environmental hazards. The UN recently issued a [statement](#) condemning environmental racism in Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" — a petrochemical corridor along the lower Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge that encompasses more than 150 chemical plants and oil refineries.

The corridor is surrounded by polluted water and toxic air levels that are [higher than in 99% of the country](#), subjecting predominantly Black communities in the area to higher rates of cancer, respiratory diseases, and even [COVID-19](#) than majority white districts. This is an example of the

intersection of discriminatory economic and housing policies that have led to racial, social, and economic inequality, all of which impact health and well-being.

COVID-19 Vaccine Equity

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated long-standing [inequities](#), especially related to testing, treatment, and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine. Limited vaccine supplies are being allocated by wealth and geography rather than by public health or human need. Across the US, White people have a [higher vaccination rate than Latino people](#) in all reporting states and Black people in all reporting states except for Alaska. Unless these doses are redistributed, huge [inequities in vaccine distribution](#) will persist, and individuals in [underserved communities](#) across the US will remain among those most affected.

Globally, high-income countries have purchased enough doses to vaccinate [more than twice their population](#) while low-and middle-income countries can only cover one-third. Though global vaccine distribution is shaped by competing interests in public opinion, diplomacy, economics, and public health, universally recognized ethical principles that focus on [“need” and “priority for the disadvantaged”](#) are a central factor in this decision-making. To ensure fair and equitable distribution, inequities and deficiencies across the broader supply chain across and within countries need to be considered.

Low-Resource Communities

Enduring inequalities and a fragile social safety net in the US have left low-resource communities vulnerable to bear the brunt of mounting challenges of the pandemic. Due to the lack of resources to prepare and protect against COVID-19, low-resource communities face [a higher risk](#) of contracting and spreading the virus with lower resources to protect themselves and their families. Low-resource communities also face greater barriers to accessing health care and mental health services than high-resource communities. For instance, rural residents in the US [are eight times more likely](#) than urban residents to lack access to internet at home, exacerbating health disparities.

Lack of internet access has also made the shift to remote [education](#) particularly challenging in low-resource communities and will likely result in a net deficit in children’s educational achievement. Challenges such as this can widen opportunity gaps and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty. It is therefore more essential than ever to restructure our systems to become more resilient to the diverse needs of *all* communities.

Gun Violence

The [recent mass shootings](#) that took place just days apart have once again drawn attention to the frequency of gun violence in the US. According to a recent report, more than [100 people died](#) and over 200 were injured by firearms every day of 2020 – most of these were gun suicides. As a human rights and behavioral health organization, we recognize that reducing gun violence will require a comprehensive [public health approach](#) that emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive community structures as a central tenet.

Learn more ways you can take action [here](#).