

Joint Statement of the Health Studies Student Union (HSSU) and the Health Studies Program Denouncing Anti-Black Racism and Proposing a Plan of Action

The events of the past week, and George Floyd's murder at the hands of the police in particular, have shaken the world. The global Black Lives Matter movement has forced people to pause and critically question or even reject the ways that our societies are currently structured. As students of health equity, we are incited to think about the gross inequities in health our Black colleagues, students, friends are made to face every day.

George Floyd's murder, among the other incidents of police brutality from the past month, provide the spark that shines the light on a centuries-long problem, and the recent deaths of Regis Korchinski-Paquet and Chantel Moore brings this fire home to Canada. If we do not take action now, we are part of the problem, and will let history repeat itself as it did with Reyal Jardine-Douglas (2010), Michael Eligon (2012), Ian Pryce (2013), Sammy Yatim (2013), Nicholas Throne-Belance (5 years old, 2014), Alain Magloire (2014), Jermaine Carby (2014), Andrew Loku (2015), Kwasi Skene-Peters (2015), Pierre Coriolan (2017), Nicholas Gibbs (2018), Greg Ritchie (2019), Randy Cochrane (2019), Machuar Madut (2019), Eishia Hudson (2020), Stewart Kevin Andrews (2020), Jason Collins (2020), D'Andre Campbell (2020) and the countless others killed by police in Canada and around the world.

The protests taking place across Canada and around the world highlight not only police brutality but also the **systemic racism** that affects the health and well-being of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC). The Health Studies Student Union (HSSU) and the Health Studies Program of University College together condemn police brutality, racism and institutionalized racial injustice. Systemic racism is a critical determinant of health, of which racialized police brutality is only one manifestation, yet it serves as an example demonstrating how systemic racism affects all aspects of the health and wellbeing of Black people:

1. **Physically**, police brutality targets BIPOC individuals disproportionately and causes them to suffer chronic physical and mental pain. The Ontario Human Rights Commission has reported that Black residents are 20 times more likely to be shot and killed by police than non-Black residents in Toronto. Indigenous people are also disproportionately harmed by police in Canada.
2. **Economically**, Black people who are charged or jailed face new barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment, thus decreasing their access to healthcare services such as medication, therapies and dental even within our 'universal' healthcare system.
3. **Politically**, police services take up an exorbitant amount of regional budgets in Canada at the expense of other critical community services. For instance, the Toronto Police Service budget takes up \$1.076 billion of Toronto's \$13.5 billion budget, which outweighs budgets for firefighters, paramedics, libraries, and public housing *combined*. This harms the Black community twice; once as they become disproportionate targets of police suspicion and aggression, and second through the concomitant disinvestment in public

services that would otherwise help mitigate the systemic racism that disadvantages the Black community.

4. **Socially**, the over-policing of Black and Indigenous people reinforces the harmful stereotypes attached to these communities, which affects the social well-being of all of their members in terms of employment, political participation, and public trust.

The health effects of systemic racism aren't limited to the repercussions of police brutality. Black Canadians have some of the highest risks for chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and high blood pressure, as well as mental illnesses such as psychosis. Similarly, evidence suggests that COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting BIPOC communities. These increased risks are directly produced by the consequences of systemic racism, such as decreased access to healthcare, unsafe working conditions, stigmatization, increased stress, inadequate housing, barriers to education, among many others.

The Health Studies Student Union and Health Studies Program **condemn racialized police brutality and stand in solidarity with the Black community** and all those who feel alienated and denied equal justice and equal opportunity in our society. We stand with the Black community in this time of upheaval and frustration, and we will continue standing with them until systemic justice is achieved and power imbalances are countered. We need to be responsible and accountable to Black and Indigenous communities, whose health and safety matter as much as anyone else's. We support the calls of activists to seriously tackle systemic racism and police brutality, and in particular to adopt new models of community safety that prioritize equity and wellbeing.

We also recognize that systemic racism affects all aspects of society, including higher education. We believe, as G. Dei and A. Calliste assert in their introduction to *Mapping the Terrain: Power, Knowledge and Anti-Racism Education*, that "universities continue to be powerful discursive sites through which race knowledge is produced, organized and regulated. Marginalized bodies are continually silenced and rendered invisible, not simply through the failure to take issues of race and social oppression seriously but through the constant negation of multiple lived experiences and alternative knowledges." We need to do more to take systemic racism and white privilege seriously, starting with our own backyard. **The following are the first few steps we intend to take on this long road.**

The Health Studies Program will:

- Advise that core courses in the program (for example, in HST209 and HST211) engage with both systemic racism and police violence as social determinants of health
- Encourage all instructors to incorporate material on the impacts of racialization on health in their courses, to seek out BIPOC guest lecturers (especially women), and to include course readings by BIPOC authors and researchers
- Add courses on anti-racism, anti-colonialism and Black lives to program requirements and electives
- Commit to offering a course on *Racism and Health* in the future

- Promote the hiring of Black, Indigenous, and POC instructors (especially women) as much as possible within the context of existing labour regulations and fair hiring processes
- Organise equity training sessions and make them available to our community, including students, staff and faculty, free of charge
- Work with University College, the Faculty of Arts and Science, and other key stakeholders to develop ways to recruit and retain Black students (who at only 4% of the student body are significantly under-represented in relation to their presence in the City of Toronto)
- Consider how the program can take further action in dismantling structural racism, in concert with the HSSU.

The Health Studies Student Union (HSSU) will:

- Actively seek out BIPOC guest speakers (especially women) in planning academic seminars
- Continue working on allyship in the health community as students, and providing a toolkit of how to be a constructive and supportive ally (access our preliminary [resource list](#) here)
- Promote and share resources and opportunities for Black and Indigenous students (e.g. scholarships and awards, links to relevant university and community organizations)
- Ensure recruitment and outreach efforts reach Black and Indigenous students by partnering with Black and Indigenous student groups
- Support the UTSU and other student unions in their efforts to evaluate and limit campus policing
- Commit to listening and taking action as new injustices come to light within our program and in the wider U of T community

Health is political. Health is social. Health is economic, mental, and cultural. We as Health Studies students and researchers are dedicating our lives to studying it. However, it is time we go beyond just studying, and consider the ways we can and should actively promote the health and wellbeing of ALL of our students within our own organizations and institutions.

#BlackLivesMatter

Health Studies Student Union + Health Studies Program

June 2020

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