

## **How the scarcity of Black men in health care professions impacts health inequities**

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Blacks experience the [worst health inequities](#) in the United States (U.S.) for many health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity. Addressing such health inequities is a focus of many public health strategies, including [Healthy People 2030](#) that features evidence-based resources and programs at the state, community and organizational levels. One such [intervention](#) in public health includes the recruitment and retention of Black men into health care professions across the U.S.

Increasing the number of Black men in health care is a major need and challenge. First, Black men represent [less than 1%](#) of the college student population in the U.S. Second, matriculation rates of Black men into medical school has [trended downward](#) in the U.S. since 1978, making this feat even more challenging. Black men only comprise [3%](#) of all U.S. physicians, even though Blacks represent roughly 13% of the U.S. population. This reality is even bleaker when reviewing nursing demographics. While men in general comprise [9.4%](#) of the U.S. nursing population, Black men only account for [0.67%](#) of said population.

Having more Black men in health care professions is needed for several reasons. First, [research](#) shows that patients are more likely to rate their provider favorably if they share the same race or ethnicity with them. Another [study](#) found that patients from minority backgrounds were less likely to hear back from their doctor through a patient portal compared to white patients. Couple these findings with many Blacks still [distrusting the health care system](#) due to personal or historical racism such as the Tuskegee experiment, it is imperative for institutions to alleviate these psychological stressors by prepping the health care field to be more representative of the populations they serve.

Improving the numbers of Black men in health care would be beneficial for several reasons. [Studies](#) show that mortality rates are lower among patients with providers who share the same race or ethnicity with them, and such providers are more likely to address health disparities among these populations. With Blacks in general and Black men specifically experiencing some of the [worst health disparities](#) in the U.S., especially for issues such as [HIV mortality](#) and [prostate cancer mortality](#), having providers with the same race or ethnicity would serve to directly improve these outcomes among Black men and their families.

There are several [barriers](#) that prevent Black men from becoming health care professionals, doctors and nurses or advancing in this industry. Unfortunately, [racism](#) is still a primary deterrent that Black men face in medical schools across the U.S., while also facing this same dilemma in the [health care workforce](#) among their peers and colleagues. Moreover, this [study](#) interviewed 30 Black nurses and identified these seven themes regarding barriers to career advancement for Black nurses in the U.S. — maintaining white comfort, distrust, no one like me, paving the way, worthy of representation, leadership role not expected of Black nurses and an advanced degree does not equal advanced opportunities.

Among the seven themes mentioned in this [study](#), the scarcity of Blacks in health care leadership is evident with 11% of hospital executive leaders identifying as an ethnic minority person or non-white person in the U.S. Having Blacks in [health care leadership](#) would not only serve the patient populations in a more holistic manner, they would also be in positions to mentor other Blacks, advance new knowledge and share diverse perspectives that would help advance health equity among populations that are not monolithic.

Increasing the presence of Black men in health care, specifically nursing, requires investments within multiple levels of society, education and health care. [Pipeline programs](#) are needed at the middle school, high school and college levels that offer Black men sufficient mentorship, academic training and psychological support. The [Network of Black Male Nurse Leaders](#) is one such pipeline program that was created to empower Black male nurses with a robust support system and professional development opportunities.

To assist this endeavor, health care institutions could follow the efforts of the Association of American Medical Colleges and the National Medical Association that launched the [Action Collaborative for Black Men in Medicine](#) in 2020 to improve the factors and systems that influence the pathways of Black men into health care professions. In conjunction, the American Nurses Association released a [Journey of Racial Reconciliation Statement](#) in 2022, acknowledging its past actions that perpetuated systemic racism and harm towards Black nurses and nurses of color.

Implementing strategies and programs to increase the numbers of Black men in health care needs to be a focus of many institutions. Doing so has the potential to directly improve the health outcomes of Black patients, while also improving the health care system and its ability to combat the many racial challenges across the American landscape.