

# Toxic Pathways:

## Exploring the Impacts of Vicarious and Environmental Racism on Black Youth in Early Childhood

Myles D. Moody, PhD (@ylesdmood)  
Assistant Professor, Sociology  
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Lacee A. Satcher, PhD (@laceesatcher)  
Assistant Professor, Sociology  
Boston College

# Defining Structural Racism

- Structural Racism
  - An **organized system** that categorizes population groups into 'races' and uses this ranking to preferentially allocate societal goods and resources to groups regarded as superior (Bonilla-Silva 1996)
  - **Beliefs/attitudes** , **institutional arrangements** , and **acts** that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation (Clark et al. 1999)
- Racial Discrimination
  - **Unfair treatment** or **bias** against an individual or group based on their racial group membership

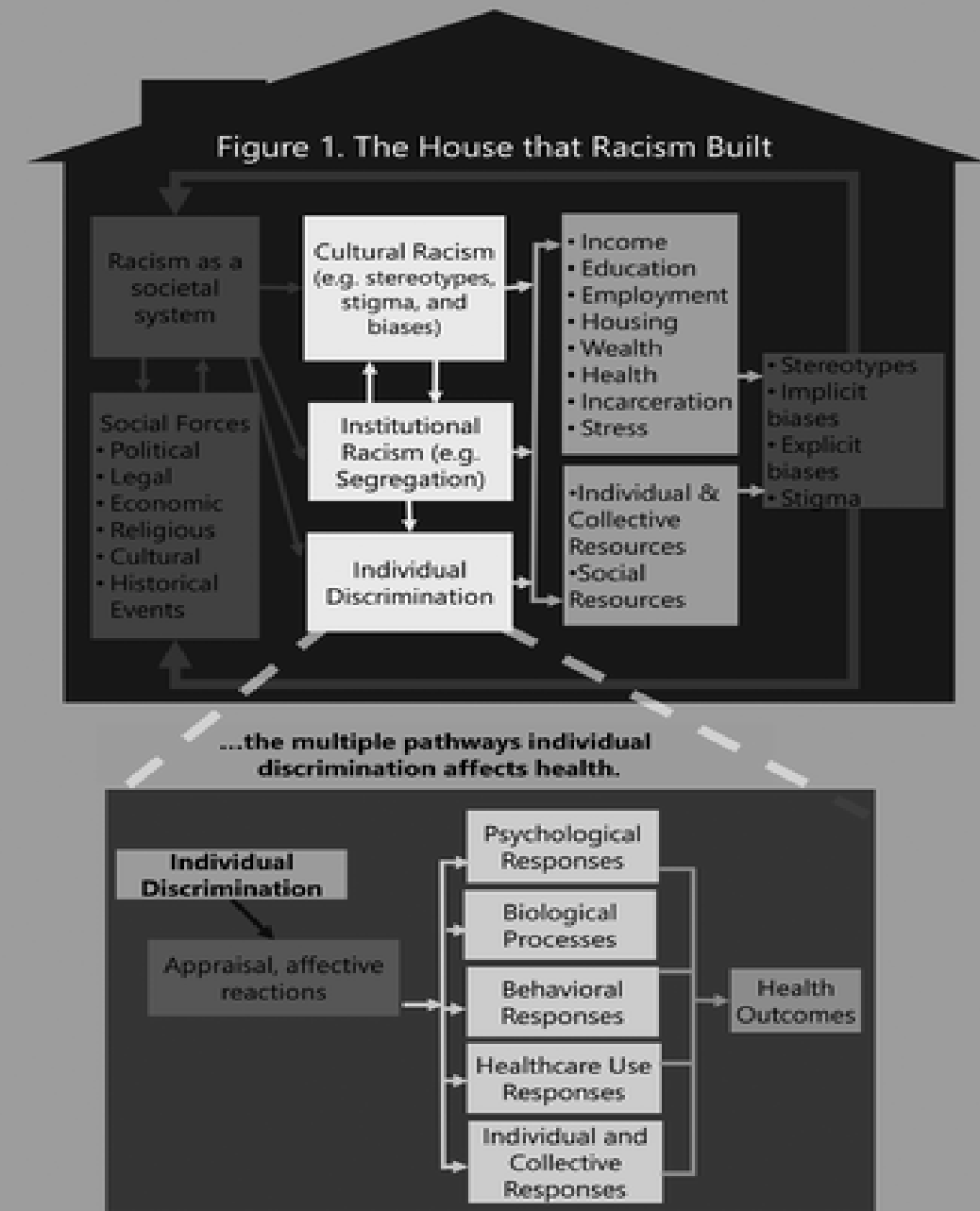
# How Racism Impacts Health (Sociological Lens)

- Residential Segregation (Massey and Denton 1988; Harrison and Weinberg 1990)
- Racial Discrimination (Williams and Mohamad 2009; 2013)
- Racism-Related Stress (Clark et al. 1999; Harrell 2000)

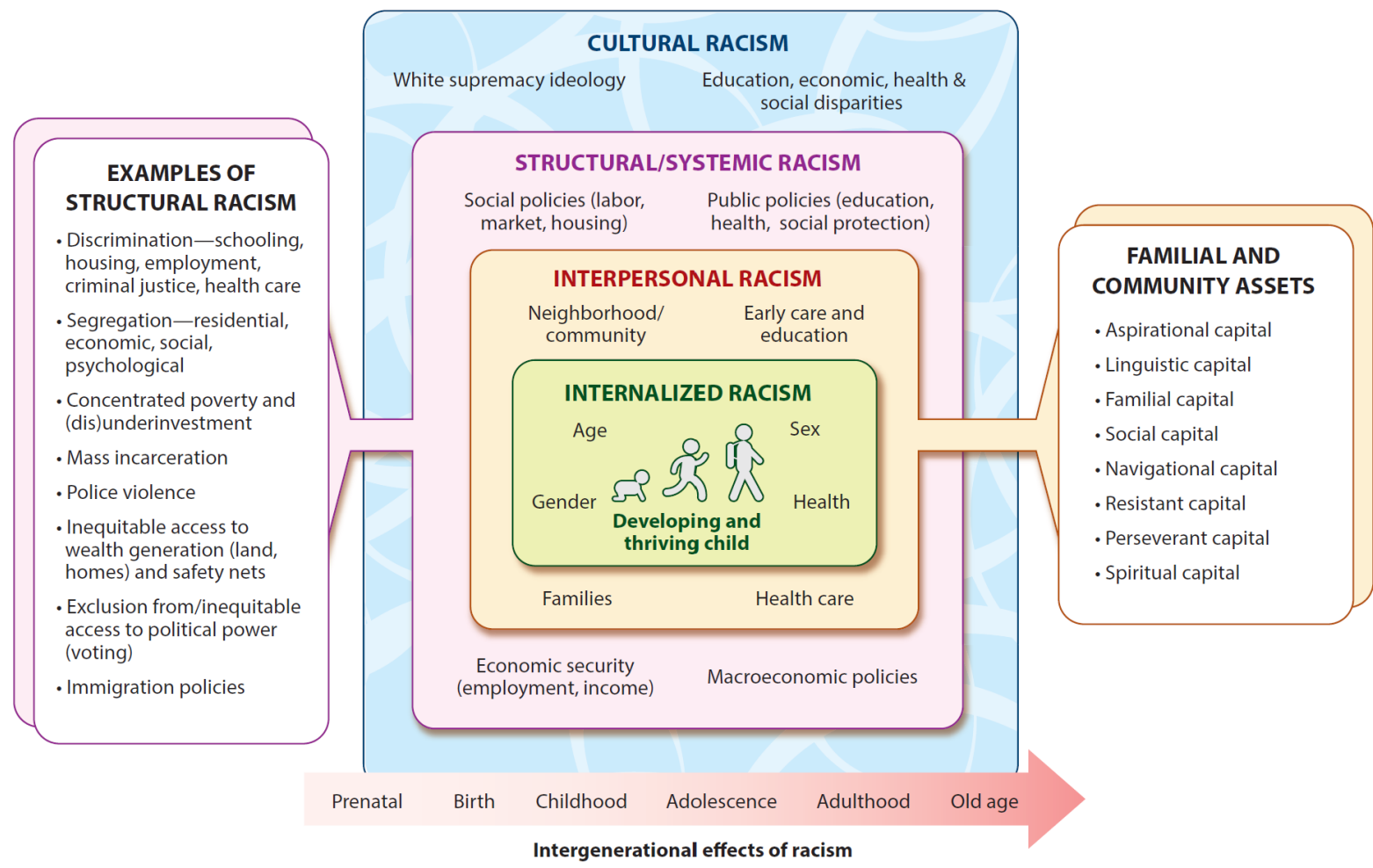
# Racism as Social Determinant of Health

- Types of Racism
  - Cultural Racism
  - Institutional Racism
  - Interpersonal Racism
  - Internalized Racism

Figure from “Understanding How Discrimination Can Affect Health” in *HSR*  
(Williams, Lawrence, Davis, and Vu 2019)



# R<sup>3</sup>ISE Model (Iruka et al., 2022)



**Figure 1**

Racism + Resilience + Resistance Integrative Study of Childhood Ecosystem (R<sup>3</sup>ISE). The R<sup>3</sup>ISE integrative model is a conceptual framework examining how different forms of racism, such as cultural and systemic racism, impact children’s healthy development and the moderating role of family and community cultural assets. Note that vicarious racism and some other forms of racism are not pictured.

# Our Study Aims

- **Aim 1**
  - To review current literature on vicarious racism and health during the early life stages for Black children
- **Aim 2**
  - To propose a conceptual model that highlights how both the social *and* physical environment are shaped by racism that impacts early life health via vicarious and environmental racism
- **Aim 3**
  - To recommend strategies for psychological resilience and harm reduction

# The Social Environment: Racism-Related Stress

## Racism-Related Stress

(Clark et al. 1999)

- The strain that racial and ethnic minorities endure because of chronic and acute experiences of racial discrimination
- It may threaten personal well-being

## Vicarious Racism

(Harrell 2000)

- Racism exerts its influence not only through direct personal experience, but also vicariously, through **observation** and **report**
- Defined as:
  - Experiences of prejudice and discrimination that happen to members of one's **family** and **close friends**, as well as those involving **strangers**

# The Social Environment: Vicarious Exposures for Ages 0-5

- Parent's experiences of discrimination → Children's health (Goosby and Heidbrink 2013; Heard-Garris et al. 2018)
  - **Pre-birth** maternal pathway
    - Infant birthweight and mortality (Chae et al. 2018; Collins et al 2004; Daniels et al. 2020)
  - **Post-birth** caregiver pathway
    - Children's health and wellbeing (Ford et al. 2013; Simmons et al. 2002)



# Residential Segregation – St. Louis, MO



# The Physical Environment: Heightened Vulnerabilities for Ages 0-5

- Consumption
  - Children eat more food, drink more water, and breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults
- Contact
  - Children are more likely to put their hands in their mouth
- Immunity
  - A child's body may not be able to break down and eliminate harmful contaminants as effectively as adults
- Exposure Time
  - Because of their age during exposure, children have more time to develop health conditions and diseases than adults who are exposed later in life

# Toxic Pathways Conceptual Model

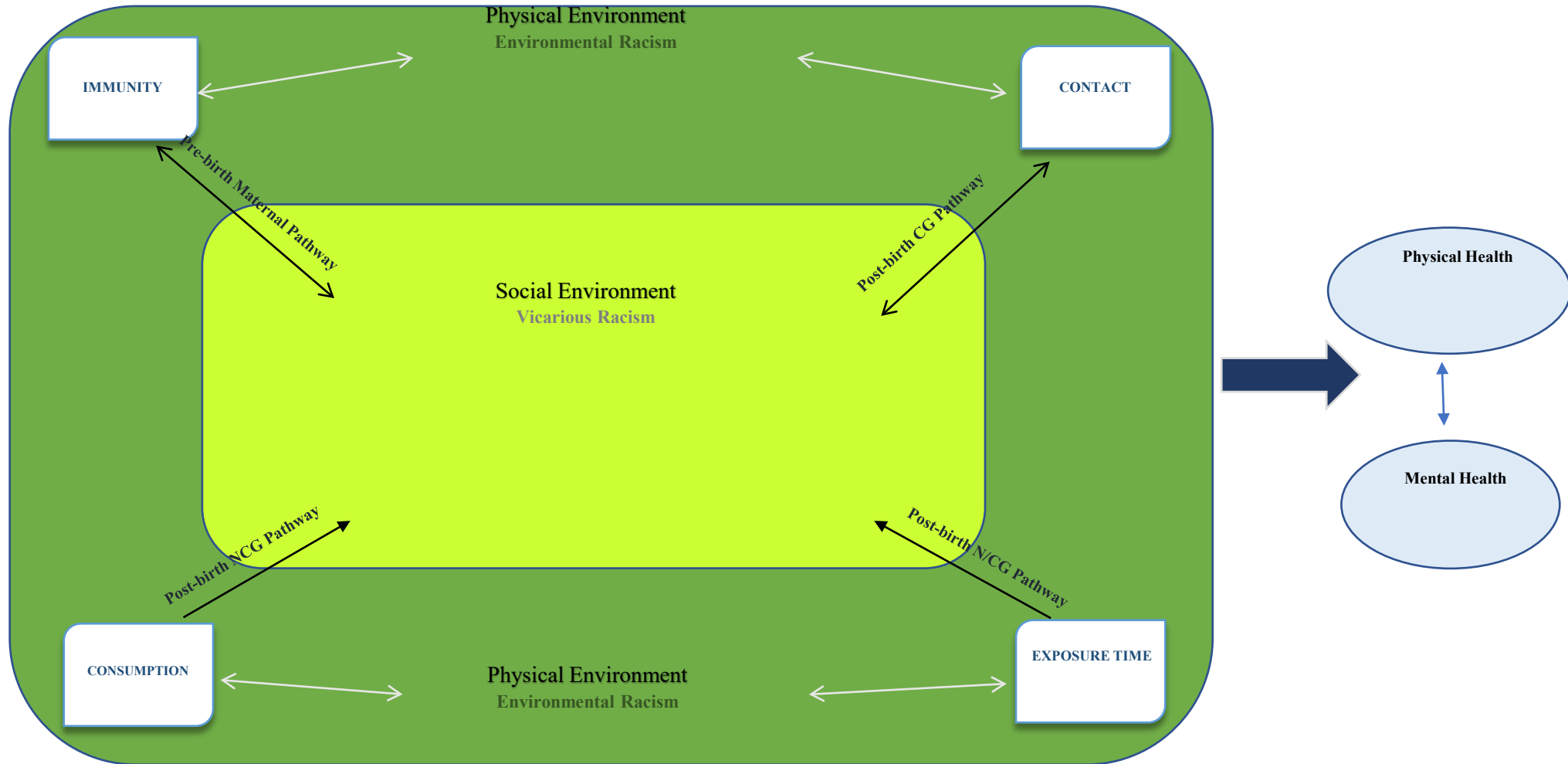


Figure 1. How Racism in the Social and Physical Environment Influences Health in Infancy and Early Childhood  
NCG= Non-Caregiver; CG=Caregiver; N/CG= Non-Caregiver and Caregiver

# Social and Environmental Buffers: Our Recommendations

- Health Policy

- Maximize the ability to gain access to adequate health care
  - Improve the quality of the lives of caregivers

- Environmental Recommendations

- Increase the amount of green spaces
  - Green spaces are associated w/ an increase in serotonin among children, as well as a reduction in cortisol among all ages (Dockx et al., 2022)
  - Green spaces are also associated w/ lower rates of gun violence, which disproportionately impacts Black children (Shepley et al., 2019)

- Social Policy

- Implement policies that remedy the social and structural conditions that stem from racism
  - For example, the ongoing city, state, and federal policy work on reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans from the Transatlantic Slave Trade

# Conclusions

## Takeaways

- Black children ages 0-5 are vulnerable to multiple exposures to racism particularly during development as they lack agency
- They are directly and **indirectly** exposed to racism through the social and physical environments

## Insights for Future Work

- Test more interventions that improve the lives of caregivers
- Continue to examine ways to increase racism-related resilience for Black children ages 0-5

**UAB** THE UNIVERSITY OF  
ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM.

# Thank you!

Emails: [mdmoody@uab.edu](mailto:mdmoody@uab.edu)

Twitter: [@mylesdmoody](https://twitter.com/mylesdmoody) [@aceesatcher](https://twitter.com/aceesatcher)

Instagram: [@mylesdmoody](https://www.instagram.com/mylesdmoody) [@aceesatcher](https://www.instagram.com/aceesatcher)