



BOSTON COLLEGE

School of Social Work

Equity/Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Nursing Homes: A Focus on Social Determinants and The Role of Social Work

Christina Matz, PhD, MSW, FGSA

Associate Professor, Boston College SSW

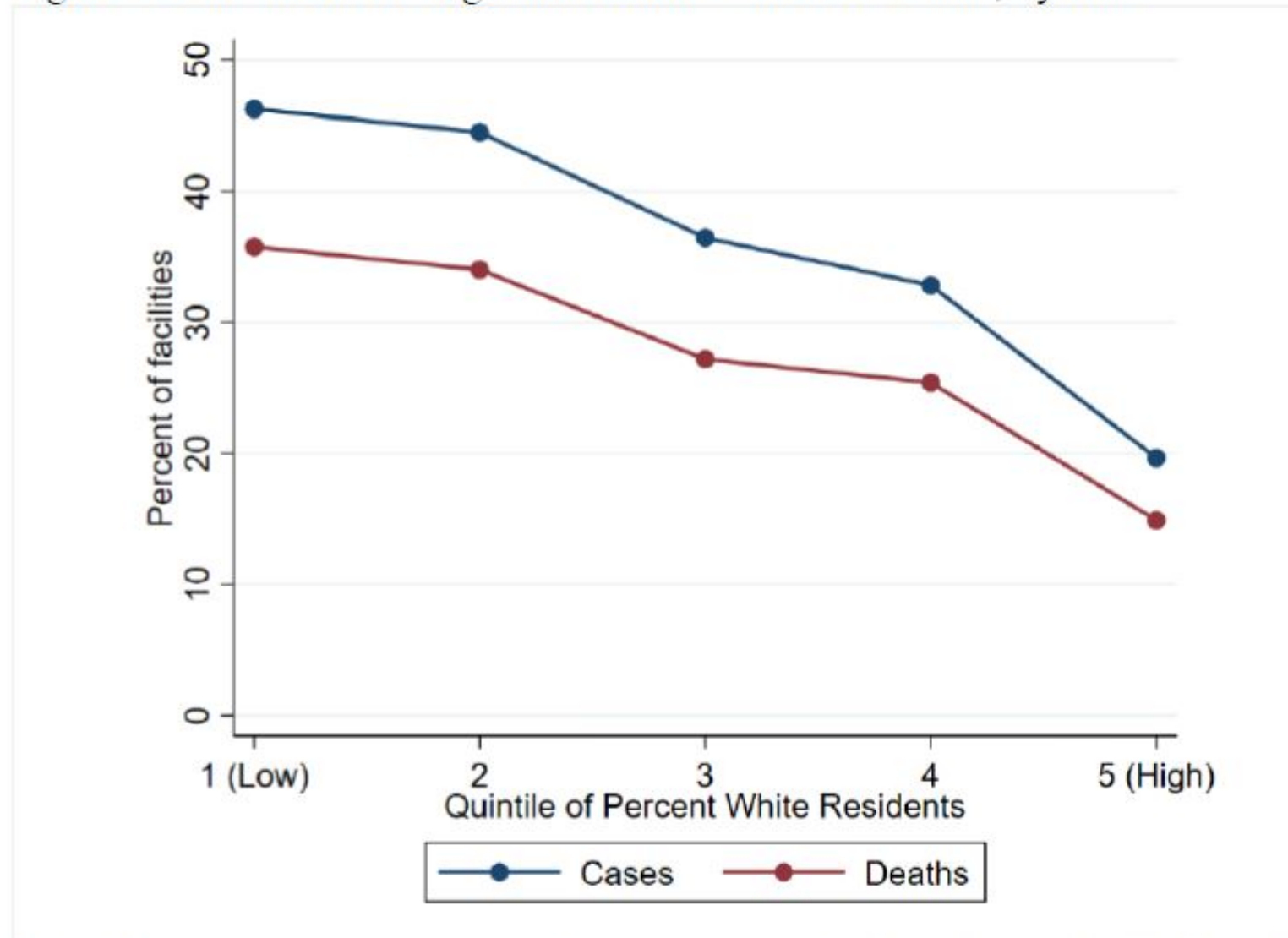
Chair of the Older Adults & Families Field-of-Practice

Co-Director of the Center on Aging & Work

In May, the [New York Times](#)' analysis showed that nursing homes serving significant populations of Black or Latinx residents were twice as likely to have at least one COVID-19 case than those where residents were primarily white.

Also in May, [Konetzka](#)'s analysis found a strong relationship between race and the probability of cases and death

Figure 1: Percent of Nursing Homes with COVID-19 Cases, by Race



Note: The percent of nursing homes with at least one case based on CA, CO, CT, GA, IA, IL, MA, NJ, NV, OH, TN, and OK; the percent of nursing homes with at least one death based on CA, CO, CT, GA, IL, NJ, NV, and TN

Nursing Homes and LTSS have a long history of disparities PRIOR to COVID

- Nursing home admissions among Blacks and Hispanics has long been found to be lower relative to non-Hispanic whites among those with similar physical need (Thomeer, Mudrazija, & Angel, 2015)
- Although proportions of non-white residents have increased in the past 2 decades (Li et al., 2015, Health Affairs).
- Nursing home care remains highly segregated. Compared to whites, racial/ethnic minorities tend to be cared for in facilities with limited clinical and financial resources, low nurse staffing, and high care deficiencies (Li et al., 2015, Health Affairs)

Why?? A Social Determinants of Health Lens

Social Determinants of Health:

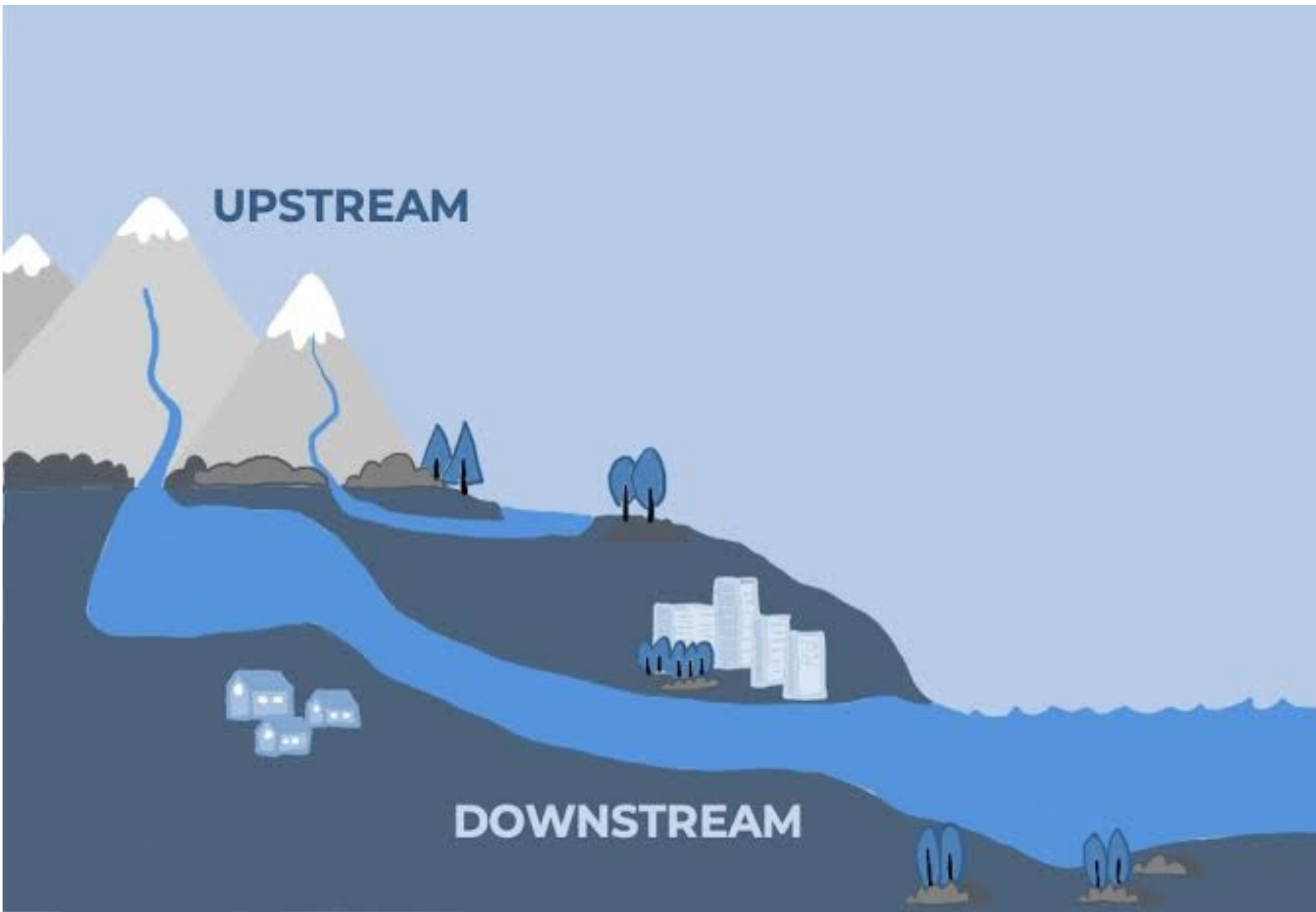
“the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes.” (Healthy People 2020)

Older adults from communities of color and indigenous people are more likely to experience cumulative adversity in their lifetime, the outcomes of which are magnified by the lack of health insurance and adequate access to health care over the life course. (Buchmueller et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2016).

And why in Nursing Homes?

People who need nursing home care usually want to stay close to home, nursing homes are often a reflection of the neighborhoods in which they are located.





Source: Gray, Anyane-Yeboah, Balzora, *et al.* COVID-19 and the other pandemic: populations made vulnerable by systemic inequity. *Nat Rev Gastroenterol Hepatol* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41575-020-0330-8>

Upstream determinants

- Racism
- Discrimination
- Social policies
- Poverty



Source: Gray, Anyane-Yeboah, Balzora, *et al.* COVID-19 and the other pandemic: populations made vulnerable by systemic inequity. *Nat Rev Gastroenterol Hepatol* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41575-020-0330-8>



UPSTREAM

Midstream determinants

- Educational attainment
- Employment status
- Safety of housing and quality of living conditions
- Stability of income
- Food security and quality of diet
- Exposure to toxins
- Medical mistrust
- Access to high-quality health care
- Access to COVID-19 testing and care
- Ability to physically distance during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Access to masks during the COVID-19 pandemic

DOWNSTREAM



UPSTREAM

Downstream health outcomes

- Heart disease
- Asthma and lung disease
- Obesity or overweight
- Type 2 diabetes mellitus
- Cancer
- COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths

DOWNSTREAM

Nursing Home/Long-Term Care Workers

- Many workers within nursing homes also share many of the same vulnerabilities experienced in the communities where COVID-19 is most prevalent.
- For example:
 - Live in predominantly non-white, low-income neighborhoods.
 - Live in families and communities with other essential workers who are unable to work at home and practice social isolation.
 - More likely to be sick, to have caregiving responsibilities for children or other family members, and to be facing financial hardship.
 - Lack of paid sick leave, fear of job loss, or a sense of dedication when staff are desperately needed may lead to coming to work sick, etc.

A Path Toward Health Equity

- Health inequalities are disparities in health that are unjust, unnecessary, avoidable and closely tied to the economic, social or environmental disadvantages that socially marginalized groups experience across a life-time.
- Health equity means social justice in health.
- Health equity mean that no one is denied the possibility to be healthy for belonging to a group that has historically been economically/socially disadvantaged.

How do we do that?

- At the most basic level, clinicians should focus on providing high quality standard of care for all patients, regardless of background.
- Work to dismantle and eradicate racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other root causes of systemic inequities.
 - Those most proximal to the inequity must be given voice to propose and implement solutions.
 - Quality improvement endeavors must include health equity as a focus.
 - A vital resource in health care facilities is adequately staffed, trained and integrated support services.

The Role of Social Workers

BSW and MSW level* social workers can offer skills during this critical time that are more important than ever.

Core functions of the social work role:

- to anticipate, assess, and address resident psychosocial needs
- Be the key liaison between the family and the facility.

[During a pandemic, that connection is more important than ever and often occurs over the phone.]

*The federal government requires only nursing homes with more than 120 beds to hire 1 full-time equivalent social services staff member, and that person does not have to hold a degree or license in social work.

The Role of Social Workers

But social workers are also trained in:

- **Cultural humility** and to understand the social determinants of health. Cultural humility is **key to fully understanding social situations and how we can be involved, or not, in the process of change.**

Cultural humility...

- adopts a learning stance while engaging in self-reflection about the cultural elements all parties bring to the table.
- a challenge to structural inequalities and oppressive systems
- Social workers can play a key role **in training and supporting other staff members as well.**



Thank you! Questions?

Christina Matz, PhD, MSW, FGSA
matzch@bc.edu