



Americans Speak Out on Disparities in Health Care

- Results from a National Poll -

The Harvard Forums on Health, a project of Harvard University's Interfaculty Program for Health Systems Improvement, commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) to conduct a national poll to explore the public's knowledge about disparities in health care and their opinions about various policy options to remedy inequities in the health care system. The issue of disparities in health care has received national attention since the Institute of Medicine's 2002 report *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*, which found that U.S. racial and ethnic minorities receive less care, and lower quality care, than white Americans. This national survey of 806 Americans age 18 and older included oversamples of African Americans and Hispanics, and was conducted August 19 through 26, 2003.¹ The main findings include:

- Americans of different races and ethnicities are divided about the issue of disparities in health care. Most whites feel that people of different races and ethnicities receive equal health care, though a substantial minority of whites do believe there are inequities in care. On the other hand, the large majority of African Americans feel that minority patients receive lower quality care than white patients. Hispanics are almost equally divided between those who feel that whites and minorities receive equal care, and those who feel the care minorities receive is not as good.
- Americans also differ as to the reasons minorities may be treated differently in the health care arena. Hispanics point to cultural and language barriers. African Americans are especially likely to feel health care professionals – whether they intend to or not – treat minority patients differently than whites. Both African Americans and Hispanics also tend to feel that minority patients are more likely than whites to disregard medical advice or forgo treatment because of distrust of the health care system or other cultural reasons.

¹ Altogether 501 non-Hispanic Whites, 130 non-Hispanic African Americans and 109 Hispanics were surveyed. For results based on total sample, oversampled groups were weighted to reflect their true representative proportion. Hispanics respondents were interviewed in their choice of English or Spanish.

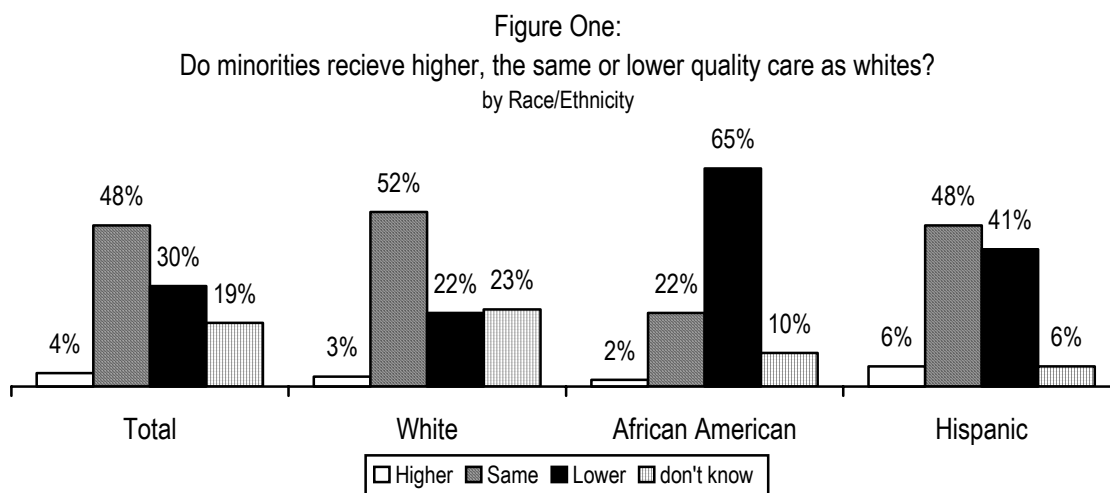
- When it comes to correcting inequality in health care, Americans of all races and ethnicities support a broad range of potential remedies. Most feel minority communities need to be educated about how best to advocate for themselves in the health care system. Majorities also support requiring special training for doctors and medical school students about treating minorities, and requiring providers to make interpreters available for non-English speaking patients. A large majority also supports efforts to increase the number of minorities working in health care; African Americans and Hispanics in particular feel strongly about this solution.
- This poll shows support for California's Racial Privacy Initiative, which would ban the state from classifying people by race or ethnicity. Despite the argument that passage of this initiative could make it difficult to study how minorities are treated in the health care system and track racial and ethnic disparities, a majority of Americans say they would support such an initiative in their home state. Although it is somewhat difficult to interpret this finding, it could be that people's desire for a color-blind society – the purported goal of the initiative – outweighs the more abstract goal of tracking inequities in the health care system.

These and other survey results can be found in detail on the following pages.

FINDINGS IN DETAIL

Americans are divided about the extent to which minority and white Americans receive different quality health care.

Whites are the least likely to feel that there are differences; half (52%) feel that whites and minorities receive equal treatment. Even among whites, however, one in five (22%) acknowledge that minorities receive lower quality health care than white Americans do. African Americans are the most likely to see differences in the quality of care different Americans receive. Two-thirds of African Americans (65%) believe minorities receive lower quality health care than whites, three times as many as say the care is equal (22%). Hispanics are divided on the issue. About half (48%) believe minorities and whites get the same quality of care and four in ten (41%) believe minorities get poorer quality care.



Americans also differ as to the reasons minorities are treated differently. Hispanics point to cultural and language barriers. African Americans are especially likely to feel health care professionals treat minority patients differently than whites.

After being told that research does indeed show that minorities, on average, receive less health care and lower quality health care than white Americans, participants were asked about reasons health care quality differs.

The most common reason, as the first panel of Figure Two shows, is cultural or language barriers impeding patient-doctor communication. Three quarters (76%) of Americans believe this is a reason care differs; four in ten (42%) consider it a major reason. Hispanic

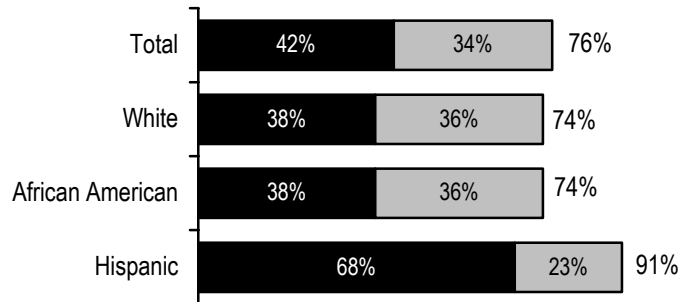
Americans are especially likely to consider communication barriers a problem. Nine in ten (91%) Hispanics say this is a reason minorities receive less and lower quality care, and two-thirds (68%) consider it a major reason.

Six in ten (59%) Americans believe that “minority patients disregarding medical advice or refusing treatment because of cultural differences or distrust of the health care system” is a reason for disparities in care. Hispanics and African Americans are more likely than whites to consider this a cause of inequality in care.

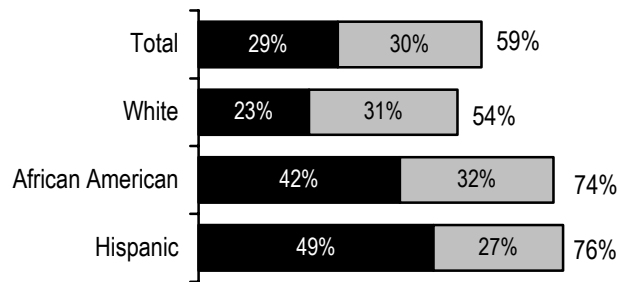
Over half of those surveyed (54%) feel another reason minorities and whites receive unequal care is that health care professionals – intentionally or not – treat minority and white patients differently. Here again there are racial and ethnic differences. Eight in ten (81%) African Americans believe this is a reason for unequal care, including over half (57%) who feel it is a major reason. Likewise, three-quarters of Hispanics (75%) believe this is a reason for unequal care and half (49%) believe it is a major reason. By comparison, less than half (47%) of the whites surveyed feel this is a reason for inequality in care.

Figure Two:
Is this a reason minorities receive less care and lower quality care than whites Americans?
by Race/Ethnicity

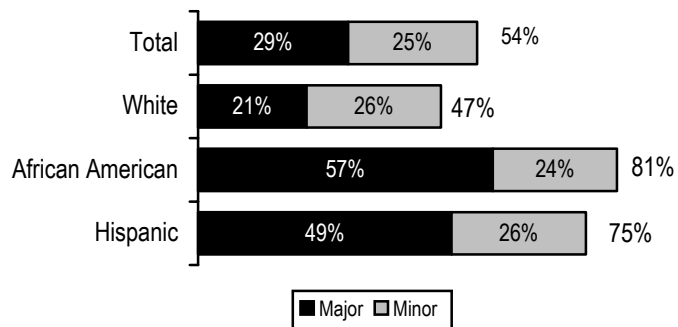
Cultural or language barriers get in the way of communication between doctors and patients



Minority patients are more likely than white patients to disregard medical advice or refuse treatment for cultural reasons or because they do not trust the health care system



Doctors, nurses and other health care professionals - whether they mean to or not - treat minority patients differently than white patients



■ Major □ Minor

Americans support a broad range of potential remedies for inequality in health care.

Survey participants were asked about the importance of a broad range of potential solutions to the problem of disparities in health care.

Reflecting their personal interest in this issue, African Americans and Hispanics tend to feel all the potential solutions are more valuable than whites do. However, as Table One shows, even among white Americans there is broad acknowledgment that these steps are important.

“Working with minority communities about how best to get the health care they need and how to participate in treatment decisions” tops the list. Large majorities of African-Americans (95%), Hispanics (95%) and whites (88%) feel this is an important step in fighting health care disparities. Eight in ten (81%) African Americans and three-quarters (74%) of Hispanics feel empowering patients in this way is very important.

There is also broad support for cultural competence training for medical students and doctors. Substantial majorities of Hispanics (79%) and African Americans (74%) feel it is *very* important for doctors and future doctors to take classes about how best to communicate with and treat patients of different backgrounds. Similarly, Americans of all backgrounds, and Hispanics in particular, feel it is important for doctors and hospitals to provide interpreters for non-English speaking patients.

There is also support for measures that go beyond

Table One: Is this important in ending inequality in health care?		
	Important	
	Total	Very
<i>Working with minority communities about how best to get the health care they need and how to participate in treatment decisions</i>		
Total	90	70
White	88	68
African American	95	81
Hispanic	95	74
<i>Requiring medical students and doctors to take classes about how best to communicate with and treat patients of different racial and ethnic backgrounds</i>		
Total	85	63
White	84	59
African American	89	74
Hispanic	92	79
<i>Requiring doctors and hospitals to provide interpreters for non-English speaking patients</i>		
Total	82	61
White	77	53
African American	94	76
Hispanic	94	84
<i>Penalizing doctors, hospitals and insurance companies with a track record of treating people differently based on their race or ethnicity</i>		
Total	79	60
White	76	55
African American	88	78
Hispanic	83	68
<i>Increasing the number of minorities who work in health care</i>		
Total	76	48
White	71	39
African American	92	73
Hispanic	92	73
<i>Giving extra payments to doctors who have a track record of going out of their way to provide high quality care to minority patients</i>		
Total	53	28
White	49	23
African American	61	36
Hispanic	69	46

simply working to improve communication. Large majorities of African American (88%), Hispanic (83%) and white (76%) Americans feel it is important to “penalize doctors, hospitals and insurance companies with a track record of treating people differently based on their race or ethnicity.” African Americans in particular feel strongly about this; almost eight in ten (78%) say this is *very* important.

While there is broad support for punishing professionals and providers who give minority patients unequal care, there is less support for giving financial rewards to doctors who have a track record of making an extra effort to provide high quality care to minority patients, as the bottom panel of Table One shows. Still majorities of Hispanics (69%) and African Americans (61%) and half of the whites surveyed (49%) feel this is important.

Many Americans also think it is important to increase the number of minorities working in the health care field. African Americans and Hispanics are especially likely to feel this is critical. Over seven in ten African Americans (73%) and Hispanics (72%) feel this is very important compared with just four in ten (39%) whites.

This poll shows support for California’s Racial Privacy Initiative despite the fact that its passage might allow disparities in health care to go undetected.

Survey participants – in California and elsewhere – were given some background about California’s Proposition 54 and asked whether they would vote to support or oppose such an initiative. The question wording, which follows, explained that passage of the initiative could allow disparities in health care to go undetected.

Question Wording:

In California there is an initiative on the ballot, called the Racial Privacy Initiative, which would ban the state from classifying people according to race, ethnicity, color or national origin.

- Supporters of this initiative argue that this is a long overdue step toward a color-blind society that treats all people equally.

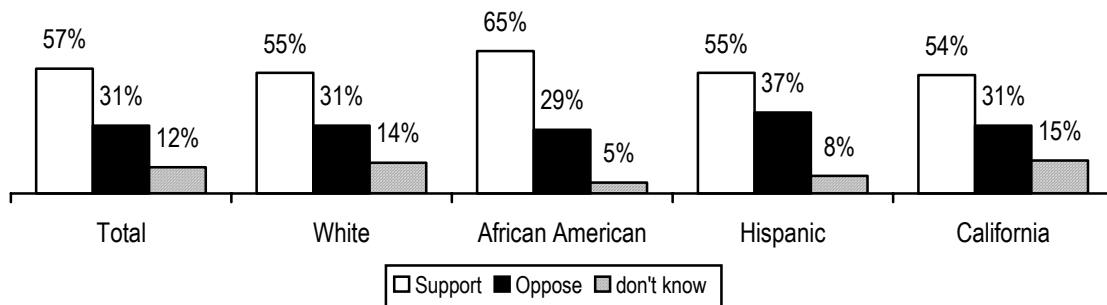
- Opponents of this initiative argue that it will make it difficult to study how minorities are treated in the health care system and the problems we have been talking about – like minorities getting poorer quality healthcare than whites – will go undetected.

IN CA: If the election were held today, would you vote "yes" to support this initiative, or "no" to oppose it?

IN OTHER STATES: If this initiative were on the ballot in your state would you vote "yes" to support this initiative, or "no" to oppose it?

As Figure Three shows, despite the argument that passage of this initiative “will make it difficult to study how minorities are treated in the health care system and the problems we have been talking about – like minorities getting poorer quality healthcare than whites – will go undetected,” majorities of Americans say they would support the initiative. African-Americans, who are arguably the most aware of, and upset about, disparities in health care, are surprisingly the most likely to support the initiative. Indeed, they support it by a more than two-to-one margin (65% to 29%). Majorities of white and Hispanic Americans also say they would support such a policy.

Figure Three:
 Proposition 54: California's Racial Privacy Initiative



It is somewhat difficult to interpret this finding. It might simply be that the potential effects of this initiative on the issue of disparities in health care are too abstract to ask about in a single survey question. This finding may also suggest that, as important as tracking disparities in health care is to Americans, it pales in comparison to the ultimate goal of a society in which all people are treated equally. For those who oppose Proposition 54, it suggests that the potentially damaging effects of this initiative may be difficult to communicate to the public.