



Systemic racism evident in George Floyd death and as black communities suffer disproportionately under COVID-19

The devastation caused by the coronavirus pandemic is massive, with more than 100,000 Americans dead, tens of millions unemployed, and a countless amount of wealth lost. Black Americans have been hit especially hard, because their households tend to suffer from higher unemployment rates, lower wages, and have much less savings to fall back on. Indeed, the unemployment rate for black Americans as of this writing is 16.7%, more than the 14.2% unemployment rate for white Americans. Further worrisome, at every level of education black Americans suffer a higher unemployment rate, according to the most recent reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Black Americans are less likely to be able to work from home, either because of the nature of their jobs or for lack of internet access, and are less likely to have paid sick days. Indeed, only 19.7% of black Americans had jobs they could do from home, compared to 29.9% of whites. Also, black Americans are more likely to risk exposure to COVID-19 because of their jobs: they make up 17% of those employed in front-line jobs such as grocery, public transport, trucking and the postal service. And though black Americans make up 12.5% of the U.S. population, they account for 22.4% of COVID-19 deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC).

This grim backdrop of inequality was made all the more stark this past week when an unarmed African American man, George Floyd, was killed by a Minneapolis police officer who pressed his knee into his neck for nearly nine minutes while taking Floyd into custody. The nation has erupted into protest over the brutality and racism evident in that act, and is demanding justice and change. But the road to real change will require an economic response as the injustice of racism is inextricably linked with the hardship of economic inequality.

To be sure, economic inequality is not solely a race issue. The reality is there are two Americas in the United States, and the struggle between them is real.

How we address that equality could start with practical, tangible reforms. Though always controversial, the longer we avoid a dialogue about economic reform, the more dramatic the divide of economic inequality becomes. Those reforms could take many forms, including a commitment to high quality childcare that addresses uneven starting points, a stronger wage-floor to eliminate in-work poverty, a public-private partnership commitment to skills development and job training, consideration of a national industrial strategy or establishment of state investment banks with regional focus, and a path to common sense tax reform that seeks to better balance the direct and indirect tax burden individuals shoulder without tipping into a redistribution of wealth scheme.

All too easy to write about, to be sure, and so hard to devise and implement. And yet our pain and suffering as a nation at a time like this shows us we have to try. Too often we have been in this position and we have let our feelings dissipate with the passage of time, the inaction of our leadership, and the scope of the challenge ahead of us. Let us not allow the legacy of this pandemic and the painful evidence of the inequality gap across America continue to widen the gulf between who we are and our vision of ourselves as a nation of prosperity and justice for all.

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