

Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness

PolicyLink

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Community members gathered at the Say Their Names Cemetery for a candlelight vigil on June 19, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in honor of Juneteenth, and to mark the lives of Black men and women who have died at the hands of police brutality. (Brandon Bell / Stringer via Getty Images)

Foreword:

An Invitation Into a Conversation of Significance

Tyler Norris, MDiv, CEO, Well Being Trust

“Any time you have an opportunity to make a difference in this world and you don’t, then you are wasting your time on Earth.”

—**Roberto Clemente**

The vision of advancing well-being for all by transcending the barriers of whiteness is not new. But as a nation, we have struggled mightily to actualize this in our lives, deeds, and outcomes. Individually and collectively, it is essential that we refresh this vision and redouble our commitment, starting with ourselves. I wrestle with this deeply, both on a personal level and in my role as a philanthropy leader. Bottom line: this current chapter of American racial reckoning is prime time for going deeper to understand the barriers to equity and justice and to act on what we learn. My childhood hero, Roberto Clemente, a baseball player and humanitarian, summed it up well in the highlighted quote.

Over four decades, I have been blessed to serve alongside residents in over 500 US communities in every state, rural and urban, red and blue, working for equitable health and well-being. Daily, I am given hope by the innovative and compassionate pragmatism of diverse local leaders working across lines that too often divide. At the same time, I am tortured by the supreme failure of our nation to measurably improve the health and well-being of people of color, and to reduce racial and ethnic health and wealth disparities. It is a travesty that amidst all the private and public sector actions taken in my lifetime, the health and opportunity gaps have widened across the board: maternal mortality, child mortality, education attainment, health, wealth, incarceration, homeownership, and more.¹

Too much that passes as philanthropy, community benefit, bipartisan policies, and organizational practices and investments to improve health and well-being for all in our nation has proven to be tinkering around the edges. When, as leaders, we come to know that our actions do not add up to the desired changes, it becomes unethical to continue doing the same.

How do we reach the point where our values and goals for advancing the dignity, worth, and equitable well-being of all members of our society align with our personal and collective actions? As this paper illustrates, policy change is a given—but we cannot stop there if we are committed to sustained change.

I challenge White readers to resist the inclination to defend the status quo in the name of loving our country, or to pre-judge Black voices and the righteous protest of diverse Americans of every stripe. Protest is the voice of the unheard, and for me, it is a sign of hope and readiness to work for a better future. It is time to see with new eyes, hear with new ears.

Instead of falling into defensive postures, let us commit to openness and curiosity. Let us ask ourselves, “What am I passively consenting to? Where am I inert or complicit? What can I do differently in my workplace, my school, my community, our democracy?”

The work of transcending the evasive barriers of whiteness is uncomfortable, messy, and may take generations. When “we” (starting with White people) put Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) at the center of work to advance well-being for all, we are taking collective action for a just and fair society, and a better future for all. When we ensure the most vulnerable in our families and communities have access to the tree of life—the vital conditions for well-being—we all become stronger. In my faith tradition, this is Sunday School 101.

As I reflect on what is needed to transcend the barriers of whiteness, I need not look past my own childhood struggles. When I was 14, a friend and I were arrested for a spree of vandalism. After three years of reconciliation and restitution, my record was expunged, and I was off to college. As a young person struggling with my own trauma and adverse childhood events who acted out, I was embraced by my community, and community saved my life. By grace, here I am. Such a second chance is not the reality for many youth of color whose lived experience brings them up against the law, as did mine. The opportunity to recover and better oneself should not be a privilege reserved for a White man.

Well Being Trust commissioned this body of work with PolicyLink to better understand how our nation can fundamentally end the malignancy of racism by addressing racism comprehensively at personal, systemic, and structural levels, and by transforming legacies and structures that perpetuate exclusion and limit equity of opportunity. To tackle the underlying problems that thwart equitable health and well-being, we must make deep changes to organizational practices, public policies, and the uses of investment capital.

We see this narrative and policy roadmap as essential to fulfilling our philanthropic mission to *advance the mental, social, and spiritual health of the nation*, while saving lives from deaths of despair. This is work Well Being Trust, PolicyLink, and scores of partners are advancing via the Well Being in the Nation (WIN) Network² and other affiliations. Together with individuals and groups working across sectors, issues, and perspectives we are choosing to follow the lead of BIPOC calls to advance actions in seven vital conditions for intergenerational well-being: basic needs for health and safety; lifelong learning; meaningful work and wealth; humane housing; a thriving natural world; reliable transportation; and belonging and civic muscle. This paper bolsters those efforts by offering a new narrative for systemic change, one that insists that policies that de-center whiteness and address inequity benefit every one of us and society as a whole.

Beyond the paper itself, this is an invitation into a *conversation of significance*. This can be a dialogue on which the future of the American people rests, as well as the health of our democracy, the fairness of our economy, and the security of our nation. Please join us in this worthy and humbling journey, a “we the people” discourse of hope and mutuality, and an effort to build the political will to act with courage and dismantle the wrongs in our midst. Let this moment of shared suffering be one in which we discover personal and policy pathways that enable us to live up to the promise of our nation, affirming that *all* are created equal.



Marcus Martin, who was injured when a car plowed into a crowd of people protesting against the white supremacist Unite the Right rally, his wife Marissa Blair (behind with arms around Marcus) and friends visit the memorial built at the place where he was injured and where 32-year-old Heather Heyer was killed in the same attack August 13, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. (Chip Somodevilla / Staff via Getty Images)



Cecilia Garcia, member of La Familia Latina Unida and founder of Family Reunification not Deportation, speaks during an emergency meeting plan of action on how to defend and protect undocumented communities at Lincoln Methodist Church in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, June 19, 2019. (AP Photo/Amr Alfiky)

Introduction

This past year has upended how the country thinks and talks about race. A deadly pandemic has exacted a steep toll and surfaced stark and deep disparities tied to age-old structures and systems of exclusion, triggering justified skepticism of generic assurances that “we’re all in this together.” A profound and widespread response to police violence and brutality against Black people united Americans of all races and backgrounds in an urgent call for racial justice. The white nationalist extremists who stormed the Capitol at the turn of the year carrying Confederate flags and other symbols and slogans of white supremacy have also spoken, signifying the challenges ahead. All this was followed by many incidents of hatred and violence directed at Asian Americans that should be understood as the continuation of a shameful history of prejudice, often sanctioned or abetted by the state. And while nativist anti-immigrant rhetoric no longer emanates from the White House, the fate of policies designed to support, include, and fairly treat newcomers remains unresolved and as contentious as ever.

If there is good news, it is that this tumultuous year has ushered in an unprecedented opportunity to radically remake our public discourse in a way that can lead to both greater understanding and ensure that all people in America—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism—participate in a just society, live in a healthy community of opportunity, and prosper in an equitable economy. Some, including the authors of this paper, have already proposed a “racial equity governing agenda”³ to improve the well-being of *all* Americans, and the elements of that agenda are coming into focus to assess the practices and policies of government agencies. But the intense period we are living through makes it even more critical that we understand how and why racial equity has so far been thwarted. That awareness can be a building block for a more just and fair society.

This paper makes the case for centering the needs and experiences of people of color as the pathway to design and advance well-being policies for all. We emphasize that although the fates and fortunes of White people and people of color are interconnected, racism has pervaded our politics and culture in ways that prevent people from seeing or acting on that commonality. We seek to motivate and guide the shaping of a new narrative with the start of a well-being policy roadmap, offering ways to rethink familiar social and economic policy problems by “de-centering whiteness” and centering Blackness and, more broadly, the experiences and aspirations of people of color. The need to make this fundamental change has been with us for a long time, but the crises of racial inequity and injustice that dominated 2020 have reinforced the urgency of taking this on directly and immediately.

Structural racism⁴ has created the very conditions that are now increasing illness and death rates of portions of the White population from substance abuse, suicide, and other responses to their increasingly pessimistic prospects. The challenges confronting White working-class populations today could be more effectively addressed if structural and institutional racism had been confronted in the public sphere at the necessary fundamental level decades earlier.

New York Times columnists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn recognized the consequences of economic disinvestment when they revisited rural Yamhill County, Oregon, where Kristof had grown up, to examine the causes and costs of the crisis faced by its White working class:

In the 1970s and '80s it was common to hear derogatory suggestions that the forces ripping apart African-American communities were rooted in “black culture.” The idea was that “deadbeat dads,” self-destructive drug abuse and family breakdown were the fundamental causes, and that all people needed to do was show “personal responsibility.”

A Harvard sociologist, William Julius Wilson, countered that the true underlying problem was lost jobs, and he turned out to be right. When good jobs left white towns like Yamhill a couple of decades later because of globalization and automation, the same pathologies unfolded there. Men in particular felt the loss not only of income but also of dignity that accompanied a good job. Lonely and troubled, they self-medicated with alcohol or drugs, and they accumulated criminal records that left them less employable and less marriageable. Family structure collapsed.⁵

Broad acknowledgment of this shared fate can be hard to come by. Our economic, political, and juridical systems devalue the lives of people of color and Indigenous people in ways so ingrained as to seem immutable. Changing how White Americans recognize the ways that racism and racialized capitalism affect outcomes for everyone will need to run deeper than recasting political priorities, as hard as that will be. The most meaningful changes must engage one’s fundamental sense of identity, humanity, and place in the world.

Solving problems in education, health, the economy, or the criminal-legal system and creating laws and programs designed to benefit the people most oppressed by those systems often end up benefiting people of all races. This calls for the generation and widespread acceptance of a new narrative framework that arises from, and speaks effectively to, the pain and anger that people feel, directs their attention away from racial divisiveness, and affirms that their shared aspirations can only be met by taking on the root causes of their common problems. We need to fill out and put forward an analysis of race and class that identifies the underlying reasons for the spike in the so-called “diseases of despair”—the illnesses, addictions, injuries, and other traumas so widespread that they have led to significant increases in mortality rates in middle-aged White adults with lower levels of education. Those underlying reasons lie not in personal behavior or cultural pathology but in concentrated economic power and racialized political strategies which have traded on fear and prevented serious responses to societal problems.

This report makes the case through four stages:

- We begin by conveying what “centering whiteness” means as a social and institutional framework that prevents meaningful movement toward racial equality.
- We describe several social and economic problems for which progress has been stymied because centering whiteness led to the failure to face or solve crises when they were first faced by Black Americans. Now, many Whites are struggling with variants of the same forces, and while that has raised the visibility of the problems, it has not yet led to a systemic response.
- Then, we describe four ways in which divisiveness over race became central to American political strategy, narratives which will need to be confronted and superseded in the mindsets of many White Americans.
- The final section lays out the themes of a new narrative and its possibilities for policy change and invites further work on it.⁶

Robert E. Lee Memorial, Richmond, Virginia, June 24, 2020. (Black Lives Matter by Alix Bryan is licensed under CC BY 2.0)



How American Society Has Centered Whiteness

First, a word about what we *don't* mean. “Centering whiteness” does not mean or require that most White people actively and consciously subscribe to notions of racial superiority, though overt white supremacy ideologies and activities have lately come into the open in alarming ways. Rather, when White identity remains the implicit standard of normalcy and entitlement to the rewards of society, this leads to acceptance of the marginalization, “othering,” and, too often, dehumanization of those who are not White. This acceptance is often paired with denial that racism is still an important issue for American society.

Viewing whiteness as a continually adapting system that perpetuates racial exclusion and oppression calls on us to acknowledge that social transformation may begin with personal recognition and change, but it requires far more than that. In each institution and profession in mainstream America there has been a de facto “whiteness framework” which has shaped explanations, values, norms, and practices, and these have direct and persistent consequences for many elements of public life, including education, housing, employment and business, and the criminal-legal system. Barriers of whiteness show up as opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that are shaped and reinforced through family and community life and popular culture. Recognizing these implicit frameworks is a necessary step toward moving beyond the tacit acceptance of white supremacy. Many professions and fields of practice are recognizing those implicit barriers and starting to “de-center whiteness” with hopefully much more to come.⁷

The protests in response to police violence have shown more widespread support for Black Lives Matter demands than had previously been seen.⁸ The questions of what it takes to confront one’s own biases or those in one’s workplace and community, and what it means to be an “ally,” itself a debatable term, are being raised. While the long-term outcomes for the movement, or for public policy, of this year of outrage, mobilization, and reflection are not yet known, de-centering whiteness and placing justice for Black Americans at the center of all movements for progressive change are at least more visible than they had been.

I have spent my entire adulthood striving to understand the interlocking systems that undergird power, access, and belonging in our society. I have learned that the complex circuitry of capital, class, and race cannot be disentangled. And nobody—no body—is untouched by the dehumanizing imprint of a system that values some lives more than others. So in this moment, as a more blatant strand of white supremacy has reemerged in our political discourse, I am optimistic—but wary—about the ways in which I see White friends, family, and acquaintances earnestly grapple with questions of systemic racism in response to state-sanctioned violence against Black, Brown, and Native people. There seems to be something qualitatively different and deeper about the questions people are asking, their willingness to acknowledge whiteness as both a racial identity and an abstract system of meaning and power, the connections they are drawing between their personal experiences and the operating logic of our systems and institutions. I am optimistic when I think about the tremendous solidarity that could be channeled, the transformation that could be effected, if enough of us let go of our personal attachment to and investment in the idea of whiteness.

I am also wary, because I know about the history of race in the United States and how whiteness has retained its status as the unmarked norm by endlessly evolving and mutating to neutralize threats to its power, whether external or internal... So much of the righteous anger that sprung up in White communities in response to the brutal murders of Black people has already been defused and redirected into a recuperative new White identity—the racial justice ally. The problem is that “ally” is not an identity or a label that you can choose for yourself or earn. It has to be a verb. It has to be done—and then done again, and again, and again—with the understanding that racism isn’t *someone else’s* problem that White folks can choose whether or not to get involved with. It is *our* problem. This is why the fight for racial justice is the fight of my life. *My* liberation, *my* wholeness, *my* humanity, *my* community’s healing and well-being are at stake. I am nobody’s ally.

—A White Participant in This Project

Structural racism was most immediately and graphically brought to light in the operations of law enforcement, but it pervades a range of public systems, and the need to change fundamental values, norms, and practices extends throughout government and the private economy. Anti-Black racism gives these issues a particular form,⁹ and we will, in this paper, focus more on the Black experience than on the history, circumstances, and struggles of other communities of color and Indigenous peoples in the US. The task of reframing narratives and policies will only be complete, though, when our analysis has comparable levels of engagement with the ways in which each community of color and Indigenous population has had to defend against institutional racism, confront deeply entrenched inequities, and envision the path forward.

We turn next to several of the most urgent and compelling areas where this change is necessary.



A demonstrator holds a sign in front of an upside down American flag, during the Chicago March for Justice in honor of George Floyd in Chicago, Saturday, June 6, 2020. (AP Photo/ Nam Y. Huh)

Issues on which Progress Has Been Stymied by Centering Whiteness

The prevailing attitudes about race and the resulting ways that social problems have been framed have made it difficult to pursue an equity-driven agenda to advance well-being. The failures of policy that have followed from the power of the dominant narrative on race have led to many lives being gravely damaged if not lost, communities being disrupted, and substantial economic hardship. We briefly examine four such problems, each with a distinct way in which structural racism and the stories Americans tell themselves about race have made things worse and impeded solutions.

Police responses to mental health crises

A problem getting more attention in wake of recent police violence and protests has been how ineffective, ill-suited, and dangerous law enforcement can be when responding to individuals experiencing mental health crises. The *Washington Post* reported in 2019 that there were “1,324 fatal shootings by police over the past six years that involved someone police said was in the throes of a mental health crisis—about a quarter of all fatal police shootings during that period, according to a *Washington Post* database.”¹⁰ Armed officers too often escalate, rather than defuse, such situations, leading to an inordinate number of officer-involved shootings and too few cases resolved with the minimum use of force. The Treatment Advocacy Center posits that “...reducing the likelihood of police interaction with individuals in psychiatric crisis may represent the single most immediate, practical strategy for reducing fatal police encounters in the United States.”¹¹

This facet of American life shows up in homes and communities of every race but is not evenly distributed. Situations involving African Americans are more likely than those with Whites to end in a violent if not fatal incident due to lack of access to mental health resources, community trauma from police violence, and the “greater likelihood that a police officer will use deadly force with Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color.”¹²

Solving this problem requires acknowledging the racial disparities in these results and creating alternatives to policing in response to mental health crises. Following through in this fundamental and thoughtful way would result in not only an improvement in the circumstances facing Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color but for the White population as well.

The opioid crisis in the context of the War on Drugs and mass incarceration

A fundamental change in the economy that in previous decades destroyed Black economic security and community cohesion is now laying waste to White working-class communities, but the economic changes and the social effects are being perceived and interpreted very differently this time. Economic losses, physical and emotional pain, grieving for what has been lost, and pessimism about the future have created genuine vulnerability for which substance abuse is too commonly the only response at hand.

Drug overdose is the leading cause of accidental death in the United States, with nearly 70 percent of deaths linked to opioid use.¹³ Like many health inequities, the rate of opioid-related deaths for Black people is growing faster than the rate for Whites.¹⁴ Still, the staggering toll that the abuse of prescription painkillers and related street drugs has taken on the population of Whites with lower incomes and education levels in areas left behind by economic transformation cannot be overstated.

Repressive and misguided local, state, and national laws about drugs not only failed to achieve the putative goals of health or crime prevention but now contribute to lowered life expectancy and serious declines in well-being for the US lower income White population and lead to a lack of societal capacity or strategy to handle that crisis properly. As a result, “half a million people are dead who should not be dead,” said economist Angus Deaton in an interview with the *Washington Post*.¹⁵

The opioid problem among the White working class is nested in a larger environment in which people of color also face severe and deadly new as well as familiar substance abuse threats. The response to the latest opioid epidemic has been shaped by the legacy of mass incarceration. Decades after the commencement of the War on Drugs, only a piecemeal system for substance abuse prevention and drug treatment exists. The lack of health-promoting resources has led to devastating consequences. Rural populations struggling with opioid addiction lack access to holistic, preventive solutions such as safe, affordable housing, job training, and other treatment options. Instead, many people are arrested for charges related to substance abuse and end up serving months-long stays in rural jails. Between 2013 and 2019, the population in rural jails grew by 27 percent.¹⁶ Many of those inmates were arrested for charges like possession or failing a drug test while on probation.¹⁷

Those policies, designed for the social control of Black and Brown populations, did not just minimize treatment and prevention compared to draconian law enforcement and prison. They have hindered a rational, imaginative, care-driven response to substance abuse for the entire country. The recent uptick in attention to prevention and treatment generated largely for Whites with opioid problems is welcome but not only racially disparate but still swimming upstream against the predominant system of law enforcement and incarceration. The opioid crisis is very much an urban problem as well, as data released in December 2020 brought home: “A record 621 people died of drug overdoses in San Francisco so far this year, a staggering number that far outpaces the 173 deaths from COVID-19 the city has seen thus far.”¹⁸

The Great Recession, mortgage crisis, and predatory lending

When the financial crisis generated by the risky practices of Wall Street investment giants led to the Great Recession of a decade ago, the causes and consequences were widespread, and Americans of all races found themselves “underwater,” owing mortgage debt that far exceeded the suddenly shrunken values of their homes. The financial problems which sprang from that core issue affected all corners of the economy and government. However, the consequences were more racially disproportionate than is often understood. The long and sordid history of lending disparities by race took on a new form, and Black communities in particular were devastated by predatory loans that resulted in unprecedented wealth-stripping and the foreclosure of hundreds of thousands of homes, widespread economic insecurity, and the transformation of previously cohesive communities. By 2012, the Brookings Institution estimated that approximately eight million children had been affected by the foreclosures of the Great Recession.¹⁹ The consequences for mental health and well-being of these massive losses were serious for both individual families and neighborhoods.²⁰ The political priority to bail out the lenders was justified by a narrative which denigrated the possibilities of governmental regulation and attributed much responsibility to borrowers for their plight. Sometimes the blame was described as a general proliferation of irresponsibility and acceptance of moral hazards across the population, but widespread cruder forms of this blaming had strong racial overtones.²¹ This prevented a policy response which could have saved homes, assets, and economic security for people of all races. A decade later, these differential losses in home equity and ownership are central reasons for the persistence and widening of the racial wealth gap, as an analysis by Prosperity Now emphasizes: “By striking at the core of the wealth owned by households of color—the home—the economic crisis disproportionately impacted these communities. Not only did families of color lose a larger share of their wealth during the downturn compared to White households, but it also took them twice as long to recover from those losses.”²² Policies to prevent predatory lending and otherwise protect consumer finances would have had, and would still have, a positive impact on that gap.

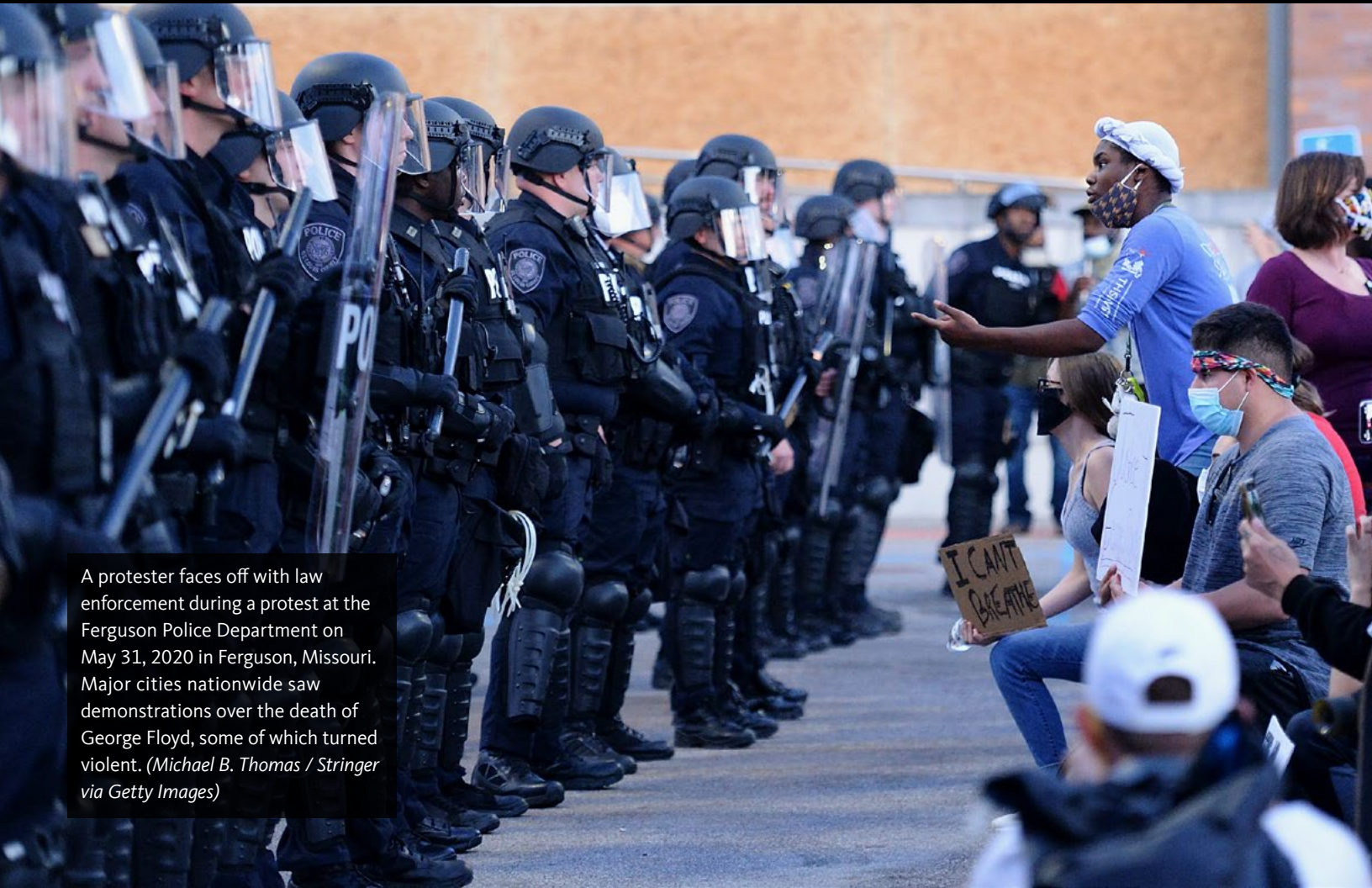
Racial inequities in education and workforce development in a knowledge-based economy

The persistence of large systematic differences by race in the resources for, and outcomes of, education has skewed access to opportunity in more ways now than in the 1950s and ‘60s when the nation first addressed these inequities at a judicial and legislative level. The scarcity of high-quality K-12 education forces parents of all races who can afford it to choose to live close to better schools or buy private education for their children, while those who cannot move or pay have very few good options.

Race and class sorting in higher education has been growing as well, with ever more students, disproportionately but not only those of color, facing greater debt levels for degrees or certificates and frequently not graduating. Forty-three percent of jobs in 2020 required at least an AA degree, but as of 2017 only 30 percent of US-born Blacks and 22 percent of the Latinx population have that level of education.²³ These are necessary credentials but do not provide the pathways to stable middle-class occupations and incomes in a knowledge economy that they once might have. There is already a shortage of skilled workers in many fields, with the US having a smaller proportion of people of working age with each passing decade. If a large percentage of young people of color receive a substandard education, the entire economy will become far less productive and competitive.



Sharena Thomas, left, Carroll Fife, center, Dominique Walker, second from right, and Tolani King, right, stand outside a vacant home they took over on Magnolia Street in Oakland, California. (Kate Wolffe/ KQED via AP, File)



A protester faces off with law enforcement during a protest at the Ferguson Police Department on May 31, 2020 in Ferguson, Missouri. Major cities nationwide saw demonstrations over the death of George Floyd, some of which turned violent. (Michael B. Thomas / Stringer via Getty Images)

Racialized Politics and Its Consequences for Well-Being

Responses to societal problems like the four profiled above have been shaped by an overarching pattern in American politics of race being used to divide the population, protect White economic advantages, advance new forms of social control, and further a particular skewed explanation of the causes and consequences of poverty and of the limits to government action. The roots of the pattern lie in stolen land, genocide, slavery, and segregation dating back centuries, but its current form dates from the 1970s. Tropes and narratives that perpetuate fear and division have been deployed to shape the mindsets of Americans and drive policy. These narratives perpetuate structural inequality, not least by promoting an outlook which misconstrues the meaning, consequences, and interconnectedness of race and class.

Strategies that have divided the electorate along racial lines have had major consequences for justice in every sense as well as economic security, health, and well-being. Four trends stand out in the origins, motivations, and implications of racialized national politics:

1. The rationale for mass incarceration and the ways that “race-neutral” criminal-legal policies have had a decidedly racially biased impact. The current protests in response to police violence against Black people are bringing into greater public view the broader regime of mass incarceration. In 2010, Michelle Alexander showed how not only street-level law enforcement, jails, courts, sentencing, prisons, and probation practices but much of the apparatus of government has been reconfigured as a form of social control—the “new Jim Crow,” the successor to eras of slavery and de jure segregation—keeping Black people from entering or succeeding in mainstream American life.²⁴ This has been normalized through applying laws and standards in differential ways, rather than officially sanctioning racial discrimination.

2. The evolution of “dog whistle” political frames and campaigns that appeal to racial grievances while seemingly shielding the presenters from being called out as racists.

The coded appeals to bigotry and fear with which we are familiar have been prominent in US political campaigns since the 1980s. Ian Haney Lopez traces the origins of this approach in that period and shows how it has mutated but not disappeared in our current environment of nativism.²⁵ White identity extremism is reaching into the mainstream, and attacks on the interests, rights, and lives of immigrants of color in the name of law and order have become federal policy. Thomas Edsall, in assessing Republican messages and strategy in the summer of 2020, saw the nation’s suburbs still having a high level of segregation which invited campaign messages based on stoking White fears, as shown in his account of rhetoric at the Republican National Convention warning that affordable housing would destroy suburban neighborhoods: “Trump warns the ‘suburban housewives of America’ that Joe Biden’s support of affordable housing ‘will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it and make it even better!’ Matt Gaetz, a Republican Congressman from Florida, echoed Trump on a future with Biden in the White House: ‘It’s a horror film really. They’ll disarm you, empty the prisons, lock you in your home and invite MS-13 to live next door.’”²⁶

The subsequent presidential campaign brought more of the same rhetoric but the election result, nationally and in states such as Arizona and Georgia, suggested that many suburban voters reacted negatively to this coded or not-so-coded appeal. Those suburban areas were not only more racially diverse than previously, but perhaps, though it is too soon to know, home to more White voters less willing to go along with the latest form of racial dog-whistling. The subsequent election of the first Black US Senator from Georgia with strong support in the Atlanta suburbs reinforced this encouraging sign.

I grew up in a former steel town turned buckle of the Rust Belt in the Midwest. In the 70s and 80s, our town hadn't overcome segregation or racism in any real way. But Black people and White people seemed to more than "get along." When my mother, sister, and I moved from an all-Black neighborhood to get closer to my school, we ended up as the first Black family in an all-White neighborhood. In my school, the Black students and White students made fast friends—we spent time at each other's homes, we went to each other's birthday parties, we took road trips together. My childhood may not have reflected a typical experience for Black and White families in the United States in the early 80s. Perhaps because, for a few decades in our town, White people and Black people had worked side-by-side in factories and fought together in unions for workers' rights. Many families were second- or third-generation immigrants from Italy, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Our diversity was our strength. But our "unity" was short lived.

As manufacturing almost completely left the area, so did the jobs, and so did the spirit that all our families were in it together. My family moved away, but I visited multiple times a year. I noticed a shift in my White friends' attitudes, politics, and how they talked about the "issues" of the town. The discomfort of White families seemed to be blamed more on Black and Brown families and the failure of the Democratic party rather than the industries and corporations that had quickly abandoned our town. In 2016, Donald Trump lost by only 3 percentage points in a town that formerly voted for the Democratic party year after year after year. The campaign tapped into feelings of loss, fear, and discomfort in White families, further dividing the dwindling population in the area. My hometown is a shell of what it once was. The feelings of interconnectedness are long gone. We simply cannot wait for a time when everyone feels comfortable in order to be in true solidarity with one another.

—A Black Contributor to This Project

3. Ideologically driven efforts to shrink the size and authority of government which have origins in segregationist strategies as well as libertarian concepts. Advocacy of very limited government sometimes is treated as though it emerged straight out of a classical liberal philosophy seminar, but its effective roots are much less genteel. Nancy MacLean's analysis of the period from the 1950s to the present shows how the intellectual and policy infrastructure built by conservatives to systematically attack the legitimacy of the federal government grew out of "states' rights" resistance to school desegregation and civil rights legislation at least as much as any race-neutral economic rationale to defend free-market capitalism.²⁷ What began as relatively small efforts linking universities in Virginia to right-wing policy agendas has evolved into a vast national infrastructure of foundations, think tanks, political strategists, and campaign financing by billionaires and their bundlers.²⁸ Even allowing for some philosophical differences across conservative movements, the overarching framework and apparatus have been marked by the synchronization of corporate opposition to government regulation and federal domestic spending with resistance to progress in racial justice. Also, the Black middle class was built disproportionately on public sector employment, due to the greater availability of those jobs once anti-discrimination policies were enacted and enforced in government, well before this happened in the private sector. Constraints on domestic public spending other than law enforcement have taken a big toll on government employment as a pathway for stable livelihoods. This decline in job quality as well as numbers is having a negative impact on the economic security of families of public sector workers, adding to the challenges to health and well-being presented by other forms of disinvestment.²⁹

4. The tendency for lower and middle-income White voters to support politicians, often espousing a form of right-wing populism, whose policies lead to greater harm and damage to their health. At least since the early 2000s, commentators have been seeking to explain what Thomas Frank called the “‘thirty-year backlash’—the populist revolt against a supposedly liberal establishment. The high point of that backlash has been the Republican Party’s success in building the most unnatural of alliances: between blue-collar Midwesterners and Wall Street business interests, workers and bosses, populists, and right-wingers.”³⁰ More recently, in *Dying of Whiteness*, Jonathan Metzl, a psychiatrist based in southern Ohio, combined his clinical experience with a cultural and political analysis to place “racial resentment” squarely at the center of this phenomenon. Metzl describes Trevor, a seriously ill “forty-one-year-old uninsured Tennessean who drove a cab for twenty years until worsening pain in the upper-right part of his abdomen forced him to see a physician.”³¹ Metzl writes, “...his experience of illness, and indeed his particular form of white identity, resulted not just from his own thoughts and actions but from his politics. Local and national politics that claimed to make America great again—and, tacitly, white again—on the backs and organs of working-class people of all races and ethnicities, including white supporters. Politics that made vague mention of strategies for governance but ultimately shredded safety nets and provided massive tax cuts that benefited only the very wealthiest persons and corporations.”³²

A health-based messenger like Metzl can become a target for the toxic rhetoric that characterizes the culture wars. Academic, medical, or psychiatric voices that address what is in White working people’s best interests have been caricatured and denigrated as representing the biased elites against which right-wing populism is organized.³³ This performative anti-elitism has been paired with the defense against charges of racism as being just the judgmental wielding of “political correctness.”³⁴ The so-called culture wars thus rage on, serving larger political interests and preventing other ways of understanding what has befallen the White working class.

I knew the names of just about everyone in the rural coalmining town where I grew up. It was the kind of place where we didn’t bother locking our doors, we looked after our neighbors (whether they wanted us to or not), and we had good reason to believe that if you worked hard and took responsibility for yourself, life would give you a fair shake. The place was far from idyllic—there was poverty, addiction, violence—but the experience of belonging, of a shared fate, came naturally. Among the thousand or so residents, about 985 of us were White. People sometimes seem to think that race only matters in diverse groups, or that it only enters a room on the shoulder of a person of color. But I’ve found the opposite is true: nowhere is race more present or more powerful than in an all-White crowd. We defined our world in contrast to big cities and all their noise, pretension, and danger. Nobody ever said out loud that “danger” was just another word for “difference,” but the sense of safety and superiority we enjoyed there had a distinctly monochromatic aura.

When I was 18, I moved to the other side of the country, to a mid-size Southern city where White people weren’t the majority, to attend a college where they overwhelmingly were. I wondered if anyone else [in the freshman class] was looking at me, I wondered if they could tell that I’d grown up eating free school lunch, that I had moved to this ivory tower from a 600-square-foot apartment that my parents and I moved into after the bank foreclosed on our double-wide trailer (the only home my family had ever owned). Everything I thought I knew about the world and my place in it buckled under the weight of all the differences—visible and invisible—present in that place, and I began to sense but could not yet understand the violence that bound them together.

—A White Contributor to This Project

Four Trends in the Racialization of National Politics

Trends

The rationale for mass incarceration and the ways that “race-neutral” criminal-legal policies have had a decidedly racially biased impact.

The evolution of “dog whistle” political frames and campaigns that appeal to racial grievances while seemingly shielding the presenters from being called out as racists.

Ideologically driven efforts to shrink the size and authority of government which have origins in segregationist strategies as well as libertarian concepts.

The tendency for lower and middle-income White voters to support politicians, often espousing a form of right-wing populism, whose policies lead to greater harm and damage to their own health.

Consequences

Street-level law enforcement, jails, courts, sentencing, prisons, and probation practices and much of the apparatus of government have been reconfigured as a form of social control, which has been applied differently for people of different races as an indirect method of sanctioning racial discrimination.

White identity extremism is reaching into the mainstream, and attacks on the interests, rights, and lives of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, especially immigrants, in the name of law and order became federal policy.

Conservative attacks on the legitimacy of the federal government grew out of “states’ rights” resistance to school desegregation and civil rights legislation. The resulting constraints on domestic public spending (other than law enforcement) have taken a big toll on government services as well as government employment as a pathway for stable livelihoods.

Conservative groups have aligned unlikely partners (blue-collar Midwesterners and Wall Street business interests, workers and bosses, populists, and right-wingers) and amassed enough people power to vote against strategies, such as strengthening the safety net, that would ultimately support some of those very people, such as low-income workers.

The United States Capitol Building in Washington, DC, was breached by thousands of protesters after a "Stop The Steal" rally in support of President Donald Trump during the worldwide coronavirus pandemic. (zz/STRF/STAR MAX/IPx)



How American Society Can Transcend Whiteness and Construct a New Narrative for Change

Discrete improvements in the policies that shape the nation's economic security, health, and well-being can be achieved, but a larger and more multifaceted strategy will be needed for more widespread change. Without a fundamental alteration of the ways in which Americans view race, transformative change is not possible. Centering whiteness and seeing progress for people of color as a threat to White people or their problems as deviations from normalcy prevents real change in public safety, education, economic opportunity, or any other sector.

Our attention to both narratives and policies reflects our appreciation that recalibrating on both levels is urgently needed. Narrative change and new approaches to policy are both important for reaching our intended audiences and their constituencies, both those already committed and those who could be persuaded by a new way of making the case. We aim to inform and motivate leaders from multiracial coalitions advocating for justice, faith-based movements among people of all backgrounds, new and traditional forms of labor organizing, and efforts in philanthropy committed to supporting transformative change. The case for a new narrative framework and innovative policy change should be as valuable for reaching the “persuadables” among Whites as well as people of color as it is for those who are already in alignment. Our goal is to not only affirm and equip but also to expand the range of people and organizations committed to racial equity.

A new narrative must shape and reinforce underlying beliefs and perceptions, what Haney Lopez calls “the hidden scaffolding” that undergirds political communications: “a skeletal story that can be told repeatedly, with different actors, facts, settings and scripts.”³⁵ In doing so, we aim to meet two broad objectives:

- People must see and become willing to resist negative behaviors, such as the racialization of public policy, ideological rigidity, and the unwillingness to be accountable to delivering on equity for all.
- Positive mindsets are important, to get people thinking about how to move beyond competition among oppressed groups over perceived scarce resources and to find edification and cohesion in building bridges and addressing structural problems.

As the progressive organizations Race Forward, Community Change, and PolicyLink advised in their recent collaborative Housing Narrative Change project, it will be important to talk directly about race, since it is at the heart of the matter, and at the same time, establish a shared value and positive goal or aspiration before moving on to naming the problem.³⁶

The trends in racializing national politics can be countered through promulgation of a new narrative, which Haney Lopez refers to as a new type of race-class analysis.³⁷ He writes, “The cure for progress on both racial and economic justice is countering the Right’s racial messages. The dark message of dog whistling lies in convincing people that, to keep their family safe, they must elect politicians who will ban Muslims, build a wall against Mexicans, and double down on imprisoning Black people—when in reality they are electing politicians indebted to, and often members of, a new oligarchy.”³⁸

The new narrative should vary to connect with different groups with respect to crafting and delivering messages, but all variants should point in the same direction: to generate an understanding of race that is inclusive rather than divisive and which lays the foundation for powerful collective action to improve health and well-being.

Components of a New Narrative for Systemic Change

Core Ideas

Convey the reasons for economic disruption and dislocation in terms and stories through which White workers can see the common roots of their losses in the experiences of Blacks, as a result of how contemporary capitalism relentlessly sheds jobs and disinvests in places.

Make the case for how policies initially intended to provide access to the people most excluded by social and economic structures can also benefit many other groups and society as a whole.

Present “centering Blackness”—policies and practices that intentionally lift up and protect Black people— as an alternative to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that center whiteness. Centering Blackness is a perspective which will promote collective healing and better outcomes for people of all races.

Raise public expectations for government to become a force for solving significant economic and social problems.

Elaboration and Illustration

Acknowledge that people of color face more intense versions of these modern problems, such as the racial wealth gap, due to historical inequities while showing how actions to address these inequities will benefit people of all races.

Demonstrate the broadly shared positive consequences of equity-driven actions, to overcome the persistent perception of redistributive programs as handouts for the undeserving.

Centering Blackness can be conveyed as the basis for policies which can build a society and economy that are just and equitable for everyone by centering those, notably Black women, who were previously deliberately excluded.

The pandemic may present the opportunity to shift the balance of influence between competing narratives about government, to reinforce its potential to generate economic fairness and stability as well as public health and environmental resilience.

This new narrative calls for four main tasks:

Convey the reasons for economic disruption and dislocation in terms and stories through which White workers can see the common roots of their losses in the experiences of Blacks, as a result of how contemporary capitalism relentlessly sheds jobs and disinvests in places.

To counter divisive, fear-based messages about their loss of status, White working-class Americans will need to be able to relate to how the well-being problems they face today have their roots in broader economic changes. Case and Deaton, the economists who earned widespread public attention in 2015 for documenting the trend of growing substance abuse, suicide, and other “diseases of despair” and declining life expectancy among noncollege educated Whites, subsequently described how this results from the path along which American capitalism proceeds.³⁹ Our economic system, in a continual drive for new sources of profitability when older ones are played out, repeatedly sheds itself of masses of workers who are no longer needed, and this dislocation triggers crises in health and well-being. What is happening to the White working class these days, they say, is what happened to the urban Black working class beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, when intense deindustrialization took hold and eliminated the stable, often unionized jobs of millions of Black people. The pressure to maximize shareholder value at the expense of other goals has been the most powerful force leading to these consequences.⁴⁰

The goal that American working people of different races will see their common fate and organize against their common foes has long been central to left-leaning populist movements, though it has not translated into consistent political solidarity. The decline of racially diverse industrial unions has hurt, but the new narrative must look forward, not back nostalgically to a perceived golden age of blue-collar prosperity during which organized labor made gains during the country’s temporary dominance in manufacturing. Contemporary issues of crippling student debt and medical debt, and the injustices and insecurity of the gig economy, have powerful potential to humanize the common plight across working people of all races. The goal will be to re-channel their pessimism about the barriers to opportunity into outrage and mobilization against corporate economic and political targets. This case should be made in a way that recognizes that people of color face more intense versions of these modern problems due to historical inequities such as the racial wealth gap while showing how actions to address these inequities will benefit people of all races.

Make the case for how policies initially intended to provide access to the people most excluded by social and economic structures can also benefit many other groups and society as a whole.

When policies are enacted to address barriers which prevent particular groups of people from fully participating in society or accessing economic opportunity, those changes will often benefit many others as well. This is the “curb-cut effect,” referencing the laws which mandated that sidewalks at intersections have ramps put in for wheelchair users. The result was a tangible advantage not only for people with disabilities but for many others, from those with strollers, roller bags, and delivery carts to cyclists and others, and are now universally appreciated and taken for granted as essential to the urban streetscape.⁴¹

Many equity-driven actions help parties beyond those for whom they were originally intended and portraying them that way helps to overcome the persistent perception of redistributive programs as handouts for the undeserving. Strategies to advance equity offer widespread advantages in education, economic justice, health, and other areas. Strategies intended to overcome racial disparities in access to jobs, for example, can target Black people but still help to meet universal goals and have a positive impact on society overall. The new narrative needs to engender broad support for the effective education of people of every race and class to ensure the success of the overall economy. This will involve increased and more equitably distributed funding, improved curriculum and teaching for students from all backgrounds, and the removal of systemic barriers to their completion of higher education. This is “targeted universalism”—setting universal goals for the general population that are accomplished through targeted approaches based on the needs of different groups.⁴² It is a modern framework but also harkens back, for example, to longstanding efforts to live up to the meaning of education as a public good. It represents a nuanced appreciation of equity as generating benefits for all of society, not as a trade-off among groups or a simplistic “win-win” bargaining scenario. Heather McGhee characterizes the advantage of getting away from a zero-sum mentality as the Solidarity Dividend: “The task ahead, then, is to unwind this idea of a fixed quantity of prosperity and replace it with what I’ve come to call Solidarity Dividends: gains available to everyone when they unite across racial lines, in the form of higher wages, cleaner air and better-funded schools.”⁴³

Present “centering Blackness”—policies and practices that intentionally lift up and protect Black people—as an alternative to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that center whiteness. Centering Blackness is a perspective which will promote collective healing and better outcomes for people of all races.

The alternative to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs which center whiteness can and should be portrayed in an affirmative way as centering Blackness. As authors from the Insight Center put it:

Centering Blackness takes into account the ways in which our social and economic structures are built on the invisibility and disposability, and yet necessity, of all Black people and Black labor. Simply put, centering Blackness demands that we create and design policies and practices that intentionally lift up and protect Black people. It requires that Black people lead the creation of these policies and practices. It recognizes the uniqueness of economic disadvantage that has come to define the majority of the Black experience, and it puts Black people—specifically Black women—at the core of a vision for racial justice.⁴⁴

This is an assertive but also an inclusive vision. The goal of centering Blackness can be the basis for building a society and economy that are just and equitable for everyone, and its absence holds everyone back: **“Anti-blackness doesn’t only impact Black people; it holds back and harms all Americans and necessitates collective healing.** We must consider that anti-blackness ensnares and disadvantages every potential beneficiary of economic-related policies and programs.”⁴⁵

Centering Blackness should be closely connected to undoing gender inequity, and here too the intersectional message is that addressing the economic needs of the most marginalized will generate overall prosperity. Janelle Jones proposed that “...if policymakers can reorient their thinking toward a ‘Black women best’ framework, we can shift the economic worldview to include and elevate Black women and other people of color in ways that will benefit everyone. A ‘Black women best’ ideology would lead to enacting deliberate strategies of inclusion to create a stronger economy so that our most marginalized can thrive.”⁴⁶

The ideology would lead to action to enact different policy priorities, and eventually produce better outcomes—in health care, education, and wealth-building. “And by doing so, it would ensure that the floor gets lifted for everyone, and the economy as a whole benefits from strong and widespread growth and prosperity.”⁴⁷

Raise public expectations for government to become a force for solving significant economic and social problems.

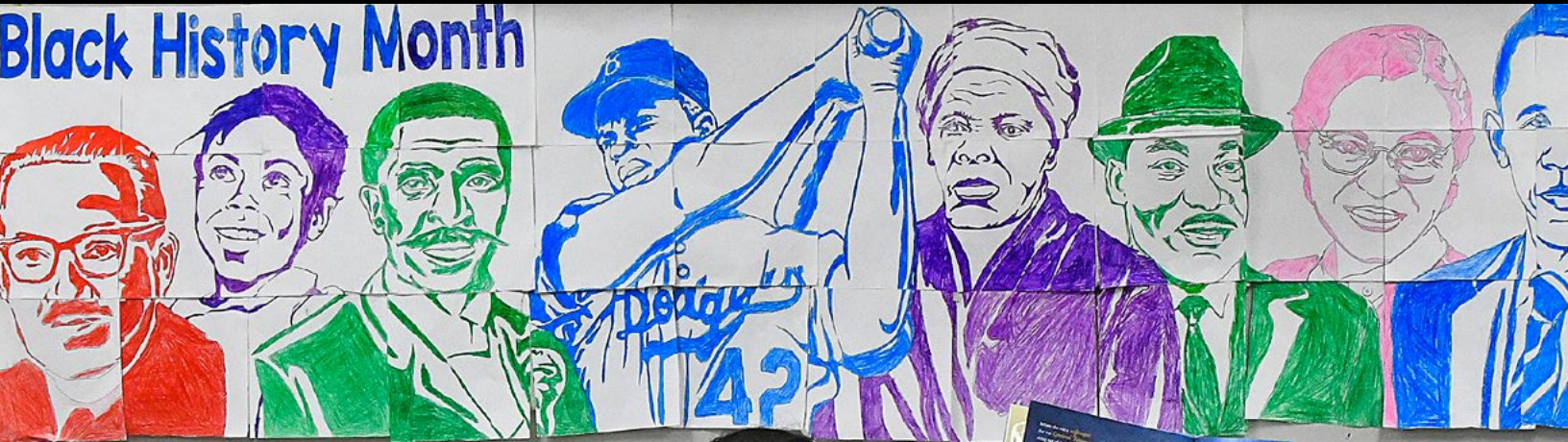
The current right-wing populist narrative characterizes the public sector, especially the federal government, as at best unhelpful and at worst contrary to the interests of the White working class. As we noted earlier, the conservative agenda for strictly limited government has segregationist as well as libertarian roots, and those have taken on modern form in racially coded or sometimes explicitly racist messages about who is a deserving “maker” and who is a “taker.” But as well dug in as that approach may have been in the Trump era, new circumstances might provide the opening for change. The ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic show that greater as well as smarter and more equitable public investment is urgently needed in many fields, from jobs and basic economic security to education, medical care, and public health. The concurrent ratcheting up of hardships from unusually severe natural disasters has increased general awareness of the need for government action to address climate change, from emergency services and infrastructure to transitioning to a green economy. These domains of public investment, when guided by strong racial equity criteria, can lead to economic and environmental benefits for the whole population. A revival of positive appreciation of, and high expectations for, a proactive federal government is going to be driven by urgent challenges which can only be addressed through collective action. This will take a shift in the balance of influence between competing narratives about the potential of government. But if such a reversal were to come about, the result would lead to restoration of the viability of government as a source of economic stability for many Americans.

Higher expectations of government should also encompass its role as regulator of the financial system. In the Covid-generated recession, the potential is rising for predatory lending to grow as masses of unemployed people seek to cover their housing and other living expenses. The opportunity is unexpectedly upon us to establish a financial regulatory framework which, in protecting the most vulnerable, provides support—and the chance to recover lost wealth over time—for people of every race and background. That will take detailed plans which will not happen without the push that would be provided by widespread public understanding of the history of race and wealth and the current consequences of that history, a key element of a new narrative.

These four core ideas provide a scaffolding from which to construct a new narrative and approach to policy change, a basis for de-centering whiteness and aiming toward building an inclusive society. There are big, structural factors to be understood and massively defended systems of oppression and denial to push through, but the key to changing minds and motivating people to act lies in making those systems less abstract and appealing to our common values and aspirations. Innovators in narrative frameworks have made a good start on some key equity issues, and now is the right time to broaden and strengthen the scale and scope of those efforts.



Nursing student Andrew Wong, right, vaccinates South Los Angeles resident Annie Carmichael with her first dose of the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine to prevent the coronavirus at the MLK Community Medical Group clinic in Los Angeles, Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2021. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)



Grove Elementary School teacher Cameo Williams reads a book about Harriet Tubman to her third grade class against the backdrop of a mural they created for Black History Month in Normal, Illinois, Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2021. (David Proeber/The Pantagraph via AP)

Conclusion

Had American society over the past half century faced its problems fairly, adequately, and smartly as Black people suffered disproportionately, our current well-being crises, in which the White working class features prominently, would not be so severe. Society does not get a do-over, but we can learn from the experience. Transcending the barriers of whiteness requires transcending the particularly American version of individualism, one which denies, dismisses, or denigrates various forms of collective responsibility or collective action. That is part of the reason race can be deployed so swiftly, devastatingly, and imperceptibly in the ways described above. The use of race is grounded in deep cultural narratives held by many Americans, and that calls for unsettling and changing that narrative framework. We have the experience and insights with which to undertake this new stage of what has been a long-term movement for racial justice. Recent events have generated widespread recognition of the urgency to act and increased our motivation to get started. We need to build on that recognition, urgency, and momentum.



. SAY OUR NAMES .

TERRENCE CRUTCHER · JEREMY ME
· TAMIR RICE · PHILANDO CASTILE ·
AKAI GURLEY · KENDRA JAMES · FREDDIE GREY ·
MICHAEL BROWN · TERRANCE FRANKLIN ·
TYISHA MILLER · BREONNA TAYLOR · AL
ERIC GARNER · SHANTEL DAVIS · WI
SANDRA BLA · WALTER SCOTT
TAMIA · REKIA BOYD
YVETTE SMITH · SHELLY FRASIER
JAMAR CLARK · TANISHA ANDERSON
TARIKA WILLIAMS · ALTON STERLING
KORRYNGA · KATHLEEN

RAGE

FL

CAN BREATHE NOW

BLACK LIVES MATTER AT SCHOOL

BE THE CHANGE

The George Floyd mural outside Cup Foods at Chicago Ave and E 38th St in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on June 4, 2020, following a memorial service. (The George Floyd mural outside Cup Foods at Chicago Avenue and E 38th St in Minneapolis by Lorie Shaull is licensed under CC BY 2.0)

Afterword

Michael McAfee, EdD, President and CEO, PolicyLink

Four-hundred years after the start of slavery, America is having a racial awakening and beginning to reckon with the consequences of a nation founded on genocide, stolen land, and slave labor. As the country shakes off the husks of complacency and indifference, people of all races, creeds, colors, religions, and national origin are discovering an unprecedented opportunity to realize the aspiration of justice in the first sentence of the Constitution of the United States.

When the founders ratified the Constitution, I would have been three-fifths a person. We are making progress, though justice still eludes us. At this moment, our ancestors extend an invitation to us. We can bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice by building a multiracial democracy. This democracy centers the diverse, beautiful bouquet of humanity in America instead of only centering White people, whose customs, culture, and beliefs have operated as the standard by which all other groups are compared, and through which non-White persons are seen as inferior or abnormal. People of color have always had a vision for, and worked to achieve, justice—just and fair inclusion into a society where all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. It is the time to work in transformative solidarity with them.

Transformative solidarity requires operating with a heart full of grace and willingness to live in a place of discontent and discomfort. The pursuit of justice and inclusion has always required finding peace *in* the struggle, not outside of it.⁴⁸ Our desire for comfort must no longer hold that work hostage. Continuing to center “whiteness” will result in a scale and pace of change, or the lack thereof, that is insufficient to bring about justice for the more than 100 million people in America who are economically insecure. Fifty-one million of those economically insecure Americans are White. A democracy and economy that were designed to restrict people of color’s access to opportunity and to cause intentional harm are also harming increasing numbers of White people, as evidenced by the emergence of high rates of the “diseases of despair” among them. America is too toxic.

As Angela Glover Blackwell wisely shares in [The Curb-Cut Effect](#),

There's really no choice. Continuing to write off poor people and people of color is not an option. Not when the American Dream is nearly unattainable for all low-income people, regardless of their ethnicity. Not when age-old health disparities between whites and people of color are narrowing because whites are sicker than they used to be and more are dying younger.⁴⁹

Constructing an unsustainable future has finally caught up with us, but we are well equipped to craft a better future. The African American historian and scholar Vincent Harding asks, "Is America Possible?"⁵⁰ I believe it is. Our democracy is an experiment, and for it to remain healthy, we must be persistent in perfecting it. Perfecting it requires designing it for all people in America—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism.

Presidential Medal of Freedom winner John W. Gardner counsels us that, "The renewal of societies and organizations can go forward only if someone cares. Apathy and lowered motivation are the most widely noted characteristics of a civilization on the downward path."⁵¹ We must be the ones who care and act. We must be the renewing spirit that builds a just America—an America that loves all its people.



In this Nov. 15, 2020 file photo, a young child holds an American flag as Georgia Democratic candidate for US Senate Raphael Warnock speaks during a campaign rally in Marietta, Georgia. (AP Photo/Brynn Anderson, File)

Notes

- 1 Health inequities start as early as pregnancy and birth. Today, Black women are **three to four times more likely** to die during childbirth compared to White women. In 2017, Black infants who were born alive died before their first birthdays at a rate **more than twice** that of White infants. Once they get to school, Black students are **nearly three times** as likely as White students to be held back. In the 2013-2014 school year, Black students were **almost four times** more likely than White students to receive at least one out-of-school suspension. Black workers and families are also at a disadvantage when it comes to economic security. In 2015, the wage gap between Black and White workers **was greater** than it was 35 years ago. The wealth gap between White and Black families has also increased, and is now **more disparate** than it was at the start of the century.
- 2 For more information on the Well Being in the Nation Network, see www.winnetwork.org.
- 3 PolicyLink is advancing such an agenda. See <https://www.policylink.org/federal-policy/racial-equity-governing-agenda> where the opening paragraph is: "Exclusion has been a defining characteristic of our country, undermining the very strength of our democracy. And the barriers that have long harmed Black people have been allowed to grow more entrenched and are hurting more people than ever before, including large swaths of White people. It is time to remove anti-Blackness from our policies and institutions, strengthening our democracy **for all** and demonstrating the power of a true multiracial democracy. We call on our national leaders to center Black people in this moment and harness the energy from the streets by committing to a Racial Equity Governing Agenda."
- 4 The Racial Equity Tools website provides this statement on "Structural Racism": "In early 2000, **The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change** convened an influential group of key thinkers, academics, and activists to discuss and define structural racism as "... a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity... It has come about as a result of the way that historically accumulated white privilege, national values, and contemporary culture have interacted so as to preserve the gaps between white Americans and Americans of color." <https://www.raciaequitytools.org/resources/fundamentals/core-concepts/structural-racism>.
- 5 Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *New York Times*, "Who Killed the Knapp Family?" January 9, 2020. The reference to being "marriageable" or not as the indicator of economic security or family stability seems archaic 30 or so years after Wilson wrote this, but the larger point about massive employment loss leading to deep poverty with few or no ways out is as true as ever.
- 6 We are indebted to and appreciative of the deep and insightful research on these subjects from which we have learned so much, but our approach to writing has been to put most of those references, discussions, and elaborations in the endnotes, to keep the main text as direct and brief as possible.
- 7 For example, in urban planning, a profession and function of public life through which so many racially inequitable policies have been enacted and sustained, when discrimination was officially sanctioned and abetted and later when policies were officially race-neutral, such a framework would include four main themes:
 - Whiteness and Exclusion, defining lines of racial demarcation in communities
 - The Value of Whiteness, as evidenced by the racial wealth gap
 - The Invisibility of Whiteness, whereby advantage and position are so normalized as to not be noticed, "the way fish don't see water."
 - The Durability of Whiteness, evident in the continued reproduction of racial hierarchy and inequality.Each theme is the subject of a section in Edward G. Goetz, Rashad A. Williams, and Anthony Damiano, "Whiteness and Urban Planning." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 2020, Volume 86 Number 2.
- 8 For example, the website, <https://defundpolice.org/>, is a collaboration among 13 organizations aligned with the Black Lives Matter movement, including PolicyLink, and includes documentation of campaigns and resources for promoting approaches to defunding police forces. It reflects the rapid evolution of protest to incorporate policy change. As of March 2021, the site referred to policy changes of this kind in over 20 cities and cancellation of police contracts with 25 school districts.
- 9 "The Council for Democratizing Education defines anti-Blackness as being a two-part formation that both voids Blackness of value, while systematically marginalizing Black people and their issues. The first form of anti-Blackness is overt racism. Beneath this anti-Black racism is the covert structural and systemic racism which categorically predetermines the socioeconomic status of Blacks in this country. The structure is held in place by anti-Black policies, institutions, and ideologies. The second form of anti-Blackness is the unethical disregard for anti-Black institutions and policies. This disregard is the product of class, race, and/or gender privilege certain individuals experience due to anti-Black institutions and policies. This form of anti-Blackness is protected by the first form of overt racism." From Movement 4 Black Lives, "Glossary," reprinted in MP Associates, Center for Assessment and Policy Development, and World Trust Educational Services, "Racial Equity Tools," December 2020.

- 10 Kimberly Kindy, Julie Tate, Jennifer Jenkins, and Ted Mellnik, "Fatal Police Shootings of Mentally Ill People Are 39 Percent More Likely to Take Place in Small and Midsized Areas," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/police-mentally-ill-deaths/2020/10/17/8dd5bcf6-0245-11eb-b7ed-141dd88560ea_story.html.
- 11 *Overlooked in the Undercounted: The Role of Mental Illness in Fatal Law Enforcement Encounters*, Treatment Advocacy Center, December 2015. <https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/overlooked-in-the-undercounted>. The summary of that report also states that "the risk of being killed while being approached or stopped by law enforcement in the community is 16 times higher for individuals with untreated serious mental illness than for other civilians." And "by the most conservative estimates, at least 1 in 4 fatal law enforcement encounters involves an individual with serious mental illness. When data have been rigorously collected and analyzed, findings indicate as many as half of all law enforcement homicides ends the life of an individual with severe psychiatric disease."
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