



2020 State of Black NY Urban League

We Must Seize This Moment To End Racism and Poverty Once and For All

TOPIC FOCUS: ECONOMIC EQUALITY

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In years to come, historians may refer to 2020 as a year of epic turmoil. In the first six months, we have experienced a national leadership crisis coupled with a political crisis, joined with an economic crisis that is spurred by a public health crisis, all contributing to a social crisis steeped in a 400-year racism and classism crisis. While this degree of turmoil has been cited as unprecedented, there is one enduring truth. As in all crises, those at the bottom of the economic ladder and people of color, particularly Black Americans, suffer the most.

Here in New York City, where enslaved Africans living in New Amsterdam built the settlement's infrastructure and laid the groundwork for its success and wealth but were denied the fruits of their labor, some 400 years later, equal access to opportunity and upward mobility remains an aspiration, at best, for many Black residents.

Today, New York City is one of the most segregated cities with one of the greatest wealth gaps in the United States. Higher income and wealth are clustered in the boroughs with the highest percentage of white residents. In 2017, white New Yorkers' median household income was more than three times what Black households earned; in 2018, the gap lessened slightly. Of course, that was for those who could get jobs. In 2018, the unemployment rate for Blacks was 2Xs that of white New Yorkers.

If the situation was bleak before, the pandemic has all but finished off any pretense of equal opportunity and economic advancement for Black New Yorkers living on the economic edge. It is more than time to call out the entrenched, systemic, anti-Black ideology that leads to a permanent economic underclass of Black Americans who 400 years later still do the jobs that allow white Americans to thrive and build wealth.

As New York moves to rebuild, our planning must begin with a day of reckoning. If Black New Yorkers return to the same low wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement; to little, if any, access to high quality health care or paid sick and family leave; and to a lack of affordable childcare, safe and affordable housing, reliable and affordable transportation, and equitable education, we will have failed.

So, what is to be done?

First, we must dare to think big when many will say this is not the time. We can hear already the desire to confine our thinking to the boundaries of so-called fiscal realities. If we start by defining the box, we will never venture outside of it. What if, for example, safety net benefits were tied to what it takes to achieve self-sufficiency based on where you live? What if there was a guaranteed basic income for all? How about measures to increase job security while offering opportunities for continuous retraining?



Second, a return to work must include a push for higher wages, emboldened by the now very visible role that low paid “essential workers” have played in keeping the economy alive. We can’t stop there. The onerous and racist policies that have prevented low-income people from gaining wealth must also be ended. Eligibility rules, for example, that disallow savings or the benefits cliff that pushes people back into poverty just as they begin to gain an economic foothold, must be revised to provide for asset building that enables low-income people to save in the likely event of future periods of economic instability, or as they aspire to build wealth.

Third, we can no longer divorce our efforts to fix discrete problems from the systemic issue of institutionalized racism. The battle will begin to be won when we solve for the interconnections that make an almost perfect web entrapping Black people. The current movement to redistribute police funding is one example. Racism has led to a militarized environment in our neighborhoods and schools. When we shift resources away from law enforcement, we can invest in more effective ways of addressing needs that emphasize dignity over domination.

Even that will not be enough. America’s enduring love affair with systemic racism extends far beyond policing to education, housing, health, employment and more. Correcting the economic inequity that traps low income people of color and destroys their financial resiliency in a crisis will require more than tinkering with the machinery. We are going to have to take the machinery apart and commit to a top to bottom redesign if we expect a different outcome.

It’s time to bury the American myth that everyone could get ahead if they worked harder and played by the rules. For Black Americans, the game is rigged. We must seize this moment to radically redesign our economic, social, and institutional systems if we are to end racism and poverty once and for all.

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