



Sign of the Times: Through the Lens of the Pandemic

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Racial Inequalities

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the brutal underbelly of American democracy that has refused to reckon with the legacy of colonialism and slavery, and which prizes wealth over justice. Racism has permeated the development of our social institutions, and it is past time to correct this. We see this starkly in the disproportionate effect the pandemic is having on marginalized populations: So far, “African-Americans [represent](#) nearly a third of U.S. deaths from the coronavirus pandemic ... despite making up only about thirteen per cent of the [population](#).” Evelyn Hammonds, who chairs Harvard’s department of the history of science and studies the intersection of race and disease, [argues](#) that rather than thinking that these disproportionate outcomes are the result of “something that black people either do or that’s in their bodies that makes them more susceptible to disease”—a common refrain since at least the 18th century—we should start “looking directly at the social conditions that, in fact, have produced higher rates of obesity and hypertension and other comorbidities that seem to have an impact on who’s more susceptible to the coronavirus.”

The current social conditions of blacks in America have developed out of historical practices. [In fact](#), “counties with disproportionately high shares of black Americans today are the same counties that had large black populations before the Civil War, suggesting that historical conditions have had extremely persistent impacts on the outcomes of African-Americans.” Those same counties tend to have the highest levels of poverty. [Public policy and personal bias](#) after the Civil War has had the effect—often intended—of segregating blacks in urban areas with fewer job options, poor schools, and worse nutritional options. Jim Crow laws, disenfranchisement, and discrimination in lending laws, criminal justice and incarceration, and social safety net eligibility, as well as white flight from cities, hiring discrimination, and highway construction all served this purpose. Combined with decentralized fiscal federalism, which means that school districts are primarily funded by local constituencies, these practices have led to underfunded educational programs, housing vulnerability, economic immobility and disparate health outcomes for minority communities.

It should not be surprising to us that centuries of these discriminatory practices have led to exorbitant inequalities today. In *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva gives this synopsis of racial status in America:

Blacks and dark-skinned racial minorities lag well behind whites in virtually every area of social life; they are about three times more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40 percent less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth that whites have. They also receive an inferior education compared to whites, even when they attend integrated institutions. In terms of housing, black-owned units comparable to white-owned ones are valued at 35 percent less. Blacks and Latinos also have less access to the entire housing market because whites, through a variety of exclusionary practices by white realtors and homeowners [and bankers], have been successful in effectively limiting their entrance into many neighborhoods. Blacks receive

impolite treatment in stores, in restaurants, and in a host of other commercial transactions. Researches have also documented that blacks pay more for goods such as cars and houses than do whites. Finally, blacks and dark-skinned Latinos are the targets of racial profiling by the police, which, combined with the highly racialized criminal court system, guarantees their overrepresentation among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated, and if charged for a capital crime, executed.ⁱ

This “systemic racism” – racism perpetuated through seemingly benign legal and social institutions and practices, such as permitting self-defense when one feels threatened – is [endemic to Canada, too](#): “By almost every measurable indicator, the Aboriginal population in Canada is treated worse and lives with more hardship than the [U.S.] African-American population. ... For new immigrants and the black community the numbers are not as stark, but they tell a depressingly similar story.”

It is morally imperative and economically strategic to identify and repair these unjust social conditions. As the [USCCB emphatically reminds us](#), “Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.”

ⁱ Racism without Racists, 2.