THE TWILIGHT’S LAST GLEAMING

Nine Washington University scholars ruminate on race, COVID-19, police brutality and America as the house of pain.

Dress me up for battle
When all I want is peace
—The Isley Brothers, “Harvest for the World”
"I COME UP HARD," SO GOES THE FIRST line in Marvin Gaye's 1972 movie theme song, "Trouble Man." It reflects the lives of many African Americans throughout their history in the United States. The epic persecution and oppression that Blacks endured have made life for them a struggle to survive. But in confronting and overcoming "the hard life," the people themselves had to become hard, enact a harsh stoicism, a sometimes pitiless discipline, to withstand their dehumanization. This dehumanization forced them to expend great physical and emotional energy in surviving, in having to do things that never should have been required of them in order simply to live decently and die easy.

The irony is that the cost of bearing this dehumanization, defending and articulating our humanity as a form of opposition, results in the loss of some of our humanity, an erosion. Becoming hard costs something, demands a sacrifice. As the protagonist's father explains in African American writer Ronald Fair's 1972 coming-of-age novel, We Can't Breathe: "Look, son, I don't want you so goddam hard that you can't enjoy none of your life! I don't want you to turn into no piece of granite with hardly no feelings for nobody so all you know how to do is fight. That's just like bein' dead." And so it is that the severe measures it takes to survive ultimately make it impossible to be a fully living person.

In the essays that follow, my colleagues brilliantly enumerate the various challenges, embedded structurally and enacted persistently, that Blacks face as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant urban police brutality crisis, which has produced hundreds of demonstrations and several acts of violence. Douglas Flowe poses the question of whether the conviction of the police officer who killed George Floyd will bring lasting change. Clarissa Hayward explains that the Black Lives Matter demonstrations are in the tradition of creating social change in a democratic society. William Maxwell considers our present moment against the backdrop of St. Louis' tragic racial history as described in Walter Johnson's The Broken Heart of America. Rebecca Wanzo considers a cartoon by Bianca Tinise that combines both the COVID-19 epidemic and the controversy of wearing face masks with the George Floyd/Eric Garner meme "I Can't Breathe" as a way of exploring the connecting issues of racial injustice in both. Will Ross provides a look at the racial inequities in medical treatment that have long tarnished American history as a backdrop for his data-rich discussion of the disparate racial impact of COVID-19. Vetta Thompson describes the difference-making work of the Center for Community Health, Partnership and Research. Kim Norwood considers the disparate racial impact of COVID-19 on Black school children who are most at risk from reduced in-school services or a move to complete online instruction. And Adia Wingfield discusses racial equity in the workplace and how the burden of its success falls unfairly on those who have been its victims.

Taken together, this robust array of pieces illuminates why life has been so hard for Black Americans; namely, the enduring legacy and power of racism and the inadequacy, wrongheadedness or sheer perversity of the solutions offered for the long-standing "Negro Problem." But the essays are not necessarily despairing, although they would have every right to be. Rather, they are, in some ways, expressions of hope as much as they are affirmations of how the struggle of Black humanity has so deeply enriched and empowered much that is good and worthy, profoundly moral and artistically innovative about American life.

Whatever can be said about the "hardness" of African American life, we must remember that Black life in America is an astonishing achievement. As Ralph Ellison reminded the sociologists of his day, "But can a people, its faith in an idealized American Creed notwithstanding, live and develop over three hundred years simply by reacting? Why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?"

And so, we have made a life, expressive, wise, learned in its forms of excellence, ethical in its aspirations, and courageous in its assertion of our belief in this country. Imagine Black people genuflecting before the flag and the National Anthem, such an anguished patriotism that whites could never begin to express! What a thing it is for a Black person to be an American, to have paid the price to be an American that even to this day continues to exact its payment.

Polls tell us that among the demographics of the Democratic Party, Blacks are by far the most religious and most likely to attend church regularly. The stern faith of the evangelical Christianity of their forebears runs through their hearts and minds, sometimes anti-intellectual and intolerant, sometimes majestically electric with the moral power of social change. In thinking of this, I often tremble at the thought that most Blacks have never stopped believing that this country, wicked and blessed, will always have God on its side.

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IS THIS A WATERSHED MOMENT IN POLICE BRUTALITY PROTEST? WHY I AM HOPEFUL, AND WHAT HISTORY TELLS US

DOUGLAS FLOWE | Assistant Professor of History, author, Uncontrollable Blackness: African American Men and Criminality in Jim Crow New York

Recently, on his CNN show, Don Lemon asked me whether the recent protests against police violence and the death of George Floyd represented a watershed moment. In my response, I said that it might be, but history tells us that we have to be diligent. I mentioned a story that comes up at the opening of my book, Uncontrollable Blackness: African American Men and Criminality in Jim Crow New York: where an African American man is shot in the back by a white police officer on the streets of New York City in 1904, more than 100 years ago. In that case, the officer was arrested and convicted of manslaughter in the end; however, the novel conviction of an officer did not change the decades to come.

“We’ve seen this happen many times throughout American history,” I concluded, “and here we are in 2020.” The broader point I was making is that despite what might happen with the officers in the case of George Floyd’s death, what happens afterward will be crucial. If there is a conviction, it will be very important for us to continue a sustainable campaign to reform American policing in some significant ways if this moment is to represent a turning point.

But I am optimistic. Recently, we have seen a national and global movement that pushed the boundaries of protest and created an ideological shift that is drawn from a tradition of civil rights protest in America. Even George Bush, one of our latest law-and-order presidents, made a statement in support of the protests on May 25 acknowledging that African Americans “are harassed and threatened in their own country.” It seems the visual of George Floyd’s asphyxiation jarred many Americans out of their slumber and into a rare position of listening.

Those once asleep have been awakened in recent years by the fact that our current president touches on the sensitive nerves of racial politics on a daily basis. And COVID-19 has forced notoriously individualistic Americans to contemplate our intrinsic connections — linkages that we have become skilled at ignoring but that bind us together in an unending thread, whether we acknowledge them or not.

Ultimately, this moment is reminding us of how violent America is. From the violence of a system that maintained human capital in slavery, all the way to the U.S. leading the world in gun murders and incarceration every year, we’ve accepted brutality as a mundane part of our lives. We have become too comfortable with bloodletting, including the violence that consumes presumed criminals at the hands of police officers. We accept police violence because we imagine it is the only thing that keeps us safe from hordes of criminals, a rhetorically spun historical myth that is chiseled into the bedrock of our racial makeup. This fable has continued even into the present, mostly because we have failed to grasp as a society that poverty, segregation, unbridled capitalism and投注 on them, and a draconian system of policing and imprisonment reinforces, and even creates, what we call “criminality.” And as we see more crime, the only solution we look to is more harshness, more policing and increased incarceration. As I put it in the epilogue of Uncontrollable Blackness, “there is a monster in America’s past and present, one that swallows [African Americans] whole on the streets, in popular culture, in police custody and in prisons.” If this is to be a turning point, we must confront that beast and deal with the uncomfortable truth of our racial history.

We need to seriously rethink our culture of violence as a society, on every level. We need to hold on to this moment in order to generate national police reform that will make police officers into peacekeepers, train them to lessen instances of violence and keep them accountable.

I am also hoping the long, hot summer of 2020 will foster a new understanding of the fact that crime is systemic, not simply individual, and that deep systemic solutions are required to handle all social problems. We will need to continue to push this subject onto the political agenda — first by voting in local and national elections, but also by doing what a lot of people are already doing: protesting, being in the streets and being heard. Putting pressure on the Democratic Party to make these issues a part of their various campaigns and administrative platforms can also be effective, particularly if kept up. We will need to continue to seek legislation to these ends and make it clear that George Floyd’s death was not simply an isolated case of police violence, but a part of a broader cross that has rested on the African American community’s shoulders for far too long. Black people are, and will be, in the streets protesting because they are tired of carrying it. (For more on Uncontrollable Blackness, see pg. 15.)

“We need to hold on to this moment in order to generate national police reform that will make police officers into peacekeepers, train them to lessen instances of violence and keep them accountable.”
"This is what democracy looks like!" In the fall of 2014, that was a rallying cry here in St. Louis, as activists mobilized to oppose police violence against Black Americans.

The activists were right. Real democracy, or "rule by the people," is not just about voting to elect public officials, campaigning for parties and candidates, and debating the issues. It is also about ordinary people — people like the early 20th-century suffragists, the striking auto workers of the 1930s, the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, the Jim Crow South and the Black Lives Matter activists of 2020 — exercising their political power to fight for change. People are governed, in large part, by laws, institutions and social practices that are not decided by elections. We are governed by structures — like the American criminal justice system — that typically operate in the background of "normal politics." Ordinary people exercise political power when they politicize those background structures.

In my research, I argue that disruptive politics perform this politicizing function. Why? Because they can compel people to pay attention to problems that they would rather ignore. Political disruption can interrupt what I call motivated ignorance, an idea that is related to motivated reasoning, or the fact that people tend to seek out and disproportionately weight evidence that supports the beliefs they want to hold.

But motivated ignorance is about what people are motivated not to know — specifically, about one’s complicity in practices that violate important ethical principles. For example, I might be motivated not to know about the oppressive conditions under which the workers who make my clothing labor. You might be motivated not to know about the suffering of the animals whose meat you consume, or the incineration of hazardous waste at the landfill near your home, or the disgusting amount of waste you throw away. At the same time, we both want to believe that our behavior is ethically unproblematic, so we avoid or ignore available evidence to the contrary. In that respect, we are like many white liberals in this country, who in principle reject racial injustice yet habitually ignore the structural racism that is the background to American politics as usual.

This is where disruption comes in. In the fall of 1961, when Gallup asked a representative cross-section of Americans to name the most important problem facing the country, less than half of 1% gave answers like "civil rights," "racial problems" or "discrimination." For the first decade after World War II — a decade characterized by rampant racial discrimination in education, employment and housing — a plurality of respondents never once identified such problems as the country’s most important.

That changed in 1965, following the Montgomery bus boycott. It changed even more dramatically in the mid-1960s, after the Birmingham and the Selma campaigns. Between 1963 and 1965, respondents to Gallup’s "most important problem" question consistently answered "civil rights" or "the racial problem."

But the change did not last. Between the late ’60s and fall of 2014, respondents said that "racial problems" were among America’s most important problems only once: in May of 1992, following the riots in L.A. after the acquittal of the white police officers who brutally beat Rodney King.

Then, in fall 2014, the Movement for Black Lives put racism back on the American political agenda. December 2014 was the first time since the ’60s that a plurality of Gallup’s respondents identified race or racism as America’s most important problem. In May and June 2020, more respondents gave race-related answers than had since July 1968.

Photo: Joe Angell

"Many Americans — including many white Americans — are paying attention to police violence and to other forms of structural racial injustice in ways that they have not for more than half a century. Of course, Black Lives Matter protests are unlikely to persuade committed racists to change their views. Yet commentators who question the effectiveness of sit-ins, die-ins and other forms of disruptive politics on the grounds that they fail to "change hearts and minds" miss the point. Political disruption can compel people, who, in principle, reject racial inequality to pay attention to the realities of structural racism — and change the terms of political discourse.

In the summer of 2020, many white Americans engaged with these issues for the first time in their lives. And at least some of them began to grasp racism's magnitude and to grapple with their responsibility to help change it. That would not have happened if not for the democratic work of their fellow citizens: the activists who disrupted them, commanded their attention and showed them what democracy looks like."
July, St. Louis time. Hot and — it usually goes without saying — humid, despite the city’s habit of snubbing the epic river that put it there. At the bottom of an ugly economic contraction, protesters pack City Hall, a product of the World’s Fair building boom modeled on the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. A policeman, unnerved by the crowd’s intensity, throws a tear-gas bomb. A demonstrator throws it back. Shades of the famous photo of Ferguson protestor Edward Crawford, bag of chips in one hand, flaming gas canister in the other. American flag shirt in the balance. The police retreat, coughing and half-blinded, but then regroup in the rotunda and storm out of City Hall, guns drawn, straight into a throng of citizens on Market Street.

Already, you’ve picked up on the trick of the tale: It could have happened yesterday or 100 years before. The St. Louis July sketched above rhymes broadly with the summer of Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson in 2014. More precisely, it might be the month in 2020 that ended just months ago, when protesters targeting police brutality and a pandemic-fed hunger crisis returned again and again to City Hall. Or it might describe July of 1932, when the Great Depression propelled St. Louis’ unemployment rate to 30% and brought class and racial inequality to a boil in a city where the two are impossible to untangle.

As it happened, the July events in question unfolded in the St. Louis of the early 1930s. They’re a set piece in the most important history of the city published in years, Walter Johnson’s The Broken Heart of America (2020). As Johnson’s title hints, his book is pained and often brutal going. Like a Howard Zinn-ish People’s History written from the observation deck of the Gateway Arch, it’s in part an atrocity exhibit of U.S. “racial capitalism” viewed from “the imperium of St. Louis.”

Johnson, now a distinguished Harvard professor, was born two hours west of the city and finds himself heartbroken by what he’s learned of its “floridly racist” history. But it’s plain, too, with his every grand, impassioned metaphor, that Johnson just can’t quit the locals who’ve never stopped trying to remake the place; his book paints the young Ferguson activists who put Black Lives Matter on the map, for example, as “legatees of a history of Black radicalism and direct action as measurelessly implacable as the flow of the rivers.” For Johnson, St. Louis is the overlooked confluence where “imperialism, racism, and capitalism have persistently entwined to corrupt the nation’s past” — and where the most creative bottom-up challenges to these intertwined forces have been innovated. The historical interchangeability of the “July Riot” — was it 1932 or 2020? — thus reflects both the persistence of what Johnson calls “racial capitalist cleansing” and the repeated disruption of this cleansing by everyday St. Louisans. Folk thought backward on the coasts but not past training in avant-garde resistance. When all is said and read, Johnson’s Gateway City is a two-hearted heart of America, the twin pump that keeps both the best and worst of our national history flowing.

Being placed at the center of American history as much as American geography has its compensations: In spite of it all, The Broken Heart of America flattens St. Louis’ self-conception as a wrongly neglected hub of innovation. Yet this brand of centrality also comes at a cost: The maturation and legacy of the city’s inventions must be traced elsewhere. Until this summer, the season of George Floyd’s murder and the rebirth of Black Lives Matter, the promise once seen in the Ferguson moment often seemed to have forsaken its hometown. There were blue-ribbon panels and modest legal reforms, but also white backlash and an out-migration of young Black talent honed in the protests. A number of the Ferguson icons and organizers who stayed put launched promising careers as political reformers, but too many others met violent deaths. Edward Crawford included, enough to spark conspiracy theories amid a rising St. Louis murder rate.

For all these painful, permanent losses, the national summer of George Floyd swiftly remade the aftermath of the St. Louis summer of Michael Brown. Six years after the fact, St. Louis’ 2014 has become a basis of the nation’s 2020 — a year of auspicious change in the movement for Black lives. Ferguson, the most dramatic 21st-century episode in the city’s long history of Black radicalism, is now seen as the progenitor of perhaps the most shaping chapter in American racial politics since the 1960s.”
"How often have you thought about how breath — literally and metaphorically — links many issues of social inequality? In this year, we are receiving an ethical call to understand how issues of breath — how our breaths — are linked. I hope many of us begin to answer it."

LINKED BREATH

REBECCA WANZO | chair and professor of women, gender, and sexuality studies; author of The Content of Our Cartilage: African American Comic Art and Political Belonging

The summer of 2020 should have us all thinking about breathing.

George Floyd — like Eric Garner and Derrick Scott before him — gasped “I can’t breathe” to indifferent police officers.

COVID-19 steals people’s breath. And identity may result in some sufferers being met with indifference as well.

This link between the two was on Bianca Xenise’s mind when at the end of July she published a gag cartoon in the nationally syndicated comic Six Chix that some people found offensive (see inset comic). It depicts a Black woman wearing a shirt stating “I can’t breathe” while wearing a mask in a store. A maskless white woman standing next to her states, “If you can’t breathe, then take that silly mask off!”

The cartoon caused controversy, with some newspapers deciding to permanently drop the collaborative comic, Six Chix. Some readers apparently viewed the cartoon as discriminating against the white woman, while others believed it was disrespectful toward the Black Lives Matter movement. Many others, however, understood what Xenise was doing: commenting on the dismissal of both police brutality and COVID-19, and the racialized tenor that connects both.

Negative reactions to Xenise’s cartoon demonstrate what we cannot do as we try to find a path forward in the new world we live in that made hypervisible the old world we inhabited. We cannot dismiss challenging framings that require us to recognize the connection between issues that many wish to see in isolation. We need to pause and, yes, take a breath, in thinking about how we look and then evaluate our way of seeing.

The issue of identity-based interpretation also links COVID-19 and police brutality. Partisan politics has played a role in how people interpret mask wearing, but some researchers suspect that data on who is most affected by COVID-19 has played a role in how seriously people understand it as a threat. The long history of producing visual and empirical evidence of structural racism — from Ida B. Wells to videos of police violence — demonstrates that people can see the same evidence and come to very different conclusions. But as the rise in support for Black Lives Matter demonstrates, people can change their perspective. You just never know what will make people see differently.

And we should see breath differently — that it is often taken for granted, that people have unequal access to clean air, and that deprivation of breath may be discounted depending on who you are. Breathing could also be understood as a fundamental way to help us understand oppression. In The Miner’s Canary, legal scholars Gerald Torres and Lani Guinier explain that “those who are racially marginalized are like the miner’s canary: their distress is the first sign of danger that threatens us all.”

In reflecting on Eric Garner’s death, theorist Ashon Crawley argues that “I can’t breathe” is an “ethical plea” and “charges us to do something, to perform, to produce otherwise than what we have.” To see and be otherwise will mean that we must look differently and act differently, make connections when many social forces encourage us to interpret in silos.

How often have you thought about how breath — literally and metaphorically — links many issues of social inequality? In this year, we are receiving an ethical call to understand how issues of breath — how our breaths — are linked. I hope many of us begin to answer it. (For more on Wanzo’s new book, see pg. 15.)
COVID-19 VACCINE PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY TO DISMANTLE STRUCTURAL RACISM

WILL ROSS I associate dean for diversity; principal officer for community partnerships; Alumni Endowed Professor of Medicine, Division of Nephrology, School of Medicine

By now we have become all too familiar with the COVID-19 disparities data: Black Americans are three times more likely to become infected than whites and twice as likely to die from COVID-19. A root-cause analysis of those disparities lays bare this country’s original sin: the immoral history of chattel slavery and structural racism contributing to the systematic dehumanization of Black Americans. All the other structural determinants of health that are operative in perpetuating racial disparities—poverty, low wages and job insecurity, overcrowded and unstable housing, low educational attainment—are downstream from America’s senseless preoccupation with preserving racial hierarchies.

Our nation’s ability to heal the festering wounds unveiled by the high COVID-19 morbidity and mortality in Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) resides in sincerely and emphatically proclaiming, and acting on, the unassailable dictum that racism is a public-health crisis.

Much of the published literature on health disparities, including the highly acclaimed 2002 Institute of Medicine Report, “Unequal Treatment,” lay much of the blame on African Americans’ historical distrust of the health-care system, which has far fewer physicians of color and a blatant record of mistreatment, as well as misguided tropes about poor lifestyle choices. This is not to deny that racial distrust plays a large role in perpetuating health disparities; it is rather to note that racial distrust within the African American community is undeniably logical.

Herein lies the relevance of this discussion: We will be unable to ameliorate COVID-19 health disparities, send our children to school safely or reauthorize our economy until we have a viable vaccine that is accessible, affordable and of high quality. Yet many Americans are reluctant to be vaccinated. According to a July 20 Gallup survey, white respondents were more likely to agree to a vaccine if available than nonwhites, 67% vs. 59%, respectively. Despite progress being made by large pharmaceutical companies, or Washington University’s participation in trials through the COVID-19 Prevention Network, a large segment of the African American community does not trust vaccine researchers or the health-care providers who will deliver one.

Deconstructing the rage behind Black anti-vaccine adherents does not require long-suffering analysis. One has only to read Harriet Washington’s Medical Apartheid, which chronicles the long, dark history of Black Americans’ abuse as unwitting subjects of medical experimentation, to prove how the medical profession has been complicit in promoting racist beliefs and practices. Unquestionably, an effective COVID-19 vaccine should be administered to those at the highest risk, which across America is disproportionately African Americans. Yet when that vaccine is met with skepticism by some Black Americans, there will be little regard for the researcher or health professional who interprets that response simply as Blacks being “distrustful” or “uninterested” in improving their own health.

Case in point: How are we doing in including African Americans in current COVID-19 vaccine clinical trials? In the phase 1 Moderna trial of an mRNA vaccine, 40 of 45 participants were white. Several clinical trials are now in Phase 3, which leaves little time to meet with the African American community and to share information widely. Current African American enrollment in vaccine trials is between 18-20%. In St. Louis, we fortunately have an organization, Prep/stl, collaborating with the university’s Center for Community Health Partnership and Research to highlight the benefit of the COVID-19 vaccine for communities of color.

John Maupin, MD, former president of Morehouse School of Medicine, offered salient advice to researchers: “We have to have more [institutions such as HBCUs conducting trials] because people will trust them more.”

Anthony Fauci, MD, director of the NIAID, recently noted it will perhaps be well into 2021 before we know if a COVID-19 vaccine actually works. There will be tremendous suffering in the African American community due to COVID-19–related illnesses and deaths before that time.

The government could demonstrate that it understands how structural racism has contributed to the disproportionate burden of disease borne by the BIPOC community. Actionable steps to promote equity include shoring up CARES Act funding with additional assistance to restrict evictions during the pandemic, expediting relief funds to small businesses in under-resourced communities, ensuring that COVID-19 testing and treatment does not become a financial burden, and continuing financial assistance to essential workers.

Such concrete actions would go a long way in restoring confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine trials and could galvanize uptake of a COVID-19 vaccine when it is available. Dismantling racism is at the root of eliminating COVID-related and other health disparities.
INEQUITY AND THE PATH TO CHANGE

VETTA L. THOMPSON | E. Desmond Lee Professor of Racial and Ethnic Studies, Brown School; co-director, Center for Community Health, Partnership and Research

We knew that we had issues with racism and health inequity long before the events of spring 2020. The long-standing issues of police misconduct and health inequity born of racism in America have a more than 400-year history. The savage beating of Rodney King 29 years ago and the failure to hold police accountable should have changed our conversations about race.

W.E.B. DuBois sounded that alarm back in 1906 and noted the role of what we now term the social determinants of health:

"With improved sanitary conditions, improved education, and better economic opportunities, the mortality of the race may and probably will steadily decrease until it becomes normal."

Social determinants of health, the conditions in which people are born, live, work and play, explain 60-80% of health disparities.

COVID-19 exposes the inequities born of an inability to sustain collective action focused on addressing systemic racism. It is, unfortunately, not a shock that as of Aug. 5, African Americans accounted for approximately 23% of COVID-19 deaths but are only 13% of the U.S. population.

Also, it is not surprising that a recent analysis by “ABC News” and FiveThirtyEight indicated that individuals in predominantly Black and Latinx communities experienced longer wait times for testing than those in wealthy, predominantly white neighborhoods. Although not surprising, these statistics seem to be motivating communities to action.

THE WORK OF THE INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

Every member of every community has a role to play in addressing the racism that contributes to disparities in disease, including COVID-19.

The Center for Community Health, Partnership and Research (CCHPR), part of the university’s Institute for Public Health (IPH), works to reduce disparities and improve health and wellness in the region by supporting collaborations among institutions and organizations. As co-director of CCHPR, I am able to see diverse communities coming together to accept that responsibility.

Community engagement promotes research, programs and policies that drive improvement through mobilization and organization of resources. The partnership approach to change suggested by community-engaged scholars improves community acceptance and implementation of behaviors that can mitigate the spread of COVID-19. To accomplish this level of community engagement and participation, the IPH has increased its efforts to work with diverse institutions and organizations in the St. Louis region and its focus on research to address the disparities faced by communities of color.

When the pandemic started, faculty with infectious disease expertise, as well as faculty and staff from the Dissimination and Implementation Center and from the Public Health Data and Training Center, extended their partnerships with local health and public-health institutions to support planning efforts and data monitoring and management. Recognizing that health inequity is socially determined, the IPH funded seven research projects aimed at social and policy countermeasures in health to mitigate the spread and negative impact of COVID-19. These projects focus on communities disproportionately affected by the virus, particularly racial and ethnic communities. Several of these projects receive direct support from CCHPR and Public Health Data and Training Center faculty and staff. In addition, CCHPR has supported efforts to ensure that COVID-19 information is available in a variety of languages and routinely shares relevant information with its partners. Partnership and sustained community effort are key components for our path forward.

THE PATH FORWARD

We are acting in ways that address the crises of race and COVID-19. We know that we see inequity in the distribution of key social determinants—such as education, employment and wealth accumulation—just as we see disparities in the health outcomes that they drive. The research, services and support that we have provided are much-needed interventions to address the consequences of centuries of racism. However, addressing the social determinants themselves moves us further along the path to equity. To achieve equity, we must be willing to intervene directly on the social determinants and the practices and policies that sustain the system of inequity. Unaddressed, the systems that drive inequity will recreate disparities each time we have a need to tackle a disease or crisis. Are we willing to commit to a sustained effort to dismantle these practices and policies, in addition to providing redress?
HOW COVID-19 NEGATIVELY IMPACTS UNDERPRIVILEGED CHILDREN IN UNDER-RESOURCED SCHOOLS

KIMBERLY JADE NORWOOD | Henry H. Oberstelp
Professor of Law, whose key research areas include the intersection of race, class and public education in America.

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc in the United States. As of this writing, the country has just over 7 million known infections and over 200,000 deaths. Black, nonwhite Hispanic/Latinx and Native American communities have been hit particularly hard, with infections at almost three times the rate and deaths at two times the rate of white populations. Two key factors, which have not been addressed in the previous essays, have led to this higher rate of infection and death. First, essential workers who are not paid living wages — including those who rely on tips because they are currently paid only $2.13 per hour — and who do not have the luxury of working from home are constantly putting themselves and their families in harm’s way to ensure the care and well-being of the rest of us. And second, these populations are disproportionately located in cities, where there are greater concentrations of people in tight spaces, more multigenerational families living in crowded conditions and more people forced to ride crowded mass transportation systems to get to work.

In these communities, school children have been impacted negatively as well. In March, school districts across the country moved to remote learning. Remote learning requires a computer or laptop at home, as well as high-speed internet. It also requires, in most cases, parents who could take time from their day jobs to act as assistant teachers to the child trying to learn online. This was impossible for thousands of children in public schools around the nation.

Most public schools are composed of black and brown students, and most of those children live below the poverty line. Many do not have computers or laptops or high-speed internet at home. Many attend schools in districts that were in dire financial straits pre-COVID-19. Many of those districts did not have the infrastructure in place to make the transition from in-person learning to online learning. Public libraries, which many households relied on for computer access, were closed. While some school districts were able to repurpose funds to purchase laptops and hot spots for their students, many were not. And for many students in these under-resourced districts, education simply stopped when their schools closed in March.

The harm to students was not limited to academics. Some students also lost special school district services. Thousands of children who rely on Title I-funded breakfast and lunch to survive saw these meals discontinued. These students lost everything: academics, special needs services, meals, friends, community, and even much-needed social- and child protective services. Stress on parents and caretakers has skyrocketed.

As schools reopen this fall, some elected officials have promised that children will be required to social distance as pictures posted on social media show no such thing. Other politicians, like the governor of Missouri, Mike Parson, admit that children will get COVID-19 but say they will “get over it.” President Trump, who has demanded that schools reopen, with Education Secretary Betsy DeVos threatening to withhold crucially needed federal dollars from schools that do not open, has also suggested that children may be immune to COVID-19. May be? May not be. And what of the people those children will undoubtedly come into contact with: transportation workers, all school employees and administrators, food-service workers, janitors and family members?

The education of underprivileged children in under-resourced schools suffered greatly before COVID-19. For those students, particularly those who have not had any academic learning since March, going back to school this fall poses a monumental challenge. Additionally, and more crucially, more and more schools are once again engaging in online learning. What does this mean for students who still do not have access to computers or internet at home? What does this mean for school districts that still cannot afford to provide such access? What does this mean for parents and guardians who still have to work outside the home? And who is home with the children?

As much as I want to remain hopeful in the face of hopelessness, the road ahead looks incredibly rocky indeed. And while the need to keep hope alive remains, it will take more than hope to make sure that these students are not left even further behind. Well-endowed educational institutions and profitable private-sector businesses can and should step up to provide the necessary funding and resources to help these students. This may be the only way to keep hope alive.
Studies show that overt racial discrimination, exclusionary social networks, differences in educational access and wage disparities contribute to Black workers’ difficulties accessing, thriving in and ascending in many occupational settings. These differences do not occur only by happenstance or accident. Even in workplaces that profess a commitment to racial diversity, employers are less likely to refer Black candidates for jobs, call back applicants whose names seem to signal a Black identity, or support qualified Black employees for promotion.

So how do we solve these problems? Research suggests that the only way to create more equitable, racially diverse workplaces is to be explicit and purposeful about it. Good intentions, political statements and well wishes do not magically create environments that are fair to and equitable for employees of color. Instead, companies have to take active steps to become these spaces.

The good news is that research does provide some pathways for companies to do better. For instance, studies show that organizations tend to be most effective in moving the needle when they specifically task managers with creating more racial diversity, provide those managers with resources and then hold them accountable for results. Companies should also collect data and set specific metrics for the goals they wish to achieve. Additionally, it is important for companies to consider the culture and atmosphere in which they ask employees to work. Hiring a few underrepresented workers into a space where racist jokes, taunts and slurs are tolerated all but guarantees that those workers will not stay long. Finally, organizations have to take responsibility for making these changes collective efforts, rather than leaving it up to Black professionals to do the “equity work” of making companies more accessible and available to communities of color.

The recent protests and renewed attention on racial justice have cast an important spotlight on these issues of racial equity. But it’s past time for organizations to take these issues more seriously. Workers of color should not face these systemic patterns of discrimination and exclusion in multiple industries and organizations. It is urgent that organizations take proactive steps to better reflect an increasingly multiracial society.

In June, Chancellor Andrew Martin issued a call for the university to take bold actions for racial equity and justice, guided by our mission of research, teaching and patient care. The action steps he announced include creating space for meaningful engagement and dialogue, reimagining campus safety and wellness, strengthening our already world-class research program on race, and engaging more deeply with St. Louis and strengthening our Investment in regional efforts to combat racial inequities. To learn more about the university’s Racial Equity Action Plan, visit andrewmartin.wustl.edu/racial-equity/.