

Promoting Equitable Access to Higher Education to End the American Racial Wage Gap

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### **Abstract**

It is an indisputable fact that people of color in America are victims of a severe racial wage gap. The source of this wage gap, however, is not that people of color are being paid less for working the same job, as many might assume. Rather, the problem lies within their limited access to decent jobs. As it can prove difficult to substantiate the presence of discrimination in a hiring process, much less enforce laws concerning the matter. The effect of the inherent racism built into the hiring process, along with similar discrimination into other systems has created a wage disparity cycle in which many people of color have trouble affording proper education due to their restricted access to jobs, but can't become qualified for those jobs due to their inability to afford education. To break this cycle, first generation students of color must be provided with financial opportunities to pursue a higher education. By allowing people of color to gain to same job qualifications as others, it will become much easier to prove the presence of racial discrimination in a company's hiring. Additionally, this will serve as a step towards ending the discriminatory tendencies that still exist within people by lessening the impact of implicit racism on the education system.

### **Racial Income Inequality in the Year 2020**

Systematic racism is an issue that has plagued the United States since its formation. Many attempts have been made in the past to alleviate and eliminate racism, which, as shown by the Library of Congress (2014), includes the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, as well as the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1875, and 1964, and many famous marches and protests. Despite these efforts, racism has managed to remain a pervasive obstruction in the path toward true social equity for all citizens of the United States. It is clear that something more needs to be done to put an end to systematic and corporate racism, and the first step in that process must be the complete elimination of the racial wage gap. To make any significant progress toward this goal, low- to moderate-income individuals, households, and communities of color must be provided equitable opportunities to pursue advanced learning to break the wage disparity cycle.

#### **Understanding the Issue of Racism**

Before one can hope to understand the racial wage gap, it is important to first understand the underlying issue of racism. Racism, as most know, has been present in America since the very beginning of the country. This is apparent in existence of the slave trade, as well as the exclusion of colored people in early human rights-related legislation. What far too many people fail to realize is that racism continues to survive in modern-day America. Many would simply like to believe that racism ended with the passing of the civil rights Amendments, as they granted people of color equality under the law. To perpetuate this notion, however, is to be willfully ignorant of reality. For instance, if racism truly ended with the 15th Amendment, then why is it that civil rights timelines (2014) show that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed almost 100 years after the amendment? The fact of the matter is that racism has lasted for hundreds of years, despite countless efforts to end it. While many would like to blame human

nature, racism has been proven to be a social construct which was created and subconsciously sustained by people. In the words of Yale psychologist Jennifer Richeson (2017), “This is not the product of some deep-seated, evil heart that is cultivated. It comes from the environment, the air all around us” (para. 5). In other words, people aren’t racist because it’s something natural, they’re racist because that’s how they learned to think. That isn’t to say that people must be explicitly taught to be racist. Discriminatory tendencies are learned from any number of subtle sources, most of which people don’t even think about. In fact, according to the *Washington Post* (2017):

One study<sup>1</sup> at Tufts University found that even with a TV show on mute displaying scenes with no explicit discrimination, the nonverbal body language of black and white actors interacting was enough to cause watchers to test higher for implicit bias afterward. (para. 7)

To make matters worse, most of the implicit racism found in society is much more pronounced than the muted TV which was more than adequate to bring out racist tendencies. In fact, there’s hardly a system in the United States that doesn’t hold some form of underlying discrimination, including segregated residential zoning, intentionally inadequate voting access, and the obvious example of policing. For proof of how potent even the most subtle of racism can be in influencing people, look no further than the age at which discriminatory tendencies can begin to develop. *Boston Globe* writer James Burnett (2012) affirms that children gain the ability to express racial preference as early as 3 years old, and popular belief held that these preferences would then develop throughout teenage years. However, studies by Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji shows that, “even though they may not understand the ‘why’ of their feelings,

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<sup>1</sup> Study at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3764987/>

children exposed to racism tend to accept and embrace it as young as age 3, and in just a matter of days” (paras. 1-2). If racism is learned so easily, it may seem a fool’s errand to attempt to end it, but while it will never be an easy task, there is hope for eventually ridding America of racial discrimination. Simply put, if racism can be learned, it is possible for it to be unlearned. For this to happen, society as a whole must show children more instances of integration and equality than it shows them racism. The best way to achieve this is to rework the American system with the goal of eliminating the racism present in their structuring. By removing the instances of implicit racism surrounding people as they develop, they can be taught to look past the color of someone’s skin and see them for the human being they are.

### **Understanding the Wage Gap**

To understand the wage gap either gender or racial base, its too big to explain in detail. The racial wage gap is mostly the consequence of decades caused by racial inequality. The nation hasn’t taken full responsibility and the Blacks are the ones being affected. “One of the biggest inequities lies in the wealth gap between Black and white households. Household wealth is the start-up capital of life” (Gold, 2020, para. 2). With the income of households being the start-up of how their life begins, there is some unfairness with the wage gap in the color community. The ratio of earning that both the whites and colors have is a great difference. According to Gold (2020), some may argue that in the 1960s is when the racial discrimination ended, as well as the racial wage gap was closed. Many centuries passed and it's now 2020 the racial discrimination, as well as the racial wage gap is far from over. The difference in the assets and debts of white and black families in the U.S. has been a persistent and a pervasive problem.

Going into the number on how much of a wage gap there is. According to Aliprantis, “...households headed by whites had accumulated as much as 10 times what Black households

did by the time they reached their 60s and seven times Black households' wealth by the end of the study" (2019) 10 times is a great amount that the white households can compile then the Black households. Also to recall the income of one's household is how one's life is said to start, with the idea of wanting higher education it all depends on the income. With having a very low income it is said to have a harder time getting started on all the ideas a person has set for themselves. That is what the communities with low income most likely have a struggle with. To end it, all this can be concluded as a consequence of racial inequality and lack of responsibility many have as well as the nation for taking a stand against racism.

### **The Benefits of Free Education**

Offering free education can supply important opportunities for those growing up in low income areas by providing them with the tools necessary to succeed. This service would allow everyone to have an equitable chance to achieve prosperity, rather than simply becoming trapped in poverty. This will end the cycle of poverty because people will no longer have to pay for education anymore. They will be able to get their degrees or certifications for free and we would have more services. People won't be forced to do jobs they don't enjoy to pay their bills. They will be able to do any job because their schooling was free. Their options will be limitless for them. For example, according to Imagine America, "With a certificate or degree from a trade school, you will have access to today's most in-demand jobs" (2019, para. 8). This shows how having advanced education can give someone more access to higher-paying jobs. Also, according to Brookings, "an individual with a college degree is nearly nine times more likely to make over \$100,000 than someone with only a high school diploma and 13 times more likely to make more than \$200,000 per year" (Greenstone et al., 2012, para. 6). Any type of education after high school can open the doors to higher-paying jobs. These show how it doesn't matter

what type of advanced education you get, you can still have more opportunities than someone who did not get that education.

People who don't have enough money for school can have the same potential as people with money for school and never get the chance to be what they want to because they cannot continue through their education. Harvard Business Review states, "More and more students are spending more and more money on higher education, and their main goal is largely pragmatic: to boost their employability and be a valuable contributor to the economy" (Chamorro-Premuzic, & Frankiewicz, 2019, para. 9). This shows that people who spend money on advanced or higher education will be able to boost their employability, which can be problematic for those who don't have the money to pay for college or trade school etc. Also, according to Learning English, "A 2015 ACE report used Department of Commerce information to show a decrease in the number of low-income students enrolling in college. These men and women have little money available to pay college costs or come from poor families" (Musto, 2017, para. 6). This shows that people who do not have enough money will most likely not be able to get advanced education. According to How Stuff Works, "While trade schools are often less expensive than four-year universities and usually offer shorter programs, they still cost money. To attend trade school, you have to pay tuition, just as you would attend college." (Winkler, 2010, para. 2). This shows that even trade schools cost money, and some people cannot afford that expense this will make it harder for people to get into advanced schooling.

Education can help people get out of poverty and it will in turn stop the wage gap disparity cycle. For example according to Global Partnership for Education, "If workers from poor and rich backgrounds received the same education, disparity between the two in working poverty could decrease by 39%" (2016, para. 9). This shows that if everyone had the same access

to education there would be less poverty. This also shows that coming from an impoverished background can hinder someone from being financially stable later in their life which contributes to the racial wage gap disparity cycle. Also, Concern worldwide US states, “If all adults completed secondary education, we could cut the global poverty rate by more than half” (Giovetti, 2019, para. 11). This shows that getting a higher education can really help people not end up impoverished later in their lives and there would be less people in poverty. These two articles show what a large impact that getting an education can make on someone’s whole life going forwards. It also shows what a large impact coming from an impoverished background can make on someone’s adult life because it can determine whether they are financially stable in the future.

### **Why Paying for First Generation Advanced Education for Students is Helpful**

First generation advanced education students will be allowed to have their education past highschool paid in full. This includes all schooling after highschool: trade schools, college, art academies, etc. This will help in turn break the racial wage gap disparity cycle by giving these first generation advanced education students an opportunity to be able to have whatever career they’d like. Having an opportunity to have any career they would like opens up so many doors for them by allowing them more options for jobs. When they are able to get a sustainable job because of their education and certifications etc. they can be pulled out of poverty in this way. When they are pulled out of poverty they will be able to afford college for their kids to keep a cycle of education instead of an impoverished one. According to Reuters, “Higher education leads to better paying jobs and by 2018 almost two thirds of all occupations in the United States will require a college degree” (Debusmann, 2011, para. 1). People will be pulled out of poverty with better paying jobs.

### **Why Folk Schools are a Good Solution**

Another option can be creating something called folk schools. Folk schools are prevalent in areas around Denmark. According to Danish Folk High Schools, folk high schools are informal boarding schools that teach classes of almost any subject, and there are “no academic requirements for admittance” (para. 1), meaning that no minimum grades or GPA are required to enter this school, and while there are no exams, they do provide diplomas giving proof of attendance.

### **Other Options for Providing Education**

One option of providing education to groups and ethnicities in need such as African-Americans and Hispanics is creating charter schools. Charter schools usually do not have the funding or approval of the government, and thus do not need to follow standard curriculum.

### **What Could Possibly Go Wrong?**

#### ***Shortcomings of this Plan***

The purpose of providing access to education is not to eliminate racism, but rather to lay the foundation for its end. As such, this should not be thought of as a fix-all solution and it must be understood that future efforts will be necessary to truly solve the issue of discrimination.

**Problem.** The first hurdle that any organization or lawmaker must overcome in addressing this racism is explained by the Harvard Business Review, stating that, “Discrimination, given how it often manifests subtly, is notoriously difficult to measure in any context” (Quillian, Pager, Midtbøen, & Hexel, 2017, para. 3). In other words, racism can be incredibly demanding to properly observe and gauge. Exhibitions of racism tend to be subjective matters, which could often be interpreted in many, conflicting ways. This fact alone has caused

numerous problems for researchers attempting to quantify racism and has made it nearly impossible to reliably enforce discrimination laws.

**Solution.** Proving the presence of bigotry within a company's hiring process has always been a complicated matter, requiring specially designed tests such as the résumé audits described by Licoln Quillian. In these audits, multiple fictitious résumés with identical qualifications are sent to the same company, with the only difference between them being their ethnically identifiable names (2017). By recording which résumés get callbacks, the existence of discrimination in the hiring process can be proven. In turn, the employer can then be fined or otherwise penalized in accordance with the law for the practice of discrimination.

### ***Resistance to Funding Programs***

Another problem that may arise during the implementation of this plan is that acquiring funding for social programs can often prove difficult.

**Problem.** *Washington Post* writer Eugene Steuerle, on the topic of Congressional fund allocation, stated that, "Programs that might promote economic mobility and opportunity for everyone make up an ever-smaller portion of the federal budget. Support for working families declines. College students get stuck with huge debts" (2019, para. 5). Essentially, the federal government has, over time, begun to spend less on important social programs. Instead, this money has been allocated for paying off the country's ever-growing debt and funding other mandatory programs, leading to the lowest share of uncommitted funds in the history of the United States other than at the height of the Great Recession (2019, para. 3). With the nation's economy in such a dismal state, there have been many calls for something to be done about it, but the resistance these efforts meet remains present.

**Solution.** In order to lessen the opposition to these efforts, it is important to convince those in power why these changes are both necessary and beneficial. One notable way of achieving this is through the promotion of *trickle-up economics*—the economic theory which affirms that supporting the lower classes will ultimately benefit the upper class.<sup>2</sup> According to Shamekka Kuykendall, since raising minimum wages and raising taxes for the wealthy—both of which are examples of trickle-up economics—the state has observed a stronger trend of economic growth as well as a reduced unemployment rate. When compared to states attempting the program’s counterpart—trickle-down economics—the undeniable benefits of helping the lower classes become clear, as those states have both lower gross domestic product (GDP) growth and a higher average unemployment rate (2017). By proving to the government that trickle-up economics is the best method for improving the economy, they may be willing to take steps towards funding social programs.

### ***Some People Never Change***

While it is possible—albeit incredibly difficult—to change a system that encourages discrimination, it has proven to be nearly impossible to change the people who do the same.

**Problem.** Despite numerous attempts at eliminating racism, including legislation and systematic reform, racial discrimination has managed to remain a problem. *Vox* writer Maryam Jameel covered this issue, stating “Over time, the way in which people discriminate, what they acknowledge and admit out loud, has changed. But the ultimate end, which is differential treatment—treating whites more favorably than African Americans—has not changed” (2019, para. 20). In other words, while systematic reform has succeeded in changing discrimination, it

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<sup>2</sup> See Pettis (2019), for more information on trickle-up economics

has completely failed to end racism. The reason behind this failure is simple: people refuse to change. It's one thing to change the structure of a system, but it's something else entirely to change the way a person thinks. This can be observed in a recording published by *CNN* in which representative Al Green asked seven bank CEOs—all of which were white males—if any of them believed that their successor could possibly be a woman or a person of color. The result was that none of them raised their hand, showing that while they might claim they believe in equal opportunity, they don't truly view people of color as their equals (2019).

**Solution.** Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, there is no realistic way to directly change the way someone thinks after a certain point in life. It is, however, possible to change someone while they are young and impressionable. This fact only further stresses the importance of providing access to a quality education, as teachers have a much larger impact on their students than almost anyone else in the students' lives. Additionally, by lessening the impact of implicit discrimination on the education system, this will slightly lower the likelihood of people learning racist tendencies from that system. Other than that, the only way to eliminate racism is the methodical restructuring of various discriminatory systems as previously mentioned.

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