

# Black Blues

## The Persistence of Racialized Economic Inequality in Black Communities

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Michael C. Dawson, *University of Chicago*  
Megan Ming Francis, *University of Washington*

**W**e are at a critical moment in the state of race relations in the United States. The years 2013–2015 marked the 50th anniversaries of important milestones in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his stirring “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the most sweeping piece of civil rights legislation in July 1964. In 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which explicitly forbade voter-disenfranchisement measures and opened the pathway for a generation of black people to vote for the first time in their lives. These historic events were the culmination of decades of struggle by women and men who risked their lives for freedom and justice. However, even when a process of struggle culminates in transformative events, the reality of everyday life shows that significant social change is complicated and slow.

On August 28, 1963, in the shadow of Abraham Lincoln and amid thousands of onlookers, King stood on the Washington Mall and observed that in the 100 years since the Emancipation Proclamation, “the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination....America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” Now, 50 years later, it is necessary to ask two important questions: How far has the United States come? And where do we go from here?

These questions are especially important given the racist police violence that has rocked the nation and weakened already-fragile black communities. From small suburban cities like Ferguson, Missouri, to big metropolitan cities like New York, black men and women were brutally killed by law enforcement officers who have escaped punishment. In response, citizens took to the streets to protest, many carrying signs that read “Black Lives Matter” as a counter to the seemingly disposability of black lives at the hands of law enforcement. The frustration and rage that many black citizens felt was plastered across the news for weeks on end. It was not the long, hot summer of 1968; it was after 2015, and now the summer of 2016.

Scholars, journalists, and concerned citizens have responded to the crisis in various ways, with different sides blaming each other for the physical loss of life and/or for the material loss of goods. However, much of the work has been uninformed by social science and has not properly interrogated the historical and contemporary racial and class dimensions. For these reasons, we believe that this chapter (and the task force report of which it is a part) is incredibly timely. Our goal is to describe the state of race and class inequalities as it relates to black politics. We cannot encompass everything related to this issue, but we highlight key areas.

The unrest in cities across the United States that has manifested in the burning of businesses, the torching of police cars, and the silent but determined marching of many black citizens was not irrational—and it certainly was not surprising for scholars of black politics. To understand the protection of white law enforcement officers in the aftermath of black killings, the #blacklivesmatter movement, and the rage of many blacks, we must examine the intersection of race and class and how it shapes individual and group identity in the black community. In what follows, we address a number of key questions, including: Do race and class continue to intersect and affect the black political agenda? Does increasing class stratification among blacks weaken their group consciousness? What is the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 on black economic prospects? Which reforms will narrow the racial gap?

### MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

To explore the role of race and class in black politics today, we first must take into account how historical decisions have shaped the landscape for blacks. Path dependency in the social sciences suggests that we cannot understand where we are today or the choices that political actors make without contextualizing the present in past decisions, policies, and laws. In other words, current outcomes in the area of black politics are dependent on the sequence of previous outcomes related to black politics. This discussion concurs with social science research that demonstrates the

linkage between America's fraught racial history and the persistence of economic inequality, black skepticism regarding criminal-justice policies, and black rage.

Recent historical work describes how the institution of slavery is foundational to understanding the development of modern capitalism (Baptist 2014; Beckert 2015; Johnson 2013). Slavery was not an aberration, and the commodities produced through forced subjugation were integral to the foundation of this country. However, slavery was not only a critical turning point for the development of capital markets, it also was important in linking racial subjugation with economics. Black skin provided a basis to exploit human bodies for profit. In the period that followed the Civil War, lynching was used to keep blacks in their place. A recent study by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) uncovered 700 names that were previously unaccounted for in lynching studies. EJI compiled an inventory of 3,959 victims of "racial-terror lynchings" in 12 Southern states from 1877 to 1950.<sup>1</sup> As pointed out by numerous activists, including Ida B. Wells, lynchings did not occur as a result of wrongdoing—they often were used to punish blacks who were succeeding economically. In this formulation, racial violence was a means to keep blacks in their place and prevent widespread wealth accumulation (Francis 2014). The most obvious example is the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 that decimated what was often referred to as "black wall street"—one of the most affluent black communities in the United States.

However, it was not only state-sanctioned violence that had an impact on the economic opportunities of blacks; federal welfare, labor, and wartime policies also were deeply implicated. Despite their service in World War II, black soldiers were explicitly excluded from federal benefits. In a searing historical analysis, Katznelson (2005) described how New Deal politicians colluded with Southern politicians and consistently excluded African Americans in the creation of a robust middle class. For example, the denial of GI Bill educational and training benefits to black soldiers exacerbated the racial gap and set blacks and whites down two different paths. Thus, while whites were improving

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From Reconstruction through the middle of the twentieth century, white civil society in the United States also actively participated in the economic subordination of blacks. Much of the white violence committed by the Ku Klux Klan, the American state, other nightriders, and individual white vigilantes in the South was economically motivated. Black writings are filled with examples, including the autobiographies of Nate Shaw (1974) and Malcolm X, as well as the powerful

antilynching pamphlets penned by Ida B. Wells (1892). Economic violence against blacks included the theft of land owned by blacks, the destruction of individual black people and black communities considered too prosperous (the 1921 Tulsa pogrom is an extreme example), and the prevention of labor organizing by blacks (e.g., the 1919 Elaine, Arkansas, massacre). White nightriders often colluded with the state, through both the terrorizing, arrest, incarceration, and murder of black people and the various tax and loan schemes to either seize or defraud blacks of their property. As discussed in this chapter, these schemes also would wreak havoc in black communities in the North.

Well into the twentieth century, federal policies continued to treat black and whites differently. "Jim Crow" was a comprehensive system of oppression designed to create two separate and unequal societies. Jim Crow laws mandated segregation in all public facilities, including schools, workplaces, department stores, courts, and public transportation. The laws were instituted mainly in the South, but the North also organized around entrenched racial discrimination and violence in the forms of restrictive covenants, discriminatory union rules, and firebombing of homes and businesses (Biondi 2006; Muhammad 2010; Sugrue 2008). These state laws emerged in the aftermath of Reconstruction, when Southern political elites began strategizing about returning to the system of white supremacy that had existed under slavery. They subsequently were aided by the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (163 U.S. 537), which ruled that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was constitutional.

The most detrimental Jim Crow policies were the discriminatory housing and criminal policies, both of which had a lasting impact on black communities. As numerous scholars have described (Alexander 2010; Forman 2012; Gilmore 2007; Murakawa 2014), the foundation for the profitable prison-industrial apparatus in place today was laid decades ago in response to civil-rights advances of blacks. Finally, it is impossible to understand the current state of class inequality in the black community without considering the historical role that federal housing policies played in discriminating against and profiting from black homeowners.

In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson commissioned a now-lauded advisory committee after the race riots in the summer of 1967. The committee conducted an in-depth investigation and determined that the frustration of blacks stemmed from inattention to structural conditions that produced inequality and the lack of economic opportunities. The committee issued the famous warning that “We are moving towards two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” and also pointed to white racism as the central cause for black rioting. The committee issued a set of recommendations designed to decrease the level of racial segregation and urban violence. By 2015, few of those recommendations had been followed and racial violence erupted again. This should not be surprising; solutions that do not address the underlying issues of a problem can serve as only a temporary stopgap. Therefore, we believe that the current crisis should be contextualized in a longer history of race, class, and inequality in the United States.

## THE GREAT RECESSION AND BLACK ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

In this contemporary era, the importance of race is perhaps best expressed through an intersectional analysis. Whereas state and private violence against black citizens is one of the most visible forms of continued racial oppression, economic violence against black communities has accelerated in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008. Race and class continue to intersect and, in some ways, this critical intersection has intensified.

The Great Recession (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012) shifted the economic status of blacks from dire to devastating across multiple domains. Even in 2016, we cannot discuss the state of black politics without considering the persisting impact of the recession. Black unemployment, the wealth gap, and residential segregation all worsened as a result of the recession; some of these changes were a result of structural damage that will be

extraordinarily difficult to reverse. Even in economic sectors that are improving, it is troubling that black economic fortunes continue to decline.

In the current period, when the United States supposedly has entered a postracial era, massive economic disparities still exist between blacks and whites and, to a significant degree, between whites and Latinos as well. Poor and working-class blacks have been hit especially hard. For example, with respect to labor markets, “[there was] a double disadvantage for black public-sector workers.... They are concentrated in a shrinking sector of the economy, and they are substantially more likely than other public-sector workers to be without work” (Cohen 2015). The well-known wealth differences that worsened both during and after the Great Recession directly affect the economic status of African Americans. Black families that did not experience unemployment had dramatically lower levels of median income than white families that *did* experience unemployment. Black families experienced a 41% higher unemployment rate (Kurtzleben 2013). This harms both economic security and mobility for black families. Public-sector cuts led to a loss of programs including childcare; other programs necessary for sustaining economic survival also were drastically cut with disparate negative impacts on black communities (Cohen 2015).

The manufacturing and the public sectors of the economy, instrumental to the mid-twentieth-century explosive growth in black incomes, have been in a 50-year decline. Dawson (2011, 118) argued, “...changes in the American political economy [were] responsible for continued high rates of black poverty—deindustrialization, spatial mismatch, the shrinking of the government labor forces at all levels, deproletarianization—have played an even more proximate role in sustaining high rates of black unemployment.” Dawson (2011, 132–3) continued by describing this transformation in more detail, using Los Angeles as an exemplar:

The rapidity with which increasing economic devastation hit cities such as Detroit and Los Angeles can be seen in the decline in manufacturing jobs. South Central Los Angeles (the iconic black ghetto of the mid-to-late twentieth-century Los Angeles, now mainly Latino) lost 70,000 high-wage manufacturing jobs just between 1978 and 1982. The 200 firms that left South Central during this period moved either to the predominantly white outer suburbs or over the border to Mexico, where labor could be more easily exploited. The manufacturing jobs were to some degree replaced by low-paid service jobs offering inferior conditions. The employers of these new service firms had a strong preference for immigrant, mainly Latino, labor and an antipathy toward black labor. This transition in the local political economy was a major factor contributing to a 50 percent black male unemployment rate during the early 1990s. This process was repeated in the major

manufacturing centers in The East, Midwest, and West Coast—all areas that had a history of militant labor organizing, including significant participation by black (and other non-white) workers).

The long-term structural changes in the American political economy devastated the black working and, to some degree, middle classes. This devastation was magnified by the ravages of the Great Recession.

The intersection of race and class combined to have a truly horrific impact on the economic health of black communities. According to the US Census in 2009, the median white family had \$97,000 in assets, the average black family had \$2,900, and the average Latino family had only \$1,300.<sup>2</sup> While black unemployment typically runs higher than Latino unemployment, in general blacks and Latinos are mired at the bottom of the US economic ladder and whites in the United States are on top. Between 2010 and 2014 white wealth rose by 2.4%, whereas Latino wealth declined by 14% and black wealth declined by 34%. Although the level of wealth was lower than those percentages before the recession, it is evident that black wealth continues to plummet absolutely and comparatively, despite the “recovery.” Both the absolute and relative economic status of blacks worsened during and after the recession. Median white wealth is approximately 20 times greater than black wealth, black unemployment continues at more than twice that of white unemployment, and black poverty rates are almost three times greater than those of white Americans.

The current black economic inequality was substantially shaped by racist state policies that were then exploited by predatory entrepreneurs. As discussed in our *Public Culture* article, blacks also were disproportionately affected by the mortgage-loan crisis; predatory mega-banks targeted black and brown communities with criminally discriminatory loan packages (Dawson and Francis 2016). An extraordinary example is in Chicago during the mid-to-late twentieth century. According to historian Andrew Kahrl (2015), Illinois passed legislation that made it easy for unscrupulous lawyers and firms to seize homes for tax delinquencies of as little as \$3. When they purchased tax liens to seize (disproportionately) black homes, both unethical and outright illegal practices were sanctioned by the state and used. Indeed, they were used in accord with practices intended to clear black neighborhoods of their residents. The state greatly exacerbated racist policies that deepened black economic inequality from the 1940s to the 1970s by intentionally over-assessing black neighborhoods while under-assessing large corporations and white neighborhoods. This unjustly shifted the property-tax burden to those who could least afford to bear it. In Chicago, this practice was the well-known “Black Tax”

(Capps 2015; Kahrl 2015). Even when these practices were fully exposed by the media in the 1970s, white homeowners and corporations continued to support the system from which they benefited.

As in Ferguson, Missouri, the extraction of unfair taxes from black residents was used as a critical revenue stream for governments throughout the country. When California attempted in the late 1970s to actually tax white properties at a justifiable level, the withdrawal of white privilege directly resulted in the tax revolt, which in 1978 produced Proposition 13 (Kahrl 2015). The predatory policies of that era served as a model for others that further devastated black communities during the Great Recession. Reporting on Kahrl’s research, Capps showed that discriminatory housing practices in Chicago extended into this era and were not confined to Chicago but also are used in cities including Baltimore, Washington, DC, and Cleveland. These policies left poor and particularly black communities vulnerable to the predatory lending policies that produced the housing crisis, which paved the way for the Great Recession.

The current debt crisis, as well as the different loan types and lending rates offered to minorities, is a reminder that this type of exploitation does not belong to a bygone era. In 2011, it was revealed that major banks—including SunTrust, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America—used race as a central factor in determining higher fees and interest rates during the housing boom. This discrimination was not isolated to a city or a state but rather was systemic (i.e., more than 200,000 minority borrowers in the Bank of America case and more than 34,000 in the Wells Fargo case). It has been shown that similarly situated blacks and whites received dramatically different treatment, increasing the debt of people in the former group significantly more than the latter. Specifically, the Department of Justice (DOJ) determined that these banks steered minority borrowers into costly and dangerous subprime loans *and* charged them higher fees. Brokers steered homebuyers into subprime loans even when they qualified for lower-interest prime loans to earn a higher commission. Signed court affidavits from former Wells Fargo loan officers portray a company that preyed on minority housing debt. “The company put ‘bounties’ on minority borrowers,” Tony Paschal, a former employee, explained. “By this I mean that loan officers received cash incentives to aggressively market subprime loans in minority communities.” The practice was so prevalent in working-class black communities that Wells Fargo loan officers referred to subprime loans as “ghetto loans” and strategized about how to infiltrate African American churches to exploit vulnerable black families who wanted to buy homes.<sup>3</sup>

Even in the twenty-first century, simply looking black or brown can result in a borrower being charged a higher interest rate and incurring more debt. The discrimination was so rampant that the DOJ sued Bank of America and Wells Fargo for their predatory lending practices. In the first and second largest fair-lending settlements in DOJ history, Bank of America and Wells Fargo agreed to pay \$335 million and \$175 million, respectively. In its investigation, the DOJ found that highly qualified black borrowers were four times as likely and Latino borrowers were three times as likely as whites with similar profiles to receive a subprime loan from Wells Fargo. The racial discrimination was so persistent that Assistant Attorney General Thomas Perez stated that these discriminatory lending practices amounted to a “racial surtax.”

Although history-making, the legal settlements were far too little and came too late for the countless minority borrowers who had already lost their homes. The paltry settlements hardly made a dent in the banks’ year-end profits, banks did not have to admit to wrongdoing, and bank executives were never held criminally liable. Meanwhile, the ramifications of the banks’ actions on borrowers were much more severe: the short-term impact for those who could meet the higher interest rates and fees has been a loss in income and savings. The impact on access to credit for blacks whose home the bank foreclosed on has been devastating; homeownership is the basis of wealth for most Americans. As a result, this “credit crunch” will likely have longer-term consequences on education and future employment opportunities. When the mortgage market collapsed between mid-2007 and 2008, American households lost 22% of their wealth (i.e., \$14 trillion) at the same time that 3.3 million jobs disappeared (Panitch and Gindin 2012, 318). These policies led to a foreclosure rate three times as high for black neighborhoods and nearly as high for Latino neighborhoods (Hall, Crowder, and Spring 2015).

The Great Recession had multiple negative effects on black communities, including the direct result of acceleration in residential racial segregation (Hall, Crowder, and Spring 2015). Racially diverse neighborhoods also had

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very high rates of foreclosure compared to majority-white neighborhoods, resulting in these areas becoming more segregated (Hall, Crowder, and Spring 2015). These effects were magnified in the South and the West, where there were higher rates of foreclosure and more fluid racial patterns of residence in metropolitan areas. Hall, Crowder, and Spring (2015, 19) concluded, “There is strong evidence that the U.S. foreclosure crisis was predicated at least partly on discriminatory lending behaviors and on racially targeted, predatory marketing....Our results

indicate that racial stratification not only structured the concentration of foreclosures, but racial inequality in the residential context has been exacerbated as a result of the crisis.”

The combination of neoliberal ideology and the recession has further undercut what had been the most reliable source of black employment in the past several decades: the public sector. Whereas blacks constituted approximately 13% of the state and local government workforce, they “accounted for almost one-fifth (19.8%) of the overall decline in state and local government employment between 2007 and 2011—blacks lost a greater percent of public-sector employment than any other racial group as a result of the Great Recession and its aftermath” (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012). However, the public-sector layoffs cannot be simply explained as needing more highly skilled workers. It was also the sector of the economy in which the racial wage gap for comparable levels of skills was the smallest. Black workers in the public sector are highly educated: “For African Americans, the share with at least a bachelor’s degree, at 42.1 percent, is more than double that of the private sector (20.1 percent), [but]...the most rigorous studies have consistently shown that state and local government employees earn less both in wages and total compensation than comparable private-sector workers” (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012).

African Americans have not only disproportionately been laid off; they also have had more difficulty than either whites or Latinos in finding private-sector employment after they are laid off by the state. Indeed, blacks represented 20% of those who lost public-sector employment and 27%

of those who were still unemployed in 2011—a much larger proportion than for other racial groups (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012). Cooper et al. concluded, “This finding suggests that, unlike other groups who either took jobs in the private sector or exited the labor force since the beginning of the recession, African Americans have faced greater difficulty in finding other work and/or remained more strongly attached to the labor market, leading to their higher share of those still unemployed.” Given the long-term tendency for blacks to be pushed entirely outside of the labor force, it is not speculative to surmise that this large proportion is due to the difficulty in finding work for former black public-sector workers. The impact of neoliberal ideology is revealed in the fact that as the recession is ending, the public sector continues to shrink, despite the growth of the population. The neoliberal attack on the state—specifically, public-sector unionism—has had a particularly deleterious effect on black economic wealth. The neoliberal remaking of the state (i.e., privatization and destruction of the social safety net) has resulted in large sections of what had been an economically vibrant and stable black working and lower-middle class devastated and destitute.

The recession also affected black employment and wealth. It greatly weakened the public sector—and 20% of all African American adults work for the state (Cohen 2015). Unfortunately, whereas the private sector has recovered 2 million jobs since the official “end” of the recession, the state sector continues to lose them—almost 600,000 jobs more than the nearly 750,000 jobs lost during the recession (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012). This is especially harmful to the economic status of blacks because black public-sector workers—better educated although compensated less than their private-sector counterparts—suffered less of a racial wage gap than in the private sector. With respect to race, the public sector was far more egalitarian than the private sector. The continued decline of the public sector also means that “African Americans have faced greater difficulty in finding other work...leading to a larger share of those still unemployed” (Cooper, Gable, and Austin 2012, 13–14).

According to a recent Pew Report, the cumulative and other effects of the Great Recession on African American communities has led to an even greater widening of the

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wealth gap between blacks and whites. Since the recession, white median household wealth is now 13 times greater than black household wealth (Kochhar 2014). Again, these economic losses continue *after* the official end of the recession. Whereas median white wealth increased by a modest 2.4% between 2010 and 2013, black and Latino wealth decreased by 34% and 14%, respectively (Kochhar 2014). The widening of the wealth gap

after the recession can be traced to the ongoing difficulties that blacks face in the “post”-recession labor market, as well as the continuation of predatory mortgage and tax policies that greatly undermine their ability to build wealth as white Americans have through the investment in their homes. The brutal combination of racist state policies and predatory and racist financial institutions has caused an economic disaster for African American communities—a disaster that is reflected in the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore.

The assaults on the economic health of poor blacks have had a particularly devastating impact on black women. As reported elsewhere, “Another devastating economic consequence was that involuntary part-time employment nearly doubled between mid-2007 and early 2013. These losses led to great increases in poverty rates for families with involuntary part-year workers. The effect of involuntary part-time work was particularly ruinous for households headed by black or Latina women, since they had poverty rates of over 55 percent. Welfare reform exacerbated all of these trends by transferring the responsibility of providing a social safety net from government agencies to private households and charities” (Lambert, cited in Dawson and Francis 2016).

Neoliberal policies that greatly intensified the financialization of both the US economy and the global economy also have resulted in declining black economic, social, and political outcomes. The mortgage-loan industry using new financial instruments that aided the predatory loans targeting black communities was one mechanism through which financialization led to depressed black communities (Panitch and Gindin 2012). Another mechanism was the use of tax liens to aid the outright theft of black property (Kahr 2015). Another example of the use of financial instruments to oppress minority communities was the use of lease revenue bonds by anti-tax Republicans

to finance the massive growth of the California prison system (Hagan et al. 2015). What is important to understand is that active state involvement was absolutely critical in making available these and other varied financial instruments that, in turn, were used with such disastrous effects on poor and particularly black communities.

Exacerbating and complicating these effects on poor, working-class, and lower-to-middle-middle class African Americans is the steady growth of a black upper-middle class and black bourgeoisie. Neoliberal ideology has had a pernicious effect on black economic inequality that transcends state policy and that targets the heart of black politics. The type of cross-class black united fronts that often marked social movements of the twentieth century is absent in the struggle for black economic justice. A wide cross section of black elites has embraced neoliberal ideology with the effect that they often blame the black poor for their plight—even when that is not the case, they have largely eschewed non-electoral politics as a means of black advancement (Dawson and Francis 2016). While linked fate remains strong across classes of African Americans, it translates even less into black agreement over strategy and tactics than it did during most of the last century. This development complicates black politics because different class segments of the black community have different political agendas—specifically related to economic and fiscal policy.

## THE PERSISTING SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

In the age of Obama, two of the most pressing questions often asked are: Is the United States postracial (or at least almost there)? Does race still matter in the way that citizens understand and navigate in the United States? Focusing on the political behavior of African Americans, previous research provided considerable insight about the contours of black group identity and revealed that race continues to have a dominant influence on black political attitudes—more so than economic factors (Dawson 1994). In writing this chapter, we wanted to revisit the second question. Stated differently: To what degree do African

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Americans still believe that their fate is tied to that of the race as a whole, given the growing chasm between the life experiences of poor and affluent blacks and the hollowing out of the black working class due to the devastation of the manufacturing and public sectors? Surprisingly perhaps, there remain strong levels of linked fate across various socioeconomic stratifications (tables 1 and 2).<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, this is understandable, given the current racist climate in the United States and the prominence of both state and individual white racist attacks on individual blacks, groups of blacks (e.g., Charleston), and black institutions—especially the arson attacks on black churches throughout the country. On the other hand, the high level of linked fate is partly deceptive, as explained in Dawson’s (1994) *Behind the Mule*. Although blacks from different strata and classes may agree that their fates are linked to that of their race, *how* the linkage is manifested can vary significantly. As demonstrated in Dawson’s (2003) *Black Visions*, deep class divisions could be manifested on issues such as attitudes toward the police, despite strong levels of linked fate. Context matters. In an environment perceived as deeply racially hostile by blacks across divisions, the strong levels of linked fate will have a more acute role in predicting black opinion on significant but not all ranges of issues. In environments in which the overall racial climate is more in the background, we found linked fate to be less predictive of black opinion—even though there are still high levels.

For blacks, the years since 2012 serve as a contemporary reminder that America is certainly not free from its racial nightmare. We observe increasing evidence to suggest that blacks across a wide range of economic strata perceive the current environment to be hostile. Perhaps no issue has highlighted the durability of racism in the United States like the escalation of violence since 2012 by officers of the state as well as private citizens. The murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Rekia Boyd, Clementa Pickney, and many other unarmed victims occurred because they had black skin in a society that has yet to embrace and protect the humanity of African Americans. These victims came from different class backgrounds, yet all met the same fate at the hands of private citizens or law enforcement officials who perceived

**Table 1: Belief in Linked Fate by Income Level (Weighted)**

BELIEF IN LINKED FATE	LESS THAN \$5,000–12,499	\$12,500–29,999	\$30,000–49,999	\$50,000–84,999	\$85,000–175,000 OR MORE	TOTAL
NO	39 37%	25 22%	42 35%	32 34%	5 11%	143 30%
YES	65 63%	89 78%	80 65%	62 66%	38 89%	334 70%
TOTAL	104 100%	114 100%	122 100%	94 100%	43 100%	477 100%

**Table 2: Belief in Linked Fate by Educational Attainment (Weighted)**

BELIEF IN LINKED FATE	NO DIPLOMA/GED	DIPLOMA/GED OR SOME COLLEGE	ASSOCIATE DEGREE OR HIGHER	TOTAL
NO	17 31%	83 31%	43 27%	143 30%
YES	37 69%	182 69%	115 73%	334 70%
TOTAL	54 100%	266 100%	157 100%	477 100%

them to be dangerous. In most cases, no one is held responsible for the taking of black lives.

The situation has become so dire that the hashtag #blacklivesmatter was created to focus attention on the fact that “black lives” were under attack, were deprived of human rights, and that they actually mattered. It was a solemn but necessary reminder that black lives appear to be increasingly disposable compared to other races in the United States. The most accurate reporting on police killings reveals that 1,134 people were killed in 2015 in the United States at the hands of law enforcement officers. The study also revealed that blacks are twice as likely to be killed as whites or Latinos and that blacks killed by police were significantly more likely to have been unarmed.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that racial discrimination remains a paramount concern in 2016 because it is the very basis for the differential treatment that African Americans receive at the hands of law enforcement. To decrease the level of racial inequality that blacks experience, their right to live must be protected.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Race and class inequality in black politics is in a vulnerable state. The recovery of the black workforce after the Great Recession has been slow and is unlikely to fully rebound. Particularly catastrophic were discriminatory housing policies and the foreclosure crisis, which decimated a

generation of black wealth and asset accumulation. Most distressing, the killings of black citizens by officers of the state have highlighted the contemporary durability of American racism. Although this chapter arrives at grim conclusions, we nevertheless see many opportunities for improvement; we are particularly hopeful about the #blacklivesmatter organizing and coalition-building around recent racial injustices.

### *Recommendation 1: Explicitly Address Economic Inequality through Government Programs*

Just as the state was responsible for crafting and enabling policies that worsened black oppression, any serious attempt to address black economic inequality will require a new range of state action. State policy, specifically at the federal level, has been required in the past to aid the quest for black racial, social, economic, and political justice. State action will be required to rein in the worst excesses of neoliberal financialization, including many of the local-level policies that resulted in the loss of black property and wealth and globally in the Great Recession. Other policies that are more positive will be needed and would include explicit government action to reduce the massive types of current inequality in the United States today.

### *Recommendation 2: Raise the Minimum Wage to a Living Wage*

Although there has been notable progress in cities including Seattle and Los Angeles in raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, we must recognize that more work is needed to address this issue. First, there are vast regions of the United States that still have a minimum wage that does not adequately support a family; moreover, in some areas, \$15 is not sufficient and, as it exists right now, the minimum wage in many cities is unlivable. A more comprehensive governmental effort to provide a living wage must consider basic costs of living in different US cities and regions.

### *Recommendation 3: Create Robust Government Jobs Program*

Given the high levels of unemployment and continued racial discrimination in labor markets, there also must be a restoration of the safety net for individuals and families who are detached from them. The best income-support program is a vigorous jobs program. The largest increase in black incomes was achieved in the twentieth century as African Americans moved into good urban public- and manufacturing-sector jobs. These jobs need to be replaced and two possibilities that both require state programs are the rebuilding of the country's infrastructure and programs designed to "green" the cities.

### *Recommendation 4: End the War on Drugs*

The US criminal-justice system has significantly shaped the development of America's racial order. Discriminatory drug laws and the overpolicing of minorities have led to a dramatic increase in the number of incarcerated Americans: one in every 15 black men and one in every 36 Latino men. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that one in three black men can expect to go to jail in their lifetimes. As numerous researchers have described, massive racial disparities undergird the War on Drugs in terms of arrests, prosecutions, and time of imprisonment. The War on Drugs has led to the long-term incarceration of nonviolent, low-level drug offenders—a problem that President Obama called "unproductive." The War on Drugs must end and new drug policies and laws based on science, public health, and human rights must replace it.

### *Recommendation 5: Curtail Law-Enforcement Discretion*

Discretion in the criminal-justice system takes many forms. The recent past has shown the dangerous consequences of police discretion in those stopped on the streets and how an arrest is made (e.g., Freddie Gray in Baltimore). It can take other forms, such as plea bargaining and sentencing. Whether walking to school, returning home, or driving, blacks are more likely to be stopped and questioned. The most recent statistics released by New York City revealed that 87% of those "stopped and frisked" by the NYPD were black or Latino. However, arrests were made in only 6% of the stops and most were for nonviolent offenses. New York City is not the only city in which blacks are disproportionately stopped and searched; this occurs in many cities across the United States.

### *Recommendation 6: Return to the Tradition of Radical Black Politics*

Both the state and other interests that have profited from the subordination of blacks in the United States will resist reform in the areas described in this chapter. All black advancement has come only as a result of the state, civil society, and economic enterprises responding to mass pressure from blacks and their allies. The radical black traditions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker, and others must be revived and adapted to the twenty-first century to guide those working within and outside of the electoral system in gaining racial and economic justice for African Americans. As evidenced by the organizing connected to #blacklivesmatter, race continues to play an important role in the shaping of black freedom movements. However, despite the continuing importance of race for descriptive representation and movement building, blacks are (and should be) increasingly building alliances that cut across race while still acknowledging its significance. The ownership by young people has led to a movement that actively seeks to connect injustices felt by blacks to other struggles for justice, such as LGBTQ and immigration rights. The #blacklivesmatter movement is directly connected to the persecution faced by LGBTQ individuals at the hands of law enforcement and to the harassment faced by undocumented students and workers. We believe the growing economic and racial inequality across a range of different domains is highlighting the need to work together in creating a new radical black politics. ■

## NOTES

1. See Equal Justice Initiative (2015), *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror: Full Report*. Available at [www.eji.org/files/EJI%20Lynching%20in%20America%20SUMMARY.pdf](http://www.eji.org/files/EJI%20Lynching%20in%20America%20SUMMARY.pdf).
2. For more information and interactive charts see Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper, *The State of America's Wealth, 2011: Through Volatility and Turmoil*. [http://epi.3cdn.net/002c5fc0fda0ae9cce\\_aem6idhp5.pdf](http://epi.3cdn.net/002c5fc0fda0ae9cce_aem6idhp5.pdf)
3. Some loan officers received anywhere from \$600,000 to \$1million in commissions for securing subprime loans. Subprime loan rates can range from only 1-2% to over 10% higher than the cost of a conventional/prime loan, depending upon a lender's rates and the borrower's credit history. See: Affidavit of Elizabeth M. Jacobson at 5, *Mayor & City Council of Baltimore. v. Wells Fargo*, 631 F. Supp. 2d 702 (D. Md. 2009).
4. Data for tables 1 and 2 are from 2010. The data used in these tables are from the "Election 2008 and Beyond Survey: Waves 1-3 (2008/2009/2010)"; Principal Investigator Cathy J. Cohen and Co-Principal Investigator Michael C. Dawson. Collected in three waves over the course of one year, the "Election 2008 and Beyond Survey" was conducted by Knowledge Networks using an online panel methodology based on a random-digit-dialing household sampling. The first wave was in the field in the weeks leading up to the 2008 election (October 17, 2008–November 3, 2008); the second wave was fielded six months after the election (May 30, 2009–July 24, 2009); and the final wave was in the field one year after the election (November 24, 2009–January 19, 2010). Comprising a rich set of topics related to race, politics, and government, these nationally representative data feature oversamples of blacks, Latinos, Asians, and young people (ages 18–35) and include substantial numbers of foreign-born respondents—approximately a quarter of the total sample. More than 40% of Latino respondents opted to take the survey in Spanish; all other respondents, including Asian respondents, were offered the survey in English. The "Election 2008 and Beyond Survey" was fielded as part of the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project, led by Cathy J. Cohen at the University of Chicago and featuring this panel study of political attitudes and behavior in the context of the Obama campaign and presidency. More information is available at [www.2008andbeyond.com](http://www.2008andbeyond.com).
5. See Laughland, Swaine, and Lartey (2015).

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