



"LET JUSTICE ROLL LIKE A RIVER..."

Racial Justice and the 2020 Election

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The upcoming election on November 3 could lead to dramatic shifts in the fight for racial justice in the United States. Our newly elected local, state, and national officials must address the presence and effects of systemic racism in the United States. The following are a few of the racial justice policy areas where we need to hold our elected officials accountable.

Housing

A highly significant reason for the wealth gap between white Americans and Black and Brown Americans is systemic racism in housing. Largely due to the U.S. government's support of racial segregation in the mid-20th century, Black and Brown Americans disproportionately live in areas of high poverty. A 2017 study showed that 27 percent of Native Americans, 26 percent of Black people, and 22 percent of Latinx people lived in high-poverty areas, versus only 5 percent of white people.¹ Living in a high-poverty area impacts access to strong schools, adequate health care, better jobs, and good grocery stores. Black and Brown Americans are disproportionately exposed to air pollution as well,² and there is evidence to suggest that exposure to pollution increases a person's chance of dying from COVID-19.³

There is also a gap in homeownership rates among racial groups. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that while white homeownership is at 76 percent, Black homeownership is at 47 percent, and Latinx homeownership is at 51.4 percent.⁴ Since homeownership allows a family to build equity and accrue greater wealth over time, such a disparity is a particularly significant factor in the racial wealth gap.

Policy initiatives that could help:

- Reinstate the Obama Administration's 2015 Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing regulation that was designed to help end housing discrimination.
- Fully fund the Housing Choice Voucher Program so all low-income families can find safe and affordable housing.
- Outlaw source-of-income discrimination against renters who need government assistance to pay for their rent.
- End exclusionary zoning, which pushes low-income people into concentrated areas.
- Expand funding for fair-housing testers throughout the United States to end discriminatory practices.

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Voting Rights

Especially in view of the flagrant and open attempts of the Trump Administration to suppress mail-in voting turnout during the midst of a pandemic, our elected officials need to address the issues surrounding voting rights. The governments of Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi, for example, have imposed more restrictive voter identification laws in the past decade. These laws often place tremendous burden on those in poverty due to the cost involved in obtaining an approved ID.⁵ States like Florida and Alabama require people with past felony convictions to pay all their fines before voting, and in Mississippi some people have been permanently barred from voting—even if they fully served their sentences.⁶

In order to ensure all Americans are able to exercise their right to vote, our governments could enact the following policies:

- Pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to ensure states are upholding the rights of voters.
- Implement a policy that all Americans automatically become registered voters when turning 18.
- Restore full voting rights to those who have been incarcerated, past or present.
- End partisan-based gerrymandering that splits districts comprised of Black and Brown people to reduce their political power.
- Provide for mail-in balloting throughout the country.

Policing

Since the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers on May 25, an increasing number of white Americans are finally beginning to take seriously the calls of Black Americans for the radical reform of our systems of community safety. Advocates for reform have made it clear that police militarization and violence have a negative impact on all of our communities, but with a disproportionate impact on Black and Brown people. The police in the United States regularly kill over 1,000 people per year. Black people are nearly three times more likely than white people to be killed by a police officer, and Black people are more likely to be unarmed than whites when killed by a police officer. And remarkably, in 99 percent of police-involved killings from 2013 to 2019, no officers have been charged with a crime.⁷

Advocacy recommendations vary on the level of reform needed for community safety, ranging anywhere from banning certain policing practices to abolishing the police altogether. Here are a few policies that could help to end police violence:

- End no-knock raids and enforce body-cam requirements.
- End the practice of qualified immunity that protects police officers from prosecution.
- Require the intervention of other officers when excessive force is observed.
- Forbid police departments from purchasing military equipment.

- Divert some of the funding of police departments toward community-led safety programs as well as mental health and addiction response teams.

Incarceration

Despite recent improvements, mass incarceration is still a serious problem. In 2015, the United States comprised less than 5 percent of the population of the world but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated persons.⁸ The Gulf South states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the nation.⁹

Racial disparities are strikingly present in incarceration rates as well. In 2017 Latino males were three times more likely to be incarcerated than white males, and Black males were almost six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males. Black and Latina women were more likely to be incarcerated than white women as well.¹⁰ Unjust sentencing laws, often based in racist post-Reconstruction legislation, force long prison sentences on people or keep people permanently under the control of the criminal justice system. In August, for example, the Louisiana Supreme Court denied Fair Wayne Bryant's request to reduce his prison sentence. Due to Louisiana's habitual offender laws, Bryant, a Black man, was sentenced in 1997 to life in prison for the theft of a pair of hedge clippers.¹¹

States could help reduce these injustices by:

- End “three strikes, you're out” habitual offender laws and mandatory minimum sentencing laws that take power away from the courts.
- Prohibit cash bail, a policy which keeps poor people who haven't been convicted of a crime in jail.
- Stop imprisonment for small and nonviolent drug crimes.
- End “life without parole” sentencing.
- Implement and empower independent Conviction Integrity Units that can monitor prosecutorial offices across the country.

These are not the only issues related to race, of course. There is no doubt that the post-election discussions about racial justice will include questions about education, employment, reparations to Black and Native Americans, and reducing hate acts throughout the country. Whether any of these policies are put into law, however, will depend largely upon whom we vote into office. As the prophet Amos proclaimed, “Let justice roll like a river...” (Amos 5:24).

ENDNOTES

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