

## Commentary

### **A personal commentary from the United States on economic diversity and social exclusion during COVID-19: The uneven effect on historically marginalized populations.**

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#### **Abstract**

This commentary explores the effect economic diversity in the United States has on social exclusion and demonstrates how vividly the global pandemic has exposed such exclusion. The commentary is a clarion call to those who strive for not only genuine equality of opportunity, but also for equitable outcomes.

**Key words:** Social exclusion; economic inequities; COVID-19; marginalized populations

This commentary explores the effect economic diversity in the United States has on social exclusion and demonstrates how the global pandemic has exposed such exclusion. In this commentary we present the notion of economic diversity as an example of inequity, where diversity is not celebrated, but rather indicates how structural determinants, such as one's income, race, or class, reinforce social stratification (Makhoul, Taket, Khoury, & Kabakian-Khasholian, 2019). We view social exclusion as a concept larger than inequality because social exclusion results from policies and practices that predicate and contribute to inequality (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 1999; Labonte, 2004). Using this line of thinking, we posit that social exclusion in the United States is exacerbated by diversity (Amin, 2019), particularly within the context of economic opportunity. This need not be the reality.

The economic consequences of COVID-19 has disproportionately affected the already most fragile segments of the population such as Black and immigrant communities (CDC, 2021; Clark, Fredricks, Woc-Colburn, Bottazzi, & Weatherhead, 2020; Hardy & Logan, 2020), having created serious challenges for social inclusion. Social inclusion is the extent to which humans can participate in society without having to encounter the barriers unwillingly imposed on them

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by their own identity; it addresses the root causes of injustice (The World Bank, 2013).

However, so much more than a mere recognition of exclusion and its detrimental effects is required to achieve inclusion (Tapia, 2009). Social inclusion requires transformation, intentionality, and values-driven decision making; it requires calling out our differences, not minimizing them (Tapia, 2009). Unfortunately, the global pandemic increased structural discrimination and perpetuated the cycle of exclusion. This is exactly why social inclusion provides a perfect conceptual space for an opportunity to truly change something (Boushey, Fermstad, Gragg, & Waller, 2007); it is a practical tool (Labonte, 2004) that can unite us in our shared efforts to fight exclusion.

As a woman who is a first-generation immigrant to the United States and as a Black man born and reared in the United States, the authors are concerned with our nation's vertical inequalities and the social exclusion of our communities. These concerns are prompted by our own personal experiences and observations. In the United States, the global pandemic most negatively affected racial and ethnic minorities (CDC, 2021). Many who were working low-wage jobs, suddenly became "essential" workers with no option to work from home, having to work around-the-clock while being relentlessly exposed to the deadly virus; many often contracted COVID-19 and ultimately put their families at risk of also contracting it. So many members of our communities who could not afford health insurance were afraid to seek medical help. Some lacked English proficiency and technical skills to apply for unemployment. One of our own family members was denied getting a COVID test at the drive-through because she did not have a car and arrived at the testing facility on foot. When trying to explain to the staff that she could not afford a car and that the test was requested by her employer as a condition to come back to work, the staff threatened to call the police if she did not leave immediately.

There are many stories that disconcert us about inequities in social outcomes for people like us. The global pandemic has been deepening inequalities exactly because of the underlying problems of inequitable wealth distribution and social exclusion of the historically most vulnerable populations in the United States (Boushey & Park, 2020). We write this commentary, as a clarion call to those who strive for not only genuine equality of opportunity, but also for equitable outcomes.

The United States has the highest level of income inequality of all the G7 nations (Schaeffer, 2020). The top 20 percent of households own 90 percent of capital in the United States, while the rest either own very little or are at all in debt (Wolff, 2017). Such extreme income inequalities are deleterious for the economy. Income inequalities drag down GDP growth, widen the gap in education and other social outcomes across individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds, and ultimately lead to large amounts of wasted potential and lower social mobility. Such conditions boost non-standard work production, such as temporary, part-time, on-call, and disguised employment (ILO, 2021), where workers are likely to be vulnerable and worse off in many aspects of job quality, such as earnings and job security (OECD, 2015). As a result, income inequalities lead to wide disparities in social outcomes.

The United States has an appealing image of a nation with a vast social, political, and economic landscape; a level playing field upon which all people can exercise their freedom to become successful (Reeves, 2014). This American Dream, however, is largely a myth (Caliendo, 2018; Stiglitz, 2015; Wyatt-Nichol, 2011). Residing at the United States' core is the notion of meritocracy: the belief that those who do not have success, simply did not earn it. Unfortunately, the starting line is not the same for everyone; far from simply being behind, there are systemic obstacles that are difficult to overcome, and inequality at birth often results in a lifetime of advantage or disadvantage (Caliendo, 2018; Sawhill, 1999). Certainly, some very talented persons do rise from the bottom to the top, but the life chances of young Americans are more affected by the socio-economic status they are born into rather than purely based on one's personal characteristics, such as hard work and perseverance.

Inequality has existed on a mass scale in the United States throughout its history, but the coronavirus pandemic has only further revealed the painful truth of who we are as a nation. Already stretched thin by the economic precarity caused by unequal access to good jobs and fair wages, people of color and immigrants have been hit hardest by the economic shock of the COVID-19 crisis (Boushey & Park, 2020) and are overrepresented in COVID-19 related morbidity statistics (Garfield, Rae, Claxton, & Orgera, 2020; Hanauer & Rolf, 2020). Driven by job losses and wage cuts, a massive increase in already extreme inequalities has pushed many vulnerable workers to a state of despair. Women, minority races, and low-income workers have found themselves employed in positions that are at most risk of becoming infected by the virus.

Furthermore, the pandemic clearly demonstrated that the inequities in health expressed by Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and immigrants were real and pervasive (Krouse, 2020). Health disparities among the minority groups were driven by unequal access to healthcare services and COVID-19 testing centers due to such factors as lack of insurance and low availability of community-wide health services and exacerbated by social determinants such as poverty, overcrowded housing conditions, high unemployment rates, and poor nutrition, among others (Krouse, 2020; Lavizzo-Mourey, Besser, & Williams, 2021; Warren & Bordoloi, 2020). The problem of racial and ethnic health disparities in the United States during the COVID-19 crisis brought to light its long-existing root cause: structural racial and socio-economic inequities.

The economic recovery has also spread unequally. For example, Black Americans have recovered only a third of lost jobs compared to white Americans, who have recovered more than half of their jobs lost at the outset of the pandemic (Long, Van Dam, Fowers, & Shapiro, 2020). Ultimately, structural and institutional racism and gaps in wealth accumulation and distribution among historically privileged and marginalized communities — exposed more so by the global pandemic — unmask the injustice in our democracy.

The United States has not been meeting its egalitarian principles (Reeves, 2014). If the United States were to be true to its ideals, it would make a determined effort to fulfill its original democratic values. A democratic society makes provisions for all its members to participate in its goods on equal terms (Dewey, 1944). A democratic society observes moral equity of all humans, represses every form of privilege, places a heavier social burden on the backs of the strong, and manifests a tender regard for the weak (Counts, 1932). Returning to these original values should be at the forefront of the national agenda if we are to put an end to persistent inequities within our society.

Unfortunately, many people in the United States are simply unaware of the actual degree of wealth-inequality within the country (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Modern-day Americans are growing up in environments that are less and less economically diverse, therefore people on either side of the income divide are unable to see the existing wealth gap that separates them (Mijs, 2017). They simply ignore the invisible power of neoliberal ideology and its followers who continue to concentrate wealth in their hands (Davies, 2020). At the same time, most Americans who actually see how much economic inequality there is in the United States rarely advocate for policies that would change it (Menasce Horowitz, Igielnik, & Kochhar, 2020; Norton & Ariely, 2011), perpetuating vertical inequalities.

For decades, the American people have been electing political leaders who prioritized the material interests of the rich and powerful above their own needs (Hanauer & Rolf, 2020). COVID-19 might have triggered economic depression around the world, but the fact that the United States has been hit hardest of all the advanced countries, is certainly not random. Extreme economic inequities embedded in the nation's systems that have been

disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minority groups for decades, have led to the massive health inequities, resulting in highly unfavorable outcomes for those groups.

The global pandemic has revealed the level of urgency with which the U.S. policy makers must act to reduce economic inequities and to build a sustainable growth in social inclusion. Our recommendations include designing new, or re-examining and ultimately re-establishing existing policies that would immediately address the problem of extreme income inequalities. Such policies could include a tax plan that redistributes some of the wealth from the richest to the poorest (Bradbury, 2012; Ingraham, 2017; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Reeves, 2014); higher minimum wages (Hanauer & Rolf, 2020; Peterson, 2017); public support for early childhood education and enhanced educational opportunities at all levels (Menasce Horowitz et al., 2020; Mischel, 2015; Peterson, 2017), skills training for those who have lost jobs due to technological change and globalization, and other social programs targeted at the least well-off (Leonhardt, 2016; Peterson, 2017; Stiglitz, 2015).

This commentary calls for a more inclusive society, where equality of opportunity produces equitable outcomes. The economic consequences of COVID-19 disproportionately affected the most vulnerable populations. The United States is believed to be the land of opportunity, but in reality, has the highest level of income inequality of all countries with advanced economies. If the United States were to be true to its ideals, it must make a determined effort to fulfill its democratic values. It is important that our laws are built on the principles of empathy and human dignity. U.S. policy makers must act to reduce economic inequities and build sustainable growth and social inclusion. The authors call for action.

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## **Biographical Notes**

**Dr. Taborda** is an avid human rights advocate and believes in universal respect for the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family. Her research revolves around social, economic, and cultural rights of foreign-born individuals living in the United States. Dr. Taborda earned her Ph.D. in Global Inclusion and Social Development from the University of Massachusetts Boston.

**Dr. Johnson** is a lifelong learner who embraces diversity and inclusion. He has served as a teacher, professor, consultant, administrator, and career coach. Dr. Johnson has worked in corporate and non-profit settings as a leader, supervisor, and manager. He has inspired people and has taught and trained in a range of settings and at all age levels. Dr. Johnson is also a decorated U.S. Air Force and Reserve veteran who began his military career as an airman basic—a “slick sleeve”—and achieved the rank of colonel. He holds a doctorate from Indiana University-Bloomington.