

**RACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES HIGHLIGHT WHY  
WE NEED TO ADDRESS STRUCTURAL RACISM**

**Statement of  
Kilolo Kijakazi, MSW, PhD  
Institute Fellow, Urban Institute**

**before the  
Committee on Health,  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**SENSE OF THE COUNCIL TO DECLARE RACISM A PUBLIC HEALTH  
CRISIS IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA RESOLUTION OF 2020**

**November 5, 2020**

\* The views expressed are my own and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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Chairman Gray, Councilmember McDuffie, and members of the council, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on structural racism and public health in the District of Columbia. My name is Kilolo Kijakazi, and I am an Institute fellow at the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. I offer my testimony today not to support or comment on a specific piece of legislation but to encourage the council and community members to engage in the issues related to structural racism and public health. The views expressed here are my own and should not be attributed to any organization I am affiliated with, its trustees, or its funders.

COVID-19 is one of the greatest health crises of our time. In April of this year, [data began to reveal an alarming trend](#): Black families and other families of color face a much higher risk of contracting and dying from the virus. Public officials have focused on the underlying health issues disproportionately affecting these communities, such as diabetes and hypertension, as contributors to the larger impact of COVID-19. But it is important to go further and examine the root cause of these racial disparities in underlying health conditions.

Research has shown that differences in access to high-quality jobs and economic stability, quality education, health care services, and quality neighborhoods contribute to racial inequities in health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that the conditions where people live, learn, work, and play affect a wide range of health outcomes. These are the [social determinants of health](#).

Structural racism is a root cause of this unequal access to the health- and opportunity-promoting social determinants that drive the racial health inequities laid bare by COVID-19. Structural racism consists of the policies, programs, and institutional practices that facilitate the well-being of white families while creating barriers to the well-being of families of color.

In 2019, researchers at Urban Institute released a [brief that examined policy options](#) for eliminating structural racism in key aspects of Black families' lives. These options can reduce the racial disparities that COVID-19 has illuminated and should be considered as policymakers help the country recover and become more resilient.

## **Close Employment and Earnings Gaps**

On average, Black workers experience higher levels of unemployment and lower wages than white workers, even during the best economic times. Too often researchers, policymakers and the public assume that these differences stem from a lack of education by Black workers. However, [my research](#) shows that these disparities persist at every level of education. [A study by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) shows that occupational segregation also persists—even 50 years after the Commission was founded. Black workers are overrepresented in service occupations that typically pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits, and they are underrepresented in professional occupations that usually pay higher wages and provide fringe benefits such as health insurance. And, [research shows](#) that racial discrimination in hiring has persisted over time; white job applicants receive 36 percent more callbacks than Black applicants and 24 percent more than Latinos.

A critical part of the economic recovery from COVID will be helping people without jobs. For workers unable to return to their previous jobs, and for those who were seeking employment before the pandemic, policymakers should consider a [federal job guarantee](#) that ensures full employment.

## Eliminate Inequities in Public School Quality

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act provided more than \$13 billion to states and the District of Columbia through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to respond to the immediate needs of K–12 public schools.

In addition to those funds, policymakers should consider solutions for recovery as children go back to school and for the long-term economic resilience that ensues when a society is well educated. One solution is to address racial disparities in school quality and educational outcomes by reforming the education finance system and giving the federal government greater responsibility for education finance and accountability.

## Close the Racial Wealth Gap

Even before the pandemic, [Black families typically had 13 cents of net worth](#) for every dollar of wealth held by white families, and Latinos had 19 cents. This gap persists even when [Black families take all the steps](#) that we are *told* lead to economic security:

- Black college graduates have less wealth than white high school dropouts.
- Black people who work full time have less wealth than unemployed white people.
- Two-parent Black families have less wealth than single-parent white families.

The racial wealth gap is *not* driven by deficits in Black families. Instead it is driven by historic and current policies including the human trafficking and bondage of people of African descent, the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, redlining, racial covenants, and urban renewal that decimated Black-owned homes and businesses in Southwest DC. More recently, financial institutions targeted communities of color for subprime loans, even when they qualified for prime loans, contributing to [Black families losing a larger share of their wealth](#) than white families (47.6 versus 26.2 percent). Given these lower levels of wealth, many Black families were not in the position to prepare for and respond to the pandemic, and they will have a harder time recovering.

Tax subsidies already exist to promote wealth accumulation. But nearly [80 percent](#) of such subsidies for home mortgage deductions and property taxes go to the wealthiest 20 percent of income earners. To further help low-wealth families recover from the pandemic, lawmakers could distribute tax subsidies more equitably.

Steps should also be taken to build an economically resilient society. Wealth gives people the resilience to weather a crisis without succumbing financially. [One bold solution](#) has been offered by Darrick Hamilton, professor of economics and urban policy, and director of the Institute for the Study of Race, Stratification and Political Economy at The New School. Hamilton proposes that every newborn be given an endowment of up to \$60,000, based on the wealth of their family. The federal government

would hold the endowment until the child becomes a young adult, when they could invest in an asset, such as higher education, a home, or a business.

## End Punitive Policing

Race-coded criminalization has resulted in [sobering disparities](#) at every stage of the criminal justice system: law enforcement, prosecution, defense, courts, and corrections. These inequities stem from a long history of intimidating disciplinary policies and [destructive stereotypes](#). Ending punitive policing would make communities safer and would represent a step toward reimagining a more equitable justice system.

To address the legacy of racism in law enforcement, advocates propose bold [invest-divest strategies](#) that divest funds from the policing and court systems that harm the Black community and invest those resources in [community-based alternative systems](#).

Communities are also investing in safety trainings, conflict mediators, and strategies to [advance the well-being of youth](#) rather than relying on policing and incarceration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given us even more clarity about our society's racial inequities and the subsequent racial disparities in health. Now that our eyes are wide open, it is time to start eliminating the structural racism that has produced these stark disparities.