

Advancing anti-racist economic research and policy

Perspectives and resources on race, ethnicity, and
the economy

Report • By Valerie Wilson, Adewale A. Maye, Trevon D. Logan, Kyle K. Moore, Angela Lang, Janelle Wong, Francisca Antman, and Patrice H. Kunesh • June 15, 2022

Creating effective anti-racist economic research and policy requires thinking critically about the assumptions and norms that influence how we view the world, and thus the way we understand and interpret data or approach solutions to social and economic problems. This process begins with a willingness to revisit U.S. history or current events from a perspective other than the dominant or popular view.

This guide seeks to strengthen anti-racist research and policy work by challenging assumptions and norms and exploring emerging frameworks for data gathering and analysis. Rather than exhaustively surveying every important topic relevant to race and ethnicity and the economy, it serves as more of a thought piece. And it is coauthored by some of the leading voices on the myriad ways in which race and ethnicity have been used to assign advantage or disadvantage and to normalize racial and ethnic inequities.

The challenge for each of us is to understand how race shapes the American experience in countless intersecting, and sometimes contradictory, ways that can be hard to disentangle from the influence of other markers of identity or class, such as gender. Given those complexities, anti-racist economic research and policy often involves nuance, and is not easily boiled down into a simple checklist or a formulaic step-by-step guide. In fact, even the most well-meaning attempts to “check all the right boxes” can come across as superficial, performative, detached, or worst of all, counterproductive.

In 2019 and 2020, EPI’s Program on Race, Ethnicity and the Economy (PREE), in partnership with the Groundwork Collaborative and the Center for Popular Democracy, hosted a seven-part workshop series titled, “**Turning Good Intentions into Constructive Engagement on Race.**” Workshops were led by scholars, writers, advocates, and activists from across the country and attended by Washington, D.C.- based policy analysts, advocates and researchers working to more effectively center racial and economic justice in their work and organizations.

This volume adapts content from the workshop series into an online resource that can be accessed by a wider audience of researchers, policymakers, organizers, activists, advocates, journalists, and others. It includes a collection of essays that discuss principles for centering race and ethnicity in research and policy or cover topics specifically relevant to Asian American, Black, Latinx, and Native American communities. As informed by the author’s area of expertise, some essays are written to a more technical audience of economic researchers and data users, such as essays on interpreting the race variable in empirical analysis and on enhancing data collection to better represent the Hispanic population in the United States. Others are written through the lens of community organizing or policy and

politics (explaining the need for race-conscious policies and the barriers to anti-racist coalitions). Finally, some essays delve into race and political economy, exploring how new policy paradigms advance growth in Native American communities and are needed to address the structural forces that limit opportunities in Black communities. The essays are introduced with a piece on how a reckoning with the centrality of race in the social and economic structures of the United States turns economic research on racial disparities into critical evidence in support of those new paradigms. Essays link to the related workshop recordings, where applicable, and conclude with a list of author-recommended resources such as articles, books, videos, podcasts, and subject-matter experts. (Note that the capitalization treatment of racial and ethnic groups follows EPI's style, rather than those of the individual contributors.)

The last chapter is an **interactive chartbook** that provides a statistical snapshot of race and ethnicity in the United States. The chartbook depicts many of the racial/ethnic disparities referenced in various essays as observed through: (1) population demographics; (2) civic participation; (3) labor market outcomes; (4) income, poverty and wealth; and (5) health. Most charts include data for five racial/ethnic groups: white, Black, Hispanic, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN). The chartbook also highlights some notable intersections of gender with race and ethnicity, including educational attainment, labor force participation, life expectancy, and maternal mortality. The findings are bracing, as they show how much more work we need to do to address longstanding and persistent racial inequities.

Each of the essays in this volume can be viewed as discussions that commonly take place among different groups of people but involve intersecting themes. In bringing each of these discussions and relevant data points together in one place, the guide aims to facilitate the consideration of race/ethnicity from alternative perspectives, spark honest introspection and discussion among stakeholders, and trigger new areas of inquiry and new collaborations that seek answers to previously unasked questions. That is the process for building a more inclusive base of knowledge that informs research questions and methodology, use and interpretation of data, and policies that promote equity and economic justice. That is how we turn good intentions into constructive engagement on race.

Guiding principles for anti-racist

research, the ‘bodycam’ for racial economic injustice

Phrases like anti-racist, racial equity, and racial justice have quickly become part of the standard lexicon of people and institutions grappling with what it really means to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive. These concepts, however, are more than just “woke” or “progressive” jargon. They are standards for making and

sustaining meaningful changes that help to dismantle social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate racial inequality. Here anti-racist research plays a key role. Rather than simply reciting the problem of racial inequity, anti-racist research questions its causes, exposes its consequences, and proposes ways to resolve it. Economists and other social scientists use data and statistical methods to model the processes of human decision-making and evaluate the effects of policy decisions. Those same tools also help to expose how race is used to systematically assign access, opportunity, power, and economic resources exclusive of individual skill, ability, effort, or merit.



The myth of race-neutral policy

Race-neutral policies—such as the drive to eliminate affirmative action—are harmful for achieving true racial equity and justice. Race-neutral policies fail to reverse the persistent and in some cases widening gaps between economic outcomes for Black and white Americans that are largely due to racism that is

entrenched within the very fabric of our customs, laws, systems, and institutions. We must acknowledge and tackle the barriers posed by structural racism with race-conscious policies that target the intersection of race, class, and gender. Only race-conscious policies—policies that may disproportionately help communities of color—can dismantle the structural barriers to prosperity, safety, and equity for Black Americans.



Race and ethnicity in empirical analysis

How should we interpret the race variable?

In trying to understand racial and ethnic groups well enough to write policy that improves their economic outcomes, we have to have a clear understanding of what “race” means in statistical analysis and how the effect of race is measured. Race factors into economic outcomes in complicated ways that even more sophisticated statistical models can’t capture. We need to carefully interpret the effect or predictive power of race in measured disparities—in both descriptive and more sophisticated statistical models—because our assumptions affect how we design policy to address racial disparities.



Stratification economics

A moral policy approach for addressing persistent group-based disparities

Conventional ideas for how to shrink racial disparities rely on methodological individualism—the notion that racial economic disparities can be eliminated by developing the “human capital” of disadvantaged groups (i.e., by “fixing Black people”). Stratification economics rejects that approach as misguided and doomed to failure. Rather, this explicitly moral research discipline recognizes that structural forces limiting opportunities for Black Americans were set up by white Americans to preserve their economic dominance. Thus eliminating racial disparities requires policy interventions that make structural changes to the way our economy functions. Stratification economics seeks to reduce disparities to improve the health and well-being of communities first and foremost, not to improve productivity.



Serving, organizing, and empowering communities of color

Best practices for aligning research, advocacy, and activism

Improving economic opportunities and well-being in communities of color requires more than data and research. It requires grassroots groups that reject the transactional nature of electoral campaigns in favor of humility, deep listening, year-round engagement, and love. Only by questioning assumptions and organizing people around the issues they prioritize can you build trust and lasting change. For grassroots groups that want to truly advance policies that serve communities' needs, there is much to take away from the lessons learned at Black Leaders Organizing Communities in Milwaukee.



Asian Americans and the anti-racist equity agenda

Contradictions and common ground

Asian Americans are a growing, predominantly progressive political force in the United States. On average, they favor a bigger government with more services and support affirmative action—and cite universal health care, progressive tax reforms, gun control, and the environment as top concerns.

However, stereotypes about Asian Americans, as well as a small but vocal contingent of Asian Americans working against anti-racist policies (such as affirmative action) complicate efforts to sustain multiracial coalitions working toward racial justice.



Multidimensional identities of the Hispanic population in the United States

The Hispanic population in the United States is a large and diverse group of people with multidimensional identities. Existing survey instruments pose critical limits on research into this population and thus impact resulting policies. While the principle of racial and ethnic self-identification is important to respect and preserve, designing better surveys with more objective indicators of racial and ethnic background would provide a clearer picture of diverse subgroups and how they fare economically compared with one another and with other demographic groups. This is a critical step that would enable researchers to advance the collective understanding of the Hispanic population and thus allow policymakers to better address the challenges Hispanic people in the United States face.



The power of self-determination in building sustainable economies in Indian Country

Tribal governments are a significant part of the national economy, thanks to a policy shift toward tribal self-governance that ushered in an era of economic development, led by tribal gaming. Yet the economic and cultural shocks that deprived Native Americans of their livelihoods and social infrastructure for so long are still affecting Indian Country. To effectively address the economic and social challenges faced by Native Americans and their communities, policymakers and researchers must understand that tribal self-determination through self-governance is the only policy that produces positive results, and that further advances for Native Americans require tackling



bureaucratic barriers such as tribes' incomplete authority to put their lands to good and productive use, their inability to collect taxes to pay for government operations, and discriminatory higher costs for accessing capital.

Racial and ethnic disparities in the United States

An interactive chartbook

This interactive chartbook provides a statistical snapshot of race and ethnicity in the United States, depicting racial/ethnic disparities observed through population demographics; civic participation; labor market outcomes; income, poverty, and wealth; and health. The chartbook also highlights some

notable intersections of gender with race and ethnicity, including educational attainment, labor force participation, life expectancy, and maternal mortality. The findings are bracing, as they show how much more work we need to do to address longstanding and persistent racial inequities.

