Scholars Say COVID-19 Has Exposed America’s Racial Fault Lines

BY THOMASI MCDONALD  APR. 17, 2020  3:21 P.M.
In a virtual panel discussion on Tuesday, three Duke scholars said the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately killed African Americans, has revealed the racial fault lines that stretch across the country, including in Durham.

William A. “Sandy” Darity, an economist whose research focuses on racial wealth disparities, pointed out “two central factors” that have thrown the pandemic’s impact on African Americans into stark relief.

One is “the deep historical residue associated with the health disadvantages that have embedded itself in the black community.”

Darity said black Americans have disproportionately high incidences of chronic health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease that make them vulnerable to the disease’s worst outcomes.

“There are staggering numbers associated with racial disparity in the mortality of COVID-19, where, for example, blacks constitute about 32 percent of the population in Louisiana but 70 percent of deaths from the coronavirus,” Darity said.

The other factor is “the long history of racial injustice in the United States,” and “the vast wealth disparities between black and white Americans.”

Black Americans constitute approximately 13 percent of the population, but only possess about 2.6 percent of the nation’s wealth, he said. “This translates into a wealth gap, per household, of about $800,000 by race.”

Darity added that the immense wealth “means that under any circumstance, black families have less resources to function as a cushion, and they do not have the resources to have access to the best health care or the best preventive measures to ensure that one has better health.”
In the months leading up to the pandemic, Durham’s service workers employed by fast-food restaurants, grocery stores, and big-box outlets relied on advocacy groups to make public their need for a living wage and affordable health insurance.

In the middle of the pandemic, these low-wage, low-benefit jobs have been deemed essential for a locked-down public in search of food and other goods. Masked and gloved workers continue to stock shelves and check out patrons in stores that have resorted to signs directing shopping routes and duct tape markings six feet apart.

Before veering her study toward COVID-19’s social and economic impact on service workers, Duke University associate professor of public policy, psychology, and neuroscience Anna Gassman-Pines had been surveying service workers in a northeastern city in the days leading up to the pandemic.

When the pandemic took root in the United States, the workers were staying at home because their hours on the job had “dramatically decreased.”
As a consequence, Gassman-Pines said the decrease in work was accompanied by a dramatic decrease in well-being, “both for the parents and their children.”

One question on her survey asks parents how much of their day is spent feeling sad, angry, fretful, or irritated. Before the pandemic, Gassman-Pines said about 6.5 percent said most of their day was consumed by negative feelings. Since the pandemic, “the numbers have more than doubled to about 14 percent,” where parents reporting negative feelings “all the time.”

Gassman-Pines said that’s also the case with service workers’ children who are exhibiting behavioral issues more frequently.

Andrew Foster, a professor of law who focuses on community development law, said race exacerbates the confrontation of a crisis by a society that’s deeply unequal.

“I think that is our starting place,” said Foster, who noted that in general economic terms 40 percent of all Americans have less than $400 in savings, while 50 percent of all Americans who earn less than $50,000 a year live paycheck to paycheck, while most households have significant amounts of death.

“And they are not well-positioned to deal with the disappearance of work,” Foster said.

Foster said the unemployment rate that was 3.2 percent at the end of February now stands at 15 percent and could “easily be 20 percent by the end of this month.”

Moreover, Foster called the $2 trillion in stimulus funds “a lot of money, but a mere drop in the bucket against this historic crisis.” The $1,200 to $2,400 going to cash-stressed families should be a monthly payment for
the duration of the pandemic rather than a one-time payment, he added.

Darity offered several “universal polices” that the federal government could enact to help all Americans, along with one that specifically targets racial wealth disparities. He said, if implemented, these policies would have better positioned the country to face the pandemic.

He said he’s been a longtime advocate for an economic bill of rights, a national health plan, and a federal jobs guarantee. He spoke of the need for new initiatives like the multi–billion–dollar Works Program Administration, the New Deal agency that FDR created in 1935.

Henry McKoy, an economist and director of entrepreneurship at N.C. Central who has collaborated with Darity, told the INDY that race–based health and economic disparities laid bare by COVID–19 could accelerate gentrification trends that the city was experiencing before the pandemic crisis. He added that unless local leaders take action, the pre–pandemic decline of black wealth in the city will also accelerate.

“Rent payments will be missed and folks will be evicted,” he says. “Mortgage payments will be missed and homes will be lost. Black folks have a high rate of sole proprietorship as their form of business and entrepreneurship, and their incomes have dried up completely. The small black businesses that had employees will also suffer and may close down. This will have a broader impact on the black community’s economic ecosystem, and that may mean kids can’t get the resources to go to college or start their own businesses.”

McKoy says time will tell how the virus affects initiatives like the city’s $95 million affordable housing bond that voters approved in November. He pointed out that less attention has been paid to the loss of
revenue generated through hotel, restaurant, and sales taxes.

“Communities love to be generous in terms of diversity and inclusion when money is flowing and times are great, but less so when they are not,” he says. “But those are exactly the times when a community must show its true soul and what it really cares about.”

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