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Coronavirus Is Making The Case For Black Reparations Clearer Than Ever

Roundup

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by **William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen**

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The COVID-19 crisis only heightens the urgency of black reparations. Long overdue, they are now more essential than ever.

Mounting statistics confirm disturbing evidence of racial disparities in reported coronavirus deaths. In Wisconsin, perhaps the state with the most extreme ratio of black morbidity, black people represent 6 percent of the population and 40 percent of the deaths. Those African American deaths have occurred at a rate 700 percent higher than black people's share of the state's population. In our home state of North Carolina, black people account for 22 percent of the population but close to 40 percent of the deaths.

So what explains these disproportionately large numbers of black people dying of the coronavirus?

Black people are overrepresented in jobs designated as socially essential but paying low wages in transportation, food and health services, as well as child and elder care. These are jobs where the physical distancing now needed for health safety is not possible. Consequently, African Americans are reduced to a Hobson's choice: either having a greater risk of outright job loss or continuing employment in unsafe occupations. Horrifying as these deprivations are, they are not new. They are just the latest example of how racism and discrimination play out in America.

There have been numerous historic moments when America could have eliminated racial inequality and granted blacks access to the same opportunities as whites. When the nascent republic was formed in 1776, it could have embraced black people as full citizens. At the end of the Civil War, when newly emancipated African Americans were promised 40-acre land grants, the country could have reversed many of the economic effects of enslavement. Black enfranchisement could have been protected during the Reconstruction era, and anti-lynching laws could have been passed, reversing the trajectory of racial injustice. The New Deal and the GI Bill, had they been administered equitably, could have given African Americans the kind of financial cushion so desperately needed now. And when, nearly 60 years ago, civil rights legislation was passed, the legislation was weakly enforced, and with it the nation lost another chance to become a true democracy.