



House Committee on Education and Labor

Inequities Exposed: How COVID-19 Widened Racial Inequities in Education, Health, and the Workforce

June 22, 2020

12:00 AM, Virtual Hearing

Purpose

The purpose of this hearing is to examine how COVID-19 has exposed the racial disparities that exist within educational, healthcare and workforce settings.

Members Present

Chairman Scott, Ranking member Foxx, Grijalva, Thompson, Walberg, Courtney, Fudge, Byrne, Bonamici, Grothman, Takano, Allen, Adams, Smucker, Norcross, Meuser, Jayapal, Watkins, Wilson, Cline, Moralle, Johnson, Wild, Keller, McBath, Schrier, Underwood,

Witnesses

Ms. Camara P. Jones, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D., Adjunct Professor, Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University, Senior Fellow and Adjunct Associate Professor, Morehouse School of Medicine, Past President, American Public Health Association, Atlanta , GA

Ms. Valerie Rawlston Wilson, Ph.D., Director, Program on Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy, Economic Policy Institute, Silver Spring , MD

Mr. Avik Roy., Co-Founder and President, The Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity, Austin , TX

Mr. John B. King, Jr., President and CEO, The Education Trust, Washington , D.C.

Opening Statements

(20:55) Chairman Scott said that the evidence has become abundantly clear. In order to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress must act to address the existing racial disparities that are prevalent throughout society. Students of color are significantly less likely to have access to the same resources that white students have. In addition, workers of color have been hit the hardest by the economic impacts of the virus. These same workers are also face significant challenges when returning back to work. Many of the employment opportunities for these workers do not have sufficient protections to provide for a safe environment. Unfortunately, instead of increasing access to health care during the global pandemic, the Trump Administration has attempted to limit access. The lawsuit against the Affordable Care Act in Texas is a prime example of this. The HEROS Act which the house passed last month would take important steps to address the racial disparities which have been exposed during the pandemic. Far too many healthcare workers have been excluded from workplace protections and paid leave opportunities. The HEROS Act provides full coverage of COBRA premiums for unemployed workers and expands

coverage of COVID diagnostic services. This Congress must accept it's responsible to tackle the pandemic by uplifting all communities.

(32:06) Ranking member Foxx said that the global pandemic has resulted in devastating jobs losses and economic impacts never seen before. However, we must remember that before the global pandemic, the US economy was stronger than it has ever been. During this time, unemployment rates for people of color hit an all-time low. However, minority communities have felt the negative effects of these unprecedented times. Blacks and Hispanics account for nearly 40% of all COVID-19 deaths in the US. These communities have also been hit the hardest by the economic impacts of COVID-19. Thus reopening the economy is essential. However, preserving public health and reopening the economy are not mutually exclusive. The White House and CDC have released guidance on reopening the United States again. If these guidance's are followed, the health of the public can be preserved while also revitalizing the economy. Mandating further top down federal policies will only add to the challenges that average Americans face.

Testimony

(41:07) Dr. Jones said that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on communities of color. This can best be displayed in the death rate. Americans of color are far more likely to die as a result of COVID-19 than white Americans. This is true for two simple reasons. First, communities of color are more likely to have higher rates of infection. Second, these communities are less likely to have the resources to address the impacts of the virus. Both of these facts are a result of structural racism. While many people may think that racism is an individual character flaw, it is not. Fundamentally it is a structural problem. There are many ways to address racism but the first tool is to ask a question. The question is 'how did we get here'. The second tool is to provide health equity to all Americans. Health resources need to be distributed evenly across all communities to ensure equal health outcomes for all groups.

(48:32) Dr. Wilson said that communities of color are less likely than white workers to have economic and health security amid the pandemic. Unemployment rates for communities of color far exceed the unemployment rates of white workers. It is also true that workers of color are more likely to be front line workers who are deemed 'essential'. This means that they are placed at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 while at work. This employment disparity cannot be explained by educational status. It can only be explained by racism. The accumulation of income inequality only exacerbates the disparities over generations. Many solutions to this problem can be found in the HEROES Act. Specifically, OSHA must employ federal standards to protect frontline workers. In addition, all COVID-19 diagnostic and treatment must be covered by the Federal government. Finally, increased paid leave is essential for the health of all essential workers.

(53:40) Mr. Roy said that economic lockdowns have disproportionately harmed minority communities. Before the pandemic, unemployment among communities of color had reached an all-time low. However, all of this progress was lost as a result of the economic lockdowns imposed as a result of COVID-19. Racial and ethnic disparities are worse when the economy is worse.

Furthermore, a move to remote learning has also hurt communities of color more than white communities. These communities often have less access to the necessary resources to successfully transition to a remote environment. In addition, these communities are more likely to rely on free and reduced lunches in public schools. Furthermore, most of the deaths associated with COVID-19 has occurred in nursing homes. Congress must take action to address this devastating fact.

(58:50) Mr. King said that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed deep flaws in the United States education system. It is true that most schools are still informally segregated. This is due to housing opportunities and resource allocation. Meanwhile, the burden of student debt has fallen harder on student of color and has led to an increase in economic disparities. These same students are less likely to have access to resources which allow for an appropriate transition to a virtual environment. Congress must take the following actions. First Congress must address devastating budget shortfalls in state education funds. Second, Congress must allocate dedicated funding to expand access to broadband internet. Congress should promote diverse schools by collecting data on race and promoting civil rights. By doing this future policies can be evidence based and founded in data.

Questions and Answers

(1:04:50) Rep. Davis asked what inequities are associated with legacy admissions. **Mr. King** said that this policy has an impact of giving white students a disproportionate advantage when compared to students of color. This results in students of color being underrepresented on campus. **Rep. Davis** asked if the early admissions process benefits white students. **Mr. King** said yes. It benefits students who have access to greater resources. **Rep. Davis** asked how institutions of higher education can dismantle racism. **Mr. King** said that these institutions need to ensure that all of their students have the resources to take advantage of distance learning.

(1:13:20) Ranking member Foxx asked what policies resulted in the record low rate of unemployment before the pandemic. **Mr. Roy** said that the biggest driver has been the Tax Cut and Jobs Act of 2017. **Ranking member Foxx** asked what is different about this recession than prior recessions. **Mr. Roy** said that there may be a much faster economic rebound. This is because there are not underlying problems with the economy. **Ranking member Foxx** asked if it is possible to reopen the economy while also protecting public health. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Ranking member Foxx** asked what the impacts are when Governors force nursing homes to accept COVID-19 patients. **Mr. Roy** said that this policy has led to an increase in deaths in nursing homes.

(1:18:50) Rep. Grijalva asked what will happen if Congress does not act to pay back debts in communities of color related to education. **Mr. King** said that school districts get a majority of their funding from states and local communities. Without providing adequate funding these schools will be devastated. It will result in mass layoffs. **Rep. Grijalva** asked if it is appropriate for Secretary Mnuchin to publically release how funds allocated for small businesses. **Mr. Roy** said yes. The smallest businesses did not have access to PPP.

(1:24:09) Rep. Walberg asked what percentage of the US population lives in long term care facilities and how does this compare to the COVID-19 death rate. **Mr. Roy** said 0.6% of Americans live in a long term care facility. Yet, they represent 43% of nationwide deaths. **Rep. Walberg** asked what should be done to address the challenges faced by nursing homes. **Mr. Roy** said that the needs to be more done to address data shortcomings from nursing homes. The CDC has issued guidance, but this guidance only applies to nursing homes and not other long term care facilities.

(1:30:00) Rep. Courtney asked what impact unemployment has had on employment based health coverage. **Dr. Wilson** said that 16.2 million workers likely lost employer sponsored health benefits. This has impacted workers of color more than white colors. These workers need health coverage. **Rep. Courtney** asked if the HEROS Act would provide continuity of coverage in the event of unemployment. **Dr. Wilson** said yes. **Rep. Courtney** asked if Mr. Roy supports the COBRA subsidy in the HEROS act. **Mr. Roy** said that is not the best way to do it.

(1:35:55) Rep. Thompson asked if there are signs that the economy is recovering. **Mr. Roy** said yes. A rebound should happen relatively quickly as soon as the economy reopens. **Rep. Thompson** asked how the economy should be reopened to protect public health. **Mr. Roy** said that the president's plan is actually too cautious. Younger members of the workforce should be the first to return to work.

(1:41:30) Rep. Fudge asked what can be done to prevent students of color from falling further behind. **Mr. King** said that black and Latino students are underrepresented in child care. Schools are also highly segregated and this must be addressed. Finally, resources need to be funneled into communities of color. **Rep. Fudge** asked how healthcare providers can earn the trust of community members. **Dr. Jones** said that hospitals need to open up dialogues with community members. Furthermore these hospitals also need to begin collecting data by race. **Rep. Fudge** asked about the impact of poverty on health outcomes. **Dr. Jones** said that poverty is directly linked to poor health outcomes.

(1:46:37) Rep. Byrne asked about the effects of the administration's policies on unemployment prior to the pandemic. **Mr. Roy** said that the policies of this administration helped to reduce economic disparities across the nation. **Rep. Byrne** asked what the effect on minority kids is by shutting down schools. **Mr. Roy** said that it is devastating.

(1:52:00) Rep. Bonamici asked how providing access to early childhood education would have on society as a whole. **Mr. King** said that there is a 7:1 return on investment in early childhood education. This includes long term health benefits. This would benefit all communities. Not just communities of color. **Rep. Bonamici** asked if investments in education is enough to reduce disparities in the labor market. **Dr. Wilson** said that it will help but it would not solve all of the problems.

(1:58:00) Rep. Grothman asked if it is true that the death rate is decreasing. **Mr. Roy** said yes. The death rate is also far below the predictions. **Rep. Grothman** asked if we should be looking at associations between levels of vitamin D in the body and COVID-19 as opposed to connections between ethnic groups. **Mr. Roy** said correlations do not equal causations. Vitamin D may not have any benefit.

(2:03:45) Rep. Takano asked how much of the college admissions process is reliant on standardized testing. **Mr. King** said that a significant amount is reliant on these tests. These tests are also biased against people of color. **Rep. Takano** asked if this is an opportunity to reexamine the college admissions process. **Mr. King** said yes.

(2:10:20) Rep. Allen asked if the debt being accumulated will have a negative impact on the economy. **Mr. Roy** said yes. There will be a massive explosion in the deficit this year. **Rep. Allen** asked how unemployment benefits are hindering the economy. **Mr. Roy** said that increased unemployment benefits have slowed the economic recovery.

(2:15:55) Rep. Adams asked if an enforceable safety standard is essential to a stable economic recovery. **Dr. Wilson** said yes. **Rep. Adams** asked how COVID-19 will impact struggling loan borrowers. **Mr. King** said that borrowers will be more likely to default on their loan. There must be targeted debt relief.

(2:20:15) Rep. Smucker asked how many deaths can be attributed to the policy that forced COVID-19 positive patients into nursing homes. **Mr. Roy** said there is no data on that specific question. It is likely that it lead to an increase in deaths. **Rep. Smucker** asked if there is a correlation between race and nursing home deaths. **Mr. Roy** said he is waiting for that data to come back.

(2:25:50) Rep. Norcross asked what will happen to low resource schools if students come back in the fall. **Dr. Wilson** said that it could be devastating. These schools need to have access to resources which will allow for schools to reopen safely. This is essential to allow staff and family to feel confident.

(2:30:56) Rep. Meuser asked if the data suggests that the economy was doing well for low income workers. **Mr. Roy** said yes. **Rep. Meuser** asked if the data suggests that a safe opening will benefit low income Americans. **Mr. Roy** said yes.

(2:36:40) Rep. Jayapal asked why people of color lack access to healthcare. **Dr. Wilson** said that it is because health coverage is connected to employment. Furthermore, there are significant disparities in the labor market. **Rep. Jayapal** asked what step should be taken to address healthcare inequities. **Dr. Wilson** said that universal coverage should be available to everyone. **Rep. Jayapal** asked if healthcare should be tied to employment. **Dr. Wilson** said no.

(2:42:15) Rep. Watkins asked how quickly jobs can return once the economy reopens. **Mr. Roy** said many jobs will return very quickly. **Rep. Watkins** asked how damaging state lock downs have been. **Mr. Roy** said that economic lockdowns have resulted in countless small businesses have had to permanently shut down. **Rep. Watkins** asked how the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act resulted in a strong economy. **Mr. Roy** said that reducing the corporate tax rate was extremely important.

(2:46:37) Rep. Wilson asked what long term unemployment is and will it surge again. **Dr. Wilson** said that it is defined as people being unemployed for 26 weeks or longer. There is a big concern that long term employment will be prevalent. **Ms. Wilson** asked what policy solutions can prevent long term unemployment. **Dr. Wilson** said that the economy needs to be reopened safely. Furthermore, there should be targeted efforts to create jobs in underserved communities. **Rep. Wilson** asked if policy makers should shift how full employment is defined. **Dr. Wilson** said yes.

(2:52:00) Rep. Cline asked if the patchwork of state policies has impacted minority communities. **Mr. Roy** said yes. This is especially true of communities who live near state borders. **Rep. Cline** asked how colleges can begin to allow students back on campus. **Mr. Roy** said that the environment needs to be altered to allow for social distancing.

(3:03:50) Rep. Johnson asked what guidance should be provided to schools to help them reopen. **Mr. Roy** said that social distancing is important. Accommodations should also be made for those who must stay at home.

(3:08:40) Rep. Wild asked how important it is for the federal government to subsidize the cost of diagnostic tests. **Dr. Jones** said that it is crucial to increase testing capacity in communities of color. There needs to be equitable access to testing across communities. **Rep. Wild** asked what inequities exist among college students earning a degree. **Mr. King** said that low income students and students of color are less likely to earn their degree.

(3:13:40) Rep. Keller asked why some states decided not to force COVID positive patients into nursing homes. **Mr. Roy** said that he does not have insight into states decision making process. **Rep. Keller** asked what pieces of data we should look at to determine the progression of COVID-19. **Mr. Roy** said that there should be more focus on death.

(3:19:40) Rep. McBath asked why race neutral policies have failed to address the needs of the country. **Dr. Wilson** said that race neutral policy making ignores the root cause of problems. Race neutral policies do not have race neutral impacts.

(3:25:40) Rep. Schrier asked what changes can be made to housing that can reduce racial disparities. **Dr. Wilson** said that housing access is directly related to health outcomes. Past policies have led to these wide disparities. These policies must be examined and reversed. **Rep. Schrier** asked about the importance of paid sick and family leave. **Dr. Wilson** said that it keeps employees and families safe. Workers should not have to choose between their health and economic wellbeing.

(3:30:30) Rep. Underwood asked how expanded access to affordable healthcare can reduce health disparities. **Dr. Jones** said that it would help to make a more equitable healthcare system. This does not address all health related issues though. We must address social determinants of health. **Rep. Underwood** asked about the importance of expanding Medicaid coverage to one full year post-partum. **Dr. Jones** said that it would help to reduce the disparities in maternal mortality.

(3:36:50) Rep. Hayes asked what disparities exacerbated by COVID-19 will continue to exist if no action is taken. **Mr. King** said that low income children will be far behind in school if these districts are forced to make large cuts. There need to be investments in these communities.

(3:41:24) Rep. Levin asked if school choice harms low income communities. **Mr. King** said yes.

(3:46:40) Rep. Trone asked how to close the wealth gap. **Dr. Wilson** said that Congress should work to close the home ownership gap. **Rep. Trone** asked how to get minority communities to open small businesses. **Dr. Wilson** said that black owned businesses need to be able to access funds to help them expand their businesses and grow community wealth.

(3:52:00) Rep. Trahan asked how the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need for diversity in the medical field. **Dr. Jones** said that providers of color tend to be able to provide culturally appropriate care. **Rep. Trahan** asked how diversity would increase the quality of care. **Dr. Jones** said that it reduces implicit bias within healthcare.

(3:56:00) Chairman Scott asked what initiatives stimulate the economy the most. **Dr. Wilson** said that food assistance programs have the largest impact. **Chairman Scott** asked if summer school programs are important during this time. **Mr. King** said yes. **Chairman Scott** asked if COBRA subsidies are a good idea. **Dr. Jones** said yes.

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