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# The State of Black America in the Midwest

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## EXCERPT

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In the year following the murder of George Floyd, I was gripped by feelings of urgency and opportunity and – perhaps for the first time – real hope. But, as I stand here today, nearly three years on from what seemed at first to be a seminal moment in American history, I confess my feelings are far less optimistic.

For decades – in fact, for centuries – when Black people have lobbied for anything from civil rights to equal educational to economic opportunity, we’ve been told “these things take time.” We’re counseled to be patient, to celebrate small victories or advancements. And while patience is a virtue and celebrating small victories is important, I believed for a time that our experience with the pandemic had put the lie to the argument that “these things take time” and “change is slow.” When COVID hit Indianapolis, Indy Parks turned itself from a recreational agency to a food distribution service in a matter of days. The City created a rental relief program in a matter of weeks. Our Courts and our Sheriff figured out how to reduce the population of our county jail more quickly than anyone would have thought possible. And, when the federal government created the Paycheck Protection Program and other COVID relief programs, our City-County Council took emergency action to authorize Indy Chamber to make loans specifically targeted to small businesses – with 75% of those dollars going to minority, women, and veteran-owned businesses. That contrasted sharply with reporting in the New York Times, which found that across the country, the Paycheck Protection Program and other federal COVID aid efforts largely neglected minority business owners, nearly half of whom reported that they expect to close permanently by the end of 2022.



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These developments seemed to me to call into question the entire “these things take time” and “change comes slowly” rationale. Clearly, sweeping change can happen quickly, given the political will and shared sense of urgency to get it done. I believed then – and I believe now – that Black people could and should stop accepting “these things take time” as an answer to any effort to dismantle inequities of race, place, or identity in our community. Equity is no one’s stepchild, no one’s back-burner project. Equity is vital to our civic health. For those of us in government and public service, it should no longer be viewed as a sort of cherry on top of our real work; it *is* our real work. Not an afterthought, but our first thought.

I stand by those beliefs. Reality, though, continues to paint a very different picture. If you want to know about the “State of Black America” in Indianapolis, Indiana, today, I can tell you: nothing has changed. And I can tell you that with depressing certainty, because the Council invested in the development of a racial equity report card for Indianapolis, compiled by researchers from the SAVI program IUPUI’s Polis Center. Here’s what the first racial equity report card, to be released later this year, tells us about the state of **our** Black America:

- White households in Indianapolis make over \$26k/year more than Black families in Indianapolis. When gaps like this persist over long periods of time, they contribute to the overall wealth gap between white and non-white families in America. In 2020, the Brookings Institution found that the average Black family’s net worth was ten times less than the average white family.
- The typical white household make 1.71 times the income of the typical Black household. If Black households earned the same amount as white households, it would yield an additional \$26,000 for over 100,000 households, resulting in \$2.6 billion in additional income across Indianapolis. Every year.
- Black workers in Indianapolis are unemployed at twice the rate of white residents. If unemployment rates were equal for white, Black, Hispanic, and multiracial workers, it would result in over 7,500 additional employed workers. If those 7,500 workers were paid equitably, imagine what they could add to that annual \$2.6 billion figure.



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- Despite decades of progress nationwide in reducing overall poverty rates since they began being tracked in the 1960's, large racial gaps persist. 25% of Black residents in Indianapolis live in poverty, compared to just 11% of white residents. And Black and Hispanic residents in Indianapolis have higher poverty rates than the national average.

Now, I know this all sounds very grim. It is grim. I try to bear in mind, though, that one of the only things that changes more slowly than systems is the data that is produced by those systems; if change takes a long time to make, it takes even longer to measure. Race continues to be the best predictor of individual outcomes from education to income to life expectancy, and it will for some time to come. Are things better for Black America than they were 4 years ago? No. Are they better than 40 years ago? Maybe.

I am not without all hope, however. While some of us “older folks” continue to push for our society’s systems to change, there are young people stepping forward to disrupt or reimagine those systems altogether and turn what’s left to their business advantage, which they then turn to the Black community’s advantage. It’s not an entirely new approach; Madam CJ Walker took much the same approach with her haircare empire. But it increases our effectiveness to be able to chip away at racist systems from both the inside and the outside. As the great Ella Baker said, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.” But we can continue to arm ourselves with new tools for the fight. I know that’s what draws all of you here. Your presence here gives me strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow.” Blessings and gratitude to each of you.

