



# Racism in America and the Current Moment

412 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> St, Harrisburg, PA 17101

• [www.pennbpc.org](http://www.pennbpc.org)

• 717-255-7156

By Marc Stier and Kadida Kenner

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*“Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention.”- Dr. Martin Luther King*

The attention of the public and political leaders in our state and country has understandably been focused in the last few days on the civil disturbances in our cities and how to quell them. We write, however, to urge that we all return our attention as soon as possible to the profound issues facing our country, the issues elevated by the murder of George Floyd that have led tens of thousands of people—Black, brown and white—to engage in peaceful protests all over Pennsylvania, the United States, and across the world.

## The Deeper Issues

The first such issue, of course, is police violence against Black men and women. There can be no hope for a truly equitable and decent society if Black and brown men and women cannot jog down the street, go to a public park, and live in the quiet of their own homes, without fear that an officer of the law may attack them with little justification and even kill them for no good reason at all. Yet in ways that too many white people have not understood, that is the circumstances faced by Black and brown men and women today. Though individual accomplishments—multiple many degrees, prominence in their chosen field or homes in rich neighborhoods—should not matter in the eyes of the law, even they don’t protect Black and brown people from harassment and bigotry and police oppression. Indeed, we have seen people weaponize whiteness and privilege in wealthy neighborhoods in response to mere presence of a Black man or woman.

The second issue is continued economic inequality between Black and white people. The COVID-19 crisis has again revealed the extent to which we are still two nations divided by race. Black people have been suffering illness and death at far higher rates than white people, in part because they are overrepresented among low-paid essential workers and in part because are far more likely to be without access to health care, healthy foods, and good housing. And the stress of living in a racist society—including the stress of facing police violence—itself undermines the health of Black and brown people. What we have seen during the COVID-19 crisis is the product of centuries of racial discrimination and inequity. And despite some doors being opened to some Black people at the highest reaches of our society, the evidence is incontrovertible that inequalities in wages and income on the basis of race in our

state and nation have increased in the last thirty years and been exacerbated by the general increase in inequality between the very rich and those with low and moderate incomes.

These two issues did not just arise in America. They have been with us for more than 400 years. And they are a product of deliberate policy—from segregation to poll taxes to redlining to Voter ID laws to overspending on police forces that often do more harm than good. That means they can be reversed by deliberate changes in policy. This is not the place for details, but over the last few years we have set forth policies to [change policing](#)<sup>1</sup> in this state [and to address the deep structural sources of economic and racial inequities in income and education](#)<sup>2</sup> among other things. Inventing new policies reduce racial inequality is not enough. We need a moral commitment on the part of all of us and our political leaders to put in place the policies we already know will work.

## The Current Moment

Finally, we want to address the immediate issue, the crimes against property that have been committed by what appear to be a very small number of Black and white people among the many who have been peacefully and calmly protesting the death of George Floyd in the last few days. We do not condone those actions—and we fear the political backlash to them. However, we understand that longstanding and legitimate grievances as well as the anger that results from them are responsible for the actions of some of those committing property crimes. We call into question any condemnation of random looting and property destruction that does not at the same time recognize the systemic looting and violence directed at Black and brown people throughout our history and continuing to the present day. And while we recognize the restraint of the police departments that have acknowledged that damage to property is far less important than the loss of life that might arise from a more repressive response, we are concerned about the actions of some police departments that appear to have escalated tensions and generated violence in our cities.

We also want to point to something we find troubling—the presence of provocateurs amidst the lawful protesters. It is important to keep two ideas separate here. One is the notion that the protests against the death of George Floyd and police violence against Black people are being organized, led, or stimulated by what are called “outside agitators.” This theme is meant to diminish the legitimacy and power of a genuine mass protest against injustice by attributing it to ideologically motivated outsiders to the community. There is absolutely no reason to think that is true.

The second idea is that there are some people among the protestors who appear to be bent on taking advantage of a legitimate mass movement by instigating trouble, stirring up destruction, and then walking away. There is some reason to think that this is happening now.

We believe the White House’s suggestion that the instigators are associates of Antifa is not true. (Antifa is not an organization and it is not appropriate to talk about their “members.”) Those who associate with anti-fascist groups do not believe in random destruction and they do not act alone. On the other hand, we have seen reports of far-right ideologues hijacking this genuine movement and encouraging destruction in order to call down repressive actions by the police—and perhaps later by the federal government. We have seen evidence of their activity—and also evidence of Black organizers and protestors at peaceful rallies calling these provocateurs out. We fear that the repressive response they aim for will not only exacerbate immediate tensions on the ground but might eventually interfere with our civil and political liberties. We call on Governor Wolf and Attorney General Shapiro to appoint a

<sup>1</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sDp2oXcZ\\_27awphj\\_\\_6\\_IQgalM0iq8WX/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sDp2oXcZ_27awphj__6_IQgalM0iq8WX/view)

<sup>2</sup> <http://wethepeoplepa.org/roadmap/>

commission to better understand the role of these people in the civil disturbances we have seen in the last few days.

Finally, we reaffirm our commitment to working with our partners to advance the cause of economic and racial justice. We reject attempts to divide us from one another on the basis of race, gender, and place of birth and to divert us from countering a right-wing agenda that is deepening racial inequality and strangling working-class and middle-class people.

Together we will overcome the structural and systemic racism that oppresses Black people and other communities of color and finally create a just society in which everyone, no matter what they look like, where they live, or how wealthy they are, can thrive.

*Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither person nor property will be safe.—Frederick Douglass*

*It's time we turn our attention from civil disturbances in our cities back to the profound issues facing country: racism in policing and our economy.*