

# Middle class not a level playing field for blacks, new research finds

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New research from Sandy Darity underscores the economic vulnerability of the black middle class. "For Black Americans, the issue may not be restoring its middle class," the authors write, "but constructing a robust middle class in the first place." Credit: Duke University

The "middle class" can be hard to define. A new report from Duke

University suggests that for African Americans it's simply hard to find—and that's in the best of circumstances.

The paper from researchers at Duke's Samuel DuBois Cook Center for Social Equity finds that when using [wealth](#) as the defining criteria to demarcate class status, the [middle class](#) of black Americans is proportionately much smaller than the white middle class.

"Even before the current pandemic exacerbated racial inequities, black Americans in the proverbial 'middle class' were far worse off than their nominal white peers," says lead author William A. Darity Jr., director of Duke's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and a professor of public policy, African and African American Studies and economics.

"And the comparative fragility of black middle class status is aggravated intensely by the COVID-19 crisis because of the lack of the cushion of wealth to weather job loss."

The study: "A Subaltern Middle Class: The Case of the Missing 'Black Bourgeoisie' in America," will appear in the July edition of Contemporary Economic Policy and is now [available online](#).

Darity co-authored the paper with Fenaba Addo of the University of Wisconsin and Imari Smith, a doctoral student at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy.

The authors argue that the underlying resources of the black and white middle classes reflect vast disparities. Prior to the coronavirus spreading through America this spring and disproportionately ravaging the black population, the playing field wasn't level.

"For Black Americans, the issue may not be restoring its middle class," the authors write, "but constructing a robust middle class in the first place."

Greater wealth enables households a greater capacity to weather emergencies (i.e., a job loss, a health crisis, or both) without stress or significant detriment; moreover, its ability to be handed down from one generation to the next renders net worth more effective as both a stabilizer and insulator, the paper argues.

And the research on the distribution of wealth finds that blacks at the top of their strata are still far below whites at the top of theirs. For example, while more than a quarter of white families have a net worth surpassing \$1 million to place them into the wealthiest quintile of all households, only 4 percent of black families can say the same.

Strikingly, middle-income blacks have wealth levels most similar to those of the poorest white households, the research finds.

"There is an unfortunate tendency to confuse income and wealth, and the confusion masks the core issues," says Darity. "Wealth, in and of itself, is a far stronger gauge of economic well-being than income. And the financial precarity of middle income black families comes into glaring view when the focus is placed on wealth."

The disparities require bold policies, according to the paper, and the authors explore several proposals, including Andrew Yang's Universal Basic Income (UBI) initiative and Sen. Kamala Harris' LIFT Act.

But the authors find them all lacking if not wholly ineffective. They stress that the majority of these policies would boost incomes for black Americans but that, crucially, "Black-white wealth inequality is not a matter of income poverty," they write.

The authors propose that more effective plans might look like Baby Bonds—allocating a publicly funded trust account to each newborn infant to help them get to young adulthood with an endowment—or a

comprehensive national program of reparations to eradicate persistent racial wealth differences.

Regardless of specifics, it is especially clear that now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, bold action is required to abolish existing racialized class structure in this country—and to create the "black bourgeoisie" that has never been allowed to flourish, the authors argue.

**More information:** William Darity et al. A subaltern middle class: the case of the missing "black bourgeoisie" in America, *Contemporary Economic Policy* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/coep.12476](https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12476)

Provided by Duke University

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