

Viewpoint: Black youth and families ignored in return to pre-pandemic norm

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Over the past year, the U.S. has intensely focused on returning to pre-pandemic "normal." As many embrace their prior lives, many voices are missing and being ignored in the national conversation. What about those

who were permanently impacted by COVID-19?

When COVID-19 first emerged, it was believed to be the "great equalizer"—an equal threat to all Americans and the world. However, the pandemic proved to be a "great amplifier" of existing [racial disparities](#) and inequities among Black youth and families. The root cause? Structural racism.

Black youth and families disproportionately experienced significantly higher rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Black Americans were over twice as likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19 and more likely to die from COVID-19 when compared to white Americans, despite being only 13 percent of the population. Black youth were also twice as likely to lose a caregiver compared to [white children](#). Black youth are still struggling with the psychological distress, grief, and loss of social support related to these losses.

Not only have Black youth been more likely to experience loss and grief, but my research has found that constant exposure to news coverage of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black communities is linked to increased anxiety about losing loved ones. Furthermore, Black youth also experienced racial trauma related to racialized police violence, such as the murders of George Floyd, Sandra Bland, and Ahmaud Arbery. These experiences have exacerbated the [mental health crisis](#) brewing before the pandemic.

Since the 2000s, the suicide rate among Black youth has been increasing faster than any other racial/ethnic group, and the pandemic significantly increased Black youths' reports of anxiety and depression. Because of the systematic under-resourcing of Black communities, there are few accessible, affordable, and high-quality mental health supports and services available to support Black youth and families.

In addition to mental health, other aspects of Black youths' development were affected. Black youth were more likely to have inadequate access to technology and experience loss of instruction when remote learning was the norm, resulting in significant losses in learning. One third of Black families with children experienced three or more simultaneous economic and health-related adversities during the pandemic, such as unemployment, financial instability, and food insecurity.

Despite the evidence that racial disparities and inequities worsened during the pandemic, little is being done to address their [deleterious effects](#) on Black youth and families. We know that racial disparities and inequities—and their root cause, racism—significantly increase the risks for negative developmental and adult outcomes among Black youth.

What steps need to be taken to ensure Black youth and families thrive? Janelle Jones, former chief economist at the U.S. Department of Labor, proposed the Black Women Best framework. She argues that policies, systems, and institutions addressing the impact of the pandemic should center Black women, who experience significant harm due to structural racism—a harm now exacerbated by the pandemic. By eliminating structural barriers, inequities, and disparities that prevent Black women from thriving, we can become an inclusive society that results in widespread prosperity for everyone, regardless of race.

This framework applies to Black youth, too. During the pandemic, we have demonstrated the ability and capacity to implement policies that address the negative effects of COVID-19 on Black youth and families. For example, the child tax credit expansion of 2021, which provided monthly allowances to families, reduced child poverty by 30 percent. It not only kept 737,000 Black youth from poverty, but also 163,000 Asian children, 1.4 million Latino children, and 1.4 million white children.

Providing long-term federal and state financial support to families with

children—such as ensuring the [minimum wage](#) is a [living wage](#), providing paid [sick leave](#), and providing free or affordable high-quality childcare to reduce employment disruptions—can help Black families meet their basic needs and thrive financially.

Local policies that provide job training and guidance to youth would increase the number of employed Black youth, such as the city of Boston's Summer Learn & Earn Program, where young people from under-resourced communities earn money while taking college-level courses and a virtual internship.

Moving toward a universal health care system and significantly investing in [mental health services](#) in Black communities would increase the accessibility, availability, and quality of health services for Black families, and provide [mental health](#) support for Black youth.

In addition, policymakers should implement fair tax strategies to fund [public schools](#) equitably instead of the current geographically based tax revenue, which leads to the underfunding of schools in Black communities. School-based health centers and training for educators to help Black students cope with the caregiver and family loss, pandemic stresses, and racial trauma can help youth thrive.

By centering those living with permanent effects of the pandemic and by implementing policies that address racial inequities exacerbated by COVID-19, we can create a new normal in our society that allows Black [youth](#) and families to thrive.

Related research is published in the journal *Social Policy Report*.

More information: Erin Bogan et al, "Wearing a Mask Won't Protect Us from Our History": The Impact of COVID-19 on Black Children and Families, *Social Policy Report* (2022). [DOI: 10.1002/sop2.23](https://doi.org/10.1002/sop2.23)

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