The Long Term Effects of the Pandemic on Black America

The Coronavirus pandemic is a worldwide catastrophe that, as of this writing, is still developing in ways most of which are impossible to predict. However, we can begin to anticipate some its effects on one particularly vulnerable population: the descendents of enslaved Africans in the United States.

Myths, especially when ideologically useful, are tenacious. The myth of universal American prosperity is one of those. But in truth, American prosperity, even in normal times, is made inaccessible for a large part of the population by racism. As a consequence it is conventional in international comparative socio-economic studies to treat the United States as two countries, one highly developed, to be compared with OECD states such as those in the European Union, the other ranking with less developed countries. No prizes for realizing that the latter is inhabited by African-Americans, who, by every relevant measure, live in another country, as it were, from their more prosperous White fellow citizens. The U.S. Census numbers tell the story: in 2018 13% of all people (and the same percentage of White people), lived at or below the poverty line of $26,200 for a family of four, while nearly twice that percentage, 23%, of African-Americans lived in poverty. If we count households, rather than individuals, 17% of White households have incomes below the poverty line, compared, again, to nearly twice that percentage, in this case 32% of Black households.

Life below the poverty level, and life for those with incomes approaching it, is in normal times differentiated from the life of the American Dream by the all too concrete reality of little food, inadequate access to good quality education, bad health and shorter lives. For many Black Americans those are the factors of day to day reality. But these are not normal times. In these plague days, many Black Americans will be even less likely to have adequate access to food, their children will be less likely to have access to adequate educational resources, and will therefore as adults lack the necessary qualifications for middle class employment. In the long run this will result in even lower near-term and life-time incomes with all that implies in poor health and shorter lives, for individuals, for their children, and for Black America. A crucial matter here is potential pandemic learning loss and its implications for Black school children, especially those living in high poverty or near poverty households.

As the conclusion reached by this blog will be disturbing and probably controversial, it would be best to work toward it carefully, step by step, at each step comparing the situation of Black Americans, children and adults, to that of White Americans, as it is the inequities that journey will reveal that are, in a sense, both resultant and causal.

As we have just seen, Black families are more likely to be poor than White families. There are poor White families, of course, but the percentage of poor Black families is routinely much higher than the percentage of poor White families. Median incomes
in 2018 were $65,900 for White households, $41,500 for Black households—Black families on average live on less than two-thirds of the incomes of White families and two-thirds of Black households have incomes below the median for White households. Even in good times, before the financial crisis and then again just before the pandemic, twice the percentage of Black households as the general population lived in poverty. This extends to their children in an even more severe fashion. Before the pandemic, approximately 15% of White children under age 18 lived in households with incomes below the poverty line. That percentage for Black children was 35%: more than one in three.

Black families are likely to be poor; Black children are very likely to live in poor households; schools attended predominantly by Black children are likely to be poorly resourced. Racial inequities in education—that pre-existing condition—are apparent in the acquisition of basic skills. In 2019, before the pandemic, at the crucial middle school grade eight, 81% of White, non-Hispanic, students scored at or above the Basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test; however, only 54% of Black students did so. Or, to put it another way, just 19% of White students, but 46%—nearly half—of Black students read below the Basic level in grade 8. They could not easily read. That is the racial divide—not the cause, but the result of inequality of resources and opportunities.

Household income not only affects educational achievement; it is affected by constraints of educational attainment and those inflicted because of race. For example, in 2016, median annual earnings of full-time, year-round, workers 25 to 34 years old who had not completed high school were $29,100 for White workers and $21,400 for Black workers. For those who had completed high school, incomes were nearly $6,000 per year higher: $35,000, for White workers and $27,500 for Black workers. For those with a Bachelor’s degree or higher, median incomes were $54,700 for White workers and $49,400 for Black workers. Increasing educational attainment narrowed the income gap, but did not close it. And a smaller percentage of Black Americans attained a college degree than did White Americans: 15% compared to 24%.

Now for the probable effects of the pandemic on education, especially as it may affect African-Americans, and a look at the likely consequences of those effects.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in the school year 2017-2018 the graduation rate for White high school students was 89%. That for Black students was 79%; ten percent lower. The 21% of Black students who did not graduate from high school may well have had to anticipate spending their lives in poverty, given that the poverty line is $26,200 and the average income of Black workers without a high school diploma is just $21,400. That, we may have to say, is normal.

Of course, these are not normal times. Most public schools have been closed for the entire second quarter of 2020. What are the implications of that for student
learning? Studies of attendance absenteeism show that missing three or more weeks of school diminishes chances for high school graduation and that this begins as early as first grade. Most students in every grade have now missed three months of school, whether or not we call it “absenteeism.” Those with limited or no access to supplementary (remote) education will have “diminished chances for high school graduation”: those in grade twelve, those in grade eight, those in kindergarten.

Most public school students have not been to their schools for at least twelve weeks and have been dependent on the Internet for education. Students who normally attend well-resourced schools, whose parents are college-educated and whose homes have access to broadband may have been spending their days in what might be called enhanced home schooling. Their schools may have delivered lessons in a variety of ways, including Zoom and the like, and their parents may have served as supplementary educators. Those students may have experienced little or no learning loss.

As might be expected, Internet access varies with household income as well as parental educational attainment. And by race, of course. A recent Pew Research Center study found that 79% of White homes had broadband access, compared to 66% of Black homes. Further, more than 90% of students in households with incomes over $75,000 and those whose parents were college graduates had broadband access in their homes. (Just a quarter of Black households have incomes over $75,000.) On the other hand, just 46% of homes in which the adults are without a high school diploma have broadband. We can conclude from this that nearly all White students living in middle class or more prosperous households potentially have benefitted from schooling available from Internet-based lessons supported by home tutoring, while perhaps half of Black students have not had those advantages. Without broadband access to the Internet and without highly educated parents, students are likely to have simply missed out on schooling. The New York Times reported in April that in some cities between a third and a half of high school students were not logging on for classes.

Black students are the most likely to live in households in or near poverty, least likely to have college educated parents, least likely to have broadband access and most likely to have attended poorly resourced schools. They are particularly likely to incur complete or nearly complete interruptions in their schooling during the pandemic.

The data presented to this point allows for some approximations of the near-term and long-term implications of the pandemic for Black students and their communities.

We can begin with the 21% of Black students who even in the recent rather good year did not graduate from high school. We might add to those a portion of the 46% of Black students who read below the Basic level in grade 8. Making the generous assumption that the 21% who did not graduate from high school are already
accounted for among those who had not been taught to read with any facility by middle school gives us an additional 25% who under normal circumstances would be at risk of not graduating from high school. It is not unreasonable to assume that given the pandemic, limited broadband access and the like, these are now as a matter of fact unlikely to graduate from high school. We therefore can work with a rough estimate that half of Black students who were in grade 12 in 2019-20 will not graduate from high school this year. And the educational attainment of their siblings and other Black students at every grade also will be significantly delayed.

Many schools will, no doubt, make increasingly effective provisions for reaching their students in the 2020-2021 school year. Educators, like office workers, will become accustomed to performing their tasks remotely, or through a combination of in-person and remote activities. Student learning loss will gradually return to traditional—unsatisfactory—levels. But this will not happen all at once and in the meantime large numbers of the most vulnerable students will not receive the level of instruction symbolized by a high school diploma. At best, they will have to repeat a year of school, whether or not that is officially admitted. If this is done in parallel with the usual school year, as it probably will if it is done at all, it will require districts to massively increase educational resources, including the number of teachers. This does not only apply to the k-12 system. It also applies in the post-secondary world, especially to community colleges, which will find themselves compelled to provide the instruction for their incoming freshman that those students missed due to the pandemic. They may, in effect, become three-year rather than two-year institutions.

We can now put some numbers to this. If half of the 2020 cohort of Black twelfth graders do not receive meaningful high school diplomas, rather than the fifth that is to be expected in a normal year, then the potential income of each will decline from $27,500 to $21,400. Over a working life of 45 years, this would amount to a lifetime earning loss of $275,000. Given a 2019-20 grade 12 class of approximately 531,000 Black students, this would result in a loss of $73 billion for the Black American community if half do not receive high school diplomas. We can add to this the lost wages of those Black Americans who, for the same reasons, would not have attended and graduated from college. Call it $80 billion lost to Black America just from the lost wages of what would have been the 2020 graduating class and their peers.

But that is only the beginning. Learning loss from the pandemic will extend to every school grade: each child in the affected households will lose up to a year of learning opportunities. Large numbers of those who normally would have achieved at least a high school degree will not complete their educations. And for all of these, the effects will continue within their families as their children grow up in households with parents who are less well-educated than they might have been and their educational attainment, in turn, will be compromised by lower household incomes and a less educationally resourced family.
We know from Raj Chetty’s Opportunity Atlas that the likelihood of Black children in low income households becoming adults with middle or high incomes is minimal. For those born into low income households in New York City, for example, the Opportunity Atlas projects adult household income at $28,000. For high income Black households, the corresponding figure is $38,000. It is much higher for low income White households: $48,000. As a matter of fact, nationally, incomes are higher for White residents born into low income families than those for Black residents born into high income households. That is normal in a racially structured society.

Given pandemic learning loss the number of Black children who will be born into low income families will rise, probably considerably, a condition that that the Opportunity Atlas tells us will in many cases be handed down to their children. While White children born into low income families, even under these dire conditions, have a good chance of climbing the proverbial ladder out of poverty, Black children have the heavy anchor of racism tied to their legs. Those begin life in poverty are likely to live their lives in poverty and their children to do so as well.

Given this country’s history and its present situation, one hardly dares recommend what might be done to avoid this dismal future for Black children, for all children in this country whose homes do not have the educational resources to replace those lost to the pandemic. However, this is America, we can hope, hope that government, at all levels, will act to avoid this catastrophe by both traditional and innovative resourcing of the education system. In the short term, universal broadband access for all households with school age children, providing challenging and engaging lessons, utilizing the possibilities of the Internet for customizing learning. In the longer term, improving pay for teachers and providing career ladders that do not require that they leave the classroom. Rebuilding America’s schools. Abandoning the model of institutions of higher education as profit-making enterprises. Adapting an attitude for which investments in education at all levels are seen as a public good. Ending racial and gender disparities in the economy. And so forth. And so forth.

As with Pandora’s box, we are left, at least, with hope.

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