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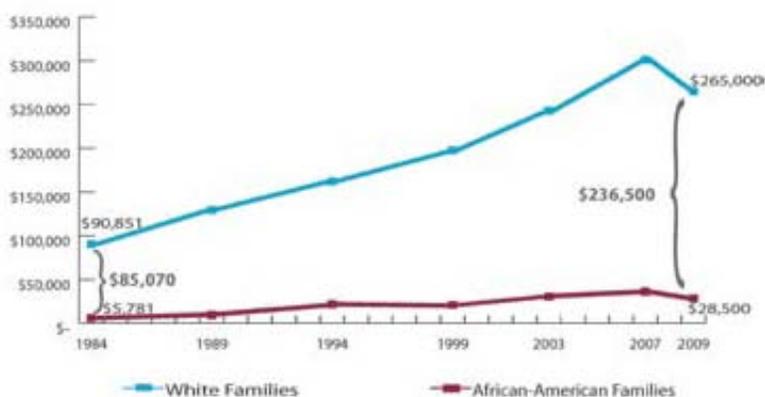
Less Talk About Racism, More Talk About Policy

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I will go out on the limb here and say more talk about racism will do little to change the plight of the good citizens of Ferguson or the poor and middle class in this country in the near term. What is needed is more talk about policy. Depending on how old you are, you've seen this scenario play out over and over again. Some catastrophic event occurs—Katrina, Trayvon Martin, and now Ferguson—and one more time we are reminded that racial inequities and racial problems exist in America. These problems have their roots in slavery, sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. Racial relations may have improved since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, but the economic fortunes of blacks relative to whites have worsened. A [report by Tom Shapiro](#), director of the Institute on Assets and Social Policy (IASP) at Brandeis University's Heller School, found the black/white wealth gap tripled between 1984 and 2009. Using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to track 1700 households over 25 years, he found the black/white wealth gap between those families increased from \$85,000 in 1984 to \$236,000 in 2009. A representative survey of U.S. household in 2009 found the mean wealth for white families was \$113,149 compared to \$6,325 for Latino families and \$5,677 for black families.

FIGURE 1. MEDIAN NET WORTH BY RACE, 1984-2009



Some would have us believe that these results are merely the objective outcome of free markets and exist because of the failure of African Americans to take advantage of the equal opportunities that are within their grasp. These are the same people who believe poor people would rather sit back and receive pitiful government handouts rather than work, when anti-labor policies and legislation and taxation that favor capital gains over wages have wrecked the economy. Financing

education largely by property taxes has resulted in huge disparities in resources in school districts. These are not racist policies per se, but these policies have placed significant barriers to upward mobility for many whites as well as blacks and other people of color. I say forget talking about racism and let's start talking about the policies needed to make this a better society for everyone.

The most productive talks following police killings in Ferguson, New York and Los Angeles have been discussions about law enforcement policies. Ferguson police are now required to wear body cameras. That will not end racism but it that will make an officer think twice before using abusive or deadly force. Congress is reconsidering the idea of arming police departments with equipment and firepower created for war. Organizations are setting up voter registration operations and taking a hard look at the voting system. Eyes will be on the practice of targeting people of color for excessive fines as a means to generate revenue. This is what should be done rather than another conversation about racism.

Besides, it seems few whites are in the mood to talk about racism. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof in [his column Sunday](#) pointed to two recent studies that confirm this notion. A [Pew Research study](#) found that a plurality of whites (47 percent) felt too much attention had been given to events in Ferguson. [Another study](#) by scholars at Tufts and Harvard University found that on average, whites believe that anti-white racism is a bigger problem than anti-black racism. People are uncomfortable talking about racism. Many whites do not want to talk about anti-black racism because they believe the concern is overblown and many blacks believe talking about racism is an exercise in futility.

That is not to say that we should stop talking about the nation's racial problems. Talk about race but more important, let's talk about the policies needed in order to reduce racial disparities. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) spelled out its commitment to address institutional racism in great detail in a [2007 call to action paper](#). Most recently, the Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) held a [forum on racial diversity](#) on the Hill and released a paper earlier this year with ideas about how the profession can improve outcomes among people of color. This is a commendable effort on the part of the social work profession's largest organization. Yet, it falls short because there are no specific recommendations for changing public policies that would reduce disparities.

What needs to be addressed is the failure of blacks and others to fully participate in the economy is costing the nation billions of dollars annually. Economists are baffled about why it is taking so long for the economy to fully recover from what used to be the Great Recession. It is now the Lesser Depression. It is because consumer demand has been lagging for decades. A report funded by the Kellogg Foundation found that if incomes of people of color were brought into parity with those of whites by 2030, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase by 16 percent or more than \$5 trillion a year, federal tax revenues would increase by \$1 trillion, and corporate profits will

increase by \$450 billion.

The most effective means of achieving social justice is not to convince people that racism exists but to pursue policies that will remove barriers to equal opportunity. I must believe that the social work profession can and will be part of that conversion. I believe it is time for the profession to create a Commission on Social Economic Justice that will generate policy recommendations that will result in a more fair and just society. Economists will tell you that bringing more people into full employment is not a zero sum game. The economic pie will grow for everyone. It is growing now but only for the affluent. I just finished reading [Nancy Weiss's biography](#) on Whitney M. Young, Jr. He wasn't one to talk much about racism. Instead he worked to change policies. I am reading his book next. It is titled, "Beyond Racism."

Written By Charles E. Lewis Jr., Ph.D

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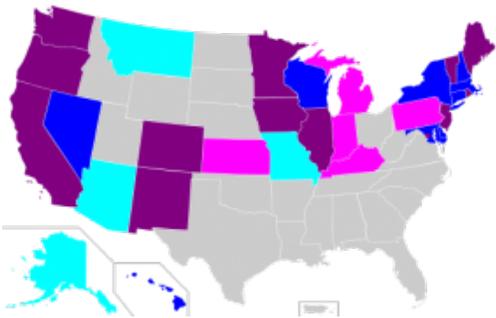
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