How the Supreme Court is about to explode America’s racial wealth gap

Yet again, conservatives on the Supreme Court are poised to do significant damage to minority communities

SEAN McELWEE AND CATHERINE RUETSCHLIN

When discussing race, the conservative argument is best expressed by the famous words of Chief Justice John Roberts: “The best way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” Translation: America has done bad things in
its history, but those bad things are gone now, so we should move past those horrors and look forward.

Conservatives believe that if blacks and Latinos simply work hard, get a good education and earn a good income, historical racial wealth gaps will disappear. The problem is that this sentiment ignores the ways that race continues to affect Americans today. A new report from Demos and Brandeis University, “The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters,” makes this point strongly. The report shows that focusing on education alone will do little to reduce racial wealth gaps for households at the median, and that the Supreme Court, through upcoming decisions, could soon make the wealth gap explode.

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Wealth is the whole of an individual’s accumulated assets, not the amount of money they make each year. As such, in his recent book, “The Son Also Rises,” Gregory Clark finds that the residual benefits of wealth remain for 10 to 15 generations. To understand why that matters, consider the fact that Loretta Lynch, Obama’s recent nomination for U.S. attorney general, is the great-great-granddaughter of a slave who escaped to freedom. (That’s four generations.) Consider also that most people on Social Security today went to segregated schools. (That’s two generations.) If Clark is correct in his thesis, then the impacts of wealth built on the foundations of American slavery and segregation will continue to affect Lynch’s great-great-great grandchildren.

It is therefore unsurprising that addressing just one aspect of this disparity cannot solve racial wealth gaps. Demos/Brandeis find that equalizing graduation rates would reduce the wealth gap between blacks and whites by 1 percent, and between Latinos and whites by 3 percent at the median. Equalizing the distribution of income would only reduce the wealth gap by 11 percent for blacks and 9 percent for Latinos. Part of the durability of wealth gaps is the disproportionate benefits that whites still enjoy: They face less job market discrimination and are more likely to reap a big inheritance, for example. This means that the returns to education and income are generally higher for whites. But even after controlling for these returns, income and education can’t explain the entire wealth gap.

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