



# When Pandemic Meets Endemic: Injustice in Our Rural Homes

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I still remember when the email came.

“In my 40 years as a university president, the crisis at hand is like none other I have ever experienced... For the remainder of the semester, all classes...will not be conducted in-class and will [instead] be delivered in an alternative format.”

Less than a week after Governor Jim Justice in my home state of West Virginia announced the closing of all K-12 schools, and one day after the state’s first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), all in-person activities associated with the university at which I work were cancelled for the remainder of the semester.

Beginning in places like Seattle and Los Angeles, moving east to New York City, the virus wreaked havoc on communities with a common refrain: [coronavirus disproportionately affected older adults](#). This analysis ignored unreported factors that demonstrated time and again to be a critical factor in health disparity. Analyses failed to capture the disproportionate impact COVID-19 had on [lower-income communities](#), [rural communities](#), and [communities of color](#) – let alone any thoughtful dissection of the intersections therebetween. As we have too-often failed to do in the history of our country, narratives being constructed around the United State’s response to this unprecedented crisis were largely whitewashed and sub/urban-focused.

In the throes of this global pandemic, one which gave rise to a rash of layoffs and furloughs that pushed [unemployment claims](#) to the double-digits, the comorbidity of endemic racism transfixed the nation. We watched with horror a video in which two armed White men hunted down and murdered [Ahmaud Arbury](#), a Black man, in Georgia. We witnessed the murder of [George Floyd](#), a Black man, in Minnesota. We learned of the murders of [Breonna Taylor](#), a Black woman, in Kentucky; and [Nina Pop](#), a Black trans woman in Missouri; and [Tony McDade](#), a Black trans man in Florida; and...

And in communities large and small, including in our rural homes, Americans ([largely college-aged](#)) took to the streets demanding to be heard. We were demanding justice. We were demanding fairness. We were demanding equity.

While the unjust killings of Black Americans, particularly by police, took center-stage, the demand for justice is broad, focused on policies that exclude, demean, and dehumanize. In our rural communities, that means understanding how racism couples with place-based discrimination to magnify the impacts of, say, a global health crisis.

## Racism

In his highly-acclaimed book [How To Be An Anti-Racist](#), historian and scholar Dr. Ibram X. Kendi defines racism as “a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.” Often we think about racism as obvious, indefensible remarks or actions that result in physical violence against people or communities of color. We conceive of racism as a character flaw or moral failure, rather than more accurately understanding racism as a descriptor of dehumanizing behavior. It is for these reasons that Justin\* – a Black man – never felt a part of his rural, central West Virginia community. Having recently embarked on his senior year of college, Justin and I talked about how he experienced racism growing up in a state that is home to one of the [Whitest populations in the nation](#).

“People are always like ‘oh my God, you’re from West Virginia, it must have been so horrible’ but like, it was never really someone calling me the n-word – I mean that happened. But it was more like being told ‘oh, my dad would never let me date you’ by a girl I liked or ‘shouldn’t you be better at basketball?’ stuff like that...”

What Justin described to me repeatedly throughout our conversation elucidates the insidiousness of racist ideas: a casual disregard for the humanity of someone deemed “other.” It is this disregard and dehumanization and othering that has resulted in people of color being left out or kept out, forced to seek special dispensation from a society built around – rather than for or with – them.

In and of themselves, these racist ideas are harmful. But it is the racist policies that both generate and are generated from racist ideas that protestors from Macon, Georgia, to Mashpee, Massachusetts, and Lexington, Virginia, to Lowell, Oregon, were – and are – rallying against, such as these:

- The racist idea of the sub-humanity of Native and Indigenous people, coupled with the racist policy of establishing [Indian Residential Schools](#), links directly to the racism that Native and Indigenous people experience now.
- The racist policy of the [capture and sale of Africans](#) to do forced, uncompensated labor as slaves, coupled with the racist idea that Africans needed “civilizing,” links directly to

the racism Black and African American people experience now.

- The racist policy of the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#), coupled with the racist idea that the immigration of Chinese people into the budding nation would bring pestilence, links directly to the racism Asian and Asian American people experience now.

The generational legacy of racist policies ([redlining](#), [Japanese internment](#), even the [criminalization of marijuana](#)) inextricably links to the racist ideas of inferiority to White people and creates this self-fulfilling cycle of disparate treatment.

## Placism

Defined by Lorna Jimerson in her 2005 article [Placism in NCLB – how Rural Children are Left Behind](#) as “[bias] against school systems and students in America’s rural communities... the discrimination against people based on where they live,” placism describes the benevolent paternalism often directed towards rural communities. Whether ignorant or ill-intended, attitudes toward rural communities often assume a complacency or downright hostility toward change. We have largely been taught not to view place as a discrete, important characteristic or identity, and therefore are left without language to describe our experiences of dehumanization.

“Yea, growing up in [my hometown], it was like...OK (laughs). Like, no one came and usually no one left either. And I even tell people here where I’m from and they haven’t even heard of it. So I guess it’s kind of like, we didn’t matter. But we mattered to us, you know? That’s what it’s like to live in West Virginia, too. Like, people don’t even know we’re a state; they think we’re part of Virginia.”

What Justin described as we talked about his experiences growing up mirrored the way he described his racialized experience. He felt, and continues to feel, a general disregard toward what the people of his hometown experience, and an overall dehumanizing tenor to how they are viewed or described. And it has been this disregard and dehumanization and othering that has resulted in rural communities being left out or imposed upon, forced to demand attention from a society built around – rather than for or with – them.

In and of themselves, the placist ideas are harmful. But it is the placist policies that both generate and are generated from, placist ideas that have magnified the global pandemic for rural communities of color.

The placist idea of the inferiority, backwardness, and uneducated rural community in need of salvation, coupled with placist policies such as the [No Child Left Behind Act](#), and the centuries-long (and continued) [exploitation of West Virginia](#) for her wealth of natural resources links directly to the deficit view of rural communities today.

And it is the generational legacy of placist policies inextricably linked to the placist ideas of inferiority to “better-educated” urbanized communities that create this self-fulfilling cycle of disparate treatment.

## **COVID-19**

To understand the state of students of color from or in rural communities in this moment, it is critical to understand how the coronavirus has laid bare the way rural communities and communities of color have largely been tolerated, rather than included. To fully equip people – especially students – in communities across this nation to pursue and achieve happiness, we must observe the ongoing racial justice protests as indictments against dehumanization. All dehumanization. Students of color – a part of and apart from rural communities – are exhausted by an organized assault on their personhood, on their mattering, and are bellowing for support and transformation. While diversity-type trainings and community revitalization projects may make modest gains, this moment demands big solutions. Policies such as universal healthcare, affordable child care, paid family leave, affordable higher education, need-based school funding, a restructuring of tax codes at all levels, environmental justice, and an emphasis on putting people first, are ones that will radically alter life – for all people – for the better. If there is one lesson to be learned from this pandemic creating a nexus of increased attention on race-based and class-based suffering, it is that we must invest anew in the communities we least serve. COVID-19 did not create disparity or the need for equity, but it has exposed the lengths to which our society lacks justice for all.

\*The name of the interviewee has been changed to protect his privacy.

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