

# Black Economists on Race and Policy: Contributions to Education, Poverty and Mobility, and Public Finance<sup>†</sup>

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*We explore the contributions of Black economists to research on major economic and social policy problems in the United States. We focus on applications in education, poverty and economic mobility, and public finance to extract common themes and patterns. The major themes that emerge include (i) Black economists' examination of individual versus structural explanations for economic outcomes, (ii) the role played by race and discrimination, (iii) the endogenous determination of race, and (iv) the nature of objectivity and positionality in economic research. A unifying theme is a willingness of many Black economists to engage critically on economic policy issues, using frameworks both from within as well as outside of mainstream neoclassical economics. (JEL A11, D72, I23, I28, I32, J15, K42)*

*The dilemma of the black community is that it finds itself in the midst of a capitalistic society but virtually without capital.*

—Robert Browne, *Founding Editor, The Review of Black Political Economy*  
(Handy 2008)

## 1. Overview

The still-incomplete task of addressing political disenfranchisement, social exclusion, and economic insecurity among

Black people in the United States must contend with policies and social norms that have historically operated to explicitly subvert and constrain economic opportunity and individual freedom. Many Black economists have conducted economic policy research

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aimed at understanding and promoting effective policies that reduce racial inequality and improve economic opportunity for Black Americans. In this article, we explore the contributions of Black economists to research aimed at identifying the origin of major social problems in the United States, exploring the role played by race and racism, and informing potential policy solutions.

Given the wide array of scholarship that may be situated under this umbrella, and limited space, we will not completely chronicle all work by Black economists on the topics of economic policy and race. Rather, we will sample a subset of topical areas—education, poverty and economic mobility, and public finance—where Black economists have made fruitful contributions. Within these areas, we seek to extract common themes and patterns that typify the work of Black economists, in the hopes of drawing larger insights on how a group, often marginalized in an academic field, and in society more generally, has nonetheless been able to shape said field, both from within its core and at its margins.

For our purposes, the context of the 1960s Great Society political, social, and economic policy expansions is especially relevant. As summarized by Handy (2008), several important policy-oriented think tanks and scholarly outlets focused on Black economic policy and economic well-being were founded and expanded during that period. Over the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Economic Research Center (BERC) and the *Review of Black Political Economy* (hereafter, *The Review*) were founded. Concurrent with the formation of BERC and *The Review*, Black economists convened at the annual Allied Social Sciences Association meetings and founded the Caucus of Black Economists, the precursor to today's National Economic Association (NEA). These organizations, taken together, represented a new level of organized effort and scholarly output aimed

at economic policy and economic conditions affecting Black Americans. The intellectual energy associated with the founding of these organizations helped to seed generations of scholarly work across multiple policy areas. And, while all Black economists cannot and do not trace their intellectual lineage to these roots, these organizations represented a major inflection point with respect to the study of economic mobility, public goods investments, and educational equality for Black Americans and by Black economists. Much of our discussion below aims to summarize a subset of Black economic thought from this watershed period to the present day.

### 1.2 *Who is a Black Economist?*

We first establish an important baseline, following both the scholarly and scientific understanding of defining race as a social construct. The categories of race have been and continue to be arbitrarily projected onto various sets of biological and cultural traits, with the purpose of achieving broader social and political goals. To quote scholar of race and law Dorothy Roberts, “race is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one” (Roberts 2011). We do not view unique features or patterns among Black economists, and Black people in general, as the result of innate genetic proclivities or biological conditions but, rather, as deriving from a history of external social forces thrust upon an evolving but persistent group of people, a tradition of response and resistance to these forces from within that group, and the dynamic interplay between the two. There is likely more heterogeneity *within* racial groups than exists *between* racial groups, but there exists a set of historical and contemporary shared experiences, challenges, and perspectives that generate enough common ground among Black economists so as to motivate a focus on their scholarly contributions separately.

Given the somewhat arbitrary nature of racial categorization, how do we classify one as a Black economist? There are both the individual decisions of self-identification as Black and social norms that may deem one Black independent of any personal decisions or desires. We will ultimately rely on the construction of previous comprehensive lists of Black economists, such as those created by Agesa, Granger, and Price (1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005) and built upon by Price and Allen (2014), Price and Sharpe (2020a), and Mason, Myers, and Simms (2022a,b). This database of Black economists informs important research on the diversity of the economics profession and contributions of Black economists to the field (Price 2008, 2009; Price and Sharpe 2020a,b).

Our data begins with the part of the Mason, Myers, and Simms (2022b) data set that was derived from the Price and Sharpe (2020) update. We built upon that part of the Mason, Myers, and Simms (2022b) data before more entries had been added to create its final version. We refer to this as the Mason/Myers/Simms update of the Agesa/Grange/Price/Allen/Sharpe database. We then augmented this database with job market candidates listed annually on the website of the American Economics Association (AEA) Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economic Profession job market candidate website. The Black job market candidates from the 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 academic years were added to the database. The websites are accessible through the Wayback Machine internet archive (American Economic Association 2018a,b, 2020a, b).

Beyond the two aforementioned data sources, we added additional names of Black economists drawn from consultation with other Black economists active in such research communities as the AEA Committee on the Status of Minority Groups in the Economics Profession (CSMGEP),

the AEA CSMGEP Mentoring Program, the Diversity Initiative for Tenure in Economics (DITE), and the National Economic Association (NEA). Finally, the remaining names were added given the authors' own knowledge of recent Black doctoral recipients. This method of identifying Black economists is not error proof and may exclude some economists who may identify as Black. However, this approach is consistent with prior methods for the database constructed by Price and Allen (2014).

We must also contend with the subjective definition of who is and who is not an economist. Once again, we build off the definition of Price and Allen (2014), who populate their database with all Black researchers who have either received a doctorate in economics and/or who work in an economics department or research-oriented institution. However, we recognize that the nature and climate of the economics profession has not always been inclusive or welcoming to Black researchers—a challenge that continues to plague the field (Allgood et al. 2019). It is therefore not uncommon for Black economists to earn a degree in a non-economics department, such as a school of public policy, and/or to locate in a noneconomics department, such as a school of education, or in a nonacademic research setting, such as a think tank or government research institution. This interdisciplinarity does not only arise due to the hostility found within economics toward Black economists. Black scholars may also find that, when engaging subjects such as race, there are benefits to proximity to scholars in other fields who have a relatively more developed theory of race than is common from within mainstream economics. We therefore exercise discretion, erring toward inclusion in cases where Black economists are found on the boundary of the profession in adjacent fields and departments, which is all the more necessary given our attention to research on economic policy analysis. And, in

contemporary times, the presence of economists across a broad array of institutions and academic departments transcends race. It is also important to note that Black scholarship is very much intertwined with the scholarly work of non-Black scholars, including non-Black coauthors. In this regard, the story of Black economic scholarship mirrors other aspects of social interactions throughout America, insofar as pathways to progress often benefit from a collection of Black and non-Black professional allies.

In summary, for this study, we define a Black economist as a scholar who:

- (i) Self-identifies as Black, including through their affiliation with CSMGEP, DITE, the NEA, or other organizations of Black economists and social scientists
- (ii) Has either received a doctoral degree in economics, and/or works in an academic economics department or research-oriented institution; or has worked in an economics-adjacent field, department, think tank, or government agency conducting economics research and who coauthors with economists.

## 2. Methodology

To build a comprehensive account of the writing of Black economists on education, poverty and mobility, and public finance, we employed a three-pronged method of meta-analysis. First, we collected the most recent curriculum vitae (CVs) for each person in the database and, when not available, we created a dossier for each such member of the list using information from professional websites and online profiles. Using information from these CVs and dossiers and the existing information in the prior database, we recorded degree-granting institutions,

current place of employment, and other descriptive statistics for each Black economist.<sup>1</sup> We also created a linkable database of every academic journal publication or working paper we could identify for each Black economist in our database, including information on place of publication and number of citations. Given the enormity of our task, we were forced to set certain boundaries in our methodology for literature review. One of those boundaries was our decision to focus on articles published in academic journals in our CV and dossier searches. This necessarily limits the breadth of the contribution of Black economists by excluding government reports or think tank publications, but hopefully our discussion of the literature published in academic journals encourages readers to seek out other publications by Black economists on these topics.

Having established a general database of Black economists, we then identified the set of papers and researchers that intersect with our key topics of focus by digitally searching the CVs and dossiers of all the Black economists in our database for keywords such as “achievement gap,” “poverty,” “income taxation,” “EITC,” etc. We manually reviewed positive matches to remove any false positives. We additionally searched for the same keywords in economics journals that have been receptive to the work of Black economists, namely *The Review*, and more recently, *The Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy*. Finally, in the course of reviewing the initially identified papers, we were sometimes led to other Black researchers and scholars publishing on the same topic. We read, summarized, and archived the final set of papers in order to write our review. Importantly, the meta-analysis complements and helps to inform our

<sup>1</sup>We have made this database publicly available to view as an online appendix through the American Economic Association’s data repository.

synthesis of the vast and overlapping literatures to which and with which Black economists contribute to and dialogue. The meta-analysis helps to discipline what is ultimately a normative exercise in placing varying weight on topics, authors, position, and importance across multiple literatures. Appendix tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the articles written by Black economists that were ultimately included in this review.

### 3. *Emergent Themes*

A few interrelated and overlapping themes emerged during our systematic review of the literature that we discuss briefly here and highlight in greater detail through examples in the sections on education policy, poverty and mobility, and public finance. Connecting the themes we observed was an underlying willingness of many Black economists to write critically about the assumptions of mainstream neoclassical economic theory. This is not to say that these economists can be placed neatly into schools of thought such as mainstream or heterodox. There are Black economists who have written papers that use neoclassical economic theory and assumptions; those who have written papers questioning one or more of the assumptions from neoclassical economic theory; and many times, those who, throughout their careers, have written both kinds of papers. We nonetheless find it worthwhile to highlight Black economists in their most critical moments, as these contributions are the most likely to have been overlooked or underappreciated (Mason, Myers, and Darity 2005).

#### 3.1 *Individualist and Structuralist Explanations of Racial Disparities*

Adapting a taxonomy from Darity (2003) and Darity et al. (2012), we describe research frameworks as falling into an individualist or structuralist perspective. Many Black economists have engaged in a multi-decade

response to arguments that ascribe average racial differences in economic outcomes to individual deficiencies (e.g., Murray 1984<sup>^2</sup> and Stigler 1965<sup>^</sup>). A prominent view within economics and the social sciences more broadly—though not necessarily *the* dominant view—surrounding the causes of racial disparities in economic outcomes emphasizes the primacy of individual behavior, work effort, cultural norms, and pathologies. This view places less weight on structural factors such as systemic discrimination and more on the role of the individual. Specific to Blacks, behavioral explanations can include a perceived lack of socio-emotional or noncognitive skills, such as industriousness, work ethic, and aptitude for education and training.

Importantly, the individualist frame is defined not solely by the consideration of these potential factors, but for the primacy of such factors relative to structural factors. Indeed, many economists who find evidence of the effects of structural factors on economic outcomes, including those of Blacks in America, allow for the admissibility of industriousness and skill formation as contributing factors. Many Black scholars' writings represent some mix or intermediate point between these two perspectives (e.g., Wilson 2011), making it more difficult to situate their scholarship solely within one or another intellectual "side" or point of view.

The emergence of stratification economics represents one example of how Black economists have critiqued the individualist framework in mainstream economic theories. This approach to the study

<sup>2</sup>In order to be clear about when we are citing Black economists, the "^(^)" symbol denotes a paper where the author is not Black. In the case of multiple authors, we employ the symbol only when none of the coauthors are Black. When an author of a cited paper is Black but not an economist, we denote that in writing in the text, e.g., "The anthropologist John Ogbu...."



of economics recognizes identity-based power structures that both influence and constrain individual choices, complicating the concept of “self-interest” amid identity group positioning in society (Darity 2004; Darity, Hamilton, and Stewart 2015). Darity (2022) and Chelwa, Hamilton, and Stewart (2022) discuss how Black economists have employed stratification economics to examine racial economic disparities, filling gaps in neoclassical approaches and offering insights independent of these approaches. This has important policy implications and resonance with our current exercise, given that a focus on individual choice that ignores underlying intergroup social and power dynamics may fail to accurately characterize the mechanisms driving economic outcomes.

### 3.2 *The Endogeneity of Race*

Spriggs (2020), in an Open Letter to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, critiques the use of race as an exogenous variable in mainstream economics research. He explains that interpreting race as predetermined assumes that racial outcome differences are part of a natural order and that such differences that remain unexplained by observable differences in skills or other factors are assumed to be due to underlying racial group differences. Spriggs (2020) posits that such differences are often assumed to be driven by deficits on the part of the group with relatively weaker observed outcomes.

Chelwa, Hamilton, and Stewart (2022) argue that models that ignore the endogeneity of race are lacking in rigor. They explain how stratification economists typically account for the incentives of economically and politically dominant identity groups to maintain that dominance in assumed choice structures, and that this affects the ability of minority groups to accumulate the resources and wealth necessary to improve their economic outcomes.

In the tax policy literature, for example, most redistributive questions hinge on the costs of reductions in efficiency and, at times, the general heterogeneity in preferences over levels of spending. In contrast, many Black economists have explored the specific role that anti-Black racism has played in curtailing spending on public goods, as far back as the era of Reconstruction (e.g., Logan 2019) to more recent episodes of welfare reform in the 1990s (Hardy, Samudra, and Davis 2019).

With implications for our synthesis of economic policy research conducted by Black economists, Chelwa, Hamilton, and Stewart (2022) argue that models that treat race as exogenous operate in an ahistorical manner, ignoring the economic and political structures that privilege whiteness. Many inquiries anchored on such an approach presume inferiority of minority groups to explain racial economic disparities. Spriggs (2020) argues that this presumption has worked to limit the effectiveness of policy interventions by encouraging economists to recommend marginal policies that target individual behaviors rather than broader, bolder policies that address underlying structures in the economy and society. In this way, this theme is related to the individualist versus structuralist theme discussed in the previous section.

### 3.3 *Objectivity and Positionality in Economics Research*

A final theme we observed involves instances in the literature where Black economists question the underlying objectivity of economic modeling. Black economists writing in the feminist economics tradition argue that normativity in theoretical assumptions and research questions is unavoidable, and rather than feign objectivity, economists should strive to be transparent in identifying underlying biases and the ways those biases may affect their analyses, particularly

in regard to racial and gender disparities (Saunders and Darity 2003). Feminist economics is a theoretical perspective that maintains, among other things, that the assumption of economic analysis as inherently objective and dispassionate is a faulty assumption (Nelson 1996<sup>^</sup>, R. Williams 1993). The definitions and assumptions that undergird economic theories and models reflect the underlying values of the architects of those theories and models, at potentially great cost insofar as members of marginalized racial and gender identity groups, including Black economists, have traditionally had relatively fewer opportunities to contribute to this architecture. Black economists' contributions to the feminist economics tradition (Banks 2005, 2006, 2020; Bueno and Henderson 2017; Holder 2020; R. Williams 1993) reflect another example of critiques to mainstream economic theory and practice.

While it is often the goal of social scientists to remain dispassionate and objective with respect to their topics of study, we find that Black economists in our review span a range of stances regarding their own identity vis-à-vis their work. In several cases, the scholars are candid about the role their own racial identity plays in their choice of topic: they are invested in the betterment of members of the Black community. A shared social experience can yield contrasting approaches and frameworks, leading to a variety of viewpoints and healthy debates. That one's identity might inform their own research is not a unique feature of work produced by Black economists. Every researcher, to some extent, exists in relation to their topic interests—a concept known as “positionality” (e.g., Merriam et al. 2001). We find that Black economists are often willing to not only admit this possibility but interrogate it in conjunction with their exploration of broader questions, in ways that recognize potential biases and provide the reader with greater transparency. This is relevant given

the intersection of race with outcome differences in the American context across education, poverty and mobility, and public finance—and the contributions of Black economists to these scholarly debates.

#### 4. *Education Policy*

Economics of education, as a field of study, emerged from the human capital theory debates of the 1960s and 1970s, as economists pondered the economic value of schooling, on-the-job training, and other skills and traits that could impact worker productivity (Teixeira 2000<sup>^</sup>). In a chapter of the *Handbook of Research in Education Finance and Policy*, Brewer et al. (2012<sup>^</sup>) argue “the core importance of economics in education, especially vis-à-vis other social sciences, lies in its conceptual structure and the scientific approaches applied by economists to their research...” However, Black economists like William Darity and Rhonda Williams (Darity 1982, Darity and Williams 1985, R. Williams 1993) have a history of pointing out the subjectivity underlying the assumptions economists make that belie the claims of purely objective scientific inquiry. For example, during the 1985 American Economic Association (AEA) Meetings, Darity chaired a session titled “Human Capital and Culture: Analyses of Variations in Labor Market Performance,” where he and Williams presented a paper maintaining that over time, human capital theory had morphed into a theory of cultural determinism (Darity and Williams 1985). They argued that, after numerous studies of racial wage differentials continued to show Black–White wage gaps, even after controlling for observable skills, rather than consider wage discrimination as an explanation, economists began to claim that there must be an unobserved cultural component to human capital that Black workers are less likely to possess.

In that same AEA session, Stephen Steinberg, a sociologist, was invited to serve as discussant. In his remarks, published as a paper in *The Review* (Steinberg and Darity 1985), Steinberg claimed that human capital theory, employed as cultural determinism, was no better than a tautology. Paraphrasing Steinberg: to employ a cultural component to human capital theory means beginning by claiming a group of people is more likely to become successful because they have the right cultural values and then explaining that the reason we know they possess those cultural values is because they became successful more often.

Despite the critiques of human capital theory levied by Darity, Williams, and Steinberg, mainstream economists who study education have largely accepted the assumption that remaining racial wage differentials, after accounting for observable characteristics, are due to differences in what we now label “noncognitive” or “soft” skills, or even cultural traits. In the intervening decades since that 1985 conference session, economists have often been called upon to provide evidence on the effectiveness of proposed education policies. This expanded the research literature in economics of education and attracted more economists to study questions in education policy (Brewer, Hentschke, and Eide 2010<sup>^</sup>). The majority of those economists operate under mainstream neoclassical assumptions in their treatment of race, skills accumulation, and discrimination. Many Black economists, however, continue in the tradition of Darity and Williams by interrogating mainstream assumptions from a critical perspective.

#### 4.1 *What Topics in Education Policy are Black Economists Writing About?*

Black economists writing on a wide range of education policy topics have been published in a wide range of journals. Based on our methodology for collecting academic journal articles by Black economists, the

most frequent topic areas addressed by Black economists in education policy are racial and socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes. After that, the next four most popular topics are school choice and competition, teacher evaluation and teacher quality, academic achievement gaps, and returns to schooling.

Given the breadth of coverage of topics in education policy, we couldn't possibly give a complete accounting of this literature. In what follows we examine a subset of Black economists' research on education policy in order to provide illustrative examples of some of the themes we highlighted in the introduction to this article. Specifically, we look at research on the causes of and possible solutions for Black–White academic achievement gaps to explore both how the treatment of race differs among those writing from a mainstream tradition compared to those writing from a critical perspective and to illustrate the individualist versus structuralist divide we identified as an emergent theme. Second, we consider a debate in the literature on the economic consequences of affirmative action in college admissions where Black economists call into question the assumption of objectivity in economic research. Third, we explore the benefits of attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in order to illustrate how Black economists might call upon their own experiences to ask research questions non-Black economists may be less likely to pursue. Finally, we highlight Black economists' recent contributions to the school funding literature to demonstrate how the contributions of Black economists can challenge the conventional wisdom in the field and advance policy-relevant research.

#### 4.2 *Black–White Academic Achievement Gaps*

The Black–White achievement gap refers to group-level differences in measurable



academic outcomes such as test scores, graduation rates, and advanced course enrollment between Black and White students, typically within a K–12 educational context. As an example, Black students score from 0.5–0.7 standard deviations (s.d.) lower than White students on average on math and English language arts standardized tests (Reardon, Kalogrides, and Shores 2019<sup>^</sup>). After controlling for socioeconomic status, the racial test score gaps shrink substantially but not entirely (Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor 2009<sup>^</sup>; Fryer and Levitt 2004; Reardon, Kalogrides, and Shores 2019<sup>^</sup>). These differences are correlated with racial disparities in longer-term economic outcomes such as college attendance and income (Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff 2014<sup>^</sup>). Given the potential consequences of racial academic achievement gaps, economic researchers have been drawn to understanding and exploring both the causes of and potential solutions to these achievement gaps.

After accounting for differences in socioeconomic status, explanations for remaining racial achievement gaps tend to be either cultural or structural in nature. Cultural explanations posit that there are underlying cultural factors specific to Black students that, on average, lead them to underinvest in education (Austen-Smith and Fryer 2005; Fryer and Torelli 2010), while structural explanations point to external factors such as racial segregation and discrimination (Card and Rothstein 2007<sup>^</sup>, Francis and Darity 2020, Reardon 2016<sup>^</sup>, Simms 1988). Ultimately, it is important to understand the root causes of achievement gaps in order to determine the appropriate policy solutions. Solutions informed by cultural explanations include mentoring programs and related interventions that attempt to adjust the behaviors of Black parents and children that ostensibly lead them to underinvest in education (Loury 2019). Solutions informed by structural explanations, on the other hand,

would require examining policies, processes, structures, and resources both within school systems and in the larger social context (Simms 1988).

The most widely cited Black economist writing on this question is Roland Fryer. Together with coauthors, his research on academic achievement gaps has appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, the *Review of Economics and Statistics*, and the *Journal of Public Economics*, among other outlets (Austen-Smith and Fryer 2005, Fryer and Levitt 2004, Fryer and Torelli 2010). The conclusions drawn from much of Fryer's research are oriented more toward cultural explanations for achievement gaps. For example, a subset of Fryer's work is anchored by anthropologist John Ogbu's oppositional culture theory, which posits that Black students underinvest in education because they perceive future structural barriers in employment such as discrimination as limiting their life chances. In response, as a way of psychological protection, they reject the dominant White culture's definition of success and develop an oppositional cultural framework devaluing dominant culture values such as academic success (Fordham and Ogbu 1986, Ogbu 2008). Much of Fryer's empirical and theoretical work finds support for an "acting White" hypothesis—an offshoot of oppositional culture theory—that says Black students underinvest in education because they fear their peers will accuse them of "acting White" (Austen-Smith and Fryer 2005, Fryer and Torelli 2010).

Some Black economists writing from a critical perspective have critiqued Fryer's conclusions. Andrews and Swinton (2014) summarize multiple empirical studies that call into question the assumptions underlying Ogbu's oppositional culture hypothesis. Several studies, from Black economists and sociologists, find that Black students are no more likely to face peer rejection for academic achievement than White students

(Harris 2006; Tyson 2011; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005), and Black students may actually put in more time studying outside of school (Ferguson, Ludwig, and Rich 2001; Harris 2006).

Francis and Darity (2020) critique Austen-Smith and Fryer's (2005) theoretical paper on the "acting White" hypothesis, which uses a two-audience signaling model where students choose whether to make an educational investment. The investment sends a positive signal to the labor market, but a negative signal to a student's peers. An equilibrium result of the model is that a student may choose to underinvest in education in order to avoid peer rejection. Francis and Darity argue, however, that nothing in Austen-Smith and Fryer's model predicts underinvestment on the part of Black students of any higher magnitude than that of White students and Austen-Smith and Fryer rely on the yet unproven assumptions of Ogbu's oppositional culture theory to presuppose that Black students would be more prone to underinvestment. Within this discourse, Francis and Darity (2020) argue that the "acting White" hypothesis is seemingly proven by assumption.

Finally, Francis and Darity (2020) point out that Austen-Smith and Fryer (2005) are careful to explain that their model does not demonstrate underinvestment by Black students, but the framing of the paper throughout—*anecdotes about Black students' fear of peer rejection and discussions of Ogbu's theory*—can easily leave readers with the impression that the paper effectively demonstrates theoretically that achievement gaps arise because Black students uniquely underinvest in education. Many papers in economics journals cite Fryer's work on the "acting White" hypothesis as evidence of Black underinvestment in education due to peer pressure (See for example Bénabou and Tirole 2011<sup>^</sup>; Benjamin, Choi, and Strickland 2010<sup>^</sup>; Grogger 2011<sup>^</sup>; and

Kling, Liebman, and Katz 2007<sup>^</sup>). Francis and Darity (2020) argue that this is problematic if policy makers become convinced that racial achievement gaps are caused by underinvestment on the part of Black students. Policy solutions overly focused on fixing an underinvestment problem will not be successful in closing racial achievement gaps if the causes are actually more structural in nature.

Research by other Black economists points to some of these structural factors. Johnson (2019) demonstrates how the resegregation of schools since the late 1980s created resource imbalances that negatively impact the social mobility of low-income and minority students. Ferguson (1991) shows that teachers in high-minority schools score lower on teacher aptitude exams. Rouse, with coauthor Boozer, (2001) illustrates how minority students are placed in larger class sizes on average, and the negative effects of large class sizes accounts for a substantial portion of the Black–White test score gap. Andrews and Logan (2010) link health inequality to test score gaps, estimating that controlling for health disparities would decrease the Black–White test score gap by 17 to 23 percent. Mincy, with a team of researchers (Zilanawala et al. 2018), shows that placing Black male students in more academically challenging learning environments had the largest positive effect on Black male math assessment scores, compared to other interventions such as reduced teacher turnover, special education designation, increased spending, or after-school programs.

Casey et al. (2018) demonstrate how minority college students are less likely to employ strategic responses to being placed on academic probation, such as taking easier courses and dropping courses that they are not doing well in, perhaps because they are first-generation college students and have less access to the institutional knowledge that would aid in strategic behavior. Notably,

minority college students improve their academic standing subsequent to being placed on academic probation even without using strategic behavior. Francis, de Oliveira, and Dimmitt (2019) demonstrate through an audit study of school counselors that well-qualified Black female students are significantly less likely to be recommended for Advanced Placement Calculus courses even when they have comparable academic records to their White or male peers. Additionally, Francis and Darity (2021) show empirically that a pattern of racialized segregation within schools can be self-perpetuating, discouraging academically eligible Black students from enrolling in advanced courses. In this instance, the contribution of critical Black economists is to push the policy discussion away from individualist solutions to the racial achievement gap that put the onus on “fixing” Black students themselves and toward structural solutions that involve examining structures within schools, and within society more broadly.

### 4.3 Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policies have long been a politically charged topic of interest. Economists have studied the effects of affirmative action in college admissions on a host of short- and long-run student outcomes. (Arcidiacono and Lovenheim 2016<sup>^</sup>; Bowen, Bok, and Nygren 2019<sup>^</sup>; Loury and Garman 1993; Holzer and Neumark 2006<sup>^</sup>).<sup>3</sup> Alongside court cases that challenge the legality of race-based admissions policies, economists have been called upon to research and testify about these effects (Long 2018). In response to potential or

realized litigation, some states eliminated race-based affirmative action in college admissions in favor of race-neutral alternatives like Texas’s Top 10 Percent law. Several Black economists have studied the effects of these alternatives (Conrad and Sharpe 1996; Darity, Deshpande, and Weisskopf 2011; Daugherty, Martorell, and McFarlin 2014a, 2014b; Fryer, Loury, and Yuret 2007; Long 2003, 2018; Myers 1997). Andrews and Swinton (2014), in particular, find that race-neutral alternatives are less efficient overall, while yielding weaker results with respect to promoting diversity.

Black economists have published research both in favor of and in opposition to affirmative action in higher education. However, we discuss the topic of affirmative action here not because of the specific policy proposals made, but because an informative debate arose between Black economists in the early 2000s, centered on affirmative action, that shed light on a tension between objectivity and subjectivity within the discipline of economics.

In a 2005 *Journal of Economic Perspectives* article on the topic of affirmative action, Fryer and Loury describe the merits of the economics discipline in evaluating the costs and benefits of race-based affirmative action policies:

We believe that economic reasoning can make a contribution to the affirmative action debate. This paper shows the insights that can be gained when one respects the consistency requirements of formal definitions, remains mindful of incentives and recalls that the behaviors of interacting agents must adjust to be mutually compatible in equilibrium. These are the mainstays of the analytic discipline conveyed by economic reasoning, and we have tried to show how their consistent application can enrich the study of affirmative action policy.

Their assertion of the benefits of economic reasoning in addressing policy questions mirrors that of Brewer et. al (2012<sup>^</sup>) discussed at the beginning of this section. However, in an exchange in *The Review*

<sup>3</sup>Black economists have also written about affirmative action in hiring and in the awarding of government contracts. However, given our focus on education policy, we concentrate specifically on affirmative action in college admissions (Miller 2017, 2019; Myers and Ha 2018; Sowell 2004)

about his book *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Loury 2003), Loury (2004) acknowledges subjectivity in the aspects of the affirmative action debate he has chosen to emphasize. He aims to reconcile and connect his prior writing on racial inequality with the seemingly more liberal writing in his 2004 book, offering that:

It is not inconsistent to hold that black parents, like all other parents, are responsible for the behaviors of their children, and simultaneously to hold that the nation is responsible for the ghetto poor. Nor is it a contradiction to assert, at one and the same time, that profound behavioral problems afflict many black communities, and that these maladies are no alien imposition on an otherwise pristine Euro-American canvas, but instead are products of economic and political structures indigenous to American society. Both can be true. And, if both are true, the question becomes one of emphasis. While my emphasis has definitely changed, I do not repudiate the earlier claims. (Loury 2004, p. 86)

Here, the term “emphasis” appears to imply a degree of subjectivity in the formation of the economic analysis. In the same volume of *The Review*, Darity (2004)—a critical Black economist—underscores the impact of this subjectivity, arguing that, in Loury’s earlier work, often lauded by conservatives, and in his later work, billed as being more liberal, “he uses different ways to say the same things.” Conrad (2004), also in the same volume, picks up on the change in emphasis in Loury’s research on affirmative action. She points out how Loury emphasized the negative effects of “race-sighted” policies like affirmative action in his earlier work, while taking a more even-handed approach in his more recent work, advising policy makers to weigh the pros and cons for themselves. This scholarly exchange raises important questions surrounding the nature of prior beliefs and subjectivity as well as the diversity of Black economic thought and the intellectual exchanges that are central to crafting economic policy recommendations. These

discussions take place from a positionality within and outside of the mainstream.

Importantly, Black economists writing from a critical perspective have challenged the notion that economic analysis is a value-neutral, objective way to evaluate the effects of affirmative action in college admissions. This is an example of a larger pattern among Black economists of questioning the asserted objectivity of mainstream economics in analyzing questions involving racial disparity (Banks 2005, 2006, 2020; Darity, Hamilton, and Stewart 2015; Hamilton and Darity 2017; Spriggs 2020).

#### 4.4 *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*

The particular role Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) should take in the education of Black students in the United States has been a topic of policy debate for over 150 years. W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether Black education should be narrowly focused on acquiring technical skills for employment or imparting a broad liberal arts curriculum like many predominately White institutions (Du Bois 2018; Washington, Harlan, and Smock 1974).

Black economists who research the role of HBCUs have investigated the graduation rates of HBCU students (Wilson 2007), the labor market returns to education from attending HBCUs (Elu et al. 2019; Fryer and Greenstone 2010; Price, Spriggs, and Swinton 2011), the productive efficiency of HBCUs (Andrews et al. 2015, Coupet 2013, Coupet and Barnum 2010), the allocation and impact of funding for HBCUs (Deng et al. 2020, Johnson 2011, Coupet 2013), and the research productivity of faculty at HBCUs (Agesa, Granger, and Price 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005; Betsey 2007; Price 2007). The focus on labor market returns and productive efficiency as a measure of HBCU effectiveness is a normative decision. For some

Black economists the value of education from HBCUs spans beyond returns and efficiency to include social and developmental benefits of being educated in a relatively more nurturing environment, one in which a student's intellectual capacity is less likely to be questioned on the basis of race (Broady, Todd, and Booth-Bell 2017; Wilson 2007).

Broady, Todd, and Booth-Bell (2017) argue for the continued relevance of Georgia's HBCUs on the grounds that predominantly White institutions of higher education continue to be hostile learning environments for Black students:

While overt racism and discrimination are still prevalent in the form of racial slurs and confederate flags at Georgia institutions, less conspicuous forms of discrimination persist as attacks on multicultural courses and curriculums are waged in various states across the nation.

Making a similar argument at the high school level, economists Diette et al. (2021) investigate how school racial composition impacts educational outcomes for Black students. They find that Black students in racially balanced high schools actually complete fewer years of schooling and are less likely to graduate high school than those in predominantly Black high schools. They argue that it is possible that racially diverse schools may be academically damaging environments for Black students, both because they lack the institutional power to command equal resource allocation within the school and because the battle for resources may make racially diverse schools more inhospitable for Black students.

In 1935, Du Bois<sup>4</sup> penned an article in the *Journal of Negro Education* titled “Does

the Negro Need Separate Schools?” The answer he arrived at was that, whether integrated or not, Black students needed educational environments where they would not be discriminated against, degraded, or erased from history textbooks. Further, he argued that Black students need “sympathetic” teachers:

The proper education of any people includes sympathetic touch between teacher and pupil; knowledge on the part of the teacher, not simply of the individual taught, but of his surroundings and background, and the history of his class and group; such contact between pupils, and between teacher and pupil, on the basis of perfect social equality, as will increase this sympathy and knowledge.” (Du Bois 1935, p. 328)

Within the education literature, pedagogical theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) refers to this as culturally sustaining pedagogy—where there is a “fluid understanding of culture, and a teaching practice that explicitly engages questions of equity and justice.” Anthropologist and educator Michèle Foster (1990) has written about the unique abilities of Black teachers to impart self-esteem, a positive view of Black identity, and an understanding of the political and social challenges faced by Black students. While postsecondary faculty within the nation's HBCUs are diverse, students are exposed to a higher proportion of Black and Black diaspora faculty and administrators throughout their course of study than they would be at predominantly White institutions (Gasman 2013<sup>^</sup>).

Tangential to the discussion of HBCU efficacy, at the primary and secondary education level, economists have examined the issue of teacher diversity by testing empirically whether there are advantages to students having a teacher of the same race. Findings indicate that Black teachers tend to have higher expectations for, and better perceptions of Black students than non-Black teachers (Dee 2005<sup>^</sup>;

<sup>4</sup>Although he did not work professionally as an economist or earn a doctorate in economics, some argue that Du Bois should be included in the ranks of Black economists, given his contributions to economic thought (Boston 1991, Oliver 2014, Prash 2008<sup>^</sup>).



Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge 2016<sup>^</sup>). Black students who are matched with Black teachers are more likely to graduate high school and to enroll in college (Gershenson et al. forthcoming). Black teachers may be more effective with Black students because they are more effective at implementing culturally sustaining pedagogy, or as Du Bois put it, have more of a “sympathetic touch.”

An early advocate for diversity among teachers was Sadie Alexander (2021), the first Black Ph.D. economist. In an address titled “Education and Social Change: The Citizen’s Role in Achieving Civil Rights,” given around 1966 amidst the backdrop of Black protests for racial justice, Alexander argued that, “A school manned by all white or all colored teachers is as destructive of democracy and incapable of building a fully rounded individual, as one attended by children of one race or color or national origin.” (Alexander 2021, p. 241).<sup>5</sup>

Edmonds (2021) examines the effectiveness of primary teachers who were trained at HBCUs and finds that Black students with HBCU-trained teachers performed better on standardized math exams, and this effect is distinct from simply having a teacher of the same race. Thus, not only are HBCUs culturally affirming spaces for Black students, but the training that student-teachers receive at HBCUs can create benefits for their future students. By highlighting these additional benefits, Black economists

introduce a unique perspective within the economics discipline, perhaps informed by their own lived experiences. The returns to attending HBCUs should not be measured solely by their labor market value to students, but also by their social and psychological benefits.

#### 4.5 The “Does Money Matter” Debate

For decades, economists have debated whether increased expenditures in public schools will lead to improved educational outcomes for students. Sometimes dubbed the “does money matter?” debate, arguments have been made on both sides, largely based on descriptive evidence and meta-analyses (Coleman 1966<sup>^</sup>; Ferguson and Ladd 1996; Hanushek 1997, 2003; Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald 1994<sup>^</sup>). The seeming ambiguity over whether spending increases can improve academic outcomes may have led some policy makers away from educational reforms that focused on school funding and toward reforms that focused more on school accountability or individual student behaviors (Hanushek 1989). In a 2015 *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (*QJE*) article, however, Black economists Kirabo Jackson, Rucker Johnson, and their coauthor Claudia Persico injected new life into the school funding debate by providing convincing causal evidence that increased school funding does improve long-term outcomes for students, such as increased years of schooling, increased wages, and decreased poverty rates (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2015). The strength of their contribution lay in their causal identification strategy, their reliance on a nationally representative sample of students, and their focus on meaningful long-term outcomes instead of solely on test scores—a commonly used outcome in the prior literature on school funding. Their research has had the effect of challenging the conventional wisdom and reinvigorating research on the

<sup>5</sup>These words by Sadie Alexander are only made readily available because of the research of Black economist Nina Banks who has recovered Alexander’s economic writings in an edited volume (Alexander 2021). Although she earned her doctorate in economics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1921, the economics profession was closed to Alexander as a Black woman (Alexander 2021). She worked as a lawyer and activist, but continued to write about economic policy throughout her life. Alexander is a prime example of a Black economist who is working outside of the field of economics and who may not be easily identified as economists.

impact of resources on student outcomes (Jackson 2020).<sup>6</sup>

Jackson, Johnson, and Persico's (2015) research has important implications for racial disparities in educational outcomes. Their results indicate stronger effects of funding increases on outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds—students who are disproportionately Black and Hispanic. Additionally, Johnson and Jackson (2019) find that increased preschool spending, when coupled with increased K–12 spending, further improves educational outcomes for low-income students. Racial segregation within a locally funded public school system creates resource disparities where low-income, minority students receive fewer resources than more economically advantaged students (Johnson 2019). The recent evidence on the importance of school funding then implies that these students are at a disadvantage with regard to improved educational outcomes relative to more affluent peers. If education is to play an equalizing role in society, ongoing research should pay close attention to how school funding and resources are allocated across the dimensions of race and socioeconomic status.

Research by Black economists influences education policy in myriad ways. In addition to advancing knowledge and providing data-driven insights to important policy questions, Black economists have also pushed the field to critically examine assumptions and policy objectives in ways that broaden and strengthen policy analyses and recommendations.

### 5. *Poverty and Economic Mobility*

Our summary of contributions by Black economists to the study of poverty and

economic mobility begins with a review of some core conceptual fault lines within a uniquely American context. Some of these core ideas were noted earlier, particularly structural and individualistic frameworks for assessing research in poverty and economic mobility. Explicitly or implicitly, much of the scholarly work in this area emphasizes a combination of structural and individualistic factors—tilting in one or another direction—see for example a discussion and disagreement between Darity (2011) and sociologist William Julius Wilson (2011) over the relative importance of these factors for explaining Black poverty. We briefly define and discuss these factors, which help to motivate and inform the founding of scholarly societies central to the study of economic conditions facing Blacks in the late 1960s. While most studies do not explicitly situate themselves within either of these frames, they effectively operate as roots, from which decades of work on poverty have grown—very often in one or another direction.

These frameworks are helpful in understanding much of the underlying motivation and ensuing research within this domain. This background helps to situate the contributions made by Black economists to poverty and economic mobility within the following topical areas, which we synthesize: (1) labor market conditions, skills, and work; (2) incarceration, work, and economic security; (3) work, poverty, and the social safety net; and (4) intergenerational transmission of wealth and economic status.

Structural factors in this context include economic shocks, secular events, developmental and environmental exposure, and both current-day and historical sociopolitical conditions—including the accumulated consequences from exposure to racism and discrimination—some of which may shape premarket and adult socioeconomic

<sup>6</sup>See for example, Candelaria and Shores (2019<sup>^</sup>), Hymn (2017<sup>^</sup>), and Lafortune, Rothstein, and Schanzenbach (2018<sup>^</sup>).

outcomes (Darity 2003). High levels of historical economic disadvantage among Black Americans have attracted the interest of many economists and social scientists, including Black economists. Historical exclusion from full participation in education, labor, and housing markets, and the ensuing economic insecurity, motivated much of the scholarly discourse we summarize here. Neighborhoods where many Black children reside remain characterized by low levels of economic resources, safety, and social networks, and higher exposure to varying forms of discrimination and exclusion from opportunity. Many Black economists have approached the study of poverty and economic mobility from a structural perspective.

Individualistic factors include individual attitudes, proclivities, and behaviors that influence economic and labor market outcomes. Of particular primacy are individual factors that shape employment and earnings. In the United States, earnings are the primary pathway for attaining upward economic mobility. Those adopting an individualistic perspective might place greater relative weight on individualistic behavioral factors, including work effort, persistence, reliability, punctuality, productivity on the job, and nonmarital fertility choices. Individualistic factors need not be solely applied to Black workers, *per se*. However, there is a well-established record of racialized behavioral or cultural explanations for any number of social, education, and economic outcomes (e.g., Bell et al. 2015, Moynihan 1965<sup>^</sup>). These have remained as dominant themes in the study of poverty and mobility, and especially so in relation to economic conditions facing Black communities and families. Many Black economists have engaged with these themes since at least the seminal scholarship of Du Bois throughout the early twentieth century (Prasch 2008).

### 5.1 *Political Ideology, Policy Change, and Poverty*

Individual factors are often described as operating independently of structural factors, though they plausibly interact. To be sure, the contributions of many Black and non-Black economists alike often fall somewhere between these two perspectives—again, as a set of relative weights placing more or less emphasis on generally opposing sets of explanations for economic mobility and poverty. As documented by Datcher-Loury and Loury (1986), these perspectives are associated with political ideological leanings. As they summarize, conservatives tend to place greater emphasis on differences in individual decisions, attitudes, and choices that lead to varying outcomes, whereas liberals emphasize that observable attitudes reflect the inequality of conditions and previous opportunities. Datcher-Loury and Loury observe that many social scientists have thus argued that cultural differences largely explain relatively higher levels of Black poverty—more succinctly referred to as the “culture of poverty argument”—in which, as one example, children’s habits and behavioral norms, and by association those of their parents, ultimately impede labor market success. As described in the context of economists Glenn Loury and Richard America, Price (2021) argues that politically conservative economists may be viewed as focusing on the relative importance of the individual and the importance of promoting individual rights and freedoms, and policy solutions that prioritize access to free markets as a pathway to upward mobility. In this type of scholarly discourse, many ostensibly liberal and conservative economists, both within and between racial groups, may find relative agreement with respect to historical factors that established group-level initial conditions—including discrimination that affects social, political, economic, and

educational developmental opportunities for Black Americans—while departing on current-day causes and solutions.

Our review reflects a tendency toward structural perspectives among Black economists. Still, Black economists are not a monolithic group. Several prominent Black economists, including Walter Williams, fall within this individualist perspective arguing forcefully for the relative importance of work, morality, and behavior. W. Williams (1993, 1995, 1996) argues that neither distant historical factors such as slavery, nor contemporary discrimination explain the social and economic conditions observed in many Black neighborhoods. A unifying theme across perspectives among Black economists is a solution-based research agenda; Williams emphasizes the primacy of the family unit, churches, and other community-based institutions as mechanisms to promote improved behavior and culture. Williams (1996) argues that the moral hazard introduced by anti-poverty programs rewards nonmarital childbearing and “destructive” behaviors, while failing to maintain neighborhood safety or provide access to high quality educational opportunities.

Williams also argues that observed outcome differences represent employer screening for skills, a statistical discrimination approach reflecting productivity differences. Several studies have placed these and related factors within a supply-side set of explanations for poverty (e.g., Elder and Zhou 2021<sup>^</sup>, Neal and Johnson 1996<sup>^</sup>). Altonji and Blank (1999<sup>^</sup>) provide a useful summary of many of the supply- versus demand-side explanations for racial and ethnic labor market outcome differences in the economics literature.

Loury (1986) stands out as another prominent Black scholar arguing, roughly concurrent with political scientist Charles Murray (1984<sup>^</sup>), that overly generous anti-poverty programs disincentivize work, encourage

nonmarital fertility, and contribute to the decline of Black neighborhoods. This tracks with a still-active debate over the root causes of rapidly declining rates of marriage among Blacks (Moynihan 1965<sup>^</sup>) and overall (e.g., Elwood and Crane 1990<sup>^</sup>). Finally, the work of Sowell (1994, 1998) argues that inequality is, in fact, relatively common across societies worldwide, and that factors including geographic isolation, the adoption of western cultural norms, and technological innovation are empirically more important than discrimination or a lack of redistribution for explaining current-day racial and economic inequality.

## 5.2 *Labor Market Conditions, Skills, and Work*

The economic framework for understanding poverty and economic mobility is directly connected to employment. Especially within the historical and contemporary US economy, earnings levels and extensive margin employment operate as the primary pathways out of poverty. There are well-documented, decades-long gaps in earnings, unemployment, and labor force participation across both race and education (e.g. Bayer and Charles 2018). Poverty research has endeavored to understand these gaps, especially work exploring Black poverty and economic mobility. Black economists have made meaningful contributions to this intellectual discourse, including studies focused on the importance of factors such as racialized violence, discrimination, human capital, and premarket family and neighborhood level investments.

Some Black economists featured here were trained during or immediately after the civil rights, social, and economic policy expansions of the mid- and late 1960s. There was great scholarly interest in how expanded access to economic and educational opportunities could reduce or even eliminate Black–White inequality. For example, Ferguson

and Filer (1986), and Anderson (1980) find that low job quality—including low wages—help to explain lower levels of observed Black job attendance and on-the-job attitudes. This line of work can be understood as responsive to arguments that lower levels of effort among Black workers, on average, could explain weaker labor market outcomes. Jackson and Montgomery (1986) similarly investigate the causes of Black youth unemployment, including how unions, industry and occupation, and tenure may explain joblessness. They argue that, after accounting for these sources of variation, discrimination could loom as an important explanation for high levels of job loss among Black workers.

Several studies in this spirit were critical of individualist explanations for Black–White labor market and economic outcomes, very often uncovering an underlying structural explanation. The scholarly tension that arose, driven in part by the research of Black scholars, was to question the underlying causes of observed differences in social and labor market interactions and behavior. A range of Black economic researchers explore and document evidence of discrimination and prejudice in the labor market (e.g., Alexis 1970, Charles and Guryan 2008, Craemer et al. 2020, Myers and Phillips 1979, Rodgers 1997). In related work, Datcher-Loury and Loury (1986) document a strong, positive association between aspirations and labor supply among Black males. Here, as in the case of many such studies, the results can be interpreted either as evidence of group-wide attitude differences, or as consistent with group-level differences in opportunities, which then shape the varying attitudes of younger Black male workers.

A series of studies motivated in part by higher levels of Black unemployment and joblessness find high levels of Black worker income volatility—driven by entry and exit from extensive margin employment (e.g., Ziliak, Hardy, and Bollinger 2011; Hardy and

Ziliak 2014). Income volatility is potentially harmful if individuals and families facing uncertainty from less predictable earnings streams cannot access savings or credit markets to buffer against unstable income streams. Job loss, a primary driver of income volatility, has been associated with a range of deleterious social and economic outcomes, including diminished mental health, weaker postsecondary educational outcomes, and relationship dissolution (e.g., Ananat et al. 2017; Charles and Stephens 2004; Hardy and Marcotte 2020; Johnson, Kalil, and Dunifon 2012). Brimmer (1972, 1992) documents an important component of the gap in loanable funds that renders income volatility so potentially harmful for Black families, demonstrating the market challenges faced by Black-owned banks lending to an economically constrained customer base, from the vantage point of the Black-owned banks. Economic instability is higher among Black Americans (Hardy 2017) and especially harmful, given their comparatively lower levels of wealth as a buffer (Darity, Addo, and Smith 2021; Ganong et al. 2020).

Anderson (1975a, 1975b) and Rodgers (2006), to name a few, highlight the importance of barriers to employment opportunities for disadvantaged Black youth. This work suggests that macroeconomic improvements and full employment do not fully transmit to Black workers and families, seeding future economic policy proposals including federal job guarantees and the provision of compensation and benefits at qualitatively fair wage levels. These policies are designed to promote full employment for Black Americans specifically, and economically disadvantaged workers more generally.

Economic research traces a positive relationship between macroeconomic prosperity and improved individual economic outcomes. However, many Black economists document that this “rising macroeconomic tide” often fails to lift or improve outcomes



for many Black Americans. In a 1945 address, Sadie T. M. Alexander argues that, “full employment is the only solution to the economic subjugation of the Negro, and of the great masses of white labor.” (Alexander 2021, p. 116). Recent archival work documents Alexander as among the first economists to prescribe full employment policies, including a federal jobs guarantee, as a remedy for persistent economic inequality and diminished economic conditions among Black Americans (Banks 2019). While strong economic tailwinds may fail to adequately lift Black families out of poverty, a weak macroeconomy has been associated with diminished labor market outcomes among workers with fewer formal credentials. Like other prominent research in this domain, Rodgers (2006) recommends a range of programs that can intervene to increase after-tax incomes, including an expansion of the earned income tax credit and higher minimum wages. Following in this spirit, Darity and Hamilton (2012) and Paul et al. (2018) propose a set of economic mobility policies, including guaranteed federal jobs programs that reset and raise the floor for low-wage work. Though not the first to propose similar interventions, these universal programs at once acknowledge the economic benefits of employment alongside the social and emotional returns to work. Representative of a series of papers that document the large-scale economic growth of the late 1990s, Mincy, Lewis, and Han (2006) find that Black males failed to benefit from this economic expansion, and at great consequence for Black families.

Ultimately, their work documents the link between low education and joblessness, arguing for a set of targeted labor market policy interventions to assist younger workers disconnected from postsecondary educational opportunities and work. These economic policy prescriptions build off of earlier work that identifies Black economic insecurity and the absence of sufficient policy reforms.

Given that earnings are derived from on-the-job productivity and skills within a perfectly competitive model, poverty research has centered on ways to address gaps in skills, envisioning a joint process in which earnings rise in lock-step with productivity. Black economists have contributed to this discourse, at times calling attention to culprits beyond standard skills gaps as causes of racial economic inequality. For example, Wachtel and Betsey (1972) address issues of working poor status and wage determination, noting that the prevailing justification for low-income status derives from individual failure—via a lack of effort and laziness. In contrast, they demonstrate that the structure of the economy has resulted in circumstances wherein workers receive low wages independent of their skills. For Black workers, Betsey (1978) demonstrates that education and experience—common explanatory factors of wage determination—explain less than half of the Black–White unemployment gap. Moreover, early spells of unemployment predict longer subsequent joblessness spells for Black workers relative to Whites. For Blacks, this persistence in scarring from any number of events, including job loss and incarceration, occurs repeatedly throughout the literature over time. Chachere (1984) provides an analysis of the state of progress on civil rights and poverty. Her work provides a pointed critique of the conceptual link between human capital theory and poverty—including the assumption that lower earnings solely derive from lower skills. The narratives of government dependency are also questioned, as Chachere (1984) documents differences in how corporate, agriculture, and human services subsidy programs are perceived, with the latter recipients of welfare programs for families viewed as “suplicants and pariahs.”

Rodgers and Spriggs (1996) explore issues surrounding racial differences in labor market skills and wages, concurrent with a wide

range of scholars within economics, including Neal and Johnson (1996<sup>^</sup>), Currie and Thomas (1999<sup>^</sup>), and Heckman (1995<sup>^</sup>). Rodgers and Spriggs (1996) interrogate the efficacy of the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT) as a racially unbiased estimate of ability; this work and the discourse that followed have important implications for how the relationship between Black–White earnings gaps and skills accumulation is understood. Their findings were situated among a set of studies that called into question the effectiveness of the AFQT as a proxy for labor market skills and ability, finding instead that skills gaps explain relatively little of the racial wage gap. Mason (1997) explores the link between job skills, race, and culture; he finds that the skill levels of Black and Hispanic workers are equivalent to those of White workers.

A subset of studies focused on this question converge on discrimination-based explanations of racial wage gaps. Discrimination can occur both between and within groups, as Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity (2007) document. They explore within-group earnings discrimination and inequality, uncovering a link between darker skin shade and lower earnings. This set of questions connects to studies that explore the relative importance of skill-biased technological changes versus broader, demand-side factors as explanations for stagnant wages and overall widening wage inequality. These questions moved to the forefront amid rising productivity coincident with stagnant wages (e.g., Hardy, Smeeding, and Ziliak 2018; Jaimovich and Siu 2020<sup>^</sup>).

In some instances, economic history serves as a tool to validate contemporary research design techniques. In one such example, a dialogue (Fryer and Levitt 2004) occurs surrounding the validity of using ostensibly Black-sounding names in a foundational study of racial discrimination (Bertrand and Mullanaithan 2004<sup>^</sup>). The critique

called into question whether these names reflected a cultural inflection point during the late 1960s and 1970s that coincided with changes to naming conventions within the Black community. In short, the implication is that the Bertrand and Mullanaithan (2004) discrimination results could instead reflect identifiable traits broadly associated with weaker labor market characteristics—including skills, effort, and attitude. Cook, Logan, and Parman (2014) investigate this concern by leveraging historical data on naming conventions by race, demonstrating that distinct Black naming conventions trace back over 100 years, lending additional credibility to the Bertrand and Mullanaithan (2004) research design and conclusions surrounding contemporary racial discrimination in labor markets.

### 5.3 *Incarceration, Work, and Economic Security*

If earnings and employment are considered to be among the foremost pathways out of poverty, crime and incarceration operate as factors that degrade individual upward mobility, neighborhoods, and the economic resiliency of families. This is true to the extent that incarcerated adults yield little or no labor market income; that income from work is the modal pathway out of poverty; and that evidence of a criminal background operates as a well-documented employment barrier, as outlined in Mincy's (2006) volume on Black male socioeconomic outcomes. On a family-specific level, incarcerated persons are out of the labor force, and face limited prospects for employment as returning citizens. Several scholars (e.g., Cox 2010, 2012; Myers 1980) document dramatically higher incarceration and crime rates for Blacks relative to other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Loury (2014) couches the root causes of these higher incarceration rates in a local political economy context, largely driven by the preferences of

suburban residents and voters who influence state-level sentencing guidelines, wielding incarceration as a last-resort social policy tool—after or even in place of social, labor market, and education policies. Bayer and Charles (2018) demonstrate that incarceration looms large as a key explanatory factor in racial gaps in Black–White labor force participation rates.

Related work demonstrates that mass incarceration diminishes family economic well-being in the form of higher food insecurity (Cox and Wallace 2016) and lowered wealth accumulation (Chiteji 2021). Continuing in the exploration of unintended or externality effects of incarceration on Black communities, Charles and Luoh (2010) link incarceration to diminished marriage markets for Black women along with increased schooling and labor supply, while Johnson and Raphael (2009) explore negative health externalities for male incarceration, finding that Black male incarceration operates as a mechanism for HIV transmission among Black women.

In a foundational study focused on Black urban crime, Myers (1978) extends and interrogates the standard Becker (1968<sup>^</sup>) model of crime within the unique context of low-income Black communities. Here, the aim is to adjust the canonical crime–work decision framework and the prevailing theory of crime for the Black community and neighborhood context to better understand the choice set of legal and illegal sector activities, perceptions of these activities, and the net flow of resources at both an individual and community level. Given persistently elevated levels of crime in many Black and minority communities, this represents an important contribution to understanding large-scale community-level economic resiliency challenges facing members of these groups.

Taken together, these studies have contributed to an understanding of incarceration

policy and outcomes as a substantial structural barrier for the economic status of Black individuals and families. This work acknowledges both the role of policy as a primary driver of incarceration levels and racial disparities, and the outcome consequences of policy exposure.

#### 5.4 *Work, Poverty, and the Social Safety Net*

The neoclassical microeconomic model situates the receipt of income transfers within the context of income and substitution effects. The expansion of the social safety net in the United States, especially throughout the 1960s Great Society expansion of poverty-reduction programs, raised concerns over potential unintended consequences of work disincentives and marriage penalties for program participants. Arguments concerning work disincentives were often commingled with concerns over the aforementioned “culture of poverty” and rising rates of nonmarital fertility among a subset of Black Americans (Moynihan 1965<sup>^</sup>, Coleman 1968<sup>^</sup>), interpreted by many social scientists as an individualist explanation for Black poverty. By many accounts, these concerns resulted in a retrenchment of poverty programs throughout the early 1980s, and once more in the mid-1990s (Zedlewski, Chaudry, and Simms 2008).

Several Black economists, writing from a structural perspective, explored these questions. Darity and Myers (1983, 1984) fail to find any empirical association between welfare program expenditures and rising nonmarital fertility among Black families. Darity and Myers (1985) similarly respond to and directly critique scholarly work by Murray (1984<sup>^</sup>), arguing that his analysis overstates the connection between welfare generosity and moral hazard, while missing the link between policies excluding Black men from many benefits and their subsequently worsened economic and social outcomes. Simms

(1985) and Malveaux and Simms (1985) document the stark resource constraints and elevated poverty facing many Black families, especially Black female-headed families, and the varying ways in which Great Society anti-poverty programs fell short of their aims in reducing poverty among these households. Specifically, they find that policy changes during the early 1980s were associated with reductions in after-tax and transfer income for many Black families.

The past is often prologue. Many of these studies addressed the underlying economic challenges facing Black families, with links to the structural barriers Black women and men face in the labor market. Within this discourse, much of the work from Black economists challenged the frame that family structure was the culprit, and foretold future empirical work reinforcing the role of economic resources and job quality as persistent predictors of economic outcomes.

A range of studies have explored whether and how cash transfers—including cash welfare and universal basic income proposals—can improve labor market (Jones and Marinescu 2019) and educational (Covington and Spriggs 2004) outcomes. Relatedly, labor market policies interact with cash and near-cash safety net policies. For example, Miller (2017) finds that affirmative action programs coincident with social safety net expansions during the 1960s are associated with higher employment for Blacks.

Ajilore (2008) examines the design of the earned income tax credit (EITC), which has operated as one of the nation's primary anti-poverty programs since at least the mid 1990s. The EITC is lauded for avoiding the work disincentives typically present within income transfer programs. This study documents lowered overall Black family poverty, though without poverty reduction for Black men. Work by Derenoncourt and Montialoux (2021) demonstrates that minimum wage expansions in 1966 contributed to reductions

in Black–White earnings inequality throughout the 1960s and '70s. Similarly, Williams (2021) demonstrates that local labor markets with confederate-named streets—a proxy for local policies, racial animus, and racial exclusion—are associated with depressed economic outcomes for Black workers. These results generally point toward the primacy of policy as a tool for improving economic well-being, and the consequences of persistent local attitudes reflecting racial animus and racial discrimination that depress economic opportunities for Blacks, with effects that can linger for generations. In line with these findings, Anderson (2000) discusses how market economies can improve economic outcomes when paired with labor market protections, including minimum wages, anti-discrimination laws, and affirmative action policies.

Black scholars have often focused on the economic precarity facing Black families. Several studies (e.g., Alexis 1970, Ganong et al. 2020) document racial gaps in consumption overall, and also demonstrate that income shocks—which likely derive from employment instability (Hardy 2017)—result in larger consumption changes for Black households relative to other groups (Ganong et al. 2020). This builds off of earlier work examining racial differences in the link between earnings shocks and subsequent consumption and savings responses (e.g., Alexis 1970; Stephens 2001, 2004, 2006; Charles and Stephens 2004). Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov (2009) link evidence of prejudice faced by Blacks to higher levels of conspicuous consumption—where this consumption operates as a mechanism for Blacks to signal economic position. This importantly links separate literatures on wealth accumulation and racial prejudice, showing that consumption differences can reflect costly efforts on the part of Black workers and families to thwart discriminatory attitudes throughout daily life.

### 5.5 *Intergenerational Transmission of Wealth and Economic Status*

Many Black economists have explored the sources and drivers of intergenerational economic mobility—the transmission of economic status across generations (e.g., Gouskova, Chiteji, and Stafford 2010; Loury 1981). For example, Loury (1977, 1987) focused on the role of inherited social status and networks as transmitters of socioeconomic mobility across generations. Much of the early work put forth by Loury seeded and informed future work aimed at understanding social networks, neighborhood sorting and disinvestment, and how economic precarity at the neighborhood level can transmit a host of consequences on individuals and families. Mason (2007) estimates models of intergenerational mobility that account for family values and family economic status as a test of political scientist and historian Daniel Patrick Moynihan's (1965<sup>^</sup>) theory of family behaviors as a primary mechanism driving Black economic outcomes. Though family behaviors matter, Mason's (2007) results point to family economic status as the larger, more persistent predictor of racial inequality and intergenerational mobility.

Research that explores the role of neighborhoods and schools as predictors of the long-term consequences of this economic situation (Johnson and Schoeni 2011) documents how early-life initial conditions shape and influence subsequent adult outcomes, while Charles and Hurst (2003) explore the intergenerational transmission of wealth, demonstrating that—independent of bequests—income, education, and preferences for asset-holding class type operate as among the most important explanatory factors in the transmission of wealth. Chiteji and Hamilton (2002) find that, in contemporary times, relatively upwardly mobile Blacks operate as a financial buffer for

less-advantaged family members, thereby constraining their own subsequent wealth accumulation. Related to this, McKernan et al. (2014) demonstrate that a meaningful share of the Black–White contemporary wealth gap can be explained by differences in private transfers across generations.

Many Black economists have viewed structural explanations for the transmission of economic status through the lens of intergenerational persistence: a range of sociohistorical factors including discrimination in education, housing, and labor markets that effectively render Black families uniquely ill-positioned to flourish over time—on average and relative to non-Black individuals and families. Several studies (e.g., Barsky et al. 2002, Darity and Mullen 2020, Hamilton and Darity 2010) have documented stark historical and contemporary racial wealth inequality, and in response propose aggressive policy interventions to ameliorate these gaps. Zewde (2020) estimates that baby bond proposals—which call for the construction of universal savings accounts for newborn children and have been adopted formally by policy makers within the US Senate—could result in dramatic reductions in racial wealth inequality. In general, the scholarly contributions of Darity in the domain of racial economic inequality connect to a research agenda focused on the identification of the long-term consequences of wealth inequality (Craemer et al. 2020), and how these implications are very often underappreciated and harder to measure relative to earnings and income inequality. Importantly, the transmission of wealth and of racial wealth inequality likely also represent differential access to occupations, networks, and connections that translate to subsequent inequality in economic outcomes.

The availability of digitized historical data throughout the 2000s, including via the US Census Bureau, has reinvigorated economic



analysis that explores initial historical conditions facing Blacks in the United States. For example, work by Andrews et al. (2017) connects higher levels of historical racial segregation—and the sociopolitical and economic exclusion it proxies for—to lowered contemporary intergenerational mobility over 100 years later. Here, the implications include linkages to persistence in local environments that Black families inhabit, very often across generations. Similarly, Craemer et al. (2020) and Logan, Hardy, and Parman (2021) establish a conceptual and empirical link between slavery, historical racial discrimination, and contemporary socioeconomic outcomes. Finally, Derenoncourt (2022) finds that the areas that received the highest rates of Black migrants during the Great Migration from 1940–70 saw, in response, greater White flight, segregation, and reductions in educational spending. This had lasting effects—children born in those same areas in the 1980s experienced lower levels of upward social mobility, as measured by their earnings in the 2010s.

Overall, the contributions of Black economists to poverty and economic mobility span many fields, including labor economics, public economics, the economics of education, and economic history. As this section demonstrates, many of these scholars challenged the prevailing economic thinking of their eras, while others made contributions that extended and improved our understanding of poverty and economic mobility from within the standard framework, offering up important extensions. These extensions often push the frontier on understanding whether and in what ways racial disparities exist, as well as how racial discrimination and economic policies that excluded Black Americans from social and economic opportunities operate as meaningful factors in understanding poverty and economic mobility.

## 6. Public Finance

### 6.1 *Early Writing by Black Economists on Tax Policy*

We begin with a discussion of a few key articles that delve into tax policy from the early years of *The Review*. Founded in 1970, *The Review* emerged amidst the first term of President Richard M. Nixon, whose tenure presented a marked departure from the “Great Society” policies of the preceding Johnson administration. It was in this context that Black economists set out to, in the words of the inaugural issue, create a “hospitable arena in which black people could explore ideas as to how they might bring about effective and substantial improvement in their collective economic position,” (*Review of Black Political Economy* 1970). These ideals are reflected in the articles of *The Review* during this period: Black economists writing about economic policy did not shy away from their own identities and the implications of their research for members of their community. In this way, they exemplified the type of positionality we have identified as an emergent theme in the writing of Black economists. The writing on tax policy in *The Review* at this time was no exception.

A key entry from *The Review* in 1972, “The Economic Bill of Rights,” (Alexis et al. 1972) embodied well a focus on economic and political policy implications for Black people.<sup>7</sup> The entry was a reprinted policy brief, commissioned by Reverend Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH and prepared for the consideration of political candidates of all parties, that outlined a call for economic justice. Coauthored by seven Black economists—Marcus Alexis, Bernard Anderson, Duran Bell, Robert Browne, Vernon Dixon, Karl Gregory, and J.H. O’Dell—it included

<sup>7</sup>Note, the document is not exclusively focused on Black people, but they are a primary focus of the text.

a section entitled “Reform of the Tax System.” This section discussed several features of the tax code, with a focus on issues of equity, including horizontal equity: e.g., “persons who earn the same income should pay the same tax regardless of the source of the income,” (Alexis et al. 1972, p. 13). The authors call for higher taxation of corporate income, estates, and gifts, and argue that when federal taxes are considered in combination with local, state, and payroll taxes, the overall tax system is not as progressive as widely believed.

The specific policy recommendations in “The Economic Bill of Rights” include the storied tax policy principle of broadening the tax base by minimizing tax deductions and write-offs. They also advocate for a guaranteed income as a part of a Basic Economic Security through Tax system (BEST) proposal. Though the idea of a guaranteed income is hotly debated today, the policy would have, at that time, been in line both with public discussions of the Negative Income Tax (NIT) and landmark theoretical research published only a year earlier by eventual Nobel laureate James Mirrlees (1971<sup>^</sup>). Mirrlees’ results featured a guaranteed income as a robust component of an optimal nonlinear tax. Indicative of what Spriggs (2020) refers to as going beyond marginal policy changes, the authors also call for more radical reforms, including the elimination of the payroll tax in the name of progressivity, an elimination of all tax expenditures (i.e., loopholes), and the replacement of Social Security with a more general guaranteed income and universal healthcare. They additionally advocate for greater geographic redistribution via expanded federal block grants to state and local governments, and a general consolidation of safety net programs within the tax system.

Throughout, the analysis makes sure to note how insufficient progressivity has a disproportionate effect on Black households,

for example, pointing out that a cap on payroll taxes for a benefit that is based on life-expectancy “is tantamount to a regressive transfer from the black and the poor to other recipients of Social Security benefits,” (Alexis et al. 1972, p. 16). On this last point, we see another of our emergent themes at play: many Black economists bring an expansive approach to studies of race and racism in the field. In this case, the authors demonstrate how race-neutral policy can interact with preexisting differences, resulting in disparate impacts between racial groups. These authors find significance in these disparate impacts in and of themselves, separate and apart from whether the policies that generate them are driven by either statistical- or taste-based discrimination, a distinction that tends to be the primary focus of mainstream studies of discrimination in economics (see Charles and Guryan 2011, for a review of this literature).

Two other early publications in *The Review* similarly demonstrate a focus on policy impacts among Black households. Ellison and Browne (1975) evaluate the Tax Reform Act of 1974, passed during the Ford administration. As implied by the title “Impact of the 1975 Tax Cut on Income and Employment in the Black Community,” the focus is squarely on the incidence of the tax law changes on Black taxpayers. The article summarizes reductions in tax liability for Black tax units by income bracket. Intriguingly, the authors note a novel 10 percent credit on income of \$4,000 or less, which could even be refunded for families with low tax liability. Here we see what must have been one of the earliest studies to mention the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which was passed into legislation only three months prior. The authors’ hope that the EITC could “prove to be an embryo for a negative income tax” (Ellison and Browne 1975, p. 442), however, has yet to be realized. In a final article published at the end of the first decade of *The Review*,

Davis (1980) examines “The Impact of Social Security Taxes on the Poor.” The article picks up on a theme raised in “The Economic Bill of Rights” (Alexis et al. 1972): analyzing the lifetime social security benefits, relative to payroll taxes paid, for Black retirees and discussing, among other factors, how a relatively short Black life expectancy reduces benefits relative to taxes.

A common thread among these earlier articles is that the authors see fit to devote entire articles primarily or exclusively to exploring the economic implications of policy for Black people. This is in contrast to a common approach in the economics literature, especially when writing about US domestic policy, to frame analysis for Black people relative to their White counterparts and to focus on gaps in outcomes. This focus on Black people does not appear to be explicitly done with an intent to exclude any other group, but rather, the researchers appear to legitimately view the scope of their analysis to be sufficient to merit inquiry. It is indeed very common for research in economics to draw more general conclusions even when restricting attention to subpopulations for various reasons, for example, reviews of labor supply that focus on men (Pencavel 1986<sup>^</sup>), studies of earnings that focus on outcomes for White subjects (Angrist 1990<sup>^</sup>), or studies of inequality that only include tax filers (Piketty and Saez 2003<sup>^</sup>). Studies published in *The Review*, and in particular this early work of Black economists on tax policy, simply extend the same liberties to studies where Black people are centered. This establishes a precedent that continues in more recent research by Black economists on tax policy, especially in studies at the intersection of race and tax policy.

## 6.2 *Empirical Studies on Race and Behavioral Responses to Tax Policy*

A number of Black economists have documented racial disparities in the access to,

receipt of, and behavioral responses to tax, transfer, and social insurance policies. One central theme of empirical public finance research involves quantifying the impacts of tax policies on labor supply, and within that literature, a core topic of interest is the labor supply of lower-income households and policies targeted to this group, such as the earned income tax credit. With several general contributions to this literature, Nada Eissa has a number of studies that specifically focus on differences in outcome by race. In work with Hillary Hoynes, Eissa finds that Black households show a stronger labor supply response to so-called “marriage penalties,” i.e., features of the tax code that increase tax liability for two earners who become married (Eissa and Hoynes 2003). Eissa has also shown, along with coauthor Austin Nichols, that the reductions in marginal tax rates brought about by the EITC are larger for Black women heads of household, as compared to their White counterparts, and that for Black women, the minimum wage is a particularly important constraint to consider when estimating the effect of the EITC on wages. Both differences are driven by underlying differences in the wage distribution by race among women (Eissa and Nichols 2005). Along a similar vein, Ajilore (2008) estimates a positive impact of the EITC on transitions out of poverty for African Americans, with the effect concentrated among Black women, and finds that any adverse labor market effects of immigration on native-born African Americans, to the extent that they exist, may be offset by state-level EITC expansions. Finally, Hoover and Yaya (2011) exploit state-level variation in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding to examine how income support influences socioeconomic inequality outcomes. They find Black inequality reductions in response to these programs appear to be somewhat attenuated relative to that of White households.

A related set of studies by Black economists similarly examine policy at the intersection of taxation, social insurance, and household finance, with an eye toward racial disparities. For example, Damon Jones and Chris Wheat, along with coauthors, estimate the sensitivity of household spending to income drops that occur for households that begin an unemployment spell and claim unemployment insurance (UI) (Ganong et al. 2020). They find that Black and Latino households experience a steeper drop in consumption, relative to White households, at the onset of unemployment, despite facing similar income replacement rates under UI. The difference appears to be driven by racial wealth gaps: households with fewer liquid assets at the onset of unemployment find it harder to maintain prior consumption patterns, and Black and Latino households are overrepresented in this category. The same set of coauthors conduct a related study on the spending response to income tax refunds and find a larger boost in spending for Black and Latino households, relative to White households, upon receipt of a tax refund, again owing to preexisting differences in liquid assets (Farrell et al. 2020). An important takeaway in this context is when the same level of liquid assets are present, households of different races behave similarly, eschewing notions of fundamental differences, by race, in tastes.

In another study at the intersection of tax policy and higher education financing, Long (2004) finds, relative to White households, that Black, Latino, and Asian households are less likely to take up either the Hope or the Lifetime Learning tax credits, which subsidize college tuition payments for middle-class households. These differences in take-up appear to be related to differences in awareness of the tax credits, which itself is positively correlated with household income, and thus negatively correlated with racial groups who tend to have lower relative incomes.

Here, again, in this set of empirical papers, we find that many Black economists and their research teams engage questions surrounding the distributional impacts of public finance reforms along racial dimensions.

### 6.3 *Race, Resource Allocation, and Public Finance*

A common feature of the above empirical studies is that they fit in naturally with the type of work commonly done on taxation within the public finance field. In some cases, for example with Eissa, this is in part due to the fact that the work bears significant influence on subsequent literature. Nonetheless, the research generally makes use of the methods and scope common to the field. Another set of studies on tax policy by Black economists introduces novel approaches, either via alternative methods or via choice of a topic matter less common in the mainstream of literature. This set of studies lies at the intersection of political economy, taxation, race, and public finance.

Black economists have explored how Black political participation at key historical junctures has had lasting impacts on local taxation and spending. Logan (2020) makes significant contributions here, using the tools of economic history and finding that the election of a Black official during the Reconstruction era caused an increase in county tax revenues, ultimately resulting in a decrease in Black–White literacy gaps. In related work, however, Logan (2019) shows that during this same period, violent attacks aimed at these very same Black politicians were likely to occur following the aforementioned rise in tax revenue collection. Though focused on historical episodes, Logan's work has implications for persistent differences in local public good provision and taxation between the US South and other regions. Shifting focus to the mid-twentieth century, Ebonya Washington and coauthor (Casco and Washington 2014) find that the removal

of literacy tests after the Voting Rights Act in 1965 led to increases in transfers from state to local governments in counties with higher population shares, that is, in counties where literacy tests were likely to impose the greatest limitations on the Black vote. The effects persist at least into the 1980s and are likely a lower bound, given that focus is only on one component of the Voting Rights Act.

Differences in local public spending outcomes, a reflection of the US fiscal federalism system, have been shown to be a function of responses to the racial make-up of local residents. Hardy, Samudra, and Davis (2019) find that states with a higher Black share among their welfare caseload allocate a lower proportion of their block grant toward cash assistance. Several studies probe the importance of location. Jefferson and Pryor (1999) find that historical factors predict sorting of hate groups. Meanwhile, Williams, Logan, and Hardy (2021) trace a link between historical lynchings and violence against Blacks and reduced public goods investments. They then trace these violent events to less-desirable contemporary state-level outcomes—including higher poverty rates and weaker social safety net protections. In a series of related studies, Ajilore and coauthors find evidence that ethnic and racial diversity results in lower per-pupil educational expenditures (Ajilore 2009) and higher spending on police (Ajilore and Smith 2011), even in cases where crime is decreasing. Furthermore, Ajilore uses tools of spatial analysis to show that these spending changes can have spillover effects on neighboring municipalities (Ajilore 2011, 2013, 2016, 2017). Finally, Derenoncourt (2022) shows that following the massive relocation of Black Southerners during the Great Migration, the locations that received the greatest number of migrants saw higher levels of White flight, greater segregation, reductions in education spending, and increased spending on policing and

incarceration. The results demonstrate the limits of the idea that Black people can simply move to a place of greater opportunity, as the investments in opportunity in these new places endogenously respond, resulting in lower levels of upward social mobility for decades to come.

A strength of these studies is that they move beyond the standard approach in economics of relegating questions of race to a heterogeneity analysis or a summary of gaps in economic outcomes. Instead, the studies turn attention toward the ways in which racial disparities become historically entrenched, through factors including racist violence, voter suppression, and racially motivated divestment from public welfare programs. Such studies illuminate how political dynamics may either disrupt or reinforce structural forms of racial hierarchy and ultimately constrain the set of feasible tax policy outcomes. These studies exemplify the theme of Black economists theorizing race as an endogenous component of the economic processes at play and highlight the structural nature of key determinants of racial inequality.

Finally, research by Darity, Hamilton, and Mullen (Darity and Hamilton 2012, Darity and Mullen 2020, Hamilton and Darity 2010) continues the discussion of inequality and redistribution and is notable for at least two reasons. First, these pieces outline concrete and tangible policy proposals such as baby bonds and reparations, going beyond the simple derivation of optimal tax formulae typically found in public finance studies. Second, the arguments presented in favor of wealth redistribution in part rely on a normative framework that considers past injustices as key to the design of fair policy. The overwhelming majority of public finance and optimal taxation approaches, on the other hand, tend to take on some form of utilitarian welfare criteria that considers only the outcomes and well-being of households today and in the future. This leaves no scope



for policy that is directly designed to address prior forms of discrimination that may continue to have lasting effects on inequality. With this, the papers are exemplary of the type of work that Black economists have pursued to stretch the frontier of the literature on race and public finance.

### 7. Conclusion

Many of the papers cited in this literature review appear in *The Review of Black Political Economy*, the journal of the National Economic Association. Mason, Myers, and Darity (2005) studied patterns in research on racism and racial discrimination and found that papers published in *The Review* receive four fewer citations, on average, than papers published in the typical economics journal. They also find that the research of Black economists is slightly less likely to appear in top tier journals. Thus, potentially influential research published in outlets like *The Review* might be overlooked if the profession focuses too narrowly on top tier journals (Price 2008). For the economics profession, this perhaps requires a reappraisal of the outlets that are deemed to be of sufficiently high quality. Zero sum need not rule the day. Traditionally favored journals can still be considered strong, even while the field takes more seriously a broader set of scholarly outlets. Others have made this point outside of the context of Black scholarly contributions (Heckman and Moktan 2020<sup>^</sup>).

Relatedly, many policy-relevant questions do not lend themselves to causal identification strategies or randomized control trials (Ruhm 2019<sup>^</sup>). There are careful methodological approaches that, informed by theory, can and do provide valuable information for scholars and policy makers. Causal inference is valuable, but important insights on political economy questions regarding economic and social inequality may be made even when a credible causal research

design is not available. This includes studies that provide novel descriptive analysis or that introduce improved measures of social phenomena. Many Black economists have been drawn to these topics and questions and have carried out careful analyses, but have been less likely to publish in journals regarded as “top tier” (Mason, Myers, and Darity 2005). Scholars will inevitably follow incentives for professional growth and promotion, and institutions and academic units will need to place a positive valuation on these contributions if such scholarly activity should have a chance at continuing and thriving. Outlets that publish careful causal and noncausal work, as well as those that allow for the exploration of topics at the intersection of race and economic policy, warrant continued inclusion in the set of scholarly outlets considered to be viable and important.

Promising directions for research can continue to draw upon interdisciplinary frameworks to build understanding of the interconnected factors that reproduce and reinforce socioeconomic outcomes. For example, more work is needed on exploring the root causes of Black–White health gaps (e.g., Green and Darity 2010) and how the link between health and human capital (Hokayem and Ziliak 2014<sup>^</sup>) could potentially exacerbate racial economic inequality. Related areas include continued local-level exposure to violent crime and environmental threats to health and well-being.

Other potential directions can be found in the field of public finance. The consequences of tax policy and public disinvestment are fairly well-documented, though academic work within economics linking these policy choices to identity-based power structures and racial discrimination is relatively limited. Scholars outside of economics are actively engaging these topics in ways that can provide insights for economic analysis (e.g., Brown 2021). At the time of this writing,

policy makers worldwide are grappling with the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and economists would do well to assess whether varying federal, state, and local policy responses—including decisions to provide expanded income transfers or enforce preventative public health measures—have affected health, education, and economic well-being for Black and other historically disadvantaged groups (e.g., Hardy and Logan 2020). And, as discussed by Collins and Graham (2005), there are opportunities to consider how globalization and macroeconomic policy choices affect economically marginalized groups.

Finally, future research on racial economic disparities can benefit from incorporating intersectional analysis along multiple identity dimensions. R. Williams (1993) provides a foundational treatise on how gender analyses that ignore racial differences and racial analyses that ignore gender differences are necessarily incomplete. More recently, research by Holder on Black women's wage gaps (Holder 2020) and the unique position of Afro-Latinos in the US economy (Holder and Aja 2021) demonstrates the importance of intersectional analysis along race, gender, and ethnicity. And Sharpe's (2019) calls for federal agency data collection that is disaggregated by race and gender are an important step toward generating the data that will be necessary for these types of intersectional analyses going forward.

Our synthesis of contributions made by Black economists serves to more generally underscore the benefits of recognizing a wider range of approaches and viewpoints in economics, and to continue to place value on interdisciplinary publications that feature economic research. A greater breadth of ideas can lead to sharper economic policy insights, to the benefit of society at large. We observe that, across education, poverty

and economic mobility, and public finance, these contributions have the potential to further enrich the intellectual debate. Black economists have historically published their work across a broad spectrum of scholarly outlets, including peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, books, and policy reports. In essence, appeals to acknowledge the historical and current-day contributions of Black economists could also broadly apply to other historically underrepresented scholars and marginalized voices within economics, whether due to demographic characteristics, networks, or institutional pedigree. In this way, as has often been the case throughout the nation's history, actions that improve inclusivity and access for Black Americans have the potential to broaden access and improve conditions for a wider set of scholars.

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