

Growth & Justice is proud to announce that Gary Cunningham, president and CEO of the Metropolitan Economic Development Association, is joining our team of Policy Fellows. In addition to his leadership helping start and grow minority-owned businesses, Gary serves on the Metropolitan Council, is a prominent member of the African-American Leadership Forum and is a former vice president of the Northwest Area Foundation. His deep understanding of the complexities and causes of racial disparity in Minnesota is illustrated in this essay. Gary's insights were also featured in a recent [Star Tribune article](#) about the racial divide in the Twin Cities.



INTRODUCTION

One of my vivid childhood memories is of my mother looking out the window of our small house in one of the poorest neighborhoods in North Minneapolis. Outside, in the dead of winter, white men were standing around a backhoe digging up the street to turn off our gas main. That night my mother and her five children spent the coldest night of the year in the main room upstairs (which doubled as a bedroom I shared with my brother) under heavy blankets in front of a small electric space heater.

In that winter of 1967, there was no cold weather rule prohibiting poor families' gas from being shut off in the winter. If you couldn't pay your gas bill, your heat was turned off. No questions asked, no consideration of your situation, and no regard for whether you had children in the home or not. Our water pipes would freeze and eventually we would be evicted. We would move to another poor area of town and the pattern would begin again; maybe next time the loss of our electricity or the inability to pay rent would trigger our eviction.

We clung to the bottom of the safety net; the welfare check really never provided enough to support our family. We were always living on the edge. We survived with some support from my grandparents and other relatives, rummage sales for clothes and furniture, food stamps and free and reduced lunch at school.

Growing up on welfare meant that we could expect a social worker to visit our home every month to make sure that no adult men were living in the house. The social worker would walk through our house looking in closets and in drawers; nothing was off limits; nothing was off limits from her prying eyes. The social worker would then ask my mother and us kids questions to deduce if an adult man was or had been present and living in our house.

In that poor North Minneapolis neighborhood, I was hardly alone. All of us young African-American children lived in abject poverty isolated from opportunity.

Looking out the window that summer, I watched the police beat Black people with billy clubs. I counted the armored tanks lining the streets; I watched National Guard troops herding groups of young Black men into

police vehicles. I remember being very scared that they were going to come and get my family and me. My mother told us “Don’t go outside” and “Don’t look out the window.” Once a safe and mixed race community made up of primarily of Jews and Blacks, it became a scary place for me as a nine- year-old boy. Soon thereafter, it became a segregated, exclusively Black community.

The injustice I witnessed looking out that window at the riots in 1967 left an indelible mark on me. It is no coincidence that fifty years later on the same block, almost in the exact spot, police officers shot and killed a Black man. That ignited a new set of protests on the same North Minneapolis street where I grew up. The killing, the subsequent protest and civil unrest traumatized another generation of children. This time the protests focused on the fourth precinct police station, which was located on the site of the former community center that was built to address the unrest that boiled up 50 years ago.

Then and now, the situations may be somewhat different, but the conditions and underlying causes have remained the same.

Conditions: Poverty, inadequate housing and homelessness, significant gaps in emotional, financial, and physical wellbeing as well as gaps in justice, employment, and educational achievement.

Causes: Cumulative impact of racialized public policies, legal injustice, cramped or non-existent opportunity structures, weakened family support systems, and racial isolation and segregation.

To leave these conditions intact and these causes enthroned guarantees not only the future misfortune of African Americans. It also makes unbearably certain that violence against them will play out on the same streets that have born witness to such sorrow for almost three generations.

To many people, the status quo now seems entrenched, inevitable, and resistant to solutions. Yet breaking the tragic cycle is doable, provided we forge together a new path. One of the first steps on that path is gaining a fresh understanding of the relevant history and the causes, especially the policies and opportunity structures.

DREAMS DEFERRED

How have African Americans come to find themselves in their current circumstances? When African Americans migrated to Minnesota from 1940 - 1960 to escape Jim Crow laws, the Klan and sharecropping, they did so much like the Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, and Jews before them. Their goal was to make a better life for themselves and their children. They came searching for a promised land, one that would offer them freedom, hope, and opportunity.

My grandparents migrated to Minnesota in 1946 as part of the Great Migration. Occurring between 1910 and 1970, the Great Migration tugged six million African Americans out of the rural South and into the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West.

My grandfather worked for over 20 years as a shift worker at a clothing factory located in North Minneapolis. It was one of the few places African Americans were allowed to work in Minnesota. My grandmother worked part-time as a maid and cook for wealthy white families. Together they raised a family of six children and got by on less than \$9,000 a year. They owned their own home and car. They were poor, but the family unit was still very much intact at that time.

The life and marriage they knew was woven into a social structure that was about to deteriorate badly. In 1963, African Americans had one of the highest marriage rates in the country: 70 percent. Today, African-American marriage rates are the lowest in the country: According to a Pew Research Center report, “The share of never-married adults has gone up for all major racial and ethnic groups in the United States, but the rate of increase has been most dramatic among Blacks. Among Black adults ages 25 and older, the share who has never been married has quadrupled over the past half century—from 9% in 1960 to 36% in 2012” (Wendy Wang, Kim Parker, 2014). In the period between 1970 and 2001, the overall marriage rate in the United States declined by 17 percent; for blacks, it fell by 34 percent. African-American women are the least likely in our society to marry (Joy Jones, 2006).

Author of works such as *Power Racism and Privilege* (1976) and *When Work Disappears* (1996), renowned Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson frames this issue as arising from the lack of marriageable African American males.

By roughly 1975, the dream of a northern promised land for African Americans had given way as America made its move from a producer to a consumer nation. In many urban communities, the industrial jobs that African-American men could work dried up in the late 60s and early 70s. From New York across to Wisconsin, what had been the robust Steel and Factory Belts turned into the job-deficient Rust Belt. The service economy was in ascendance.

At the same time, a reverse social current began flowing. Due in part to hard-fought civil rights legislation and to the riots that exploded across the low-income African American communities from 1968 through the early 1970s, a fledgling educated African-American middle class emerged. Its members began moving out of low-income Black communities into more affluent urban areas.

So a once united, segregated community gave birth to two groups: A distinct, yet achingly familiar African-American underclass and a new African-American middle class. When coupled with the exodus of middle-class whites from low-income urban areas, the departure of middle class blacks significantly increased the concentration of poverty.

The unrelieved density of that poverty converged with several other factors to negatively impact the lives of low-income urban African Americans' communities. Especially curtailed was the development of their social and human capital. Some of these other limiting factors include:

- Keen loss of the vibrant family structure in low-income African-American communities, exacerbated by the legacy of national welfare policy.
- Sharp decline of economic opportunities as the earlier generation's manufacturing jobs disappeared.
- Continued patterns of structural discrimination in housing, access to credit, and employment opportunities.

CASTE SYSTEM: ALIVE AND WELL IN MINNESOTA

In 1998, I became the director of planning and development for Hennepin County. In this role, I was the person in charge of policy research for one of America's most prosperous counties. Soon after I arrived, I was summoned to a commissioner's office and he asked me point blank: "Why are so many

young men populating street corners in the middle of the day, rather than working earning a living and raising their families?" (Gary L. Cunningham, 2006). Regardless of that commissioner's awareness, his question triggered a significant four year quest to find answers.

With my help, the African American Men Project (AAMP) was born. AAMP enlisted the support of community leaders, academics, politicians and the business community. Together we took a deep look at the ecosystem in which young African-American men live. We found some startling realities for these young men (John M. Bryson, Gary L. Cunningham and Karen J. Lokkesmoe, 2002).

In 2002, African-American males 18-30 years of age in Hennepin County shared in the following (Crossroads, 2002):

- 49% lived in one of Minneapolis' five poorest and least safe neighborhoods.
- Homicide was the most common cause of death.
- Over 44% of this population were arrested each year in the three years studied—a higher percentage than were arrested in the South Africa at the height of apartheid system.
- Twenty-seven times more likely to go to jail than young white men and twice as likely to die.
- Criminal justice expenditures involving them were over \$220 million per year.
- 54% of young African-American children in Hennepin County were being raised in single-parent households.

In 2010, Michelle Alexander defined the mass incarceration of African-American men as the new Jim Crow (those subjugating laws so pervasive across the South from 1870 to 1965). According to Alexander, "The racial dimensions of mass incarceration are its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid" (Michelle Alexander, 2012).

PROBLEM: STRUCTURES LOCK IN POVERTY

Research confirms that children and adults living in highly concentrated poverty and segregated places experience mutually reinforcing and cumulative negative impacts. Adding together the greater likelihoods of 1) lower educational attainment, 2) living in substandard housing, and 3) being involved in—or being the victims of—crime, the net outcome is falling far short of obtaining the social and human capital necessary to pursue the American Dream.

I recently had lunch with a young planning researcher at the University of Minnesota, a man whom I consider a friend. Of East Indian descent, he and his family had moved to North Minneapolis a few years back. This young man was advocating for social change in the community. He started the conversation off by stating, “While I’m not a segregationist, I believe that we shouldn’t move low-income people of color out of this community to the suburbs and create gentrification.” He further stated that he believes the best approach is “equity in place” to reinvest in the inner city communities so that they can become engines of equity and opportunity.

I said to him, “Anytime you have to start your argument by saying you are not a segregationist, that’s problematic. Segregation has not worked for us.”

Yet on one significant point, my friend is correct: Migrations are happening today in metropolitan areas throughout the country. The areas near downtown—where low-income people of color live—are being gentrified. Professionals (mostly white) who once coveted the suburban lifestyle are now migrating to inner city communities. The impact of their housing choices are driving up property values and displacing low-income people of color.

Over this last decade, events and opportunities, which I’ll describe, taught me many things. They also convinced me that stable, mixed-income, racially diverse communities are the key. Only with them can we address the tenacious problems—sown over decades of isolation from opportunity structures—that low-income people of color face.

RACE MATTERS: THE TWIN CITIES IS THE BEST AND WORST PLACE TO LIVE

Five years ago I was appointed by Minnesota’s Governor Mark Dayton to sit on the regional planning body called the Metropolitan Council. Part of the Metropolitan Council’s charge is to plan economic development of the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. Working on the council, I learned firsthand that public policy has prompted significant increases in racial concentrations of poverty. Increasingly so, a person’s zip code is all that’s need to accurately predict their likely life outcomes.

If you’re white, the Twin Cities metropolitan region is one of the best places to live in the country. The Twin Cities is ranked as the fittest, cleanest, best for running, best for finding a job, and among the most literate cities in the nation (Rankings, 2012). The list goes on. According to the Metropolitan Council, in 2015, the Twin Cities ranked #1 or #2 among 25 largest metropolitan areas in the following categories (Metrostats, 2015):

- Population of age 25 with high school diploma
- Percentage of the civilian working age population that is employed
- Percentage of individuals with incomes at or above the federal poverty threshold
- Percentage of householders who own their own homes

However, if you’re a person of color, particularly African American, your family’s outcomes are diametrically opposed to the above data. In fact, in the same study, the Metropolitan Council found that “the Twin Cities metro’s disparities between African Americans and white, non-Latinos in educational attainment, employment, poverty rates and homeownership are the largest among the top 25 metropolitan areas” (Metrostats, 2015).

According to the Metropolitan Council, “Unchallenged, these disparities jeopardize the future economic vitality of this region. Currently, residents of color make up almost one quarter of the metro’s population; by 2040, their share in the region’s total will be 40 percent. The Twin Cities region cannot and will not continue to thrive if disparities hold back a growing share of its population” (Choice, Place and Opportunity, 2014).

Holding in place these horrendous disparities are deeply embedded historic housing patterns, ones that nurture and enforce segregation (Structural Racialization, 2012).

Federal and local housing policies shaped the present-day geographic areas of racially-concentrated urban poverty. These housing policies are reinforced by a variety of systems of opportunity that maintain racial and ethnic inequalities. These include opportunities for:

- Employment
- Access to capital
- Education
- Health care access
- Justice in policing and the courts
- Transit and transportation

Shifting and often reorganizing themselves, these systems of opportunity impact—and are impacted by—the vast networks of our individual and collective behaviors.

SOLUTION: NO EASY ANSWERS

It seems that many people want a neat, one-size-fits-all solution. Our western culture nudges us to look at these problems from a linear perspective of cause and effect. However, the issues we face are much more complex. They are deeply rooted in the structures of our systems.

The structural issues of racial disparities fit the definition of “wicked problems.” An expert in dealing with complexity and uncertainty, Simon J. Buckingham Shum wrote,

“Wicked problems cannot be tackled by the traditional approach in which problems are defined, analyzed and solved in sequential steps. The main reason for this is that there is no clear problem definition of wicked problems.”

People of goodwill in nonprofit organizations and social services have been working for decades to address some of the “wicked” problems within urban America. However, the problem of systemic intergenerational poverty persists.

Of course, we’re fascinated by the problems, but we act paralyzed, hands tied, never effectively getting at

the underlying causes, seldom agreeing on solutions. Meanwhile, racially concentrated areas of poverty continue to grow steadily in the Twin Cities and across the country. We need to start taming these wicked problems.

Using the theory of complex adaptive systems can help us to understand the balancing and reinforcing feedback loops that cause racial economic and social inequalities to persist (Senge M. Peter, 1990). To alter these complex systems will take more than technical approaches; it will require innovative systems of learning (Heifetz A. Ronald, 1994).

Stephen Menendian and Caitlin Watt have given us an excellent explanation of how to think about these systems. In their Kirwan Institute publication *Systems Primer*, they wrote:

“All systems have a structure, and those structures matter. It is the organization and relationships between a system’s parts as much as the components themselves that shape system outcomes and system behavior.... Systems behavior is different from the sum of its parts, and does not follow from intentions of the individual agents, but on how system agents are interacting with each other within the system structure.”

Menendian and Watt go on to suggest that, “Racial differentials in the United States are as much a product of system structure as they are of individual behavior” (Stephen Menendian and Caitlin Watt, 2008).

The systems thinking of Menendian and Watt suggests how we can start to coax out solutions that will fix our vexing wicked problems.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS

As noted earlier, there has been a significant rise in African Americans who have moved into the middle class over the past two decades. Increasingly in this century, African Americans hold prominent positions in nonprofit organizations, government, arts, business, education, and philanthropy.

This healthy shift gives us the opportunity to push down on the levers of real change. To do so, we’ll need to combine the historic leadership of the African-American clergy with these emerging leaders in government, business, and the nonprofit sector.

So gathered, we could repair the breaches between lower-, middle-, and upper-class African Americans that occurred so many years ago. As a new and potent force in America, these united leaders could forge a common agenda and help enact it to advance the wellbeing of African-American communities.

To test this theory about the potency of a united African-American leadership, as vice president of the Northwest Area Foundation in 2008, I hosted a series of meetings. The first were at my dining room table. I met with key individuals across class, education, and gender lines in the African-American community in the Twin Cities. These conversations effectively gauged the will among these African-American leaders to leverage opportunities and collectively address the challenges facing our community. This effort became known as the African American Leadership Forum (AALF) (Gary L. Cunningham, Marcia L. Avner, and Romilda Justilien, 2014).

The framework for the AALF is based on John Powell's targeted universalism, an approach that frames universal goals that are mutually agreed upon in the broader community. As an example, the overarching AALF goal is "a just and healthy society that works equally well for everyone." This is an all-inclusive goal, which, if achieved, benefits all. To accomplish this goal, however, requires targeted strategies for different groups in society depending on how those groups are situated relative to the opportunities (j.a. powell, 2012).

The AALF's work was also guided by the ideas of economist John Nash, who developed a game theory on how groups interact in non-cooperative negotiations. In the case of the African American community and its interactions with broader society, we have reached what is known as a Nash equilibrium (J. Nash, 1951):

Unless the broader society sees a benefit to itself for improving the conditions of African Americans, the allocation of resources and opportunities will remain unchanged.

Encouragingly, the Nash equilibrium also suggests that groups that have enough social cohesion to negotiate a common agenda can improve their chances of transforming the playing field and changing the entire game.

In the intervening years, the AALF movement in the Twin Cities has grown with over 1,500 people

participating. The forums have also assisted the nonprofit sector and religious and corporate communities to work toward common objectives that strengthen the African-American community.

INSPIRED TO START A FRESH NARRATIVE

William Julius Wilson in his book, *More Than Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner-City (Issues of Our Times)*, put out a call for a new framing of the issue of race in America. Inspired by Wilson's call, the Metropolitan Economic Development Association (where I am now President and CEO) and the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society hosted a series of Convenings on Race and Economic (CORE). The primary purpose of CORE is to engage a diverse network of stakeholders in the development of a new framework and agenda that address racial wealth disparities and increase economic security for African Americans.

CORE has hosted full-day learning labs with key stakeholders in seven cities throughout the US in the past two years. These working CORE sessions culminated in a three-day retreat held at the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Conference Center in May 2015. The Bellagio CORE retreat was attended by some of the leading practitioners, academics, and community activists working on the racial wealth gap in the United States and internationally (Bellagio CORE retreat).

From the Bellagio CORE retreat, here are key excerpts from a keenly debated working draft:

Today powerful elites have rigged the system, capturing government and the marketplace. In their greed, they are hollowing out the middle class, stifling economic prosperity, limiting the mobility of current and future generations, and endangering our democracy.

We need a new approach, founded on the following principles: People first, and for each other.

People first—corporations, the marketplace, and government should serve people, and not the other way around.

People for each other—we owe each other a duty of care and respect and, seeing ourselves in others, we gain the power to create a society where all people can attain their full potential.

When I stepped back and looked at the preliminary findings of the CORE work, I was very surprised. I went into this work with the idea that African Americans needed to develop something separate and distinct in terms of an economic strategy and agenda. I came away moved by the need for African Americans to not just coexist with whites on opposite sides of our cities but to interact regularly within a larger American social framework. To build opportunity structures that work for African Americans, the guiding principle must be that the structures in this larger framework will work equally well for everyone.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Fifty years after the initial riots in North Minneapolis, we sadly have come full circle. Once again many African Americans and their allies have taken to the streets of Minneapolis and other American cities to demand an end to police misconduct. The police violence and mass incarceration are symptoms of a much deeper fundamental issue within our democracy. As Martin Luther King so eloquently stated about African Americans,

“We must frankly acknowledge that in past years our creativity and imaginations were not employed in learning how to develop power.... Although our actions were bold and crowned with successes, they were substantially improvised and spontaneous. They attained the goals set for them but carried the blemishes of our inexperience” (Martin Luther King, 1967).

For over 50 years, African Americans have used the strategies of mass protest and civil disobedience. With limited success, they have brought to the nation’s attention the painful costs of African Americans’ exclusion from the circle of those who matter.

Unfortunately, we have not been able to translate these “bold and spontaneous” actions into sustainable power. In the heat of the moment, the system responds. Its newly wrought policy actions yield scattered and inadequate outcomes. So a few more short-lived programs appear; a few more Black people can climb up the elusive ladders of opportunity.

In contrast, the majority of African-American people still live wrapped up, largely out of sight, in the vicissitudes of poverty. When the fundamental opportunities structures go unchallenged, the living conditions of low-income African-American people remain the same.

CONCLUSION

For too long, we’ve been caught up each in our own conscience-numbing dreams. It is the time for all of us to wake up, to not just admit we have a problem but to name it and own it together. It’s time to change the old patterns that have wasted so much human potential. It is time for a new narrative that spells out how we can move forward together.

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