COVID-19 Exposes Racism as a Chronic Affliction in the United States

By Collaborative Innovation Center for Ethnic Minority Development

The United States, the country with the largest immigrant population in the world, gathers people from a wide variety of races and ethnic groups. According to the results of the 2020 Census in the US, non-Hispanic whites accounted for 57.8% of the population, Latinos for 18.7%, Africans for 12.4%, Asians for 6%, Indian and Alaskan indigenous peoples for 1.1%, and Hawaiians and other Pacific islanders for 0.2% (with overlap). The COVID-19 outbreak has not only pushed the US to top the world rankings by the number of infections and by death toll, but also revealed the systemic racism in the US society as the pandemic rages on.

I. Racial Minorities Suffered More from COVID-19

For a long time, racial minorities in the US have suffered from unfair treatment, such as earning far less than the average wage level and having unfairly less access to social welfare. When COVID-19 spread across the country, these people became the hardest hit. According to Stanford News, COVID-19 hit non-whites harder and highlighted the gap between whites

and non-whites in terms of overall health conditions. As Anthony Fauci, director of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, the inequality in hygiene and health conditions between races is a failure of the entire US society.

First, COVID-19 has a higher incidence among racial minorities. According to a survey of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US, among the 23.75 million patients with COVID-19 surveyed (those with information on their racial origin available), 47.7% are ethnic minorities, higher than their share in the total population by 5.5 percentage points. Their hospitalization rate is also higher than that of white people. Specifically, the hospitalization rate of indigenous Indians and Alaskans is 3.3 times, that of black people is 2.7 times, and that of Latinos is 2.6 times the hospitalization rate among white people. Moreover, the proportion of positive COVID-19 test results is also much higher among racial minorities than among whites. Specifically, the positive rate is 7.0% for whites, 13.8% for the black, 11.9% for Latinos, 7.2% for Asians, and 13.5% for other minorities.[1] The Navajo Nation where Indians live, traverses the states of Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. It once had one of the highest infection rates across the country. In addition, some American news media have revealed that the vaccination rate is significantly lower among minorities than among whites, and the WHO believes that this disparity still remains.

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[1] Data on COVID-19 infection, incidence, hospitalization, and death toll are from https://www.cdc.gov.

Second, the death rate is higher. In terms of deaths from COVID-19, the death rate is 31.7% for Latinos, and 22.5% for black people, both much higher than the population-wide rate. White people who died from COVID-19 accounted for 38.5% of the total deaths, lower than its share in the population by 19.3 percentage points. In particular, the share of deaths in the total number of infections is far higher for minorities than that for whites. Specifically, the share for indigenous Indians and Alaskans is 2.4 times that for whites, the share for Latinos is 2.3 times and that for African Americans is 2 times the rate for whites.

Third, the impact of COVID-19 on daily life is greater. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, minorities in the US, having long been disadvantaged in society and economy, were hit the hardest. In terms of annual income, the median of household income is 57,467 US dollars for the black and 59,976 US dollars for Latinos, respectively 65.2% and 68.1% of that for whites. In terms of employment, black people have the highest unemployment rate, which is 11.4% in 2020 and 8.4% in Q3 2021, followed by Latinos with the corresponding rates at 11.2% and 6.2%. Comparing with the average nation-wide figures of the same periods, 8.1%, and 5.2%, the gap is clearly wide. According to a report published on the website of *USA Today* on April 7, 2021, data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that as of Q1 2021, about 615,000 Asian Americans were unemployed and 48% of them had remained so for more than

six months, which is the highest long-term unemployment rate among all races. CNN reported on July 15, 2021, that about 17% of families with African origin had no access to basic financial services, nearly six times the rate among white families. A report published on the website of *Los Angeles Times* on December 15, 2021, claimed that Latinos, although accounted for 19% of the US population, held only 2% of the country's wealth; and that the median of the net asset of white households is more than five times that of Latino households.

II. Social Differentiation and Antagonism on the Rise

COVID-19 amplified and exposed the severe consequences of long-term racial discrimination in the US. Resentment and antagonism accumulated and fermented among racial minorities over the problem of systemic racial discrimination in the US. The Floyd Incident of May 2020 ignited the "Black Lives Matter" movement which soon swept across the country, severely jeopardizing social stability and tearing the US society further apart.

First, partisan politics aggravated racism. In the background of the donkey vs. the elephant politics, neither the Democratic nor the Republican administration has been able to forge a plan within the existing US policy framework to effectively resolve the deep-rooted problem of racism. Rather, the race issue became a hot topic for "vanity projects" that both parties leveraged when wrestling for votes in the background of

severe disputes between them. Joe Biden, the incumbent Republican president of the US, while saying that systemic racism is "a stain on the soul of America", has never actually believed American people to be racists. In comparison, former US president Donald Trump, during his term of office, had spoken racist words on many occasions, building up racism in the country and giving rise to more race-based violence. The Republicans and Democrats follow drastically different courses when it comes to the issue of race and this has torn the American society apart on this point and even added to the tension and conflicts between races. Meanwhile, both parties exerted their influence in the states through political manipulation to hold down the political influence of minority voters through reapportionment, thus pushing up their chance of winning the general election. This is very likely to hamper the rights of the minorities. For example, Texas is the state with the largest black population, but none of the 38 constituencies is dominated by black people.

Second, there are disputes in how people understand racial discrimination. Though to be against racial discrimination is clearly what is "politically correct" in the American society today as all media are calling for eliminating "systemic racial discrimination". However, beneath what people say and call for are concrete discrepancies in their minds. According to Pew Research Center's analysis of public opinions, following the murder of George Floyd, nearly 80% of black

people, 59% of Latinos, 56% of Asian Americans, and 42% of white people advocated adopting many measures to overhaul the US laws and systems; while the corresponding shares of people advocating thoroughly rebuilding most laws and major systems are 58% for the black, 30% for Latinos, 24% for Asian Americans, and 18% for whites, showing wide gaps between races and clear discrepancies within each race.

Third, US diplomatic policies aggravated anti-Asian hate. Throughout US history, Asian Americans, especially Chinese Americans were long suppressed and discriminated against, with the Chinese Exclusion Act adopted in 1882 and not abolished until 1943. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Trump administration frequently labeled the novel coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus" and some US authorities intensified their efforts to investigate in Chinese American scholars, turning many American people increasingly against people of Chinese origin. An article titled "Rivalry without Racism" published on the website of *Foreign Affairs* on July 28, 2021, states that "U.S. foreign-policy makers' consistent overexaggeration of China's threat to the United States" is the key factor in the surge in anti-Asian sentiment and incidents and that demonizing China would inevitably result in the demonization, by association, of all people with an Asian face in the US. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, with the racist manipulations of some politicians, anti-Asian assaults in the US have been on the rise. A report released by Stop AAPI Hate on

November 18, 2021, claims that the organization received a total of 10,370 reports on Anti-Asian violent incidents from March 19 to September 30, 2021, and most of the reported attacks happened in the streets, at workplace or in other public spaces. Data published by the New York City Police Department on December 8, 2021, show that in 2021, anti-Asian hate crimes in the city shot up by 361% from the level of the previous year. A report dated October 22, 2021, on the website of National Public Radio states that a quarter Asian Americans worry that their families may be attacked or threatened because of their race.

III. Racism as a deep-rooted affliction

Racism has had a long history and deep roots in the US. Starting from the 1950s, minorities in the US, represented by black people, launched the Civil Rights Movement to fight for equal rights, resulting in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that ended racial segregation in legal sense. However, it clearly did not truly end racial discrimination; instead, it only pushed racial discrimination under the table and forced it to take up new forms. The *de facto* inequalities between races have always remained, so racial gaps are never filled and racism has become persistent in the American society.

First of all, racism is a legacy of history. The American history is brimmed with racial oppression and discrimination. Early settlers committed genocide against indigenous peoples, trying to wipe out entire peoples with over 1,500 attacks

initiated by the federal government, as well as a "cultural genocide" after the United States declared independence. In 1814, an act was promulgated by the US federal government offering a "scalp bounty" and each Indian scalp submitted equaled 50-100 dollars in reward. When Columbus discovered the New Continent, there were about five million indigenous Indians within the territory of today's US, yet by the end of the 19th century, less than 250,000 were left. Meanwhile, the US government also implemented the cultural genocide policy, funding the establishment of more than 350 boarding schools for indigenous peoples where children were forced to stay far away from their family and community for the convenience of cultural assimilation. This lasted till the 1970s and kept hundreds of thousands of indigenous children away from home, even costing some of their lives due to mistreatment on campus. Racial oppression and discrimination, as an integral part of the American history, without doubt, still has profound impact today and may as well continue to influence the US society for quite some time in the future.

Second, racism has its institutional roots. Domestically, the US laws are intrinsically pro-rich. The wealthy get exemptions, while the poor, especially racial minorities, take punishments. Punishments and penalties, in turn, push many people of African, Hispanic and other minority origins inevitably into the vicious cycle of inter-generation transmission of poverty. Such a structural bias of the system has been

aggravating race-based inequalities. Globally, the US, in its early days, took racism as the theoretical basis for its oppression and exploitation of other nation states; while today, it uses racism as an ideological leverage for its global hegemony strategy.

Third, racism is a cultural imprint. When early European immigrants first came to America, they put people into a hierarchical system based on race so that they can conveniently carry out slave trade and safeguard the privileges and interests of white people. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, more than 12.5 million African people were trafficked to the New Continent. However, citizenship was only granted to "free white persons" when the United States was founded, establishing white supremacy. After the Civil War, slavery was abolished in 1865 and black people got "freedom" that was only nominal. The whites soon forged the "separate but equal" racial segregation system and southern states issued quite a number of laws for this starting from 1876, collectively referred to as the Jim Crow laws. This reinforced racism that was based on white supremacy. After World War II, when racial segregation was put to an end, white supremacy lost its institutional foundation but unfortunately had already taken deep roots in the American culture and has survived till today in all aspects of the American society. An article published on the website of Stanford News in February 2021, examined systemic racial discrimination in all dimensions in the US society and revealed the following: in

education, children of color are under closer surveillance at school; in judicial settings, people of color, black in particular, are more likely to be targeted at; in the economic realm and in employment, black people and other minorities are discriminated against in job hunting, loan granting, and many other scenarios across the entire workplace and economic environment. As former US president Barack Obama said, the scourge of slavery and the legacy of Jim Crow laws, as well as discrimination in the American systems, have deep roots in the American gene and are passed on to the next generation.

Racism was the foundation of the United States when it was founded, and has been the "catalyst" that sped up development. The deep-rooted problems that stemmed from racial discrimination were covered up for quite a while by the economic boom and rapid development shortly after World War II. However, today, the COVID-19 pandemic, like a magic mirror, has exposed the systemic racism in the US society. Racism is now the hidden spike between different races in the American society. It has become a deep-seated, hard-to-cure, and ever-aggravating affliction in the country.