



To Advance Racial Equity, Policy Makers Must Move Away from “Black and Brown” Discourse

Julio Alicea, Rutgers University, Camden

In common parlance, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers regularly discuss the needs of “Black and Brown” communities. The intentions here are mostly positive: to call attention to the accumulation of disadvantage that people of Black and Latinx descent face in the U.S. context. This disadvantage crosses many avenues of policy, including education, criminal legal, housing, and health. By compiling this information, there have been many meaningful efforts to attend to these inequalities via research, professional practice, and policy making. The implications of the widespread use of the phrase, however, can be less positive. The use of the “and” too often serves the effort of obscuring the differences between groups of people who are racialized as Black and/or Latinx.

A narrative of Black and Brown inequality often combines the numbers of the two groups in a way that rhetorically links their lived experiences together. If those numbers are disaggregated, one is likely to find at least one additional layer of inequality that exists between Black and Latinx groups. Too infrequently does the policy discourse take this approach, instead seeking to situate Black and Brown populations on one side with White populations on the other and, at times, also including a monolithic representation of Asian Americans. As part of a research team that examined the compounded inequality faced by Black youth in Los Angeles County and included data about other racialized groups as well, we were able to interrogate the different experiences of Black and Latinx youth. For example, if read from a comparative (rather than conflating) point of view, one could learn that when compared to Latinx students, Black students were ten percentage points more likely to fail standardized tests in math and English, six percentage points less likely to graduate high school, and seven percentage points less likely to qualify for admission to multiple state university systems in California. This data along with comparative insights in criminal legal, housing, and health policy reveal what is missed when we consider “Black and Brown” as one group in policy discourse.

Criminal Legal Policy and Mass Incarceration

Mass incarceration has significantly impacted the lives of Black, White, and Latinx Americans, albeit in distinct ways. Addressing these disparities requires recognizing the unique challenges faced by each group. In 2021, the Sentencing Project released a [report](#) entitled, “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons.” Among its key findings were that Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly five times the rates of White Americans while Latinx Americans were incarcerated at 1.3 times the rate of White Americans. Yes, it is true here that both of these figures are indicative of disparities when compared to Whites, but an overlooked story here is that Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly 3.6 times the rate of Latinxs! This is a classic example of the vastly different experiences Black and Latinx Americans have with the criminal legal system.

Housing Policy and Houselessness

When we turn our attention to examine the perils of houselessness, it would not be inaccurate to read this research [article](#) and write that Black and Latinx Americans make up 62% of all unhoused people in the United States. Such a statistic should alarm policy makers everywhere. Once again, however, disaggregating the data tells a different story. Looking more closely, we find that Black Americans make up 40% of the unhoused (compared to being 13% of the overall population) and Latinx Americans make up 22% of the unhoused (compared to being 18% of the overall population). Now we can see that Black Americans face much greater risk of becoming unhoused compared to Latinx Americans. Both populations need assistance with houselessness, but there is a significant disparity in the magnitude of need between the two groups.

Health Policy and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Another policy area to consider when disaggregating the data includes health policy. The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating to Americans across the country and continues its impact to this day. The latest numbers, as of a June 2023 [report](#), suggest that approximately 1.1 million Americans have died from COVID. When we examine the crude mortality rate (calculated as the number of deaths per 100,000), the data reveal that Black Americans have one of the highest rates (1 in 265 have died) and Latinx Americans are among the lowest (1 in 358 have died). The large disparity here between Black and Latinx Americans suggest a need to dig deeper into the different challenges that each community continues to face during this ongoing public health crisis. At the same time, Latinx Americans are the most likely of any racialized group to [report](#) experiencing long COVID. Researchers have observed a kind of domino effect with long COVID, noting associations with greater financial and food insecurity, as well as increased suffering of mental health hardship. Thus, there is a need for a multifaceted policy response to prevent the premature death of Black COVID patients and to mitigate the onset of long COVID among the Latinx patient population.

Next Steps for Scholars, Practitioners, and Policy Makers

The objective of this research brief is not to weaken relations between Black and Latinx populations, but rather to advocate for more thoughtful policy efforts around the needs of each community. Below are key policy takeaways for stakeholders to take into consideration.

1. **Adopt a “thick solidarity” mindset:** Cross-racial solidarity is and has been an important element for furthering the project of racial justice in the United States. There are ways to do this work well and ways to do it not so well. In their [article](#), scholars Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange offer the distinction between thin and thick solidarity. They note that the latter recognizes the difference in experiences and strives for complicated nuance over simplified confluences of experience. This mindset creates a foundation for coalition building and more targeted policy responses.
2. **Always disaggregate the data:** Separating the data by different social indicators is way to derive deeper and more actionable meaning. While it might feel more efficient or compelling to talk about Black and Latinx communities together, the end result will be messy policy options at best and misinterpreted diagnoses of the problem at worst. This includes finding ways to understand and address the needs of Afro-Latinx Americans, who experience greater poverty than non-Black Latinx Americans.
3. **Narrow the Focus to Deepen the Impact:** Policies focusing on one particular racialized group will increase the likelihood of problem and solution clarity, leading to deeper impact. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd, the Los Angeles Unified School District partially defunded the district police department and created the Black Student Achievement Plan, a comprehensive plan to invest in Black student needs and supports. And even though not all of the funds have been used, significant impacts have been observed in key indicators like graduation rates and completion of courses required for admission to the state university systems.

Moving forward, scholars, practitioners, and policy makers must take note of how the framing of a policy problem foreclose avenues of greater understanding and deeper impact. While it is true that people of color continue to face myriad social inequities, those inequities must be examined carefully to discern what works, what doesn't, and where disparities (new and old) persist, and the need to more critically consider the differences of experience within groups of color. In my forthcoming book project, I examine the origins of racial inequality between Black and Latinx students in a Latinx-serving high school with a social justice mission. Despite good intentions, a shared Black and Brown discourse got in the way, time and again, of more difficult conversations regarding the inequality (rather than the similarity) between the two groups. Attention to these kinds of disparities open up new avenues for policy intervention, especially in spaces where Whites do not make up a significant portion of the population.