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Commentary: To Honor Martin Luther King, Let's Re- Double Our Efforts for Racial Justice

By Robert Greenstein

While Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is best known for his extraordinary, inspirational leadership in bringing down legal barriers to civil rights for African Americans and other people of color, he also emphasized the critical importance of reducing poverty and expanding opportunity in achieving true racial justice. In his last years, he placed increasing emphasis on poverty and opportunity, and his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, published in 1967, outlined an agenda for economic justice.

As we prepare to honor Dr. King on Monday by celebrating the national holiday in his name, we would be well advised to remember — at a time when poverty remains stubbornly higher, and opportunity remains more limited, for people of color — that we must do much more to address these challenges.

When King was assassinated in Memphis in April 1968, he was there in an effort to expand economic justice — specifically, to support striking sanitation workers who were demanding a rise in their meager pay and improvements in their grim and even dangerous working conditions.

At the time, King was organizing a Poor People's Campaign in which people of all races and ethnicities would come to Washington to seek new policies to boost employment and combat poverty, including basic income support and affordable housing. While breaking away from his work on that campaign to come to Memphis, he viewed his support for the strikers very much as part of his broader efforts for economic and racial justice.

“I think it is absolutely necessary now,” King said of the Poor People's Campaign shortly before his death, “to deal massively and militantly with the economic problem. . . . This is why in [the Southern Christian Leadership Conference] we came up with the idea of going to Washington, the seat of government, to dramatize the gulf between promise and fulfillment, to call attention to the gap between the dream and the realities, to make the invisible visible.”

As King predicted, the struggle for economic justice has proven difficult. “[I]t's much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to guarantee a livable income and a good solid job,” he declared in an April 1967 speech at Stanford University on economic justice. “It's much easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee the right to live in sanitary, decent housing conditions. It is

much easier to integrate a public park than it is to make genuine, quality, integrated education a reality. And so today we are struggling for something which says we demand genuine equality.”

A half-century after King’s death, the challenges of poverty and opportunity remain persistent and stubborn. While 13.9 percent of all Americans lived below the poverty line in 2017, that figure was 22.1 percent for Black people and 21.4 percent for Hispanic people — based on the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which most experts favor because it accounts for the effects of taxes and non-cash government benefits.

Moreover, while yawning racial disparities in both income and wealth are widely recognized, some recent policies have made these disparities still worse. As one example, white families are three times likelier to be among the nation’s top 1 percent of earners, the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy and Prosperity Now found in a joint report, but the 2017 tax law showered 23.7 percent of its total tax cuts on this small group of wealthy white families in 2018 while providing just 13.8 percent of its tax cuts to the bottom 60 percent of households of all races.¹

As we look to the future, we need policies and programs that address the challenges of poverty and opportunity for all Americans, as well as policies and programs that target the particular challenges faced by people of color.

For starters, we must protect basic safety net programs. Not only do programs like SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, and tax credits for working families like the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) reduce poverty, they also raise the long-term prospects for children.² Children with access to SNAP are likelier to finish high school and have lower rates of certain health problems as adults; children with health coverage through Medicaid earn more, pay more taxes, and have fewer hospitalizations and emergency room visits; and children in families that get the EITC and other tax credits do better in middle school and are likelier to graduate high school and attend college.

Similarly, we need to address the stark shortage of affordable housing and ensure that housing assistance programs provide families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to live in neighborhoods with decent schools and access to jobs.³ We need to raise the minimum wage and improve working conditions, which includes strengthening workers’ ability to organize. We also need to invest in and substantially improve education and job training programs, especially for those children and youth — many of whom reside in partially or fully segregated communities — who face inadequate and underfunded schools, training programs, and other services.

¹ Roderick Taylor, “TTEP-Prosperity Now: 2017 Tax Law Gives White Households in Top 1% More Than All Races in Bottom 60%,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, October 11, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/itep-prosperity-now-2017-tax-law-gives-white-households-in-top-1-more-than-all-races-in-bottom>.

² Danilo Trisi and Guillermo Herrera, “Administration Actions Against Immigrant Families Harming Children Through Increased Fear, Loss of Needed Assistance,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, May 15, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/administration-actions-against-immigrant-families-harming-children>.

³ Alicia Mazzara and Brian Knudsen, “Where Families With Children Use Housing Vouchers,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, January 3, 2019, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/where-families-with-children-use-housing-vouchers>.

Needless to say, addressing these issues will necessitate major tax reforms at both federal and state levels, both to raise the necessary resources and to make tax codes more equitable in their own right.

That's hardly a comprehensive list of agenda items. Ending voter suppression and mass incarceration — both deeply and disproportionately harmful to communities of color — must be high on the list as well. Recent moves in the opposite direction on voting rights in a number of states represent a significant step backward on racial justice. So do the current Administration's anti-immigrant policies.

Nor is the need for action limited to the federal government. As we have written, some states retain various policies established decades, if not centuries, ago that limit the possibilities for more people of color to prosper economically.⁴ These include constitutional requirements that state legislatures secure supermajorities (e.g., three-fifths, two-thirds, or three-quarters votes) to raise any taxes — which, among other things, makes it harder to secure the resources to adequately fund schools with large numbers of students of color — as well as constitutional limits on property taxes, and sales taxes that were designed in part to limit property taxes and shift some of the tax burden from affluent white property owners to Black families with little or no property.

States can help reduce racial inequities by improving their tax and budget policies. They can ensure that high-income households pay their fair share of taxes; enact or expand tax credits for low-income families that work for low wages; and eliminate fees that mainly burden low-income people, particularly people of color. They also can raise sufficient revenue to finance decent-quality schools in all communities while investing in infrastructure, health, and other services to build an economy whose benefits are much more broadly shared. And they can eliminate archaic limits on revenue raising, cited above, that shield wealthier residents and constrain investments that would help people of all races and incomes but would particularly benefit people of color and those with limited means.

Poverty and the lack of opportunity remain challenges for far too many Americans, and the legacy — and continued reality — of racial discrimination and prejudice continue to impose barriers to people of color. This should not be acceptable in 2019, especially in the world's richest nation. Were Dr. King still with us, he likely would be exhorting us to re-dedicate ourselves to overcoming these and other injustices — and to re-double our efforts. If we wish to commemorate Dr. King and his legacy, it is only fitting that we do so.

⁴ Michael Leachman *et al.*, “Advancing Racial Equity With State Tax Policy,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 15, 2018, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/state-budget-and-tax/advancing-racial-equity-with-state-tax-policy>.