



## **After the Fact | Race and Research: Data and Our Neighborhoods**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

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**Andre Perry, senior fellow, metropolitan policy program, The Brookings Institution:** We essentially learn how to compare Black, Brown, Asian folks to White folks, in everything from educational outcome, housing outcomes, and what that sets up is this idea that people of color have to act like, or catch up to, White people in order for there to be parity. And that's just a bad framing. It leads to bad research, bad results.

**Dan LeDuc, host:** Welcome to "After the Fact." For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. And that was Andre Perry, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution—we'll be hearing more from him in this episode as we continue our look at race and research.

For our data point this time around, we turn to Harvard University's Opportunity Insights—the data point: 99%. The nonpartisan research project had this finding in 99% of the nation's census tracts: Compare a young Black man and a young White man who grow up in the same community with the same resources and come from similar lower, middle-income families, the Black man ends up earning less than his White counterpart, virtually everywhere in America.

Over this season, we've been looking at the growing diversity of the United States population and how that diversity, specifically race, is measured and accounted for in a range of research. Today the focus is on economics, how communities are actually valued in dollars and cents, and what that means for economic mobility.

We begin the conversation with David Williams from Harvard's Opportunity Insights, who told us about a fascinating research tool the project has developed called the "Opportunity Atlas."

**David Williams, policy outreach director, Opportunity Insights, Harvard University:** It's basically an interactive map. And it shows us rates of economic mobility, economic opportunity, for neighborhoods across the country. And underlying it is data on 20 million kids who grew up across the country—every neighborhood. And we use Census Bureau data and IRS data to be able to track their outcomes. And what this really allows us to do is get at the roots of social inequality—the roots of poverty—the roots of upward mobility and opportunity, and helps us understand how neighborhoods and place really impact kids' long-term outcomes.



We've done all this research, have all this data, crunched it in really interesting ways. And, so, this tool is basically a way to get this information out into the public, really getting into the hands of policymakers, practitioners—folks who can use this data to really have impact in their communities.

**Dan LeDuc:** Add the layer of race to the atlas for us and tell us what we can learn from your newer data.

**David Williams:** I think something that our data in our research shows is that racial bias, disparate racial outcomes, it's not just a legacy of our history, but it's really a product of our present. Kids who are growing up in the same communities have very different outcomes based on their race and ethnicity. And I think that really forces us to think more critically around all of the systems in our communities—ways in which race and racial bias are manifesting in our communities. And I think being able to actually show the impact of race in very concrete ways, showing that young Black men and White men who grew up in similarly low-income families, in the same communities, in the same neighborhoods, on the same block, even, still have very different outcomes in terms of going to college, in terms of earnings and adulthood. And, so, I think being able to actually show not just anecdotally, but showing that the data can really track and quantify these disparate outcomes, I think reinforces what we're seeing in the news every day. And, so, typically, we think about the history of race in this country. So, presumably, lots of African-American families have less wealth and income because of historical factors. They're oftentimes in less-resourced neighborhoods because of segregation. But we even see that a young Black man and a young White man who grew up in the same community with the same resources and similarly lower, middle-income families end up earning on average a very different amount. And we basically see this in 99% of census tracts of neighborhoods across the country.

**Dan LeDuc:** Oh, I'm sorry. I got to interrupt. Say that again. You're saying virtually the entire country?

**David Williams:** Virtually the entire country. It is a pattern that is unfortunately extremely consistent. I think, in some ways, we weren't shocked by those disparities. But something we also see is that even for Black men who grow up in high-income families, there's actually a downward mobility trend. So young Black men who grew up in high-income families, they're actually more likely to grow up to be lower-income adults than to just stay in that same income bracket as their families were. Probably not surprisingly, that's very different for White men, who when they grow up in high-income families tend to remain high income as they grow up. So, it's not just race or racism. Racial bias is impacting folks in the lower economic spectrum. But even higher-income folks are still being impacted by these systemic factors.

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**Dan LeDuc:** At The Brookings Institution, Andre Perry considers systematic factors as he studies the racial implications in housing, income, and health.

**Andre Perry:** When we studied housing prices in Black neighborhoods, what we wanted to get at is what's causing these housing prices. When we looked at home prices in neighborhoods, where the share of the Black population is 50% or higher, and then we compared them to places where the share of the Black population in those neighborhoods were less than one percent. And when we measured home prices, we found what a lot of people expect. Home prices in White neighborhoods are priced more. But a lot of people will say, that's because of education. That's because of crime. And, so, when you're doing this research, you really do want to remove all these other reasons why home prices are lower.

So we control for education, crime, walkability, and what we found is that if you could imagine helicoptering a home in a Black neighborhood, and placing it in a neighborhood with similar social circumstances, similar crime rates, similar education rates, all those different things, we found that homes in Black neighborhoods are underpriced by 23%, about \$48,000 per home, about \$156 billion in loss equity. Now, it goes without saying, that's the money municipalities use to fund education, policing, infrastructure. It's also the money that individuals use to lift themselves up, so to go to college, to start a business, to move to a better neighborhood.

But, when other researchers examine this, they'll drill down on behaviors. And, so, for me, let's not add that water to the wine. Let's really say what's happening here. If we control for those factors that really isolate race, that's the kind of approach we need in our research. It's about shifting how we view Black people. And that's hard for researchers to do, because we are infected with the same biases as police officers, as teachers. But we like to think researchers are these dispassionate, removed, external observers of the world. No, we're part of the world. And our biases come out in the models we use in our research.

**Dan LeDuc:** Even as researchers strive to free themselves from the biases Andre Perry describes, they operate in a society where historical narratives—whether borne out by facts or not—help define reality. Here's more from Andre.

**Andre Perry:** Research is both a problem and a cure for the social ills. We all believe to a certain extent in the American dream, that if you work hard and you do all the right things, that you'll be able to start a business, own a home. You'll have economic mobility. And we all take that in, including researchers. And, so, when people said, "Hey, the great migration, people are going up North. It must be because they are going toward opportunity, and folks are working hard." And that may be true, but it's also true they were fleeing rabid racism in the South and looking for opportunities in the North. And, in many cases, when they arrived North, they saw many of the same problems there.



When we look at problems in our communities, and we see these racial disparities, we reflexively blame people's behaviors for those differences.

**Dan LeDuc:** So how are you and your fellow researchers in this field maybe changing what you do given the last year. Or are you saying, "Hey, I'm glad everybody else is catching up."

**Andre Perry:** I'm saying I'm glad everyone else is catching up, because at least with my team, we've always said, hey, it's racism, not race. That's the issue. When we learn how to do regression analysis, which is a staple in research that allows you to compare variables against some norm or a referent group, we essentially learn how to compare Black, Brown, Asian folks to White folks, in everything from educational outcome, housing outcomes. And what that sets up is this idea that people of color have to act like or catch up to White people in order for there to be parity. And that's just a bad framing. It leads to bad research, bad results. But we see more of that than any kind of examination of a racist policy. I say all the time in my talks that there's nothing wrong with Black people that ending racism can't solve.

**Dan LeDuc:** Well, let's talk about the last year. COVID is the perfect example. You've done research on the effects on the Black community. What are some of the specific findings from the pandemic on the Black community?

**Andre Perry:** There's two major issues at play, and they are connected. Black and Brown people live together in intergenerational housing much more. And we're much more likely to work in what we now call essential jobs. And, so, we're the grocery store clerks, we're the drivers, we're the people who have to go to work day to day. They can't work from home. And there's one other factor that I really neglected, wealth. Wealth predicts for health. It predicts for a lot of things. But you really did see the impact of wealth on so many different areas.

In business, for instance, if you don't have savings, you're going to have to run up your credit cards. If you don't have home equity, you have to go into greater debt. And, so, when the PPE loan program came out as a component of the CARES Act, when it was first released, we saw how a lack of wealth played out. So, business owners, Black businesses are overwhelmingly much more likely to be sole proprietorships. And the PPP loan did not recognize them as eligible.

And so most Black businesses didn't get that subsidy. And guess what? They were out of revenue. They probably had to work, probably had to expose themselves to the virus more. I mean, it's just a never-ending spiral that Black people face. But our research really doesn't address that undercurrent of racism that led to these conditions, that led to higher rates of death, where Black and Brown people are dying in two to three times the rate as their White counterparts in many metropolitan areas.

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**Dan LeDuc:** But even as the research community is catching up, those research findings have to be put to use—especially to inform better policymaking—and just maybe to make people’s lives better. Back to David Williams.

**David Williams:** This is what I find to be the fun part, I think the research is super innovative. It’s really interesting, but if it’s not having impact, then it’s a lost opportunity. And I think especially with the research on the geography of opportunity, being able to really see where kids have chances of rising up the income ladder, and where they don’t. I think that in some ways reinforced, I think, a lot of what people assumed about the importance of neighborhoods—but I think was really a galvanizing force in the housing space specifically—and we ended up having the opportunity to work with the Seattle and King County housing authorities and basically saying, now that we can pinpoint these areas where kids, especially low-income kids, have better outcomes—how do we help them access these neighborhoods? But how do we explore what the barriers are?

We actually ran a randomized evaluation, basically testing out to see if we could provide support to these families while they are using public assistance and public subsidies for rental housing. Could we increase the neighborhoods that they had access to? This program was called “Creating Moves to Opportunity.” We in conjunction with the housing authorities and some other nonprofit organizations basically provided housing counseling—folks who would work individually with these families when they were looking for rental housing.

We’d give them information around some of our data and research, and other supports through this process. And what we saw was that those families who received that support, they were almost four times more likely to move to some of these higher-opportunity areas or areas where, according to our research, when kids grow up there, they will probably earn upwards of \$100,000-\$200,000 more over their lifetime. So real significant impacts.

I think both this issue of equity and justice [is] in some ways almost focusing on residential discrimination and those injustices of the past, but in a way that can really drive outcomes and hopefully help lift people out of poverty moving forward as well.

**Dan LeDuc:** But is there a time when maybe the researchers get it wrong?

**David Williams:** Oh. That’s a really good question. Actually, it’s funny. I mentioned our “Creative Moves to Opportunity” pilot program. And I think something that when I talk with our research team, they’re economists. They’re always thinking about dollars, dollars and cents, and how that can drive incentives and how people act. And I think a lot of their assumption going into that pilot program was if we give folks money and incentivize them to potentially look at some of these other communities they may not be familiar with, that should really be enough to change what we’re seeing in terms of outcome.



But I think what was really helpful was the researchers who actually do all this great data work actually having real dialogue with community and with those folks who were doing the work. And I think something we learned and something that was really borne out through the results of the program was that it wasn't just about dollars. But these families are all facing a range of different issues, maybe it's lack of transportation, lack of child care.

What we found was that having that individualized attention through that housing counselor helped each family deal with their individual issue while they were looking for a new place to live. And that really seems to be what was driving better outcomes through this program.

By working across different silos—working with the folks who have that first-hand experience—I think can really help us use our expertise, but then really make sure that we're approaching the problem in the right way and then asking for help and support when we need it as well.

These policy questions, these policy choices that we're making, are difficult. And there's folks across the country, especially on the local level, who don't really have the resources to be able to synthesize all the research and figure out exactly how they can apply it to their work. And that's a lot of what we try and do is take our research and make sure that it's accessible to the folks who can use it. And when there are opportunities, working directly with communities and policymakers and practitioners to actually implement.

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**Dan LeDuc:** Pairing research with lived experience is exactly what Andre Perry's latest research did—analyzing data from a social media platform that allows users to rate and review experiences at restaurants and businesses.

**Andre Perry:** We did a study not that long ago that examined business quality. And we scraped all the data to get a sense of quality. And what we found [is] that businesses, Black, Brown, and Asian businesses actually score higher. But we did that research using the phrase that Black elders used to say all the time. They would say, "Our ice is just as cold."

Meaning, the elders knew that if you bypass a business in a Black neighborhood, you reduce revenue for that neighborhood, you distort the market in a way that high-quality businesses are then forced to compete with low-quality businesses. If researchers walked with, talked with, Black people, they would test this theory. Is our ice as cold?

But oftentimes, we're running our research through the lived experience of biased policymakers. And I do this all the time. I try my best to put my biases up front. I say, look, I was a son of an incarcerated father. I wasn't formally adopted. So, when I talk about these issues, understand that my background is involved.



And, so, if you're doing research on Black people, Black neighborhoods, conditions, and you don't show your privilege in this, then you're doing your own research a disservice, but you're certainly doing the community a disservice. Because you're essentially just going to project your biases onto others and, so, when you look at researchers, we often talk to our peers in other fields or the city officials, and the governors, and we also have to talk with regular everyday folks, and bring them into our conversations.

**Dan LeDuc:** As the research community expands to include more social scientists of color and to focus more on the effect of race on a range of issues, David Williams said there also is growing interest in helping those efforts.

**David Williams:** Our real goal is to create models and templates for others to use, create these online tools, so not just doing all that data work and making a paper, but saying, hey, let's actually make this as publicly accessible as possible. And let's work with other folks and try to help them think through how they can use their data to help answer other policy-relevant questions as well. Because of COVID, if we don't act in a very meaningful way, things will only get worse. The inequality that we see in our data, the trends we see in our data, will continue in a very negative pattern. But I think, hopefully, this can be a galvanizing force. Our research shows that race impacts all the different systems in our communities. And you're not going to be able to just solve those systems with one simple tweak.

In some ways, almost everyone has to become an expert in race and think about how what they're doing in their daily work, in their daily life, is either perpetuating the systems that we already see, the outcomes we already see, or is this helping reverse those trends? So, again, it's not just about research. But I think we all have to think critically around how race, racial bias, both the history, but also in the present, impacts all of our work.

*Music break*

**Dan LeDuc:** To learn more about the topics in this episode, visit [pewtrusts.org/afterthefact](https://pewtrusts.org/afterthefact). Next up, we continue our discussion of race and research, and turn to higher education. We're in Washington, and just up the road is the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. It is gaining international recognition for how it engages with its students, and its alumni are diversifying the scientific community. UMBC leaders say their strategies for their multiracial campus can be used anywhere.

Thanks for listening and, please, subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts.