

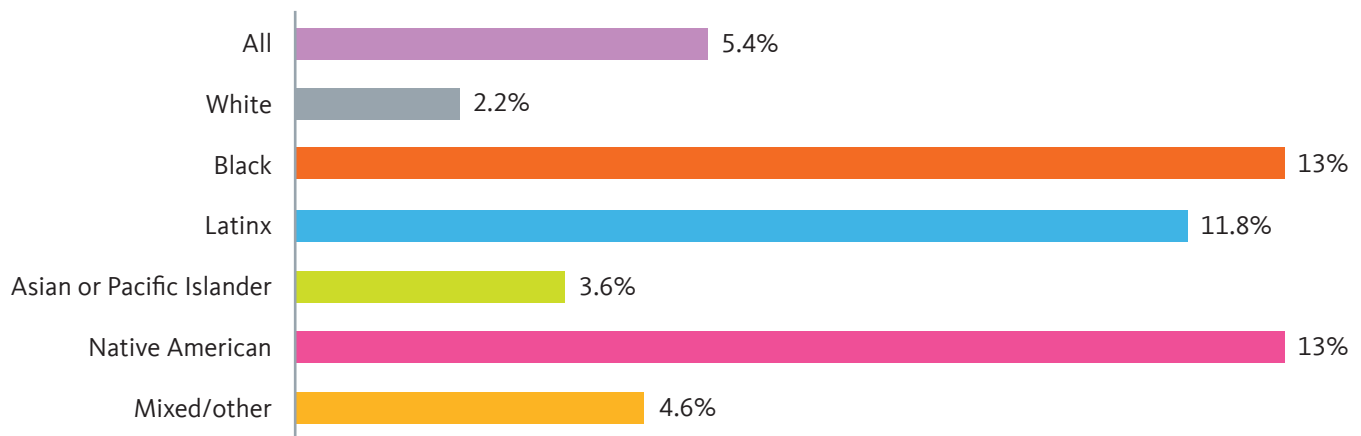


As shelter-in-place orders went into effect across the country in response to COVID-19, school districts scrambled to implement distance learning, businesses closed their doors, and the inequities in critical community infrastructure became even more apparent. Low-income people of color are far more likely than affluent White people to live in neighborhoods that lack the most basic characteristics of safe, healthy places, such as

safe drinking water, clean air, quality schools, grocery stores, parks, libraries, and services. These disparities are no accident, but stem from years of discriminatory land use planning, inequitable investment, and neglect at all levels of government. Such underinvestment has created persistent health and economic disparities which have left many low-income people and people of color particularly vulnerable to our current crisis.

Communities of color suffer from systemic disinvestment that produces health and economic inequities.

Percent living in high-poverty neighborhoods by race/ethnicity, 2015



Source: [National Equity Atlas](#).

Note: High-poverty neighborhoods are defined as neighborhoods where at least 30 percent of residents live in poverty.

For an equitable and lasting recovery from the coronavirus crisis, we must rebuild our physical infrastructure—food systems, water, housing, transit, and roads—as well as our social infrastructure—the trusted network of nonprofit, cultural, philanthropic, and local institutions that help our communities function. Both types of community-building infrastructure will play a critical role in helping communities recover and thrive. Resourcing this infrastructure sufficiently is critical, and investments must be made with an equity lens, prioritizing programs and policies that focus on those most impacted by COVID-19.

Now is the time to ensure that all people—regardless of race, income, or zip code—live in healthy communities of opportunity. This requires the following policy and investment actions:

- ✓ **Fortify community-based organizations.**
- ✓ **Provide financial support for state and local governments.**
- ✓ **Invest in physical infrastructure in high-need communities.**

Fortify community-based organizations

Community-based organizations serving and located in distressed communities are central to making an equitable recovery a reality. A top-down recovery will not capture the knowledge, wisdom, and experience that residents and community leaders bring to identifying challenges and designing innovative solutions to build inclusive, vibrant communities. Government and philanthropic leaders must invest in the sustainability of community-based organizations and strengthen their availability to serve their communities.

In addition, federal infrastructure policy has too often short-changed communities of color, leaving them disconnected from opportunity to generate and lead recovery efforts. Policymakers and funders must invest resources in community-serving nonprofits to generate inclusive policy responses and allow communities to define their own recovery and rebuilding efforts. Using a racial equity impact analysis to determine who is being most burdened and harmed by the virus and its economic consequences will ensure that response and recovery practices and policies will benefit those most impacted.

For example, out of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, many residents started community-based organizations dedicated to rebuilding New Orleans. The 9th Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA) was created shortly after the storm to take charge of the Ninth Ward's future. This meant counseling families, coordinating actions, and challenging the state to distribute resources more equitably. NENA began working with the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority to transfer land for redevelopment, bringing back the entire neighborhood blocks at a time by making sure homes were clustered in certain areas, securing infrastructure to support the neighborhood, and supporting community businesses to ensure money remained in the community. Developers began adopting this strategy across the most damaged and blighted portions of the city.

Provide financial support for state and local governments

State and local governments must be well-positioned to support residents and partner with communities to ensure the [100 million people](#) who are economically insecure in this country emerge from this crisis stronger. The pressures on state and local budgets from addressing the current public health and economic crisis are expected to be significantly worse than those they experienced during the Great Recession. Already, a record number of people are turning to states for Medicaid, unemployment benefits, and other forms of public assistance all while state revenue streams, such as sales taxes, are declining. Experts estimate that state budget [shortfalls could total \\$500 billion](#) over the next year. Because state and local governments must balance their operating budgets, even during a recession, these increased costs will likely lead to cutting programs and laying off public employees, including teachers. While federal policymakers have provided some emergency fiscal relief, states urgently need more substantial funding through both Medicaid and flexible funding streams. Congress should also give direct aid to local governments for critical public services, such as public transportation and utilities, which are seeing huge losses in revenue.

Responses should also recognize the unique challenges that arise in different geographic areas. Urban areas are already experiencing overburdened public health systems and challenges to social distancing that may be particularly acute for people of color, frontline service and health-care workers, and immigrants, who are more likely to live in crowded housing, use public transportation, and face water shutoffs. Smaller cities and lower income suburbs lack the infrastructure of their larger counterparts and will likely see fewer resources and diminished giving. And more rural areas have less access to critical public infrastructure (e.g., broadband internet, health services, high-quality water systems).

Federal investments must direct state and local officials—governors, legislators, agency heads—to create governance tables that include the informed perspectives of nonprofit and community leaders of the most-impacted communities, and enable these leaders to hold the government accountable for addressing community needs. Federal investments should allow states and localities to engage effectively in channeling funds where they are needed most and effectively prioritize longer term recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Invest in physical infrastructure in high-need communities

This moment spotlights the need to bolster national investments in public health and community infrastructure, particularly in communities hit worst by health inequities. Investing in physical infrastructure is critical to achieving health and prosperity for communities. Developed with a focus on racial equity, such investments can ensure that historically underserved and marginalized communities can be healthy and safe, and can offer the resilience needed for all to recover and thrive. Investing in the physical infrastructure of disinvested communities can restore the aging systems of water, transportation, housing, and toxic remediation that have outsized impacts on community health, and can create new pathways for work and business opportunities in the communities most impacted by COVID-19 job losses.

Investing in long-term community infrastructure is a highly efficient mechanism for bolstering community health and a strong economy while providing needed services and supports. As the economy continues to falter, millions more Americans will face ongoing economic and health challenges. An equitable approach to reviving the economy and rebuilding from this crisis includes:

- Reinvesting in public goods including public health and health-care infrastructure
- Improving and expanding resilient water and stormwater systems, broadband connectivity, transportation systems, and other community infrastructure
- Providing robust acquisition funds to secure land and housing for community-controlled affordable housing, and to stave off predatory land grabs and transfers of wealth
- Setting aside 1 percent of all infrastructure investments to cultivate a new generation of inclusive workforce and small-business development systems for residents and firms in the most-impacted communities

A focus on physical infrastructure investment can address crumbling systems, deferred maintenance, and the health risks associated with substandard infrastructure, laying the foundation for healthy communities of opportunity where all can thrive. An estimated [\\$2 trillion in infrastructure](#) is needed in the US by 2025 to address failing systems. Rebuilding this infrastructure in an equitable way can deliver significant economic benefits to low-income communities.

Conclusion

Investing in the strength of our community infrastructure and ensuring state and local governments engage frontline leaders in prioritizing community needs is the best path to guaranteeing the health of our communities and their economic recovery. Make your voice heard by contacting your local, state, and federal leaders and demand they take these actions and invest in our community infrastructure. Stay connected to our work by visiting policylink.org/covid19-and-race.



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