

JUNE 19, 2023

COMMENTARY DETROIT FREE PRESS

# Opinion: On Juneteenth, let's take stock of race in America since 2020 protests

Michael Rafferty

[View Comments](#)

Our newest federal holiday, Juneteenth, celebrates the end of slavery, a pivotal time in race relations in this nation. A hundred years later, the Civil Rights movement was another critical era in the quest for equality. Where are we as a nation today?

This summer marks 56 years since the Detroit uprising. Just three short years ago, 2020, marks what I believe was the next essential moment in race relations in the United States. Americans watched in horror as George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, died from unmitigated police force on camera. This was also during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Michigan and other states saw a huge disparity in who was dying of this disease. In those early days, 40% of the deaths due to the virus were Black individuals.



Our nation experienced a collective racial awakening. Conversations about biased law enforcement practices and the inequities in health care for Black communities were seemingly taking place everywhere, by everyone. The Black Lives Matter movement elicited pledges from corporations and organizations to do better in providing equal treatment and opportunity. We started seeing changes in our culture. We started seeing more diverse content offered in entertainment and news outlets. NASCAR barred the Confederate flag at its events. When National Football League quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the National Anthem prior to 2020, it was considered unpatriotic. In 2020, it was understood.

A whopping 60% of Americans in 2020 were convinced there was a problem around race.

But where are we now?



There is still a massive wealth and income gap against Black people due to a continued biased in banking practices, hiring practices and upward advancements in the workplace. Black women are still dying in childbirth at a rate three times that of white women. The rate of infant mortality is almost three times for black babies than for white babies.

Three years later, are we still motivated to make significant changes?

We may have had an awakening in 2020, but we have lost momentum and commitment. There is collective fatigue around race. “Woke” was not a pejorative in 2020, but for many, it is now. And America has an attention span problem as fast as the 24/7 news cycle.

So where do we go from here? We cannot say we are blind to the disparities we have all witnessed and realized. We must continue the drumbeat and call for change even if people aren’t necessarily ready to hear it. Change isn’t comfortable for the privileged.

In the wake of 2020, real conversations around reparations were finally starting. Although this is a topic that has periodically reared its head since the Civil War, it has yet to gain enough momentum to be put into action nationwide. A California reparations task force is making recommendations. Some city governments, such as Detroit, are taking on this as well. One city or state cannot make us whole. This will take national effort. Will it take still more generations to dismantle system racism?

We need to convert our pledges into action. Fair access to public spaces, healthcare resources, and financial institutions must be a national effort and while it’s a mammoth undertaking, it needs to be mandatory if we want this nation to be truly the democracy we claim to be.



We need to get to a point where the color of someone's skin doesn't equate to a different reaction, reality, and experience whether it's in the workplace, out to dinner, getting a bank loan or appraisal, or getting pulled over by a police officer. At New Detroit, we have programs in our Just Institute designed to address inequities within industries and organizations in health care, law enforcement, banking, hospitality and in city gentrification that is not inclusive and unwelcoming to people of Color. programs like these train professionals to be aware of systemic racism and provide tools to combat it.

We begin with the question, "Where are we now?" to start the conversation on how we can move from stagnation to actual change.

The next question I pose is: "Will you convert your pledge against racism into action?"

*Michael Rafferty is president and CEO of New Detroit.*

[View Comments](#)