Power Play:

How Monopolies Leverage Systemic Racism to Dominate Markets, and What We Can Do to Democratize Economic Power

By Susan R. Holmberg

With a foreword by Jeremie Greer, Liberation in a Generation

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ILSR INSTITUTE FOR Local Self-Reliance

About the Institute for Local Self-Reliance

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a national research and advocacy organization that partners with allies across the country to build an American economy driven by local priorities and accountable to people and the planet. Whether it's fighting back against the outsize power of monopolies like Amazon, ensuring high-quality locally driven broadband service for all, or advocating to keep local renewable energy in the community that produced it, ILSR advocates for solutions that harness the power of citizens and communities. More at **www.ilsr.org**.

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Foreword

By Jeremie Greer, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of Liberation in a Generation

"What's race got to do with it?" This is a familiar question posed to those in the racial justice movement. It's a frustrating question because our economic systems — and the people who shape them — intentionally ignore the impact that systemic racism and white supremacy have on the well-being of Black and Brown people. The truth is that the answer is always the same: **EVERYTHING.**

This question loomed in 2020, when my colleague and Liberation in a Generation (LibGen) co-founder, Solana Rice, and I began looking into the relationship between systemic racism and monopoly power. We were invited into the existing antimonopoly advocacy space by colleagues at the Economic Security Project and the Athena Coalition. Upon entering, we quickly realized that the predominant economic analysis by many antimonopoly advocates was largely race neutral and did not adequately explain the outsize impact that monopoly power has on people and communities of color. So, with the guidance of longtime colleagues in the wider economic justice movement and our new friends and partners in the antimonopoly movement, we began to examine this relationship. Our exploration culminated in the publication of the paper, *Anti-Monopoly Activism: Reclaiming Power Through Racial Justice*.[1] We describe the many ways that monopoly power harms Black and Brown people and suggest that the surest way to curb it is through grassroots activism led by people of color. At the time, it was one of few works that made this explicit connection between systemic racism and monopoly power.

In the paper, we argue that monopoly power is a driver of what we at LibGen call the "oppression economy." The oppression economy uses the racist tools of theft, exclusion, and exploitation to strip wealth from people of color so that the elite can build their wealth. In this oppression economy, racism is profitable, and it fuels a cycle of oppression that depresses the economic vitality of people of color, suppresses our political power, and obstructs our ability to utilize democracy to change the economic rules that make racism profitable in the first place. Monopolies thrive in an oppression economy by extracting scarce and precious resources from

Photo Credit: Sarah Deragon

Black and Brown communities, excluding Black and Brown consumers, and exploiting Black and Brown workers. This cycle is how monopolies increased their profits and expanded their wealth in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2022, and historic levels of inflation in 2023 and 2024. Our mission as racial justice activists is to build a “liberation economy” where all people of color have their basic needs met, are safe and secure, are valued (and compensated for that value), and belong in all of our intersecting identities.

> *“Monopolies thrive in an oppression economy by extracting scarce and precious resources from Black and Brown communities, excluding Black and Brown consumers, and exploiting Black and Brown workers.”*

Power Play is a critically important contribution to the emerging cross-movement effort to dismantle the oppression economy and build a liberation economy. It substantially expands the wealth of knowledge that our movement is building to inform strategies to curb the monopoly power that large corporations wield to oppress Black and Brown people and communities. As only they can, ILSR skillfully illustrates the real and concrete impact that large national monopolies have on communities of color at the local level. They highlight examples that are soberingly close to the lived experience of Black and Brown workers, consumers, people, and communities. By focusing on monopolies in the grocery, pharmacy, waste, and banking industries, they zoom in on how large, complicated regulatory antimonopoly policies have concrete impacts on Black and Brown people struggling to navigate the oppression economy.

Further, *Power Play* masterfully elevates local activism led by grassroots organizers of color who are turning the tide on monopoly power in local communities across the country. For example, the report elevates how grocery chains, such as Walmart and Family Dollar, exploit historically racist housing policies (e.g., redlining), which have residentially segregated cities, to then exploit Black and Brown communities and crush Black and Brown small businesses. To illustrate this, *Power Play* elevates local advocacy efforts, including that of the Oasis Fresh Market in North Tulsa, Okla., which is pushing back against the grocery conglomerates. The real-life examples of the impacts of monopoly power, and the heroism of the Black and Brown people fighting against it, are the gifts that ILSR has provided to the movement through the publication of *Power Play*. This report emphatically reaffirms a very clear answer to a very stubborn question: **Race has EVERYTHING to do with it.**

Preface

> *"While our movements must fight for power at all levels of government, it is at the local level that organized people can often have the most direct impact — and most clearly see how organizing can lead to tangible benefits in their daily lives."*

Lauren Jacobs,
Executive Director of PowerSwitch Action[2]

Step Up Louisiana has been organizing protests at dollar stores to push the chains for better worker conditions, adequate staffing, better wages, in-store security systems, and more.

Photo Credit: Step Up Louisiana

Amid a global pandemic and the unyielding endemic of police brutality reaching a new fever pitch, 2020 gave way to the most sustained civil rights protests in decades, emboldening calls for centering racial justice in policy platforms at all levels. At the same time, the antimonopoly movement emerged at the forefront of the fight to confront the last half-century of unchecked economic power.

In 2021, Liberation in a Generation — an organization leading the charge to build the power of people of color to transform the economy — published a groundbreaking report connecting the dots between racial injustice in the U.S. and historic levels of concentrated corporate power. *Anti-Monopoly Activism: Reclaiming Power Through Racial Justice* spelled out a fundamental truth about the American economy: Major corporations use racism every day to amass economic and political power.[3]

> "Racism is profitable, and it fuels a cycle of oppression that depresses the economic vitality of people of color, suppresses our political power, and obstructs our ability to utilize democracy to change economic rules that make racism profitable in the first place."[4]

The report's impact reverberated throughout the antimonopoly movement, highlighting two urgent needs: First, organizers of color must be positioned as key leaders in the antimonopoly movement. Second, policymakers need a deep bench of in-depth analysis and evidence showing how monopolies wield structural racism to accumulate profit and power and how corporate concentration disproportionately harms communities of color.

This report is the Institute for Local Self-Reliance's answer to that call.

Power Play stems from our work on community-based power and community-built solutions. We believe that local community power is essential for building racial justice and that private economic power must be broadly dispersed to sustain it. By learning from the groups that we work with on the ground — citizen activists and advocates fighting to restrict corporate chains, local officials promoting policies that cultivate local economies, small businesses and entrepreneurs meeting the needs of their communities — we have developed an analysis of monopoly power and its local effects that communities can use to reclaim local power. For example, community organizing groups incorporated our analysis of Amazon's monopoly power to successfully pressure Amazon to abandon its plan to put its second headquarters in Long Island City, N.Y.[5] Armed with our research, reporting, and technical guidance on how to fight dollar store chains, communities of color in North Tulsa, Okla., Atlanta, and beyond are fighting back against predatory dollar store encroachment and creating their own community grocery stores.[6] And through our hands-on training, Tribal Nations that have been ignored by telecom conglomerates are building their own high-speed wireless and fiber-optic Internet networks.[7]

"We believe that local community power is essential for building racial justice and that private economic power must be broadly dispersed to sustain it."

Power Play also draws from our on-the-ground activism with the Athena Coalition, an alliance of over 50 grassroots and advocacy organizations joining together to stop Amazon's growing, powerful grip over our society. Since its inception in 2019, which ILSR played a key role in, coalition partners have achieved historic wins at the federal, state, and local levels in large part because the organizing reflected the experiences and impacts of monopoly power on communities of color. Recently, the Minnesota State Legislature passed the strongest warehouse worker protection law in the U.S. because Amazon workers organized with the Awood Center — a worker-led organization building the next generation of leaders in Minnesota's East African communities.

And while we provide a range of local tools for communities to protect themselves against corporate giants and build vibrant, local economies, we can't win with a bottom-up strategy alone. *Power Play* draws from ILSR's research and advocacy for the big categories of federal and state policy — antitrust, tax, and finance, to name a few — that structure economic power and determine what is possible. For decades, corporations have used federal economic policies to help impede local power, from lax antitrust enforcement and a tax code riddled with loopholes that small businesses can't maneuver to financial deregulation that has fueled corporate consolidation. Communities fighting dollar store chains need federal antitrust laws, such as the Robinson-Patman Act, to be vigorously enforced so that predatory chains cannot leverage their power over the supply chain to drive local grocers out of business.[8] Federal and state governments also have a fundamental role to play in investing capital to foster healthy communities. Funds from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act provided an unprecedented opportunity to support small businesses and build their local economies.[9] And it is federal dollars that are helping germinate those Tribal broadband projects. Direct government action is critical to curtailing corporate dominance, strengthening the small businesses that serve communities of color, and empowering communities to chart their own course.

Our Language on Race

Following our allies, we use the terms “people of color,” “workers of color,” and so forth, not to erase distinct identities but to acknowledge the shared experiences of white supremacy. We also want to recognize that people in Latino/a/x communities identify in many different ways, and we chose “Latine” for this report to reflect the gender-neutral alternative. However, when we draw from research publications that use “Hispanic” to describe ethnic identity, we also use it to preserve accuracy since these two terms do not hold the same exact meaning.

We also want to acknowledge this report’s omissions. In doing a deep dive on monopoly power and structural racism, *Power Play* neglects to deeply examine the intersection of race and gender, including that provided by the Black Women Best framework.[10] It also predominantly focuses on Black Americans, only drawing examples of other races and ethnicities, particularly Latine and Indigenous groups, when the research evidence was at hand. We hope that our academic and advocacy partners in the antimonopoly space will pursue and develop these research pathways. They are crucial to the growing body of analysis on the intersections of race and monopoly power.

This report is an offering from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance to the movements for racial justice and a fair, democratic economy. ILSR affirms Liberation in a Generation’s declaration that racism is profitable and that, to build a liberation economy, we must explain how corporate giants leverage structural racism to build their market power. We believe that no matter who’s in power at the federal level or the condition of national politics, we must prioritize local communities in this fight. Through collective action, we can change the terms and conditions of our economy and restore the safety, freedom, and opportunity taken from communities of color through corporate concentration and power.

Introduction

"Antimonopoly is really about the relationship between democracy and corporate power."

Lina Khan,
Chair of the Federal Trade Commission[11]

After decades of unchallenged consolidation, antimonopoly fervor is growing in the United States, with a renewed recognition that corporate concentration is a deep systemic problem. However, even as the movement gains influence to affect policy, the racial oppression that is embedded in American capitalism continues to hamper our ability to democratize economic and political power.

This report makes the case that while tackling monopoly power is crucial to achieving racial justice, targeting structural racism is also essential to dismantling monopoly power. Through four industry case studies, this report illustrates how dominant corporations have leveraged structural racism as a tactic to eliminate competition and control markets. The central thesis of *Power Play* is that racial disparity is not merely an outcome of monopoly power but rather a means by which corporations attain it. By identifying racial exploitation as a strategy that can fuel monopolization, this report aims to both advance racial justice and sharpen our ability to combat concentrated corporate power.

Liberty vs. Oppression: Two Strands in America's History

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom magnified the connection between civil rights and economic justice.

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The United States carries two opposing strands in its history: the populist will to democratize power and the malignant impulse to oppress and exclude racial groups, often for the purpose of accumulating wealth. Antimonopoly is a worldview about how to structure the governance and ownership of our economy. The end goal is not market competition in and of itself — it's freedom and democracy by way of checking and balancing the accumulation and exercise of private economic power. The notion of racial capitalism, on the other hand, is the recognition that the U.S. economy is shaped and fueled by the exploitation of people of color and has been for our entire history.[12] We cannot understand the current American economy without understanding how structural racism is leveraged to accumulate (white) wealth. Structural racism works in service of monopoly power.

"Antimonopoly is a worldview about how to structure the governance and ownership of our economy. The end goal is not market competition in and of itself — it's freedom and democracy by way of checking and balancing the accumulation and exercise of private economic power."

The countervailing tension between these two strands in our history helps explain why we have yet to realize the dream of a democratic and fair economy. The American Revolution was, in part, about overthrowing unaccountable power, both corporate — in the form of the British East India Company — and political — in the form of the British Empire. Early state limits on corporate accumulations of power were conceived as a kind of check-and-balance mechanism to safeguard democracy, similar to checks and balances among the branches of the federal government. But just as structural racism sharply constrained the American ideal for truly democratic political governance, so too has structural racism, throughout our history, impeded our ability to check monopolies and democratize economic power.

One crushing example of this came at the end of the Civil War, when momentum was gathering around the idea of pairing freedom for the formerly enslaved with the breakup of the land monopolies that had formed a key structural feature of the slave economy. The promise of 40 acres and a mule embodied that dual vision, but the U.S. did not follow through; freed Black Americans held a glimpse of political and economic rights before they were stripped away in a white supremacist backlash that relegated them to a system of sharecropping. As a result, those in power perpetuated the monopoly control of land, upon which they built a system of labor and concentrated control over production strikingly similar to slavery. Today's vast inequalities in power and wealth are rooted, in part, in this early failure to reach for that dual vision of racial liberation and economic democracy.

Even as the rights of people of color have inched forward, powerful elites have repeatedly played out this dynamic, using racism to defeat laws that check corporate power. For example, driven by an alliance of segregationists and big business to defeat inter-racial union solidarity and power-building, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act rolled back New Deal worker-organizing rights. In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, political actors were making the depletion of our social safety net palatable for white voters through a deliberate strategy — the "Southern Strategy" — to harness our country's racial divides, particularly through dog whistles such as the "welfare queen." Decades later, the racial coding of "subprime borrowers" contributed to the lack of accountability and restitution paid by Wall Street for the global financial crisis.

Nevertheless, there was a period of time when strong antimonopoly policies and enforcement helped to alleviate racial hierarchy and foster empowerment. Despite the deep discrimination and segregation of the time, including among New Deal policies, the mid-twentieth century produced a cluster of laws that constrained the economic power of elites and amplified the political agency and economic well-being of people and communities, including many communities of color. These policies — strong antitrust enforcement and worker protections, higher tax rates on corporations and the wealthy, a financial industry structured to meet the needs of local communities — worked in concert to democratize economic power, fuel widespread prosperity, and narrow the racial income and wealth gaps. They also helped foster thriving business districts in Black communities, such as Dorr Street in Toledo, Ohio, Rondo in St. Paul, Minn., and North Tulsa, Okla., which were strongholds of Black economic vitality, culture, and political activism.

"Today's vast inequalities in power and wealth are rooted, in part, in this early failure to reach for that dual vision of racial liberation and economic democracy."

This trajectory, however, didn't last. On the heels of gains made by the Civil Rights movement came the rise of neoliberalism, which swept through the fields of law and economics beginning in the late 1970s. Under the guise of free market rhetoric, neoliberalism celebrated bigness and corporate scale, resulting in a radical change in how antitrust laws were interpreted and enforced. After Ronald Reagan's presidential election, the antitrust agencies and federal judges began to abandon long-established goals of decentralizing power and protecting the economic liberties of people as workers, farmers, and small business owners. Instead, antitrust enforcement was reconfigured to favor consolidation on the misguided theory that big business delivered greater efficiencies for so-called consumer welfare. One manifestation of this is the Federal Trade Commission's (FTC) 1982 merger guidelines, which reflected this pivot and ignited a merger spree across the economy.[13] The agencies also stopped enforcing the Robinson Patman Act, a law designed to prevent dominant retailers from bullying suppliers for favorable prices. Meanwhile, a series of Supreme Court decisions made it increasingly difficult to stop anticompetitive tactics, including predatory pricing.[14] These changes were embraced by both liberals and conservatives and were part of a larger neoliberal project to concentrate the wealth of white elites and decimate broad collective power.

After decades in which the Black-white income gap narrowed — partly a result of strong economic policies, along with the gains of the Civil Rights movement — the neoliberal turn in policy brought this to an end. Between 1940 and 1980, the earnings of Black men rose from 45 percent of white male earnings to 73 percent, but there has been no real progress in the four decades since. Wealth is now as concentrated as it was at the start of the Great Depression, and average wealth holdings for Black families is 10 percent that of white families.[15]

Market concentration is at levels that we have not seen since the Gilded Age when robber barons controlled the railroads, the steel and oil industries, and the banks. Monopolies today, from Big Tech to Big Waste to Big Pharma, have used an arsenal of anticompetitive tactics to eliminate their competitors and gain dominance — buying up smaller companies, using Wall Street bankrolls to charge prices below cost, selling on the same online platforms that they control — all of which, and many more, have made our economy more unequal and less resilient. (So much for "consumer welfare.") Among this arsenal of predatory tactics, monopolies have weaponized structural racism to amass market power and profit.

Leveraging Racism Is a Monopoly Tactic

There are distinct patterns in the ways that corporations leverage racial hierarchy to gain dominance. One strategy is to drive rapid growth by strategically siting noxious facilities in low-income communities of color that lack the political power to fight back, as Amazon has done with its warehouses and Waste Management Inc. with its landfills. Another is to crush the small local businesses that are committed to communities of color, leaving residents either reliant on expensive, substandard substitutes — bank-affiliated payday lenders instead of banks, dollar stores instead of grocery stores — or compelled to travel elsewhere for basic services. Still another tactic is to use the political influence that invariably accompanies growing market power to block public options — in areas like broadband and healthcare, for example — that would free communities from the grip of a monopoly.

To illustrate these patterns and their impacts, *Power Play* draws from ILSR's decades of expertise in four key industries: the grocery sector, pharmacies, the waste industry, and banking.

Section 2 summarizes what we see as the key tactics monopolistic corporations deploy across these industries as well as from research evidence on other sectors. The four sections that follow dive deeper into each of the four industries to show how dominant corporations have exploited structural racism to amass economic power and the harms that this has caused.

"We maintain that the path to racial equity is squarely about policy change, with the growth of businesses owned and controlled by communities of color as one important way to measure progress."

Each of these industry case studies also zeros in on solutions. While we see the creation of businesses that are locally owned and community rooted as one crucial way to counter concentration and expand the economic agency of communities of color, our approach differs radically from that of neoliberalism. For decades, neoliberalism held out Black entrepreneurship as a viable solution to Black poverty, even as neoliberal policies in areas such as antitrust, finance, and trade gutted the basic underpinnings of community vitality and ensured local businesses had little chance of surviving in a world designed to funnel power to corporate executives and shareholders. Under neoliberalism, the idea of Black business creation served as a mirage, deflecting attention from deliberate policy decisions and allowing the powerful people behind those decisions to sidestep accountability by blaming people of color for their inability to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." We maintain that the path to racial equity is squarely about policy change, with the growth of businesses owned and controlled by communities of color as one important way to measure progress.

Power Play closes by offering a policy framework that reflects the truest meaning of antimonopoly — an antiracist vision that seeks to democratize economic power for everyone, using the full range of policy tools in our toolbox at every level of government.

The Way Forward

We contend that not addressing the ways that dominant corporations weaponize structural racism is holding the U.S. back from realizing the antimonopoly vision of a democratic, fair, and equitable economy. This is true as a matter of policy. It is also true as a matter of politics. For too long, wealthy elites have stoked division and racist backlash to block the passage of broadly popular policies that would shift economic power to everyday Americans — of all races.

An antimonopoly vision with a clear and direct racial analysis has the power to build cross-racial solidarity. Many communities have been marginalized by monopoly power over the last several decades, including rural and low-income white communities that stand to benefit from rebalancing power away from outsized corporations to build a vibrant job market, stronger small businesses, and resilient communities.

This vision of antimonopoly also has the power to draw in policy leaders and advocates who may not (yet) identify as antimonopolists but who have fought against corporate harm in other spheres. It has the potential to unite, under one banner, leaders who are fighting for individual issues — racial justice, workers' rights, a clean environment, affordable health care, and more. These are all pieces of a larger whole to distribute economic power and build a world free from the harm of monopoly power.

A Breakdown of the Key Monopoly Tactics That Leverage Structural Racism

The power of dominant corporations is by no means the only structural force that has harmed and held back communities of color. Monopoly tactics are embedded in a larger web of structural discrimination that has shaped every dimension of life for communities of color. New Deal labor laws excluded predominantly Black agricultural and domestic workers from its protections. The same era's redlining and racist lending practices blocked homeownership and wealth building in communities of color. Across the country, interstate highways, so-called urban renewal, and mob violence gutted historically Black business districts and the surrounding neighborhoods. Once home to over 100 businesses, Toledo, Ohio's Dorr Street has never been the same.[16] Tulsa's once thriving Greenwood neighborhood, also known as "Black Wall Street," was decimated twice, once by a violent mob that killed hundreds of people and burned hundreds of homes and later by the Crosstown Expressway that spliced the Greenwood neighborhood and paved over homes and businesses.[17]

Monopoly power, however, uniquely imposes its own violence to build dominance. Large corporations have the ability to systematically exploit structural racism to give them more wealth and more market and political power. In this report, we evaluate four different sectors to closely examine how this interconnected relationship plays out. Here, we summarize what we see as the key tactics arising from these case studies as well as from other research evidence.

Locating Noxious Facilities in Communities That Lack Political Influence

We find that, in some sectors, monopolies have gained market dominance, in part, by locating harmful or polluting facilities in communities that lack the political sway and resources to effectively push back. These are often low-income communities and predominantly Black and Latine communities. A striking illustration of this, as we detail in our case studies, is Waste Management, Inc.'s siting of its toxic incinerators and dumps in communities of color as part

Photo credit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/gazeronly/

of a multifaceted strategy to monopolize the waste sector. The same is true for fossil fuel and energy conglomerates, which have a history of locating their polluting facilities in communities of color.[18] Similarly, Amazon locates a disproportionate share of its fulfillment warehouses, which generate intense air pollution from truck traffic, in communities of color while steering higher-quality facilities to whiter regions.[19] During Amazon's search for its second headquarters, for example, the corporation passed over Westphalia Town Center, Md., which has a significant Black professional class, yet it tried to put one of its warehouses there. As one resident put it during a town meeting, "What I have noticed — it's not singling out Amazon — is that businesses tend to put their industrial locations in Black communities. They tend to put their corporate facilities in other locations that don't look like this room right here."[20]

Stripping Communities of Local Businesses and Basic Services

A key premise of the neoliberal antitrust policy that took hold in the 1980s was the idea that consolidation would be good for consumers. It was assumed that giant corporations would outperform in terms of delivering goods and services at low cost. That's why our antitrust agencies willfully ignored big corporations deploying all of the standard monopoly tactics, including anticompetitive mergers, price discrimination, and predatory pricing to wipe out the competition, particularly that of the many smaller, independent businesses that once served communities of color.

"The fact that the so-called consumer welfare standard — the doctrine that has dominated antitrust policy since the 1980s — has left many consumers of color without access to fundamental goods and services is a stunning failure to deliver on a promise, however disingenuous that promise was."

Much is lost when independent businesses are eradicated in communities of color. Workers face a much more concentrated and limited labor market, which compels them to accept lower wages and subpar conditions.[21] Communities lose an essential mechanism for wealth building amid a widening racial wealth gap. Everyone loses innovations when entrepreneurs of color can't access capital and bring their products and services to markets. It also undermines community power and resiliency. Research tells us that small businesses provide sites for community support and building political capacity. As Brandi Collins-Dexter, activist, scholar, and author of *Black Skinhead*, explains, "Black-owned businesses have supplied critical leadership, spaces for organizing, and financial support for civil rights movements then and now."[22]

As the industry case studies illustrate, once a local grocery or pharmacy has been muscled out by a dominant chain, or a large bank buys up neighborhood branches, they often abandon communities, either closing the stores or never filling the vacancy that their monopoly tactics created. This allows dominant corporations to consolidate market share even as they cut costs. Senator Sherrod Brown underscored this strategy at an oversight hearing in which he addressed the CEOs of the nation's seven largest banks: "You profit from all those transactions — to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. With those profits — and with the taxpayer support you get — come a responsibility to actually serve your customers and the larger economy. And I think you know you don't always hold up your end of the bargain."[23]

Aaron Johnson, owner of the only grocery store in North Tulsa, Okla., explained the far-reaching effects: "There are medical deserts, there are educational deserts, there are public health deserts, there are broadband deserts, entrepreneurship deserts, and homeownership deserts. But most importantly, [there is] the intrinsic hope desert. That cycle of generational poverty continues over and over."[24]

When we think of monopoly tactics, we tend to think of aggression, not the absence of a product or service. However, the fact that the so-called consumer welfare standard — the doctrine that has dominated antitrust policy since the 1980s — has left many consumers of color without access to fundamental goods and services is a stunning failure to deliver on a promise, however disingenuous that promise was.

Exploiting Workers of Color

Monopolies can use their power not only to fleece consumers but also to steal from workers. The concentration of employer power has driven down wages, degraded working conditions, and forced many people to rely on precarious "gig" jobs.[25] And it's people of color who have borne a disproportionate share of this theft. One striking example is Amazon's takeover of the logistics sector. By leveraging its monopoly in e-commerce, Amazon has built a formidable market position in warehousing and shipping. In 2023, it delivered more packages than UPS and FedEx and is on its way to overtaking the United States Postal Service (USPS).[26] Amazon has flexed its growing power as a dominant buyer of labor in this sector to drive down wages and subject workers to an unsafe and grueling pace of work.[27] As a result, workers in Amazon facilities face markedly higher injury rates than the sector as a whole. By cutting corners and costs, Amazon has driven its market advantage over competing unionized shippers, even as these entities, including UPS and USPS, look to mimic Amazon's low-road practices. All the while, Amazon has delivered enormous wealth to a handful of top executives and shareholders. Nearly two-thirds of Amazon's senior managers and executives are white, while just 6 percent are Black. Among those laboring in its warehouses, three-quarters are people of color, with Black workers alone accounting for one-third.[28]

Imposing High Prices and Substandard Services on Communities That Have No Alternatives

Not all dominant corporations abandon communities of color, particularly when there is profit to be made by setting up a two-tiered system that provides worse quality and charges higher prices. Often in metro areas, the dominant Internet Service Providers do serve low-income communities and communities of color, but the connection is less reliable and much more expensive.[29] In the financial industry, subprime mortgages are the most notorious example, but big banks continue

"Not all dominant corporations abandon communities of color, particularly when there is profit to be made by setting up a two-tiered system that provides worse quality and charges higher prices."

this behavior by profiting from payday loans and predatory municipal finance while putting full-service branches in whiter and higher-income areas. Dollar store chains amass stores in Black and Latine communities to dominate the poverty grocery market while selling mostly processed, unhealthy food, often in smaller containers that disguise higher prices. By chronically understaffing their stores, dollar chains have sown violence in these neighborhoods, putting shoppers and workers at risk. In the prison system, private companies are securing monopoly contracts and price gouging incarcerated people and their families for vital services, including phone and video calls and digital messaging services.[30]

Using Surveillance and Algorithmic Discrimination to Manipulate and Profit From Communities of Color

By harnessing their unprecedented ability to amass and exploit data, Big Tech companies have pioneered new strategies for entrenching their power at the expense of people of color. Until recently, Amazon Ring held partnerships with over 2,000 law enforcement agencies, which means they were handing over video surveillance without warrants and thus fueling racist policing.[31] Amazon also uses surveillance to monitor its warehouse workers, the largest percentage being Black or Hispanic.[32] The company — which is facing unionization fights, in part, because of its use of surveillance to drive inhumane productivity standards — tracks organizing efforts through the handheld scanners used to monitor inventory and with cameras capturing their every move.[33]

Big Tech also profits from producing algorithmic bias and discrimination.[34] Facebook allows advertisers to exclude Black homebuyers from seeing ads in affluent neighborhoods. Facial recognition software more often misidentifies people of color as criminals than it does white people. As the research and advocacy organization Demos reported in 2021, "The algorithms and automated decisions that characterize data capitalism are based on data that reflects [the] deeply inequitable status quo."[35]

Blocking the Public Options That Compete with Dominant Corporations

Smaller companies aren't the only competitive targets of monopoly power. Public goods, which are so essential to racial liberation and equalizing economic well-being, are also a threat to corporate control. Dominant corporations have used their political influence to roll back existing goods and block new forms, all while designing regulations that favor their dominance. Big Pharma, in partnership with insurers and private hospital groups, spent $143 million total in 2018 alone in lobbying against a public option for insurance.[36] Amazon enjoys a sweetheart deal on standard parcel rates with USPS, leading to its rise as a dominant shipper and exacerbating the post office's financial problems such that it has shifted shipping costs onto its other customers, *"Public goods, which are so essential to racial liberation and equalizing economic well-being, are a threat to corporate control."*

including small businesses, and moved to squeeze its workers.[37] The big cable and telephone companies have lobbied to limit local authority to create municipal broadband networks. Additionally, laws in 17 states are written to divert communities' ability to create a public broadband service, reinforcing monopoly dominance and thwarting a future with better, more affordable service for underserved communities.[38]

Monopolies exploit and extract from the communities of color that have been abandoned and have the fewest alternatives. This is monopoly theft of labor power and income. Monopoly theft of wealth. Monopoly theft of health and the right to breathe clean air and drink clean water. Monopoly theft of privacy. Monopoly theft of safety. These monopoly thefts deepen long-standing structural disadvantages, allowing corporations to leverage these disparities to further consolidate their economic and political dominance.

Groceries

"I don't think it's an accident [dollar stores] proliferate in low socioeconomic and African American communities."

Vanessa Hall-Harper,
City Councilor, Tulsa, Okla., District 1[39]

The lack of supermarkets and the deluge of dollar stores in communities of color are direct consequences of corporate consolidation, abandonment, and predation in grocery retailing. The market power of Walmart and major dollar store chains, in particular, has made it more difficult to access fresh food and foster healthy communities.

That's why some community activists and city leaders are fighting back against dollar store encroachment and investing in local grocery stores. However, the dollar chains' predatory tactics also require federal action, particularly the revival of the Robinson Patman Act.

For 14 long years, everyday grocery shopping posed a challenge for those who lived in North Tulsa, Okla. This section of the city, which stretches for miles, lacked a single full-service grocery store until 2022, making it difficult for the district's predominantly Black residents to access fresh vegetables and other necessities. Despite Walmart, the nation's largest grocery retailer, boasting over two dozen stores in the Tulsa metro, those living near North Tulsa's Booker T. Washington High School faced a trek of over 7 miles to the nearest outlet. Public transit meant an hour-long journey involving two bus rides and a 15-minute walk. Alternatively, residents could venture to a Reasor's supermarket, a small Oklahoma-based chain, by walking 1.2 miles to a bus stop that ran only once every hour.

Photo Credit: Allison C. Severance, who is one of several organizers fighting Dollar General in Cascade, Md.

Faced with such a taxing trip, many residents turned to nearby dollar stores for groceries — with plenty of options nearby. Dollar General and Family Dollar, subsidiaries of Dollar Tree, operate more than 50 locations in Tulsa, with many situated on the northside. These stores offer a limited selection of groceries, primarily consisting of processed foods that are neither healthy nor cheap. While they stock cereal, chips, and frozen waffles, these dollar stores offer little to no fresh produce, dairy, or meat. Most items are intentionally sold in small packaging at “low” prices, but the cost per ounce often surpasses that of supermarkets.[40]

Many people assume that the proliferation of dollar stores is merely an outgrowth of poverty and that these chains fill a need in cash-strapped communities. However, as outlined in our report, *The Dollar Store Invasion*, ILSR concluded that these stores also cause economic distress.[41] By concentrating their presence among consumers of color — while also illegally flexing their muscle with suppliers — the dollar chains have captured a significant share of the market, making it almost impossible for a full-service grocery store to survive there.

Redlining, Grocery Consolidation, and Walmart

White flight, racial exclusion, and weak antitrust enforcement paved the way for major retailers to dominate the grocery sector in the U.S. The massive exodus of white city dwellers to the suburbs started in the 1950s and 1960s. They moved to not only avoid Black southerners migrating north but to obtain New Deal housing policies of the post-War years that were fueling segregation. While federal housing officials were “redlining” Black neighborhoods — marking maps in red to indicate high lending risk, which meant Black residents couldn’t get mortgages — white families were taking advantage of federally backed loan guarantees to buy homes on the outskirts of American cities. The burgeoning white affluent suburbs provided the perfect environment for the emergence of massive chain supermarkets and the consolidation of the grocery sector.[42]

Meanwhile, as the suburbs grew, antitrust enforcement was withering. In the 1970s and 1980s, enforcers at the FTC and Department of Justice (DOJ), which are tasked under the law with protecting fair markets, fell for a new, indiscriminate “bigger-is-better” ideology that spurred mergers across the economy, including in the grocery sector, and ultimately set the table for Walmart’s dominance.

Walmart deftly exploited the downshift in antitrust enforcement. It opened its first supercenter in 1988, a store format that combined the retailer’s regular array of merchandise with a full supermarket. Over the coming years, as Walmart was building thousands of these stores, blanketing one metro area after another, it muscled other retailers out of business by using its vast capital resources to engage in two potent anticompetitive tactics that had long been prohibited under U.S. antitrust law.[43] First, it sold key goods, and even entire product categories, at a loss until competing local retailers, unable to finance similar losses, went out of business — a tactic called “predatory pricing.” Second, Walmart used its power as a dominant buyer to bully suppliers into giving it discounts while then charging competing retailers higher prices — known as “price discrimination.”

By 2005, Walmart was the largest grocer in the country. Today, the retail behemoth controls more than 50 percent of the grocery sector in 43 metro areas and is one of the most profitable corporations in the U.S., making over $1.5 billion per day.[44]

Walmart's takeover of Tulsa was typical of its national strategy. Within a few years, the retailer opened dozens of locations — supercenters and stand-alone supermarkets — across the region and, by 2012, had captured 55 percent of the market.[45] It notably located all of these stores in the outer reaches of the city and its surrounding suburbs, which had two primary outcomes.

The first outcome was the exclusion of communities of color. Dr. Jerry Shannon, a geographer at the University of Georgia, refers to this location strategy as "supermarket redlining," a term that, he argues, "highlights how the locational decisions of food retailers are evidence of intentional disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color."[46]

The second effect of Walmart's location strategy was the capture of customers who had the means to travel away from grocery stores located in the city. Competing supermarkets closed in droves; the hardest hit were small, locally owned grocery chains and independent supermarkets — the types of grocers most prevalent in Black and Latine communities.

When Walmart, Kroger, and other big chains elect not to open a store in a community of color, their decision is based on their expected return and how it will reward their shareholders. For local, independent grocery store owners, the calculus is very different. These entrepreneurs tend to share deep connections with their customers and the neighborhoods where they are doing business, often residing in the same communities. It's personal for them and for the community members who depend on the store.

As these communities of color lost their grocers, Walmart had no incentive to fill the gaps, and healthy food options dried up. The results can be seen in national research on food access. According to a 2014 study from Johns Hopkins, "at equal levels of poverty, [B]lack census tracts had the fewest supermarkets [and] white tracts had the most."[47] Today, one out of every five Black households is now living in a "food desert."[48] In fact, the concept of food deserts — as a way to describe neighborhoods and towns lacking adequate food access — surfaced in the early to mid-1990s, coinciding with chain supermarkets vacating neighborhoods and cities to build bigger stores in the suburbs.[49]

Here Comes the Predator Species: Dollar Store Chains

With corporate control over the grocery sector, dollar store chains, which offer little to no fresh food options, were enabled to aggressively come in and saturate communities, moving in with the "force of an invasive species let loose on a denuded landscape."[50] On Tulsa's northside, there are so many dollar stores in the neighborhood "that they are literally on top of each other," explained Vanessa Hall-Harper, the city councilor who represents the area.[51]

The same pattern has unfolded in city after city. ILSR mapped dollar store locations across several metro areas and found that Dollar General and Family Dollar appear to target their predatory, market-saturation strategy on communities of color.[52] In Washington D.C., for example, more than

40 dollar stores occupy the predominantly Black eastern half of the metro area, while the mostly white western half of the metro is home to only two. In metro Atlanta, the two chains have opened more than 100 outlets. Many are clustered in the western and southern parts of the city, where half a million, mostly Black residents live in neighborhoods without grocery stores. In Philadelphia, Pa., there are more than 100 dollar stores within the city limits; almost all are concentrated in neighborhoods with large Black populations.[53]

In 2021, Dr. Jerry Shannon, the aforementioned geographer, confirmed this connection between dollar store locations and racial divides. Looking at 27 metro regions — controlling for household income and other factors — he found "a significant association between proximity to dollar stores and patterns of racial segregation," with dollar stores more concentrated in communities of color. The companies' location strategy feeds "a long history of racial discrimination and economic exclusion."[54]

"As these communities of color lost their grocers, Walmart had no incentive to fill the gaps, and healthy food options dried up."

Meanwhile, the dollar store chains have taken a page from Walmart's anticompetitive playbook. Dollar General and Dollar Tree have leveraged their power as dominant buyers of packaged foods to compel suppliers to give them lower prices and special package sizes while charging competing independent grocers more and restricting the products available to them. These tactics are illegal under the Robinson-Patman Act, a 1936 antitrust law. Until very recent moves by the Biden Administration, however, this law hasn't been enforced since the 1970s as part of the broad effort to weaken antitrust.[55]

The result of dollar chains' exploitative strategies within such a weak regulatory climate is that nearly half of all new stores that opened in the U.S. in 2022 were chain dollar stores — an unprecedented growth rate in the history of the retail industry.[56] Wall Street investors recognize that the dollar chains' success flows directly from concentration in food retailing and the decline of independent grocers — and they can't get enough. "'Food deserts' are [Family Dollar's] sweet spot," said investment analyst Ann Natunewicz.[57] Todd Vasos, the C.E.O. of Dollar General, put it plainly on a call with investors: "We do very good in good times, and we do fabulous in bad times."[58] With Dollar General's total shareholder returns averaging 18 percent for the last five years, Wall Street is reaping the gains of their relentless pursuit to saturate communities with their stores.[59]

For communities of color overrun by dollar stores, the consequences of this proliferation extend well beyond a lack of fresh food. Dollar stores create few jobs. Both Dollar General and Dollar Tree pay low wages and have a history of labor law violations.[60] Dollar chains also invite and incubate violence. Both chains have prioritized low costs by forgoing the implementation of basic safety systems typically found in other retail outlets and by reducing the staffing levels during each shift.[61] These decisions have made their workers easy targets for robberies and led to a startling trail of violence.

Dollar chains also deter new business formations and investment efforts to reinvigorate neighborhoods that have struggled under the weight of decades of systemic racism. "They nullify or undo current and future investments designed to revitalize distressed neighborhoods," according to Reverend Doctor Donald Perryman, who is leading a grassroots effort to block the chains and rebuild food security in his Toledo, Ohio, neighborhood.[62]

A Better Future: Community-Based Enterprises and Structural Policy Solutions

Tulsa City Councilor Vanessa Hall-Harper organized to stop the encroachment of dollar store chains and helped create Oasis Fresh Market, North Tulsa's first grocery store in 14 years. Photo Credit: Ruby Ella, Graphic Credit: Em McPhie

Meanwhile, Tulsa's City Councilor Hall-Harper waged her own fight to build food security in North Tulsa with a one-two punch: stopping the encroachment of dollar store chains and spearheading the establishment of a grocery store. She understands that ensuring food access to her community means restraining the growth of dollar stores in these communities. "That proliferation makes it more difficult for the full-service, healthy stores to set up shop and operate successfully," said Hall-Harper.

Hall-Harper and local residents organized for over a year — rallying community members, marshaling legal research, and steadily chipping away at the opposition — to convince the City Council to limit dollar stores on Tulsa's northside. "It was one of the first ordinances in the country to specifically target dollar store chains — banning new dollar stores within one mile of an existing dollar store — and sparked a movement for other cities and towns to fight their spread," as outlined in ILSR's *Dollar Store Invasion*. By our count, 140 cities and towns (and growing) have successfully blocked new dollar store projects since 2019, and more than 60 have established ordinances that will block any future dollar stores from coming in.[63]

Aaron Johnson is the owner of Oasis Fresh Market, which is becoming integral to economic and community revitalization in North Tulsa. Photo Credit: Oasis Fresh Market's Instagram page

Hall-Harper also knew that ensuring food access would require city leadership to seed a new grocery store in North Tulsa. She joined forces with Rose Washington, head of the Tulsa Economic Development Corporation, and other community leaders to help secure financing for Oasis Fresh Market, the first supermarket to serve North Tulsa's historically Black neighborhood in 14 years.

The approximately $5 million, 16,500 square foot store fills a vital need for fresh, healthy food while also providing community supports, such as job training and housing resources. Aaron Johnson, the virtuoso at the helm of Oasis, reports that the store is not only attracting North Tulsa locals but is also luring customers from all over the city, particularly those with connections to North Tulsa and Tulsa-based

"It's crucial to activate our antitrust laws, especially the long-dormant Robinson-Patman Act, to both curb dollar chains' predatory tactics and enable fair markets in which all independent retailers can thrive."

businesses that are procuring supplies for their offices. This Black-owned independent grocery store, operated by the majority Black-owned Eco Alliance Group, is already becoming integral to economic and community revitalization in North Tulsa.

While Oasis is a success story in eradicating a food desert and nourishing an underserved community, it's still a profound struggle for Johnson and his staff. "We don't have the power of stores that have massive warehouses, that have barges where they can ship their own product in," Johnson explained. "And where's the money coming from? How are we going to make payroll? […] I love what we do, what we get a chance to do every single day in reaching people. But it's the hardest thing I've ever done."[64]

In the final section of this report, we present a comprehensive framework for federal antimonopoly policies capable of rectifying the race-based harms of concentrated corporate power. In terms of the grocery sector specifically — and the retail sector as a whole — it's clear that communities need action at the federal level. The status quo, negligent approach to antitrust has allowed grocery chains and dollar chains to edge out smaller competitors, especially independent grocery stores, using anticompetitive tactics. It's crucial to activate our antitrust laws, especially the long-dormant Robinson-Patman Act, to both curb dollar chains' predatory tactics and enable fair markets in which all independent retailers can thrive. We also need the federal government to enforce stronger financial protections that make capital available for the development of local grocery stores while putting limits on Wall Street's ability to underwrite anticompetitive tactics.

Aaron Johnson and other independent grocers shouldn't have to confront such challenges in providing their communities with access to fresh, nutritious food. Federal policymakers need to address the impacts of misguided policies that are fueling grocery consolidation, the destructive proliferation of dollar stores, and the persistence of food deserts. Without a doubt, communities require robust federal reinforcements to tackle these issues effectively.

Prescriptions

“For too long, corporate businesses have treated Black, Brown, and working-class communities essentially as though we are second-class citizens.” [In response to Walgreens’s 2022 announcement that it was closing three stores, all in neighborhoods of color.]

Tania Fernandes Anderson,
City Councilor, Boston, Mass.[65]

Pharmacy benefit managers — the intermediaries between drug manufacturers and pharmacies — are imposing untenable costs for lifesaving medicines. This is threatening access for everyone, especially communities of color, in part by threatening the independent pharmacists who provide vital medical care.

Expanding access to prescriptions requires a range of policy solutions, including public manufacturing of drugs and universal health insurance. Additionally, fostering and protecting independent pharmacists is essential. Some states are taking the lead by targeting the power and influence of pharmacy benefit managers.

In 2016, when Antavia Worsham turned 21, she aged out of her public insurance program and wasn’t eligible for Medicaid. For five years, she had managed her diabetes with the help of an Ohio-based secondary insurance program for children with medical handicaps. Without her coverage, however, Worsham’s out-of-pocket costs jumped to approximately $1,000 a month, which forced her to skip doses of her life-preserving insulin. One fateful evening, Worsham’s brother and grandma went to her home to check on her and found her unresponsive. At only 22-years-old, Worsham became another fatality victim of the ongoing insulin-rationing crisis that has hit Black people and families particularly hard.[66]

Systemic racism threads throughout the American healthcare system and is a key driver of higher incidences of chronic disease among people of color, particularly in Black communities.[67] Gone are the days of forced experiments and sterilizations, at least in the U.S., but the structural racism built into our healthcare system remains rampant. Stereotyping and implicit bias persist, seeding distrust in providers and affecting quality of care. Despite inroads in health insurance coverage with the Affordable Care Act (ACA), disparities in Medicaid and employer health insurance coverage for Black, Latine, and Native people make it that much harder to access needed healthcare.[68] Meanwhile, one in five Black households live in food deserts and are living without access to fresh, healthy food.[69] Black and Latine households are also more likely to live in polluted environments and endure profound toxic stress from the ongoing threat of racial discrimination and police violence.

Health industry conglomerates exploit these racial vulnerabilities and, in fact, exacerbate them to harness profit and market share, which fuels industry consolidation. Though racial monopoly tactics happen throughout the healthcare system, this section drills down on one consequential dimension of the healthcare industry — pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) — to illustrate how dominant corporations weaponize racism throughout the entire industry.

Along the pharmaceutical distribution chain, there are drugmakers (the pharmaceutical manufacturers) and drug distributors or retailers (the pharmacies). PBMs operate between these functions, interfacing with both public and private insurers to determine the drugs eligible for reimbursement to patients.

As the dominant pharmaceutical manufacturer, Big Pharma carries a sizable blame for driving up prescription drug costs including insulin.[70] Pharmacy benefit managers, however, bear their own share of responsibility, not only for driving up the market price of lifesaving drugs but also for making it increasingly difficult and costly — and sometimes impossible — to access medicines. Dominant PBMs are all part of massive, vertically integrated healthcare companies, such as CVS Health, that include insurance and retail pharmacy under the same roof as the PBM. PBMs are wiping out independent pharmacies and, under the umbrella of the chains that own them, such as CVS and Walgreens, shuttering their own locations in Black and Latine communities throughout the U.S. This forces patients of color to travel longer distances or rely on substandard mail-order service.

PBMs Drive Up Drug Prices

Americans pay sky-high drug prices by international comparison. Prescription drug prices in the U.S. are over 2.5 times as high as in countries with similarly high income levels.[71] Between 2021 and 2022, over 1,200 drugs had price increases above the 8.5 inflation rate with an average increase of 31.6 percent.[72] Probably the most notorious case is Daraprim, which treats a parasitic infection that is particularly dangerous for patients with compromised immune systems. Daraprim's price jumped over 5,000 percent from $13.50 a pill to $750, when Turing Pharmaceuticals bought the drug patent in 2015, forcing doctors to find lesser alternatives.[73]

The privatization and consolidation of pharmaceutical manufacturing is what gave Big Pharma control over insulin and other prescription drug prices. In the 1920s, the inventors of insulin transferred their intellectual property rights to the University of Toronto for $1. The price of a vial of insulin, which can last in the fridge for about 28 days, was around $14 in 1982.[74] Today, Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk, and Sanofi — the three largest insulin manufacturers — now control 90 percent of the insulin market and have colluded to raise insulin prices, leaving patients with no affordable alternative. In 2018, the average list price for a vial of insulin was $98.70.[75] Before conceding to pressure from the Biden administration — and competition from a non-profit manufacturer to lower its insulin costs — Eli Lilly charged almost $275 a vial for Humalog, its fast-acting mealtime insulin, and collected $3.1 billion in revenue from insulin sales in 2022.[76]

Despite pharmaceutical manufacturers' blatant price gouging of lifesaving medicines, the role of PBMs cannot be ignored.

The origins of PBMs are fairly benign, especially compared to what policymakers have allowed them to become as one of the most poorly regulated and highly consolidated sectors in healthcare. PBMs were established in the late 1960s and 1970s to process paper claims on behalf of their clients — health insurance plans — a service for which they collected a small fee.

However, the function and power of PBMs ultimately morphed into something much larger. In the 1980s, they began setting copays and coinsurance amounts and negotiating directly with pharmacies and drug companies. By the 1990s, PBMs were becoming increasingly consolidated as their business model moved into formulary management, determining the lists of drugs that insurers are willing to cover. They also began setting the reimbursement amount a pharmacy receives for filling a prescription. By 2022, three PBMs — CVS Health, Express Scripts (Cigna), and Optum (UnitedHealth Group) — controlled more than 79 percent of the market.[77]

Pharmacy benefit managers, in negotiating deals with drug manufacturers for insurance plans, are increasingly demanding spoils for themselves, increasingly focused on padding their pockets rather than delivering savings to patients and insurance plans. PBMs drive up medicine prices through the rebates they receive from pharmaceutical companies — a kickback for getting manufacturers' drugs placed on insurance lists, which boosts sales.[78] In fact, in January 2021, the Senate Finance Committee investigated the escalating costs of insulin despite no major advances in the drugs themselves.[79] It found that "PBMs used their size and aggressive negotiating tactics, like the threat of excluding drugs from formularies, to extract more generous rebates, discounts[,] and fees from insulin manufacturers."[80] Between 2014 and 2018, the mean list price of 32 insulin products increased by over 40 percent. The expenditures on insulin received by manufacturers went down 31 percent while the share that PBMs siphoned increased by more than 154 percent in these five years.[81]

PBMs Make Access to Pharmacies More Costly

The costs of accessing life-sustaining medicines go beyond affording the market price. It's also about having convenient access to a physical place for picking up prescriptions, getting a flu shot, and buying medical supplies. Importantly, independent pharmacies outperform chain pharmacies

"The lack of competition that PBMs have created means that they can dominate these markets while neglecting to make any investment in serving them."

in several key ways, research shows. The quality of care that they provide is better, with shorter wait times and often lower prices.[82] In fact, states with high concentrations of independent pharmacies were more effective at distributing early COVID-19 vaccines.[83] Meanwhile, understaffing at chain pharmacies, particularly CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens, is putting pressure on pharmacists to fill prescriptions too quickly, putting patients' safety and health at risk and prompting protests among chain pharmacy workers.[84]

Black-owned independent pharmacies provide an even more important, culturally competent level of care. "We understand the community because we are a part of the community," Lekeisha Williams, owner of Health and Wellness Pharmacy in Shiloh, Ill., said. "We are visible in our area doing outreach, attending events, and promoting health and wellness."[85] Another example is Lester Carter Jr., who owned Carter Drug Store for 50 years and was among the first Black pharmacists in Milwaukee, Wis. "To the Black community, he was the miracle worker on Burleigh [Street] who was trusted to cure nagging health woes."[86]

By design, PBMs are making it very hard for independent pharmacies to stay in business and serve vulnerable populations, using their sheer size and central position to funnel customers toward their own pharmacy services. Today, the three dominant PBMs all own mail-order pharmacies; CVS, the largest PBM, owns the second largest retail pharmacy chain in the country. Between its stores and mail-order pharmacy, CVS alone captures over one-quarter of prescription revenue.[87]

PBMs have used several monopoly tactics to lock in their advantage over independent pharmacies and push them out of the market entirely, including but not limited to:

- PBMs are the designated "regulators" of pharmacies. The supposed logic is that this intermediary role helps to both eliminate unnecessary and fraudulent spending and ensure pharmacies are upholding high standards for recordkeeping and serving their customers. The reality, however, is that PBMs push community pharmacies out of their networks for minor administrative errors. This allows these corporations to direct customers toward their own mail-order services, concentrating their hold on the pharmacy market that they are supposed to be monitoring.[88]

- PBMs cut reimbursement rates to competing independent pharmacies, often below cost, which can force them out of business. In some cases, CVS's "acquisitions unit" has followed up a cut in reimbursement rates by sending letters to the affected pharmacies offering to buy them out.[89]

- Some PBMs execute mandatory mail-order clauses on health plans, again steering patients to their own mail-order services over local pharmacies.[90]

While economic pressures on pharmacies manifest in many forms, the tactics deployed by PBMs have resulted in catastrophic outcomes. Between 1980 and 2000, the total number of independent pharmacies decreased by almost 48 percent.[91] According to one study that examined pharmacy

Monopoly Racism Permeates the Entire Healthcare Industry

The ways PBMs have driven up costs for communities of color in their march to collect more profit and market share are illustrative of how racism and monopoly power intersect throughout the healthcare industry. Hospital consolidation — often driven by Wall Street in its pursuit to cut costs and enhance shareholder payouts — is driving the closure of hospitals, physician offices, and outpatient clinics, including ambulatory surgical centers. Consequently, low-income and communities of color are left without essential care, regardless of whether they reside in urban areas or rural places.[95] Meanwhile, the dialysis industry is also highly concentrated, ultimately limiting access to clinics and undermining the quality of care at the clinics that remain — severely impacting Black patients, who are much more likely to suffer from kidney disease than their white counterparts. Roll-ups in the insurance industry are raising coverage prices, which exacerbates racial disparities in insurance access, particularly in states that have not expanded Medicaid.[96]

closures in the U.S. between 2009 and 2015, independent pharmacies were more likely to close than their counterparts. And in urban settings, pharmacies in city neighborhoods with disproportionately low-income, uninsured, and publicly insured populations were at increased risk of closure.[92]

Meanwhile, pharmacy chains are closing largely in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. The lack of competition that PBMs have created means that they can dominate these markets while neglecting to make any investment in serving them. CVS is calculating that it can compel people to travel longer distances to reach one of its pharmacies or use its mail-order service. In January 2023, the company announced that it would be closing 900 stores by the end of 2026.[93] In 2019, Walgreens announced that it would close 200 stores in a "transformational cost management program."[94]

The Racist Harms of Costly Drug Access

The chronic health conditions that Black and Latine patients disproportionately experience mean that they are disproportionately victim to monopolists' price gouging of the lifesaving medicines required to treat their diseases. Black diabetics are more likely than their white counterparts to need insulin. They are also more likely to reduce or skip doses altogether due to lower average household incomes, lower rates of insurance coverage, and the skyrocketing insulin costs driven by Big Pharma and pharmacy benefit managers. Black diabetic patients lose limbs to amputation from untreated diabetes at three times the rate of others, as ProPublica reported in 2020: "It is the cardinal sin of the American health system in a single surgery: save on preventive care, pay big on the backend, and let the chronically sick and underprivileged feel the extreme consequences."[97] The price of Bystolic, a blood pressure medicine, increased by 41 percent between 2015 and 2020, with a yearly cost of $1,747. This astronomical cost has made it that much harder for Black people, who are 40 percent more likely to have high blood pressure, to control their condition, and they are more likely to suffer the consequences of hypertension, which include stroke, renal disease, and congestive heart failure.[98]

At the same time, Black and Latine communities often reside in pharmacy deserts, heightening serious concerns about their diminishing access to medicine and medicine adherence. This exacerbates health disparities for people of color. One-third of neighborhoods throughout the 30 largest cities in the United States are pharmacy deserts, according to one study.[99] Among the neighborhoods uplifted in the research, almost 40 percent of segregated Black and Hispanic neighborhoods were classified as pharmacy deserts in comparison to only one-quarter of white neighborhoods.

Massachusetts Representative Ayanna Pressley accused Walgreens of racial and economic discrimination by closing outlets in the state in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods. She argued on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, “When a Walgreens leaves a neighborhood, they disrupt the entire community[,] and they take with them baby formula, diapers, asthma inhalers, lifesaving medications and, of course, jobs. These closures are not arbitrary[,] and they are not innocent. They are life-threatening acts of racial and economic discrimination.”[100]

A Better Future: Community-Based Enterprises and Structural Policy Solutions

PBMs have also been caught overcharging state insurance programs as part of their broader monopoly scheme, which has fortunately prompted state governments to lead the charge in fighting their market power. Ohio’s Attorney General Dave Yost has been particularly aggressive in suing PBMs, including on antitrust grounds. “PBMs are modern gangsters,” Yost proclaimed. “They were designed to protect and negotiate on behalf of employers and consumers after Big Pharma was criticized for overpricing medications, but instead, they have absolutely destroyed transparency, scheming in the shadows to control drug prices on all sides of the market.”[101]

The state’s increasing pressure on PBMs is perhaps giving Ohio pharmacists some optimism. After Cincinnati’s Avondale neighborhood was without a pharmacy for two decades, pharmacist Dr. Emmanuel Ayanjoke opened his doors. Altev Community Pharmacy is the only Black-owned pharmacy in Greater Cincinnati, and it aims to fill a need for trusted healthcare for the Avondale community. “People want to see people that they can relate to [...] to open up and talk about their health issues,” explained Dr. Ayanjoke.

Individual states and pharmacists, however, can’t fight PBMs on their own. Chaired by Lina Khan, the FTC is putting these industry middlemen — and drug manufacturers — under the microscope. The agency launched an aggressive investigation into the industry practices of PBMs, building scrutiny and pressure that will hopefully lead to reforms that reduce costs for patients, pharmacists, and state insurance programs.[102] The agency is also compelling drug makers to lower the cost of some drugs by targeting improperly listed patents.[103]

Reining in the power of PBMs is, of course, only one piece of the broader solution needed to improve access to medicine and promote a more equitable and less consolidated healthcare system. Implementing public options across the sector, from pharmaceutical manufacturing to health insurance, is a crucial first step, as is reforming our patent system. It’s equally important to integrate community pharmacists, who often serve as the gateway to medical care for vulnerable people, in the broader reform landscape.

Waste

"My entire life has been near a landfill. I live in a community that has disproportionately been devastated by COVID-19. But it's because we have chronic illness issues, because we have issues with breathing, with COPD, with lung diseases, with different rates of cancer."

Jonathan Hall,
Former Nashville, Tenn. District One Metro Councilmember[104]

Waste monopolies site landfills and incinerators in communities with the least economic and political resources to fight back — predominantly Black and Latine — which helps them gain monopoly advantage across the waste industry.

Community-based zero waste planning, which aims to minimize, and even eliminate, the waste funneled to these toxic facilities, is both antiracist and a primary mechanism for putting the lid on Big Waste. But because waste conglomerates are predictably standing in the way of community-based solutions, such as locally controlled composting and recycling, these solutions need the backing of strong federal antitrust enforcement.

When an unknown company bought land near Emelle, Ala., in 1978, residents of the town, 90 percent of whom were Black, thought that they were getting a brick plant.[105] Because the company didn't make the transaction public, vague newspaper headlines and rumors passed between neighbors about an exciting new industry coming to town, promising new jobs and economic growth for the Black Belt region, which was still deeply fractured from the shadows of its plantation economy. Yet the Emelle community, and the rest of Sumter County, ultimately came to realize that this tract of land would not bring a wave of economic opportunities for their families. Quite the opposite. It turned out that the land was owned by Chemical Waste Management (ChemWaste), a subsidiary of Waste Management, Inc. (WM), the largest disposer of toxic waste in the country.[106] Instead of a brick plant, the community ultimately ended up with the biggest hazardous waste dump in the U.S.[107]

Photo Credit: https://www.flickr.com/photos/91959510@N00/

Since building the Emelle landfill, WM has funneled millions of tons of hazardous waste to the site from all over the U.S. and several overseas military bases.[108] At its peak, ChemWaste took in nearly 800,000 tons of waste per year.[109] Jimmy Evans, a Montgomery County prosecutor turned Alabama attorney general, once christened it "America's biggest industrial pay toilet."[110]

"The land sales were rubber-stamped, reflecting the apartheid politics of the Old South. In other words, the white minority wielded both governing and economic power, with no Black residents occupying public office or serving on regulatory commissions."

Unsurprisingly, the environmental impacts of the Emelle landfill have been devastating. WM has been accused of multiple safety violations at the plant, including spillage, unmarked containers, cracks in storage floors that violate polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) regulations, unauthorized dumping of radioactive waste, and chemical burying without any location mapping.[111] One activist told of workers' shoes melting on their feet in the pits.[112] Water-quality tests conducted outside of the landfill detected cancer-causing PCBs that were leaching into water supplies.[113] According to a Greenpeace report, an accident in June 1984 produced a cloud of acidic vapor that floated a half mile off site; just months later, a burst pipe sent liquid waste into a neighboring property; and a fire in April 1985 prompted the evacuation of 180 workers.[114]

Two years after the Emelle landfill opened, locals realized that James Parsons, the son-in-law of Alabama's then-governor, was one of the sellers of the initial tract of land (plus hundreds more acres later added to the site). The land sales were rubber-stamped, reflecting the apartheid politics of the Old South. In other words, the white minority wielded both governing and economic power, with no Black residents occupying public office or serving on regulatory commissions.[115]

The Emelle story is not an anomaly; it illustrates a pattern of corporations and white elites exploiting communities' lack of political influence to expand and entrench monopoly control over the waste industry. For waste conglomerates including WM, targeting low income communities of color is one of several anticompetitive strategies. Additional strategies include (but are not limited to) bullying smaller competitors, dominating every link in the waste processing chain — including sustainable solutions, such as recycling and composting — and using political muscle to capture regulators.

Collecting Power Along the Waste Processing Stream

Consolidation in the waste industry means that monopolies are able to dominate every profitable chokepoint of the waste processing chain — a strategy known as "vertical integration." Waste companies have muscled each other out, leaving a handful of companies to dominate entire collection routes, the processing and transfer stations, and the landfills and incinerators, thereby controlling the fees and prices charged at each stage — to local governments, to competitors using their facilities, or directly to customers.

The trajectory of monopoly power in the waste industry started in the mid-20th century, as thousands of small private companies across the country — many with just 10 or 20 trucks — competed to collect waste from commercial accounts. Then organized crime began to see the potential profit in taking over waste companies, using heavy-handed, often violent tactics to gain a market edge.[116] By the late 1960s, large waste companies had worked to shed their mob image with less violence but continued their aggressive moves to muscle aside and take over smaller competitors. Waste Management, Inc., along with Browning Ferris, arose as the first vertically integrated consolidators by the end of the decade. "The process continued into the 1990s, as consolidator companies were themselves consolidated through mergers and acquisitions in a seemingly never-ending cycle of national and regional consolidation," explained ILSR co-founder Neil Seldman.[117] Today, just five corporations — WM, Republic Services, Waste Connections, GFL Environmental, and Casella Waste Systems — control approximately 61 percent of the total municipal solid waste landfill volume.[118] The first three of those companies own over 46 percent of the collection market.[119]

"As recycling and, later, composting arose as sustainable solutions to waste management, Big Waste maneuvered to control those processes as well."

By the late 1990s, WM had acquired 3,000 small, independently owned haulers, bullying their competitors with tactics such as price-fixing and bid-rigging.[120] WM has been sued repeatedly for its anticompetitive behavior and environmental harms. As an in-depth Greenpeace report on WM (then WMI) stated, "For a giant like WMI, environmental penalties, antitrust penalties, and legal fees (many of which can be written off against taxes) are easily absorbed as normal costs of doing business — even when those penalties run into millions of dollars."[121] The corporation now controls about one-third of managed landfill volume and is the largest company in a $91 billion waste industry (as of 2022 data).[122]

As recycling and, later, composting arose as sustainable solutions to waste management, Big Waste maneuvered to control those processes as well. The environmental movement galvanized around recycling in the 1970s and 1980s as a way to break free from Big Waste's stranglehold. However, waste monopolies swiftly jockeyed for control over the recycling industry to maintain its profit margins, market control, and political influence. Today, WM owns approximately 40 percent of all material recovery facilities in the U.S.[123] Monopoly control over our recycling systems has been disastrous, resulting in high levels of contamination and too many recyclables ending up back in landfills and incinerators.

Waste monopolies are now trying to disrupt community efforts to divert yard trimmings and food waste for composting. Composting has significant environmental benefits, minimizing landfill methane emissions, helping to build soil health, and sequestering carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. Food scraps comprise about 24 percent of the tonnage flowing to landfills.[124] WM has been lobbying, often successfully, to overturn local and state laws such as bans on yard trimmings going to landfills to continue capturing those profits.

Big Waste's Targeting of Black and Latine Communities

As WM and other dominant players vie for control of the waste industry, a key part of their monopoly strategy has been siting landfills and incinerators in less powerful communities with less of an ability to put up a fight. Communities are either unaware of corporate plans to build toxic facilities nearby or lack the resources and political access needed to protect their safety. They often don't have connections to key decisionmakers, whether on zoning boards or city councils, and they don't have the funds to hire lawyers and technical experts needed to resist a siting. Additionally, communities that only speak Spanish lack access to essential information about these developments because they are typically written in English.[125] WM exploits the fact that low income Black and Latine or Hispanic communities do not have the resources for the political resistance that more white, affluent communities can wage.

"Today, 80 percent of existing U.S. incinerators are located in majority poor and/or communities of color — and the disproportionate health burdens are undeniable."

Key research studies have verified this pattern. Toxic sitings in communities such as Emelle and those in Warren County, N.C., for example, inspired a seminal report published in 1987 by the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice.[126] The commission's report found crucial demographic patterns concerning commercial hazardous waste facilities and uncontrolled toxic waste sites. Its groundbreaking results showed that race was the most significant factor related to where commercial hazardous waste facilities were located, with economic status playing a lesser but also important role (even when controlling for urban areas and regional differences). It also showed that communities with the greatest number of these facilities had the highest average percentage of Black and Hispanic residents.

WM disputed these findings and successfully perpetuated a years-long debate about whether corporations site their toxic facilities in low income and/or Black and Hispanic communities or if the communities move in after the fact because of low property values.[127] But in 2016, an in-depth analysis of data from 1966 to 1995 on over 300 of these facilities and the neighborhoods around them found "a consistent pattern" of targeting low income and/or Black and Hispanic communities with these waste facilities.[128]

Today, 80 percent of existing U.S. incinerators are located in majority poor and/or communities of color — and the disproportionate health burdens are undeniable.[129] Landfills and incinerators cause considerable air, soil, and water pollution. The putrid air around incinerators is filled with nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, lead, and mercury, which are, in various combinations, tied to elevated rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases, cognitive disorders, and multiple types of cancer.[130] In Baltimore, Carlos Sanchez, an anti-incineration youth advocate, asked for everyone to hold their breath for 15 seconds to represent the 15 years of lower life expectancy in his community compared to the average Baltimorean — a horrific disparity fueled, in part, by

hazardous and municipal waste incineration.[131] Disproportionate exposure to toxins helps explain why Black people died of COVID-19 complications at 1.4 times the rate of white people, according to The COVID Tracking Project at *The Atlantic*.[132] Big Waste creates health disparities for frontline communities and waste industry workers, which were exacerbated by the pandemic. And climate change, which is producing heat islands in U.S. cities, will worsen these health disparities if we don't act.

A Better Future: Community-Based Enterprises and Structural Policy Solutions

Communities are pursuing solutions that address the need for racial justice and sustainability while also tackling monopoly power. There is widening enthusiasm across the country for zero waste planning, which offers towns and cities the ability to both minimize the amount of waste they generate and also change who controls — and profits from — those waste streams. In Baltimore, a community coalition has been pushing for a citywide zero waste plan designed to reduce the flow of waste, eliminate incineration, and foster public support for enterprises that focus on a healthy waste system. These community groups and companies would provide waste diversion, deconstruction, reuse, recycling, and composting, which would create jobs within the community. By investing public money in a democratically distributed and diverse recycling and composting infrastructure — rather than large-scale landfills and incinerators dominated by a few industry players — Baltimore, along with communities across the country, could significantly reduce the environmental and health harms wrought by the waste industry while building their local economy.

Also, over the past 15 to 20 years, a handful of states have implemented laws that encourage organic waste recycling to reduce methane emissions and other air- and water-borne toxins. As one example, California's new regulations, which took effect in 2022, aim to "reduce organic waste disposal to landfills by 75 percent and recovery of at least 20 percent of currently disposed surplus food by 2025," according to ILSR's Composting for Community Initiative.[133]

Design Credit: Clarissa Libertelli, Institute for Local Self-Reliance

However, if federal antitrust enforcers fail to target waste conglomerates and the enormous power that they have over the industry, local and state policy efforts will be insufficient. Though they are now recommitting to their original purpose of protecting fair competition, the FTC and the DOJ's Antitrust Division did little to rein in waste consolidation for decades. Though the DOJ did investigate some pending mergers and their potential impact on prices — almost always at the urging of local governments or smaller waste management companies[134] — it ultimately allowed all of the industry's mergers in recent decades to proceed.[135] In some cases, the agency demanded that the acquiring company divest some of its assets as a condition of moving forward with the deal, but those assets were often simply bought up by other large firms, furthering consolidation.

"There is widening enthusiasm across the country for zero waste planning, which offers towns and cities the ability to both minimize the amount of waste they generate and also change who controls — and profits from — those waste streams."

As part of their recent effort to reinvigorate antitrust enforcement, and representing a major course-correction in federal policy, the FTC and DOJ adopted new guidelines for evaluating proposed mergers in 2023.[136] In keeping with the letter and spirit of antitrust statutes, the agencies set much stricter thresholds for when a merger is deemed illegal. They specifically target rollups of small firms by dominant players, as has been the pattern in the waste industry, and also direct enforcers to block harmful mergers outright rather than approve them with so-called "remedies," such as divestitures. If adhered to, the new guidelines should impede further consolidation in the sector.

However, to undo the harms of sectoral concentration and level the playing field for community-based solutions, the antitrust agencies will need to do more. While this report provides an in-depth discussion of antitrust enforcement in its final section, it's crucial to say here that to keep waste conglomerates from overpowering the will of communities, particularly communities of color, antitrust enforcers must target the market structure of the waste industry.

Banking

"I remain concerned that bank closures across the country, which are often the consequence of mergers, are expanding bank deserts and harming communities that rely on branches for basic services."

Maxine Waters,
U.S. Representative (D-CA 43rd District)[137]

After winning bigger-is-favored regulatory advantages and embarking on a multi-decade merger spree, a few big banks have concentrated control over the financial sector. These huge banks have solidified their grip by shuttering thousands of branches, leaving many communities of color as banking deserts, and then targeting these same underserved communities with high-profit subprime mortgages and other predatory loans that prevent community wealth-building.

To create an equitable and effective banking system — one that fosters strong local economies — we must break up the biggest banks, establish universal public banking infrastructure, and enable community-level banks and credit unions to thrive, particularly those that represent the communities that they serve.

One of the crowning achievements of the Civil Rights movement was the passage in the 1960s and 1970s of a series of groundbreaking laws designed to eliminate the structural racism embedded in the banking system. These landmark laws included the Fair Housing Act and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which outlawed discrimination in lending, and the Community Reinvestment Act, which mandated that banks invest in low-income communities.

On the heels of these new civil rights protections, however, came a shift toward consolidation of the banking sector that undermined the very goals that these laws were designed to achieve. As a result of deliberate policy decisions made in the 1970s and 1980s and fully codified in the 1990s, the banking industry morphed into a handful of giant Wall Street banks, and the whole financial industry bloated to an unhealthy size, with shockingly little oversight. Consolidation,

Photo Credit: Sam Valadl

which eliminated many local, community-based banks, enabled the banking sector to close bank branches in communities of color — directly violating the purpose of the Community Reinvestment Act to ensure that they have close access to financial services. This abandonment has laid these communities open to predation by financial speculators, including the big banks, with devastating impacts.

Access to full-service banking — and protection from predatory financial services — is essential to wealth building, and wealth is arguably one of the most important drivers of racial and economic equality. Wealth is needed to start businesses, invest in homes and education, pass opportunities down to next generations, and create a cushion during personal crises and economic downturns. But after decades of progress, the current racial wealth gap (the ratio of white wealth to Black wealth) is no longer converging. During the Civil Rights era, it narrowed from 8 to 1 in 1960 to 5 to 1 in 1980. But between 1980 and 2020 — as neoliberalism took hold and corporation consolidation ran amok — it began to stagnate again, increasing by about 0.1 percent a year.[138] Despite key advancements, the U.S. is losing progress on building wealth equality. There are myriad drivers to the racial wealth gap that need to be addressed, but without access to the most basic requirement for wealth building — quality banking service — it will definitely worsen.

Big Banks Consolidate Power

During the 1980s, Congress and federal regulators began disassembling the policy structures of our banking system. While by no means adequate for the needs of communities of color, the banking sector overall was variegated with a mix of small, medium, and large banks that better served people's needs. But policymakers, particularly during the Clinton years, successfully pushed to allow banks to branch across state lines with no limits. They did this by passing the 1994 Riegle Neal Interstate Banking and Branching Efficiency Act, which opened the way for a wave of mergers across the country.[139] The law marked a new era of pro-Wall Street policies that included Congress overturning Glass-Steagall, which expanded the scope of what banks could do by allowing commercial and investment banking under one roof.[140]

As New Deal-era banking laws were swept aside, federal regulators moved to give big banks even more leeway. They preempted a wide range of state laws, including those that had protected consumers from predatory lending, safeguarded smaller banks from exclusion, and ensured fair dealing. They also allowed large banks to use their control of essential infrastructure, such as electronic funds transfer networks, to impose excessive fees and other costs on smaller banks and credit unions. An unprecedented period of bank mergers and acquisitions followed these policy changes.

In the ensuing years, big banks morphed into megabanks, and the consolidation of the banking industry was firmly entrenched. In 1994, megabanks — conglomerates with more than $120 billion in assets in 2020's dollars — held 16 percent of total bank assets. By 2019, their market share had ballooned to 64 percent of bank assets. The Big Four — Wells Fargo, Citigroup, Bank of America, and JP Morgan Chase — together controlled 41 percent of assets.

Shuttering Local Banks and Branches

Market concentration has resulted in local banks losing ground, despite out-competing big banks by many measures. Community banks and credit unions do a better job than megabanks of judging and managing credit risk. Local banks typically have lower default rates in their loan portfolios. Credit unions and community banks tend to be more capitalized than larger banks. Local banks and credit unions also devote a larger share of their capital to productive lending, particularly small business lending, while the megabanks are more engaged in speculative trading.[141]

Yet, because of “big-is-better” policies, consolidation of the banking industry has led to a sharp decline in community banks and credit unions, including Black-owned banks. In 1994, there were about 12,500 community banks overall; by 2019, that number had shrunk to 5,000. The number of credit unions fell from more than 12,500 to less than 5,400 in that same period.[142]

The decline of Black-owned banks is even more stark. In 2001, there were 48 Black-owned banks in the U.S. Before the Great Recession, there were 41. Today, there are only 22.[143]

The impact of losing Black-owned financial institutions for communities of color — or not having them in the first place — is immeasurable. Black-owned and “minority-owned” banks and credit unions provide the same relationship banking that community banks overall provide, with an added layer of protection that buffers customers from racial discrimination in lending. Black-owned and -operated banks approve a larger percentage of loans to Black applicants than other banks.[144] But their challenges, particularly limited inflow of capital, make their ability to stand up against wave after wave of bank consolidation even more untenable.

“Black-owned and ‘minority-owned’ banks and credit unions provide the same relationship banking that community banks overall provide, with an added layer of protection that buffers customers from racial discrimination in lending.”

Meanwhile, following the same pattern as large grocery and pharmacy chains, the megabanks that so aggressively siphoned market share by buying up smaller banks have been closing branches, particularly in majority-Black neighborhoods. Between 2010 and 2018, JP Morgan Chase closed nearly one-quarter of its branches in majority-Black neighborhoods, even as its total branch count in the rest of the country remained the same. Bank of America cut its branches in majority-Black neighborhoods by over 29 percent, compared to 18.4 percent in nonmajority-Black areas. These disparities extend to prosperous Black-majority neighborhoods, which lost more of their branches than low-income nonmajority-Black communities.[145]

As a result, Black consumers, workers, and small business owners are more likely to live in banking deserts and struggle with the lack of access to mortgages, car loans, business loans, basic banking services, and even bank accounts — especially if they are living without the broadband access necessary to bank online.[146] The resultant disparities in access to credit for Black borrowers are dire. Loan denial rates for Black and Hispanic borrowers are much higher than for white borrowers — even with similar incomes.[147]

Throttling Black-Owned Businesses

At the same time, small businesses, particularly those owned and operated by entrepreneurs of color, are struggling to access fair, affordable credit, making it harder to survive. Higher borrowing costs make a small business less able to grow and much more likely to fail. Local ownership is a significant way to build wealth and create enterprises that are embedded in and serve their communities. Black people represent just over 4 percent of the country's small business owners but are 13 percent of the overall population.[148] Even controlling for factors such as credit risk, Black-owned small businesses are around twice as likely to be denied a loan.[149] As a result, Black entrepreneurs with good credit history shy away from even applying for loans because they expect to be discriminated against and turned away. The pandemic highlighted these credit disparities for Black small business owners; multiple studies show that Black entrepreneurs were much more likely to be denied a loan under the Paycheck Protection Program, a federally financed pool of credit administered by banks to sustain small businesses during the pandemic.[150] This has meant that small businesses are increasingly reliant on high-cost, sometimes predatory, and often poorly regulated "Fintech" lending sources.[151]

These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that industries across the economy have consolidated, shutting out businesses owned by people of color across multiple markets. As market concentration has expanded, opportunities for entrepreneurs of color to grow and expand their businesses have been stifled.

Wall Street's Predation of Black Wealth

In 2008, following the collapse of the financial system, financial elites sidestepped accountability and instead evoked a racially coded culprit to blame for the meltdown: subprime borrowers. Billionaire and former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, spelled it out for us:

> "It all started back when there was a lot of pressure on banks to make loans to everyone. Redlining, if you remember, was the term where banks took whole neighborhoods and said, 'People in these neighborhoods are poor, they're not going to be able to pay off their mortgages, tell your salesmen don't go into those areas. And then Congress got involved — local elected officials, as well — and said, 'Oh that's not fair, these people should be able to get credit.' And once you started pushing in that direction, banks started making more and more loans where the credit of the person buying the house wasn't as good as you would like."

What was revealed in reporting and in study after study about the crash, however, was that the financial crisis was perpetrated by banks that had explicitly targeted borrowers of color, including middle class borrowers of color, with mortgages that yielded quick profits for Wall Street but were doomed to implode. It took an unhinged financial sector bloated from weakened antitrust enforcement and financial regulation, combined with the vacuum left by banks abandoning these neighborhoods, to unleash these products on low income communities and communities of color.

Subprime mortgages are a type of loan offered to people who supposedly pose a higher credit risk. They come with higher interest rates and less favorable terms in exchange for little or no collateral and lower probability of paying the loan back. Wall Street unleashed subprime loans when they realized that they could package them — and quickly offload them — in mortgage-backed securities that were subject to little or no regulatory oversight.

"Even as they have stripped full-service banks from communities of color, megabanks still aimed to profit from them, and their role in predatory lending hasn't waned since the housing crisis."

"Too-big-to-fail" banks pushed borrowers of color into risky subprime loans, then bundled the loans into securities that generated huge profits while both hiding and vastly magnifying the risks. In 2006, as these securities were beginning to implode, lenders were steering Black Americans and Hispanics into subprime mortgages at almost double the rate of white borrowers.[152] These loans were not just made to borrowers of color with low incomes but also to those with the financial profile to attract much better loan terms. Controlling for factors such as credit risk and income, Black borrowers were targeted. While just 7 percent of white borrowers with annual incomes above $165,000 received high-interest loans, 55 percent of African Americans and 49 percent of Latines at the same income level did, according to one study.[153] "Borrowers in upper-income [B]lack neighborhoods were twice as likely as homeowners in low-income white neighborhoods to refinance with a subprime loan," one Housing and Urban Development study reported.[154]

Black and Hispanic borrowers who fell victim to these mortgages faced excessive fees for late payments and even penalties in the case of prepayment. It was also common for lenders to structure high-interest loans with huge balloon payments that often came as a surprise to borrowers, and then they sometimes convinced those borrowers to refinance, which then generated additional fees and points for the banks. Undergirding this were the appraisers who failed their fiduciary duty and egregiously overvalued home appraisals, leading to higher loans and eventually to "underwater" mortgages where loan balances sat above the market value of properties, a trend that was happening even before the housing crisis tanked real estate values.[155]

While the biggest banks profited and gained market share as a result of these tactics, the impact of this financial engineering and the Great Recession it triggered was especially detrimental for Black families. Since the crisis, the racial wealth gap has deepened. Between 2005 and 2009, the median wealth (net worth) of Black households fell by 53 percent, compared to 17 percent for white household wealth, according to the Economic Policy Institute.[156]

Predatory Lenders

Even as they have stripped full-service banks from communities of color, megabanks still aimed to profit from them, and their role in predatory lending hasn't waned since the housing crisis. Megabanks are financing payday lenders, pawn lenders, car title lenders, and beyond. In Dallas, Tex., for example, there are 88 storefront locations of payday and auto title lenders below Interstate 30, which is the boundary that demarcates the city's white population to the north with the city's Black and Latine populations to the south.[157] Black and Latine people make up 45 percent of households in Dallas but comprise 71 percent of auto title customers and 74 percent of payday loans customers. WFAA, a Texas-based ABC affiliate, reported that almost 20 banks fund predatory lenders, with Wells Fargo and Bank of America at the heart of this credit network. Fort-Worth, Tex., based FirstCash operates 2,800 pawn stores and, because of state law, is able to charge 240 percent for their subprime loans. Wells Fargo, with Texas Capital Bank and Bank of Texas, shares in a $400 million line of credit to FirstCash.[158]

"Dominant banks have thus fueled their profits and expanded their market shares by erecting a two-tiered financial system that fleeces communities of color."

The dominant banks are financing these predatory lenders not just in Dallas but all over the country in both rural and urban communities of color, imposing costs that are far beyond typical credit agreements. In 2019, the average interest rate on a payday loan was 391 percent, compared to 17.8 percent for the average credit card and 10.3 percent for the average personal loan from a bank, according to the St. Louis Federal Reserve.[159] Dominant banks have thus fueled their profits and expanded their market shares by erecting a two-tiered financial system that fleeces communities of color.

Siphoning Away Public Dollars

Racist financial predation isn't limited to the household level. As Saqib Bhatti, Co-Executive Director of the Action Center on Race and the Economy, explained in his report *Dirty Deals*, Wall Street and megacorporations have lobbied to minimize the taxes that they have to pay, which has diminished the resources of cities and states to provide essential services. Big banks have then taken advantage to target local and state governments with predatory financial deals, which has disproportionately impacted working class communities of color in cities that include Detroit, Mich., Chicago, Ill., Philadelphia, Pa., and Baltimore, Md. Similar to subprime mortgages, these deals have hidden costs and hidden risks for cities. They allow the banks to generate billions of dollars in revenue every year while exerting considerable power over these governments. As Bhatti further explained, "When there are revenue shortfalls, cities typically impose austerity measures and cut essential community services, but Wall Street gets a free pass — payments to banks are considered untouchable."[160]

Policies starting in the 1990s fostered banking consolidation and enabled megabanks to shutter banks, particularly in communities of color, and exploit opportunities to profit from the lack of resources in these communities. The way to build a more equitable and racially just banking system is to fundamentally restructure it so that local banks, especially banks led by people of color, can thrive and serve their neighborhoods, towns, and regions.

A Better Future: Community-Based Enterprises and Structural Policy Solutions

Before Dr. Suzette Cowell co-founded the Toledo Urban Federal Credit Union (TUFCU) with Pastor Bishop Duane Tisdale and Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur (D-OH) nearly 30 years ago, she worked at a bank. Cowell saw the impacts of redlining first hand and wanted to fill the vast need for fair and just banking services. TUFCU started in a small storefront and has steadily grown, eventually occupying its own building and recently opening its second full-service branch.

Dr. Suzette Cowell co-founded the Toledo Urban Federal Credit Union nearly 30 years ago and has been a fierce champion for the revitalization of Dorr Street, the city's once thriving Black business district.
Photo Credit: Ron Knox

Cowell has worked tirelessly to bring capital into the credit union, including forming a lending partnership with Mercy Health hospital to offer home equity loans for much needed repairs and renovation in the neighborhood's housing stock. The credit union has also worked with ProMedica, a nonprofit healthcare provider, to align clients' medical wellness with financial wellness. Cowell has also been championing the revitalization of Dorr Street, the city's once thriving Black business district, which was decimated by decades of racist policies and corporate consolidation. That the head of a community bank is at the center of efforts to renew this historic neighborhood is not surprising and bodes well for this effort; local bankers are uniquely situated to foster local businesses because their own business model depends on their relationships with and knowledge about the community.[161]

Yet, fearless champions and smart, innovative strategies are not enough to fill banking deserts and close the racial wealth gap. We need to fundamentally restructure our banking system. We discuss antimonopoly policies in the final section of this report, but in the context of banking, this means putting an end to the runaway tide of bank mergers, breaking up the biggest banks, and enacting new policies that block banks from engaging in extractive and discriminatory practices. It also means supporting the formation of new community-oriented banks and credit unions as well as creating public banks, such as the bank of North Dakota, which can anchor small local banks by supporting them with adequate capital and back-end services.

A Policy Framework for Democratizing Economic Power

"As long as Black-owned businesses and Black consumers are systematically underrepresented and disadvantaged, we know our markets are not fair."

Rebecca Slaughter, FTC Commissioner[162]

As the antimonopoly movement — advocates, scholars, journalists, policymakers, small business owners, workers, and everyday citizens — builds momentum in the fight to contain monopoly power, we must take direct aim at the structural racism that is coded in our economy, which hinders this fight and fuels concentrated corporate power. A clear analysis of race must inform the policy response for dismantling structures of corporate control. To do that, we need to see antimonopoly not just as an antitrust fight but as a unified theory that calls for democratizing economic power and encompasses a broad set of policies.

To create an antimonopoly vision and policy framework that fully integrates racial justice, three broad elements are required. First, antitrust itself must be guided by a primary commitment to safeguarding the economic liberty of all Americans. Broadly, this means that enforcement must follow the vision and goals of the antitrust laws — namely dispersing economic power, promoting fair competition, and enhancing community self-determination. From the 1980s until very recently, antitrust enforcers ignored these goals. They dismissed concerns about fairness and freedom and focused narrowly on misguided notions of efficiency. The result was a permissive approach that furthered corporate concentration and deepened its racial impacts. Fortunately, a reanimation of antitrust is already underway, led by the Biden Administration and guided by a 2021 executive order that declared that concentrated corporate power is "denying Americans the benefits of an open economy and widening racial, income, and wealth inequality."

Stewart's Pharmacy in the Dorr Street neighborhood of Toledo, Ohio, a once thriving Black business district. Photo Credit: Toledo-Lucas County Public Library

It also means that antitrust enforcers need to recognize that race shapes how markets operate. As this report documents, monopolies have harnessed racism to build and entrench their market

“What we are presenting here is a policy framework designed to dismember the ways that corporations leverage structural racism to advance their dominance.”

power. Recognizing these racial dynamics can sharpen regulators’ ability to analyze markets and spot monopolization strategies and other competition problems. Race is not merely a social concern best left to other areas of law, as some have suggested; it is highly relevant economically.[163] As this report shows, monopolistic firms have exploited racial hierarchy to amplify their monopsony power in labor markets, raise prices on captive consumers, reduce output by creating food and pharmacy deserts, and block new businesses and innovations that might challenge their grip. These are all competition problems at the center of antitrust.

Second, this vision requires understanding that antimonopoly action includes the full range of economic policy tools in our tool chest — not just applying antitrust but also rewriting our tax code, restructuring financial markets, strengthening labor protections, and reorienting corporate governance. If antitrust is the hub of the wheel of our regulatory policies that can restructure the economy to contain corporate power, the other four tools are the main spokes on that wheel.

Third, antimonopoly should include in its scope the direct repair of and investment in poor communities of color through public options and public goods at all levels of government.

These economic policies are not sufficient for repairing historical racial harm in the U.S. and advancing the struggle for civil rights. For that, we also need criminal justice reform and voting protections, not to mention policies that address gender justice, particularly for women of color. What we are presenting here is a policy framework designed to dismantle the ways that corporations leverage structural racism to advance their dominance. This includes policies that help to repair that harm, and in doing so, realize the vision of America’s antimonopoly tradition — to democratize economic power and build open and fair markets.

1. Bring a Racial Justice Lens to Antitrust

In the late 19th century, Congress responded to the emergence of big corporate “trusts,” such as U.S. Steel and Standard Oil, by passing the 1890 Sherman Act, the first federal antitrust law. Over the coming decades, lawmakers enacted a robust body of antitrust laws, which, as their language and legislative histories make clear, were designed to disperse economic power, promote healthy market structures, and ensure fair competition. These economic principles have worked, fostering lower prices, dynamic labor markets for workers, entrepreneurship and growth for small businesses, and stability for communities and democracy.[164]

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, policymakers were increasingly influenced by economists and legal scholars associated with The Chicago School, who dismissed the democratic aims of our antitrust laws. They favored an approach to enforcement that focused narrowly on consumers and erased people’s identities as workers, small business owners, community members, and citizens. Under the sway of these ideas, antitrust enforcers and judges began to turn a blind eye to anticompetitive corporate behavior and greenlight mergers on the grounds that letting the largest firms do as they wish would lead to lower prices for consumers or higher economic output, even if the result was less competition and highly consolidated markets.[165]

It turned out, however, that the consumer welfare standard was only good for big corporations. Antitrust enforcers allowed for historic levels of market concentration across our economy, and many industries now lack meaningful competition. The consequences include rampant corporate price gouging — especially on life-sustaining goods, such as food and medicines — unreliable supply chains, concentrated labor markets, fewer new businesses, and less innovation. Our consumer selves were sold a bill of goods; our other identities were disregarded altogether.[166]

The consumer welfare standard also carries an embedded racism. It is based on the quiet assumption that as long as consumer welfare has increased in the aggregate, it doesn't matter who benefits or who gets hurt.[167] In our deeply unequal economy, this has resulted in a transfer of wealth along race, class, and gender lines, with concentrated power and profit primarily flowing into the hands of wealthy white men. Stated another way, the consumer welfare standard has given corporations the theoretical basis and legal cover for engaging in the racist monopolization tactics detailed in this report.

Undoing the resulting damage to our markets and communities requires that the antitrust agencies do the following:

- **Bring antitrust enforcement back in line with the broad democratic goals of the antitrust statutes.** Shortly after entering office, Biden gave a speech in which he forcefully repudiated the consumer welfare standard. His administration has made significant strides in reinvigorating antitrust enforcement and bringing it back into alignment with the language and intent of the laws enacted by Congress. A starting point is already taking shape. The antitrust agencies are jettisoning the consumer welfare approach and restoring the original intent of our antitrust laws by focusing on dispersing economic power and promoting competition. This can be seen in the agencies' 2023 Merger Guidelines, which make clear that mergers that reduce competition or lead to an excessive concentration of market power are illegal regardless of any purported price benefits.

  In another important example, both the FTC and the DOJ now recognize that monopoly power harms workers as well as consumers. To that end, the FTC adopted a new rule banning noncompete clauses as an "unfair method of competition."[168] Noncompetes allow corporations to suppress competition and keep wages low by blocking workers from pursuing a better job or starting a business, which disproportionately ensnares workers of color. Research has found that banning them will significantly narrow the racial and gender wage gaps.[169]

  Another crucial foundational principle of antitrust is safeguarding community self-determination. During the congressional debate of the 1950 Celler-Kefauver Antimerger Act, which is a key amendment to our antitrust laws, lawmakers "underscored the importance of community self-determination and how its absence bred alienation and a loss of faith in democratic government," according to ILSR's Stacy Mitchell and Ron Knox.[170] For antitrust to achieve its democratic purpose, a primary goal of enforcement should be that all communities, especially communities of color, are free from economic control by distant corporate overlords.

- **Account for racial disparities when defining markets, assessing mergers, and investigating potential monopolization cases.** The 2023 Merger Guidelines recognize that the Celler-Kefauver Act prohibits mergers that harm competition in "any market." A key step in merger reviews is accurately defining the relevant geographic and product markets at stake. In the case of geographic markets, these are often defined too expansively to account for the different circumstances of communities of color.[171] A supermarket merger, for example, may not show harm when evaluated in the aggregate across a metro area. It may well, however, show harm to shoppers, workers, and competition in a Black or Latine neighborhood, where limited access to transportation, the heightened barriers to entry facing entrepreneurs of color, corporate redlining, and other factors make the realities of that local market distinct and different from the broader metro area. Antitrust enforcers need to recognize that a narrower market definition might be called for to accurately assess the legality of a merger that might eliminate competition within a community or even lead to a food, banking, healthcare, or other desert. Similarly, as this report shows, exploiting structural racism can be a key component of a monopolization strategy — a fact that the agencies should be attuned to in antitrust investigations.

- **Prioritize enforcement in sectors where monopolization and anticompetitive behavior disproportionately harm communities of color.** Like every law enforcement office, the antitrust agencies must set priorities in order to direct their finite resources to the enforcement actions that will yield the most public benefit. When choosing industries and types of cases to prioritize, the agencies should focus on those where action would address the most significant harms and greatest disparities in power, including and especially in communities of color, in low-income communities, and in rural communities. This report has named several sectors where combatting concentrated power would be especially beneficial to marginalized communities: healthcare, the waste industry, banking services, and the grocery sector. To this list, we would add utilities, including broadband and electricity; the logistics industry; and the tech sector.

- **Study sectors where market abuses appear to be particularly borne by people of color.** FTC 6b studies are wide-ranging research projects that allow the agency to deploy its fact-finding power, develop its industry-specific expertise, and shape enforcement priorities. The FTC should prioritize 6b studies on sectors that appear to have racial monopoly tactics and harms. It should also collect detailed demographic data for industries that can inform its merger reviews and enforcement decisions.

- **Directly engage with communities of color about monopoly harms and community power.** We cannot have fair and effective policy solutions without clear communication channels between stakeholders within communities of color and agency officials. We are beginning to see this under FTC Chair Lina Khan's leadership, as she has reintroduced open commission meetings to invite people affected to share their stories. FTC Commissioner Alvaro Bedoya is also going directly into communities affected by corporate concentration. In 2023, he visited North Tulsa, Okla., which, as this report has described, is a predominantly Black neighborhood that has been fighting the encroachment of dollar store chains and is now home to community-based Oasis Fresh Market, the first grocery store in the area in 14 years.[172]

2. Leverage Other Economic Regulatory Tools to Contain Corporate Power

On the surface, most economic regulations and policies are so-called race neutral. It is well documented that, in some cases, ostensibly race-neutral policies can further entrench racial disparities. But if designed to actually democratize economic power, economic regulations can, in fact, serve an essential role in structuring the economy to benefit people of color as, for example, minimum wage laws have. If antitrust enforcement is the hub, the spokes of this regulatory wheel include rewriting our tax code, restructuring the financial system, bolstering labor protections, and restructuring corporate governance. What follows provides a broad description of each of these interventions.

Rewriting our tax code to stop favoring corporations, private equity, and white wealth. Local and federal policymakers have systematically structured our tax system in a way that deepens the concentration of corporate power and the financial industry and exacerbates wealth inequality. Meanwhile, workers, smaller competitors, and people of color bear more than their fair share of their tax burden. The tax code is filled with loopholes that enable corporations to avoid paying their fair share, loopholes that small businesses don't have the resources to maneuver. In addition, the difference between how wealth is taxed relative to income is much lower; small business income is often passed through to owners who pay income tax, while corporate executives collect the bulk of their earnings in the form of capital gains. And the IRS is racially biased in choosing who they audit and what kinds of tax breaks they can get, according to Dorothy A. Brown, author of *The Whiteness Of Wealth*. Making our tax system fairer would help curtail corporate dominance, help smaller businesses compete on a more level playing field, and stem the concentration of white wealth.

Restructuring the financial system to stop advantaging big banks and credit card companies. Consolidation in the banking industry underwrites consolidation throughout the economy. Community banks make the bulk of small business loans, and Black-owned banks are essential to overcoming racial bias in the banking industry. But big banks have grown to dominate and wipe out smaller competitors, and our capital markets are almost entirely oriented toward supporting large public companies. Two credit card companies collect 80 percent of all credit and debit card fees that small businesses have to pay on card transactions.[173] Our financial markets need restructuring to equitably serve communities, especially business owners of color. Rebalancing power in the banking system requires breaking up big banks, establishing universal public banking infrastructure, and making capital available to start and foster healthy community-level banks, particularly banks that represent — in ownership and governance — the communities they serve.

Bolstering U.S. labor laws and protections to foster workers' collective bargaining, build their countervailing power against corporate concentration, and ensure sustainable livelihoods. The fact that the rising fight to tame corporate behemoths has happened in tandem with an emboldened labor movement is not a coincidence. Amazon warehouse workers, predominantly people of color, have waged a fight to unionize that has helped bolster both broad sweeping labor actions across industries in the U.S. and the FTC's own fight to contain Amazon's monopoly power. The struggle to advance antimonopoly can be better achieved when workers use their collective voice to fight corporate power. However, they need the support of strong labor laws that protect workers at the workplace as well as their right to organize for better working conditions.

Strengthening corporate governance laws to restructure internal corporate power from shareholders to workers and other stakeholders. Starting in the late 1970s and 1980s, while antitrust enforcers were losing sight of their core mission, shareholders — who are overwhelmingly wealthy and white — were gaining power "inside" the corporation over corporate executives, boards, and workers, which meant they were applying increasing pressure for ever rising share prices. Notably, shareholder pressure to raise stock prices often drives merger decisions. Shareholder pressure has also prodded public companies to shortsightedly buy back their stock rather than invest profits back into the corporation. Meaningful antimonopoly reform requires policy that reduces the outsized power of shareholders and allows companies to make decisions for the long term. One example is making stock buybacks illegal, as economists William Lazonick and Lenore Palladino propose.[174]

3. Create Public Options and Investment in Communities of Color

Curtailing corporate power through economic policies is not enough to overcome the racial oppression and division that is so integral to corporate strategy. A race-forward antimonopoly lens must also be about repair and investment in the communities harmed. This goes beyond targeted financial assistance to help entrepreneurs of color. It's about recognizing that neoliberalism, the same so-called "free market" ideological project that anesthetized U.S. antitrust enforcement, also siphoned off public resources and political support for public options, which has exacerbated racial and economic inequality.

Neoliberalism has used racism to fundamentally erode the provision of public goods — from the underfunding of public schools and the decline of federal grants for financial aid to college students, to the decline in public housing and the fight against universal healthcare. Racism played a profound role in fostering the political alignments between the white working class and economic elites that succeeded in imposing the neoliberal order and draining our social safety net. "Hidden in plain sight — and too often ignored by progressives — has been the use of strategic racism to consolidate economic and political power for the few at the expense of everyone else," explained economist Darrick Hamilton.[175] The decline of the welfare state has been bad for all of us but has explicitly driven racial divides in income and wealth.

As we navigate our way past neoliberalism to something better, we can firmly situate the investment of public goods, as well targeted investment in people and communities of color, as part of the antimonopoly framework. We approach this through two pathways.

The first pathway is building our safety net to foster racial and economic equity. A strong safety net gives people economic freedom and power. It gives people more freedom in their work. It helps people start businesses. If you have affordable healthcare and childcare, you can take that risk. And as workers, you have more power to leave a bad employer or move to a startup that is riskier. A strong safety net also means investments to individuals, such as federally provided universal baby bonds, which could help to dramatically close the racial wealth gap.

The second pathway is directly investing in public options in the sectors that have languished and underserved communities of color because of concentration. We must invest in public infrastructure and services that create good jobs, ensure resilient industries, and give all people access to the goods and services that they need to live their lives.

Public options not only ensure the provision of goods and services that dominant companies have failed to provide, but they also inject competition into the market as a whole, which has forced dominant companies in, for example, the broadband industry to improve their services and lower their prices in certain regional markets. Injecting public provision directly into markets nudges corporations into doing their jobs.

Public Healthcare: A new partnership between California and a nonprofit manufacturer has huge potential for building access to an array of medically vital medicines. In March 2023, the state of California announced that it signed a contract with nonprofit drugmaker Civica Rx to create its own line of insulin: CalRx insulins. The 10-year $50 million agreement will produce insulins that will cost patients — insured and uninsured — no more than $30 per 10 milliliter vial and will be available across the country, not just in California.[176] Before California's announcement, Civica's new presence in the insulin market had already been pushing down prices; the three largest drug makers had cut their prices, in part, because Civica moved into insulin manufacturing in 2022.[177] California's contract with Civica fortified the possibility of applying public competitive pressure on drug prices, bringing costs down dramatically and making them widely available.

Public Banking: The Bank of North Dakota, currently the only state-owned bank in the country, has nurtured a dense ecosystem of local banks unlike anywhere else in the U.S.[178] Public banks in every state, which should include postal banks, could give people of color consistent, reliable access to affordable banking services.

Public Broadband: Hundreds of communities, many helped by federal dollars, have established municipal broadband to bypass telecom monopolies and further narrow the digital divide.[179]

Public Investment: Communities have been able to use federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to provide grants to entrepreneurs of color and to even purchase buildings to incubate businesses launched by underrepresented business owners. City officials can use Community Development Block Grant money to help launch independent grocery stores, as Tulsa, Okla., did for Oasis Fresh Market, or use general operating funds, USDA grants, and other public funds to ensure fresh food access, as several Kansas communities have done. There are myriad ways that we can invest public dollars to build infrastructure and services, which both fosters market competition and can directly provide all communities, especially communities of color, with what they need.

As long as policymakers allow monopolies to leverage America's structural racism to build profit and power, we will not reach our antimonopoly vision of democratizing economic power. However, we can win if, instead of allowing politicians to scapegoat people of color, we confront racist monopoly and work to dismantle it. If we continue to ignore the role that structural racism plays in monopoly power-building and its resulting impacts, we not only lose an opportunity to build a multi-racial coalition led by people of color, but we also lose track of a key way that corporations build dominance, which harms all of us. We can and must hold racist monopoly to account, as foundational to a unified, antimonopoly vision of American democracy and a key pathway to building broadly shared power and prosperity. ■

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