

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Two Pandemics: Forward Promise Fights Racism in the COVID-19 Era

In May 2021, the U.S. reversed mask mandates and loosened restrictions on gatherings amidst the raging COVID-19 pandemic. These changes signaled a return to “normal” for some. As people resume their gym workouts, reschedule their weddings, and rebook their vacations, the lives of the nation’s people of color (POC)—particularly those in poverty—are far from normal. These families are in worse conditions than ever before, and their mental, physical, and economic well-being is more precarious.

The profound inequities that have been exposed throughout this crisis continue to disproportionately and negatively impact communities of color nearly two years into the pandemic. Consequently, the POC leading Forward Promise grantee organizations have been taking care of boys and young men of color (BYMOC) and their villages, while navigating personal and professional traumas during two pandemics—COVID-19 and the pandemic of racism. Based on their reports from the ground and the data highlighted in *The Two Pandemics: Forward Promise Fights Racism in the COVID-19 Era*, an urgent call-to-action has emerged:

The helpers, and their communities, need help.

PAPER HIGHLIGHTS

- **Throughout the pandemic, poverty has intensified for POC.** Issues of hunger, housing instability, economic strife, and unemployment remain nearly two years after the crisis began. According to the U.S. Census, 9% of all adults—or about 20 million people—reported that their households did not have enough to eat.¹ Many Americans have faced homelessness or eviction because they lacked funds for bills and basics. And the financial obligations of those most impacted by unemployment have skyrocketed as states stopped using federal pandemic funds.
- **This crisis has also highlighted the ongoing and significant disparities in access to affordable healthcare, paid sick leave, mental health services, and other social services for POC.** There are even more barriers to this access today due to conditions wrought by the



% of People Who Lacked Enough to Eat in U.S. Households¹

September 29-October 11, 2021

American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Multiracial not Latinx	19%
Black not Latinx	17%
Latinx of any race	16%
White not Latinx	6%
Asian not Latinx	5%

pandemic and, as a result, many people of color have died. As of October 2021, Black people accounted for a slightly higher share of deaths from the virus compared to their population share; Latinx people represented a larger share of cases relative to their share of the total population; and American Indian/ Alaska Native, Latinx, and Black people were at least twice as likely to die from the virus compared to white people, according to age-standardized data.² POC have also suffered from higher levels of anxiety and depression throughout the crisis.

- **In addition, it has been difficult or impossible to collectively grieve for loved ones or practice sacred burial customs during the pandemic.** Many infections in communities of color have been accompanied by many deaths of loved ones. For some families, they could not gather to physically comfort or even bury their kin—according to sacred customs—due to social distancing restrictions. Striking a balance between the restrictions and cultural practices has traumatized POC who rely on these traditions to cope.
- **The digital and learning gaps between communities of color and their white counterparts have only widened since the start of the crisis.** Millions could not afford or depend on broadband services or computer devices, so many students opted out of remote learning in 2020. They encountered technology problems during instruction; and they experienced the racist and culturally insensitive³ requirement pressuring students to turn on their video cameras during class. This requirement failed to encourage active engagement or improve learning.⁴ If anything, this and other online learning challenges likely drove kids already anxious about missing their friends, dealing with the pandemic, and being stuck at home to disengage—contributing to the ever-growing learning gap among students of color.⁵
- **Due to the pandemic, Forward Promise grantees have fundamentally changed the way their organizations operate. And they have been reeling professionally and personally.** Lack of funding—or inflexibility with existing funds—has prevented them from seeking professional services to make pivots in a different direction. Furthermore, many organizations that previously relied on specific offerings to generate revenues have lost funds due to operational changes. The toll of the pandemic is apparent—as most of the Forward Promise grantees navigate the same emotional and mental blows as the communities they serve.
- **Despite this and other stresses, Forward Promise grantees have worked to thwart the negative policies that have harmed POC during the past 20 months.** They have advocated for emergency policy reforms—enacted to deal with the consequences of the pandemic—to become permanent. Disrupting dehumanization and restoring humanity in the treatment of BYMOC, both at the policy level and in public systems, remains essential.

- **The grantees have also intervened to keep their communities safe when gun and domestic violence exploded during this crisis.** The breadth of the increased violence caused by the pandemic has devastated communities. The last year ushered in the highest rates of gun violence-related deaths in the past 20 years. Many factors have contributed to this increase, including a surge in gun sales during the crisis.⁶ According to a NIH report, “the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the inequities that exist in communities of color that place them at risk for exposure to violence.”⁷
- **All of this—the violence, the poverty, the COVID-19 deaths, the emotional upheaval—was happening when Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other victims of police brutality were murdered.** The destructive and deadly aftereffects of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic of racism haunt the Forward Promise grantees and the people they serve—in their daily lives, through their television screens, and on their electronic devices. And grantee organizations are wrestling with how to help BYMOC, their villages, and themselves heal from this never-ending trauma.
- **While BYMOC and their villages endure anguish and setbacks, the politicization of reopening schools, wearing masks, and getting the vaccine has only exacerbated an anxiety-inducing situation.** Slack federal leadership in 2020 on the issue of schooling during the pandemic meant that children, particularly in communities of color, were at greater risk. This process has been a tug-of-war between opposing parties—with the health and well-being of our children hanging in the balance. In addition, rampant misinformation about vaccines and POC has driven the spread of harmful narratives about their communities.

PAPER HIGHLIGHTS

Now more than ever, the sustainability of POC-led organizations—and the communities they serve—is vital. Therefore, the Forward Promise grantees have identified four key areas of opportunity where philanthropy can substantially support their work:

1. Technical Assistance

Fund technical assistance to help grantees build their capacities for advocacy work, create online platforms, and address mission drift, among other business development needs.

2. Negative Narratives

Actively use its influence to counter negative narratives about POC and the communities in which they live. This action is an essential component of investing in communities of color.

3. Flexible Funding

Increase investment among severely underrepresented groups, expand funding for systems reform, and provide general operating support. These investments will help grantees continue the rapid-response work they have done to literally save lives.

4. Partnership

Be a funding partner that recognizes the need for organizations to recharge and offers resources to help grantees plan for a “new normal.” This will allow grantees to prioritize resting, reflecting, and healing as the communities they serve recover.

Forward Promise organizations have battled for the people in their communities, stretching their dollars and recalibrating their focus on immediate necessities and systemic racism. They have continued services, listened to youth and their villages, and acted on their behalf. Nevertheless, most organizations are flat-funded for the next fiscal year, despite the list of concerns left unaddressed. The grantees have done their best with less, but new problems continue to emerge and they must reconsider what recovery will look like in the future. Right now, they are asking themselves, their colleagues, and their youth, “How can we come together to rebuild loving, supportive environments for BYMOC and their villages without the culture of policing, surveilling, and blaming?”

But we are also looking to America’s philanthropies to ask these same questions of themselves, to reject the racist systems that led us here, and to fund all community organizations fairly and equitably.

Download the full paper at forwardpromise.org/two-pandemics

REFERENCES

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³ <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/03/03/why-its-wrong-require-students-keep-their-cameras-online-classes-opinion>

⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2021/03/03/why-its-wrong-require-students-keep-their-cameras-online-classes-opinion>

⁵ <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/06/Understanding-the-initial-educational-impacts-of-COVID19-on-communities-of-color.ResearchBrief.pdf>

⁶ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-violence-and-covid-19-in-2020-a-year-of-colliding-crises/>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8075843/>