

What is racial capitalism?

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The concept of racial capitalism asserts that racialized exploitation and capital accumulation are mutually reinforcing. The idea is attributed to Cedric Robinson, who argued that “the development, organization and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions.”¹

The “[AMA’s strategic plan to embed racial justice and advance health equity](#)” notes that racial capitalism promotes competition and exploitation of natural resources, leading to the destruction or depletion of resources and leading to widening inequities for Black, Indigenous and other people of color. This persistent cycle of structural violence contributes to the generational and recurring trauma that negatively affects health and well-being.²

What experts are saying about racial capitalism

Exploiting workers for capitalist pursuits

“Racial capitalism created the modern world system... During slavery, Black humans were seen as valuable for the profits that they made,” said Whitney Pirtle, PhD, assistant professor of sociology associated faculty critical race and ethnic studies University of California Merced, in the AMA’s [Prioritizing Equity video episode, “The Root Cause.”](#)³

“As humans, they were devalued, dehumanized, disposable. But the enslaved were the quintessential essential workers. They were essential for capital, but their lives are expendable,” she added.

Dr. Pirtle said that something similar is happening now during the COVID-19 pandemic. “...Black and brown workers in the fields in the San Joaquin Valley where I am, those who are at the checkout counters, those who are packaging meat in unsanitary warehouses,

those who are delivering our goods, they're essential to capitalist pursuits, but have been seen as wholly expendable because we're not protecting their health and well-being.”

Racial capitalism and COVID-19

Dr. Pirtle’s recent article “[Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Novel Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and Pandemic Inequities in the United States⁴](#)” finds that racial capitalism is the fundamental cause of racial and socioeconomic inequities of COVID-19, due to four main factors:

1. Severity of other diseases that interact with COVID-19 faced by people of color
2. Increases in disease risk factors that affect disease outcomes for poor, people of color (e.g., racial residential segregation)
3. Access to flexible resources (e.g., medical knowledge) that can lessen the impact of disease outcomes
4. Replication of historical patterns of inequities within pandemics

“I walked the idea of racial capitalism as a fundamental cause, thinking about it as a basic root cause, because of all of the things that we know about [structural racism](#) and how it interacts with capitalism, that it shapes multiple risk factor mechanisms, like racial residential segregation, homelessness, precarious work, medical bias,” said Dr. Pirtle.

“I think we have ample evidence to say that racism and socioeconomic disadvantage have persistent, significant and multi-faceted associations with poor health in the United States. What I said in the article is that COVID-19 is just showing America who we are again.”

Explore AMA resources on racial capitalism

Learn more about [health equity education on the AMA Ed Hub™](#) featuring CME from [the AMA’s Center for Health Equity](#) and curated education from collaborating organizations. To earn CME on the AMA’s “Prioritizing Equity” videos, [visit the courses page](#) on AMA Ed Hub™.

Other key health equity resources include:

- [Advancing Health Equity: A Guide to Language, Narrative and Concepts](#)
- [AMA's strategic plan to embed racial justice and advance health equity](#)
- [AMA policies on structural racism](#)
- [Defining racism is key to helping doctors advance health equity](#)
- [AMA Center for Health Equity](#)
- [Health Equity topics](#)

References

¹Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition*. University of North Carolina Press, 1983. (Cited in [Prioritizing Equity: The Root Cause](#), May 28, 2020.)

²Marya R. *Decolonizing Healthcare: Addressing Social Stressors in Medicine*. Bioneers. Published Dec. 11, 2018. Accessed April 12, 2021. (Cited in the AMA's [Organizational strategic plan to embed racial justice and advance health equity, 2021-2023](#), references 46,47).

³Pirtle W. Racial Capitalism: A Fundamental Cause of Vowel Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Pandemic Inequities in the United States. [Health Educ Behav](#). 2020 August; 47:504–508. Published online April 26, 2020. (Cited in [Prioritizing Equity: The Root Cause](#), May 28, 2020.)

Reviewed by: Fernando De Maio, PhD, director of health equity research and data use, Center for Health Equity, AMA; professor of sociology, DePaul University

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