



Open letter to Congress

January 15, 2020

Poverty and Racism: Social Work Science for Action

Beginning January 15, more than 2,000 social work researchers are in Washington, DC for the annual conference of the Society for Social Work and Research. The 2020 conference theme is *Reducing Racial and Economic Inequality*, reflecting the importance of simultaneously addressing these two interrelated issues, which adversely affect people across the world.

Acknowledging the inextricable link between economic and racial inequality is a necessary step in moving forward towards reconciliation and justice through policies and interventions designed to address such imbalances. Historically, racism has underpinned the creation of economic policies and systems, resulting in exclusion and penalties solely on the basis of race. Sadly, these policies and practices continue to perpetuate racial and economic inequality today.

Social work is a distinct discipline that views individuals within systems – families, neighborhoods, organizations, and policies. Social work research focuses on solutions to social problems in a manner best suited to remove barriers and create opportunities for all to thrive. Economic and racial inequality are the two fundamental barriers that must be addressed across all issues of concern, whether it be immigration, housing and homelessness, criminal justice reform, health care, job training, or climate change.

Under the current US government and Trump administration, racial and economic inequalities are further solidified, and much of the meaningful progress to date is rapidly reversing course. In addition to the current threats of additional wars in the Middle East, we continue to face a growing crisis at the southern US border and atrocities at detention camps for displaced and traumatized children. Affordable housing is no longer a policy priority, despite housing insecurity increasing across the country. Disparities in health care and health outcomes are directly related to poverty and race; the data are unequivocal. The service industry is growing at the peril of the undereducated and untrained – mostly people of color living on the fringe of economic viability. Climate protections continue to be rolled back while the earth burns.

These societal grand challenges all have potential remedies, and social work research remains at the forefront of such efforts. With over 300 separate research presentations, our annual conference in DC this year highlights our best scholarly efforts at ameliorating the impact of poverty and racism. We offer science-informed options for our policy-makers in Washington to consider and urge them to refocus their energy and attention beyond war, impeachment, and retrenchment.

We besiege our elected officials to care about those who are differentially and disproportionately impacted by both the actions and inaction of the current administration. Thwarted human potential, death, and destruction are yet a few of the very real consequences. This is not hyperbole but science-informed, data-based truth. We also besiege our fellow citizens to exercise their civic rights and boldly engage in the process of informed voting. The Honorable Stacey Abrams, former Minority Leader of the Georgia House of Representatives, is a keynote speaker at the conference. Political disenfranchisement is happening because we are allowing it; electoral inaction is happening because we do not vote or we are structurally discouraged from voting; and our policymakers have fallen short of our expectations and not in society's best interest because we have failed to hold them accountable.

Action is indeed needed – action that is driven by a laser focus on poverty and racism and their ongoing consequences for US society. As we approach the day honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we evoke his claim that the long arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. We grab onto his words for hope, and encourage science-informed, civic action to improve the human condition. On behalf of the board of the Society for Social Work and Research and our more than 2000 members, social work stands at the ready with science for action.

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