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## Post Pandemic: Climate Change, Racial Injustice, Unemployment, Crumbling Infrastructure – Time for Creative Leadership

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## Editorial Comments

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### *Post-Pandemic:*

**Climate Change,  
Racial Injustice,  
Unemployment,**



*Breathe, Courtesy, Oleksandr Stepura*



*Harlem Housing Project, New York City, New York  
Courtesy, F. Muhammad*

**Crumbling  
Infrastructure –  
*Time for Creative  
Leadership***

– *Elizabeth Gingerich, JVBL Editor-in-Chief*

The U.S. is adding one Wuhan a Day while other parts of the world are opening up. Lives and livelihoods are on the line daily with the virus unabated without more stringent COVID-control plans – on a federal scale. During the time of COVID, other problems have either risen to the surface or have finally commanded the attention so desperately warranted:

### *Climate Change*

What has been the effect so far on greenhouse gas emissions as the world has shut down? Is there hope for a reversal of CO2 emissions if certain practices are permanently altered – e.g., less air travel and the provision of alternate forms of clean-fuel technology?

## **The Good News.**

Thanks to COVID, foot traffic is on the increase, flights have been limited in passenger bookings and destination choice, and skies have been noticeably clearer – from Shanghai to Los Angeles. And global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are on track to drop by 5.5%. Such a drop in carbon dioxide emissions would still be the largest yearly change *on record*, beating out the financial crisis of 2008 and World War II. Air pollution levels have taken a marked decline worldwide as a result of stay-at-home rules and guidelines in a way not seen before the Industrial Revolution.

## **The Bad News.**

Even with the global economy gridlocked, science indicates that the world is still on track to release 95% of the carbon dioxide emitted in a typical year, continuing to heat up the planet and driving climate change even as so many of us are stuck at home. Where are greenhouse gases still coming from and who are they impacting? Energy, ground transportation, consumption levels, factory farming, rising populations, landfills – all contribute to increasing greenhouse gases and the overall warming of the planet. And according to the U.S.'s own Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) projections, the Trump Administration's repeal in 2019 of the Obama era "Clean Power Plan" – America's first and only nationwide limit on carbon pollution originating from existing power plants – will make air even more toxic for years to come, causing the greatest harm to the most vulnerable communities.

## ***Racial Injustice***

Ever present, but continually glossed over, is the disparate treatment of, and opportunities available to, people of color. The filmed killing of George Floyd in the Spring of 2020, with the whole world watching, brought to light literally centuries of abuse and denial of rights to those who originally established the American economy – and so many other economies throughout the world that engaged in the slave trade. Systematic injustice extends to the provision of basic services – healthcare, education, occupation, transportation. Adding insult to injury is the fact that marginalized communities are often more harshly impacted by climate-related disasters – from the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward in New Orleans to the back streets of Houston – and have been disproportionately impacted by the virus.

The evidence is unrefuted that COVID-19 is deadlier in people with preexisting health conditions, particular those which weaken lungs and immune systems. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that COVID-19, a respiratory disease, is disparately impacting the poor and communities of color – a large percentage of whom are already suffering from respiratory ailments associated with exposure to air pollution. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services in 2014, Americans were already more than 3 times more likely to die from asthma-related causes. In 2017, the NAACP reported that African Americans are exposed to air that is 38% more polluted compared to white Americans.

## **The Good News.**

Criminal prosecutions have been launched and several recent killings of Black men and women submitted to new investigations. Corporations are forcing revised marketing and staffing compliance standards and many Confederate memorabilia and vestiges of the past are being questioned and, in many cases, removed.

## **The Bad News.**

Institutionalized racism is close to impossible to eradicate under current conditions – especially while prime employment and educational opportunities continue to be reserved for privileged individuals and the current administration is ever more insistent on supporting – and often instigating – race-baiting political ploys.

And COVID has virtually shut down so much of urban infrastructure, exposing its years of neglect to public inspection, and further denying its users even the most basic of reliable services.

## ***Unemployment:***

The global economy is under pressure and reminiscent of the Great Depression era of the 1930s. But now is also the time to plan ahead to create public-works jobs with a vision of the future.

## **The Good News.**

The June 2020 Jobs Report in the U.S. indicated that nearly 4.8 million Americans returned to work. Large swaths of European Union nations, the United Kingdom, and parts of Asia are reopening their doors in a fervent effort to restart their respective economies.

## **The Bad News.**

With borders closed and trade stifled, private sector manufacturing jobs have been compromised and many who were already close to retirement age have decided not to return to work. Others simply have given up any viable search.

## ***Crumbling Infrastructure***

Without question, there is widespread consensus in the U.S. that its infrastructure – highways, water supply and filtration systems, bridges, and country roads – is in gross disrepair and wholly inadequate to face increased traffic and the onslaught of new destructive weather events. Marked by decades of indifference and budgetary shortfalls and straining from overdue maintenance, this problem can no longer be ignored.

## **The Good News.**

Less traffic produces less negative impact to existing infrastructure.

## **The Bad News.**

Less taxed income generates lower budgets for infrastructure repair and rebuilding. Roads less traveled often reveal structural shortcomings that signal disastrous consequences if further ignored – especially as climate-related disasters take a rapid toll on its ability to withstand further stress.

With massive overhaul needed – and keeping in mind the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs – particularly #11 which, in part, refers to “making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable”) – wouldn’t it make sense to embark on a course of revision and reinforcement that seeks to render infrastructure more resilience to the forces of climate change – preferable using sustainable construction methods – and design them in a more equitable way of providing basic human services to the populace? As *Wisrd* founder and

Denver-based civil engineer Mark Reiner PhD, PE expounds in a June 18 2020 blog, “Achieving sustainable outcomes from a city’s system of systems requires a reliable and resilient infrastructure foundation. But it is important that urban planners and, all system stakeholders, have their own indicators for better reporting and quantifying the relevance of infrastructure for achieving sustainability.” In this context, shouldn’t this feat be accomplished by so many of the unemployed and underemployed – particularly in hard-hit minority communities – under the tutelage of competent leaders with a vision of achieving more equitable, sustainable, and resilient outcomes?

## Novel Coronavirus Calls for Novel Leadership

To responsibly and equitably create a post-COVID-19 economy, governments, businesses, and individuals must do their part to re-calculate their consumption habits and look for alternative ways of providing public services. The administration must avoid implementing environmental regulatory rollbacks. Decisions concerning supply chain relationships, arrangement of meetings, purchasing trends, traveling routines, and financing practices must be re-evaluated and revised accordingly. Energy suppliers and users must quickly transition to renewable sources. Online transactions and e-meetings must continue to be encouraged.

While a succession of COVID stimulus packages have served as a temporary band-aid to the harsh realities created by the pandemic, addressing the overload of problems – climate change, racism, unemployment, and crumbling infrastructure –



*Circa 1939, Courtesy, US National Archives*



might be best handled by resurrecting programs of the past. It appears that trillions of dollars in government assistance simply will not be effective –

long-term. A Post-Covid Stimulus Policy designed to mimic the successful elements of FDR’s New Deal, namely the WPA (Works Progress Administration) and the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) might serve to address these multifaceted crises, however. Elements of these programs have been integrated into what has been termed the “Green New Deal” – largely authored by New York Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – which attempts to parallel the FDR Administration’s efforts to reverse unemployment trends while

focusing on infrastructure rebuilding. The added twist to Green New Deal objectives is to undertake efforts in concert with attaining climate remediation goals.

Regarded as one of the most successful work programs ever introduced in the world, President Roosevelt launched the WPA in 1935 and through the life of the program, put millions back to work. The program was responsible for building and staffing healthcare centers to address the millions who went without treatment for even the most serious of illnesses and accidents (providing an example of wartime mobilization needed to fight the current pandemic) and championed the arts.

The CCC, a voluntary public work relief program that operated from 1933 to 1942, was initially restricted to unemployed, unmarried men of a certain age range and was chief in producing ecological preservation projects and encouraging outdoor experiences. Minorities were included, but kept in segregated program sections. The CCC built much of the infrastructure servicing America today, including wildlife refuges, water storage basins, bridges, and campground facilities. Understandably, caution and social distancing today dictate a pause in the implementation of any grand projects now but the situation most assuredly should not slow planners, policy-makers, architects, and engineers who would lead these efforts.



2019, Courtesy, Jordan Johnson, Creative Action Network



Over 9,000,000 Americans were involved in a multitude of Works Progress Administration projects, from building roads to beautifying government buildings. The (left) WPA mural depicts the arrival of the first train west of Chicago and can be found in an Oak Park, Illinois, post office. Courtesy, US History.org

Throughout the world, as nations respond to the exigencies of COVID in different ways, perhaps we can proverbially make some lemonade out of lemons as we have the rare opportunity during this uncertain pause to assess the salient problems and challenges of the day and move to address them – hopefully, in an integrated manner. New infrastructure can feature more pedestrian-friendly and mass transportation options and a greater – and faster – transition to renewable energy sources to replace fossil fuel usage. Urban structures can be retrofitted much like New York’s Empire State Building has already been and all people be part and parcel of such nationwide investment. Who wouldn’t love to see this happen – with cleaner skies, water, and ground to boot? Without widespread change in policy and individual behavior that takes the situation of marginalized groups seriously, those who do not make such changes are truly part of the problem – and not the solution.

With the ball in our court, let’s get to work.

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## About the Author



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