

June 1, 2020

Statement of Professor Olatunde Johnson, Board Chair of the Poverty & Race Research Action Council, on Structural Racism and Police Violence

Our Collective Responsibility

“Like many of you, I am reeling from the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota by a police officer who drove a knee into Mr. Floyd’s neck for over eight minutes until he stopped breathing. The killing has ignited demonstrations throughout the country. And Mr. Floyd’s is just the latest killing. We are also remembering the police killings of other black people including Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. Police abuse is an all too familiar story in America. It reveals the persistence of racialized structures of violence and inequality sustained by a legal and political apparatus that thwarts meaningful accountability. This latest reckoning with police violence comes during a pandemic which has affected people of color and low-income people most severely. When we read the statistics on racial disparities from Covid-19, we are seeing the deadly consequences of discrimination, segregation, a lack of health insurance, and communities burdened by environmental toxins, housing instability and dangerously unequal work conditions.

“To respond, we need to address structural racism and its enduring consequences with renewed urgency. At a minimum, this means joining the calls for Congress to remove legal barriers to holding police institutions accountable. At PRRAC, we will continue our efforts to address the health, economic, educational, and political consequences of segregation and systemic disinvestment in low-income communities of color. We know that ‘structural racism’ isn’t an abstraction or too big to tackle. Rather it means changing the practices of every level of government now, including those at the state and local levels that so profoundly impact policing and public health. Still, the current crisis should prompt us all to question the sufficiency of our approach. This means asking: How can we more effectively prompt change? Who sits at our table? How can we create robust and inclusive partnerships? How do we fruitfully engage politics and power? We will need courage and imagination, so that the future looks different from our past.”