

COVID-19, Structural Racism, and Community Investment

Notes Toward a Just Recovery



The following is an excerpt from an issue brief by the Center for Community Investment at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. To read or download the full brief, visit <https://bit.ly/cci-ajustrecovery>.

CRISES BY THEIR VERY NATURE are times of disruption. Our customary activities and ingrained mental models, things that seem natural and inevitable, can fall by the wayside. As the COVID-19 pandemic has escalated, our normal routines—commuting to work, gathering with family and friends, going to the movies, sending kids out the door to school—have gone out the window. In response to George Floyd’s murder and the persistence of police violence, Americans have taken to the streets in unprecedented numbers and places demanding action to address entrenched structural racism.

It is a time of great uncertainty. Yet this kind of disruption and discontinuity can also be a time of invention and shifts in mental models. Think of the new institutions, new policies, and new routines that emerged from the Great Depression and World War II. We now have an opportunity to imagine a different future, one that uproots the structural racism that has been so central to the development of this country. As we go forward, we can draw lessons from prior crises, including the critical importance of centering racial justice to avoid creating solutions that maintain existing inequities—or create new ones, often for generations to come.

The magnitude of the moment calls for bold leadership. At the Center for Community Investment, we are supporting leaders who are attending to the needs of their communities in ways that position them for equitable long-term recovery, rethinking, and rebuilding.

What can community leaders and their allies and supporters in the community investment field do now to respond to this historic moment? We have identified some guiding principles for this work (described in depth in the full brief):

- **Center racial justice and Black communities.**
- **Bring the work as close to communities as possible.**
- **Spend according to your values.**
- **Prepare for the long haul.**
- **Lead with courage.**

The following strategies can help lay the groundwork for a just recovery built on the foundation of these principles.



Start from the Future

As we consider our options, it is natural to start from current activities and plans. We are emotionally invested in them and have worked hard to garner clarity and buy-in. Yet our circumstances have changed profoundly, and business as usual won't get us where we need to go.

One way to unhook ourselves from the tyranny of existing activities is to take time to imagine what future success will look like and allow that imagined future to shape the choices we make in the present. Beginning this way allows leaders to step out of the constraints of the present and really consider what might be possible.

For example, some communities are starting to rethink their budgets, in particular the funds allocated to the police department. Rather than starting with how municipal funds are currently

distributed, begin by imagining the future you want for your community. Does everyone have a home? Do schools have smaller class sizes? Do community members take responsibility for the safety of their neighborhoods?

Once you have a vision, you can explore how the budget would need to be reallocated to make that vision a reality. Many communities have enacted temporary emergency legislation to protect renters from eviction or establish rent moratoria. Imagine a future in which eviction protections have been made permanent and forgiveness or other creative measures to ease rent burdens are in place. What are the actions you would have to take now to make such a future possible? By digging into the details of the future you want to help create, you can begin to liberate yourself from the confines of the status quo and the uncertainty clouding our short-term horizon.

Triage the Work

Effectively addressing the current crisis and achieving your vision for the future means making tough decisions. No one has the time or resources right now to do everything.

To help organizations and leaders think through what you need to do, what it's possible for you to do, and how you should prioritize and sequence your work, we offer a triage tool at <https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/blog/reimagining-strategy-context-covid-19-crisis-triage-tool>.

Our triage tool helps you prioritize strategies and activities based on the results you seek now, assessing the relative feasibility and impact of each item on your current agenda in light of your new circumstances. Once you have sorted your strategies and activities into the tool's five categories (current priority, emerging expanded priority, pause, unknown, and let go), it is important to ask the following questions:

- How do the activities in the current and emerging/expanded priority boxes advance us toward the result we seek to achieve?
- Do we have the capacity to do these activities? If not, what else do we need to shift, pause, or let go of to make space for critical work?

The triage process can be undertaken at multiple levels—a single leader sorting their work, an organization examining its portfolio, a collaboration resetting its priorities. At any level, a triage stance can help you uncover or refine a set of emergent priorities—whether it is work that was not on the table before these crises but now must be attended to or existing work that must now be recast or given higher priority. For example, leaders who were committed to expanding the number of Black- and Latinx-owned businesses are now working to protect existing businesses, which means they must shift their focus away from new entrepreneurs. Similarly, communities around the country that were working on issues of affordable housing are now finding that they must redouble their efforts to protect residents so they can stay in their housing, which means slowing their efforts to produce new units.

Each of these pivots produces new work that must be staffed and resourced. This requires making tough choices, a planning step that cannot be avoided. At the same time, these emergent priorities also provide the opportunity to lay the groundwork for longer term system interventions that advance racial equity: finding new ways to keep people in their homes can help expand a community's housing strategies, while strengthening the environment for local businesses can ultimately enable the success of new Black- and Latinx-owned businesses.



Get Started, Get Going . . . and Keep Racial Justice at the Forefront

It may feel difficult to plan for an uncertain future at a time when community needs are overwhelming and things are changing quickly. However, it is more important than ever to start moving on the long-term community needs you have identified. So where can you begin?

BUILD ON WHAT'S WORKING

- Is there a local CDFI that is more effectively reaching Black and Latinx borrowers?
- Is there a promising demonstration project working in two neighborhoods that could be extended to three more?
- Does your community have a land bank that is handling 30 properties effectively? What would it take to double that number? How can their approach be replicated?

Identify existing capacity to achieve the results you seek, then ask yourself, how can that capacity be reinforced and increased to produce larger results?

CHUNK THE WORK

Figure out what needs to happen and divide it up. Give different people or departments responsibility for different chunks. If you are part of a cross-organizational collaborative, think about how work can be allocated explicitly among the partners in ways that build upon their strengths.

- Who has deep relationships in the community that can be leveraged?
- Who has experience applying for government or philanthropic grants?
- How can groups work together in a spirit of racial equity so that resources and responsibility are appropriately shared?

Once people begin to see progress and results, it is easier for them to get on board because in the end you have to act in order to collaborate.

PICK A SLICE OF THE WORK AND BEGIN

In times like this, it is easy to get paralyzed by the sheer volume of work to be done and the volatility that surrounds us. It is tempting to overthink decision making and prioritizing. The question of where to start can ensnare us as we try to mitigate risk and find the right answer. The right answer turns out to be that there's no right answer, or at least no right answer we can discern from here. We have to begin in order to find what will work. So begin.

MOVE QUICKLY AND PAY ATTENTION TO EQUITY

In a crisis situation, speed matters. It is easier to contain the spread of disease than to mitigate the effects of a pandemic, easier to keep people in their homes than to deal with the displacement and vacancies caused by evictions and foreclosures, and easier to keep businesses operating and help people keep their jobs than to deal with the economic shocks of unemployment and the loss of critical services. But moving quickly can lead to privileging existing channels, products, and relationships, which in turn can shut out people and communities of color, as was the case with the CARES Act. At every stage of the work, attend to the racial equity implications of the strategies you advance and choices you make.

For more strategies and advice, read the full brief at <https://bit.ly/cci-ajustrecovery>.

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