



LeBron James says “being black in America is tough.” He’s correct.

We can debate where LeBron James sits in the pantheon of great basketballers. There should be no debate, however, about his role as one of sports’ most insightful figures.

In response to an abhorrent act of vandalism involving a spray-painted racial slur on his house, James offered a thoughtful reflection on the intersection of race and class in America.

“No matter how much money you have, no matter how famous you are, no matter how many people admire you, being black in America is tough. We got a long way to go for us as a society and for us as African Americans until we feel equal in America.”

Although there are several important points embedded in James’ statement, his comment on wealth has attracted the most scrutiny. Is it true that even wealthy black Americans have a tougher time?

The answer is yes.

Just look at a few key indicators in housing, health, justice, and labor.



- **Wealthy black families are significantly more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods than their white counterparts.** In some of America’s largest cities, black families making \$100,000 or more a year are more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods than white families making less than \$25,000 a year.
- **Black people are more likely to experience discrimination in mortgage lending.** On average, wealthy blacks have higher mortgage rates than their white counterparts who earn the same amount of money. Fictitious mortgage applicants with a black-sounding name are also less likely to receive follow-up contacts by mortgage lenders, roughly the equivalent to a having a credit score reduced 71 points.
- **High-income black Americans face worse health outcomes.** A new analysis of black people making over \$175,000 a year found health disparities in 10 of 16 health-related outcomes examined. College-educated black women also have higher rates of preterm birth than white mothers without high school degrees.
- **Increased wealth does not insulate black Americans from negative outcomes in the criminal justice system.** Children from wealthy black families were shown to be more likely to go to prison than white children from poor families. Additionally, many famous and wealthy black men have discussed being stopped repeatedly for “driving while black.”
- **Evidence reveals discrimination in the labor market.** Graduates of elite colleges with black-sounding names are less likely to get job callbacks, and black people in the high-end service sector struggle to get ahead because of issues both real and assumed with attracting high-end clients.
- **Success can be fragile.** Compared with other ethnic backgrounds, black middle-class families experience more downward mobility than white middle-class families.

Why is wealth a weaker protector for black Americans?

In general, higher socioeconomic status is associated with better outcomes across many domains. But for black Americans, it appears income and wealth are a weaker protective factor than for other groups. Why? No single explanatory factor exists, and the reasons are particular to the outcome considered. For instance, redlining has contributed to housing inequalities, and “weathering” has perpetuated health inequalities.

Although LeBron James will continue to be a super-rich basketball deity and he and his family are safe, the symbolism of this act of vandalism is unmistakable. Black families have been subject to the threat of violence through these kinds of warnings for decades—from rocks thrown through windows for moving into white neighborhoods to cross burnings on the lawn.

That LeBron James was the target of this crime represents ethnic intimidation intentionally magnified by the moment and his central role in the spotlight of the NBA Finals.

And although we should be dismayed that the act took place, we should appreciate the perspective LeBron brought to the event. He closed his statement with a reflection: “If this incident that happened to me and my family today can keep the conversation going and can shed light on us trying to figure out a way to keep progressing and not regressing, then I’m not against it happening to us again.”

James’ comments are a timely reminder that the legacy of racism in the United States ripples across all levels of socioeconomic security and success. ■