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AFTER THE DELUGE

WHAT NOW?

EDITOR'S NOTE

BLUEPRINT

A magazine of research, policy, Los Angeles and California

THIS PAST YEAR HAS FELT LIKE A DELUGE — an overwhelming rush of events that left many Americans gasping for air — in hospitals, in astonishment at the malevolence of leaders, under the knee of a police officer. Since March of 2020, it has been difficult, in fact and metaphor, to breathe.

With some relief finally at hand, it's tempting to forget all this and hope for life to return to what it was. But despite the desire to get back to "normal" once the threat of COVID-19 has passed, or at least subsided, it is important to remember that there were plenty of problems with "normal" before the world had ever heard of the novel coronavirus. The American economy was uneven: President Trump's tax cuts for corporations and the very wealthy exponentially deepened the national debt without delivering much to those at the bottom. California was struggling to provide housing to the poor and middle class. Politics was besieged by big money and determined efforts to discourage certain voters from casting ballots. The earth was warming, with devastating effects from California to Texas and beyond. Mass shootings were alarmingly commonplace.

So now, as the seasons of COVID-19 shift again, this time to hope and the possibility of recovery, the conversation moves not so much to picking up where we left off as to where we go from here. That opens myriad ideas to consider. This issue of Blueprint addresses a few: Housing, the economy, politics, race. Each is a concern where American values and experiences were being tested even before COVID-19 began its work.

The underlying question is: How do we move forward from our crisis? To take just one issue, the economy is battered, both in California and nationally, but it hardly seems adequate to wish for the weakened, unequal state of affairs that predated the pandemic. COVID-19 did not create national division, but the virus made stark its consequences. Distinctions between those of means

and those without have carried graver implications during this past year. They have meant, all too often, the difference between survival and death.

Last November was a pivotal moment. A solid majority of Americans rejected Donald Trump and replaced him with Joe Biden. January was another turning point. Trump's increasingly shrill attempts to hold onto office disintegrated into a violent storming of the U.S. Capitol. A third historic juncture came this March, when Democrats, now in control of the Congress, passed a recovery package championed by Biden that accelerated vaccine distribution and provided economic relief for millions of American families.

That's a lot of history in six months, and none of this guarantees that a new wind is blowing in Washington. Politics can be responsive, but it also can be notably stubborn — witness the utter lack of bipartisanship in the final tallies on the recovery package.

But there are signs of hope, too. The pandemic appears to be subsiding, and \$1.9 trillion is making its way into the hands of Americans. Businesses, moribund for more than a year, are stirring to life.

The nation has endured a great flood. It has inundated the land but now its waters are receding. What's left is a mess — the mud-covered rubble of a troubled country.

There's a chance to breathe again. Now it's time to clean up.



JIM NEWTON

Editor-in-chief, Blueprint

INSIDE BLUEPRINT

ISSUE #13 / SPRING 2021



LANDSCAPE

- 02 **LIVING WITH COVID**
A year of trial and disappointment
- 03 **LIVING WITH COVID**
A year without basketball
- 04 **RESEARCH AND POLICY**
Public support for war
- 04 **"LIGHTER LOOK"**
Rick Meyer on our Irish president



PROFILE

- 06 **BARBARA LEE**
Oakland Congresswoman on history, race and progress

INFOGRAPHIC

- 10 **THE SCOURGE**
The far-reaching damage of COVID-19

FEATURED RESEARCH

- 12 **THE MYTH OF WHITENESS**
How supremacy infects and distorts
- 16 **TRAGIC AND UNEQUAL**
COVID-19 hurt everyone, but some more than others



- 20 **DIVISION POLITICS**
A history of division and a drive to make it worse
- 24 **A PLACE TO SLEEP**
Job loss and housing

SPECIAL REPORT — A CLOSER LOOK

- 28 **RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM**
COVID-19 forced remote education. It has not been all bad



TABLE TALK

- 32 **GOVERNOR MIKE DUKAKIS**
Dukakis talks with veteran journalist Bill Boyarsky



CLOSING NOTE

- 36 **BUILDING ANEW**

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WE
DRA
W
SC
S
D
N
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FIRST PERSON:
LIVING WITH
COVID-19

Two writers look back at a year of troubles

LIFTOFF
INTERRUPTED

Searching for meaning — and a job — in the year of the virus

WHEN THE FIRST SHUTDOWN was put into place last year, and the uncertainty and confusion that came with it set in, I found myself wondering when things would be “back to normal.” But as the months went by, it became clear that there is no return to normal, and that our normal is due for a change.

COVID-19 struck the United States as I was nearing the end of my college education, interrupting what plans I had for life after UCLA — not that those plans were ever fully formed. In all the hypotheticals I had run through, I could not have imagined the meltdown of the national economy at the moment I prepared to enter into it. My summer of online job searching yielded about as much as an unanswered email.

I happened upon my job shortly after moving to a new neighborhood, when I walked into a bike shop with a hiring sign. With limited knowledge of bicycles and limited optimism, I applied. I was hired and immediately began learning on the job.

The cycling industry has been whipsawed by COVID-19. Demand skyrocketed — riding a bike is a good way to get exercise when gyms are closed — but production shut down entirely for months. The shop is regularly busy, understaffed and understocked. Every day I tell customers that the bikes they’re looking for are delayed for months, much like everything else.

Despite the challenges of retail during a pandemic, I’m grateful to work in a social environment. I’ve bonded with my coworkers from behind a mask; while choosing what music plays in the store or goofing around during lulls on weekdays. Even when our capacity and inventory are limited, it feels good to be part of something that has a positive impact. There’s the satisfaction of teaching

adults to ride, the joy of putting kids on their first bikes. There’s hope and frustration and happiness and longing — all of which seem to capture life in general.

Some of that has crept into politics, too. Living in the United States during this pandemic has exacerbated my anger and frustration with leadership. The way the crisis was handled, especially in its early stages, set us up for a year of unimaginable loss. Over the past year, we’ve experienced the consequences of government at its worst: the politicization of safety precautions and the pressure to open the economy, at the expense of public health; the failure to reckon with white supremacy and the way our institutions perpetuate it; the disdain for the working class exhibited by members of Congress who are worth millions debating and “means testing” how much relief the people whose taxes pay their salaries deserve.

When the results of the runoff election in Georgia came in, I was hopeful. But it’s been months, and the “day one” promises of \$2,000 checks, closing of migrant detention camps and a \$15 minimum wage aren’t anywhere in sight. It feels like a slap to all the orga-

nizers in Georgia and all over the country who fought against voter suppression, registered hundreds of thousands of people to vote and encouraged people to put their faith in elected officials.

Change is always slow, and progress is not linear. But I can’t help but feel that the people who promised to fight for us have laid down their

weapons. I have to remind myself that cynicism doesn’t help anyone. There are people who work tirelessly to better the lives of others and simple things I can do as well. There has been positive change this year. I don’t have to let go of my anger to experience happiness.

I’ve started singing along to my music out loud when I’m walking to the shop. I’ve definitely gotten some looks, but I decided not to care. Now I can actually play the guitar I bought back in April. Not particularly well, but that was never really the point of it anyway. I used to be too scared to ride my bike on busy streets or to take my hands off the handlebars for even a second, and now I’ve



ridden down Wilshire with both hands in the air. This is the year I learned about and began actively participating in mutual aid. A year where I became more engaged in issues I care about, by doing things like pledging to read more and joining a book subscription service through Haymarket Books. This year I started to both understand and imagine how different the world could be.

I feel lucky to have found so much joy and growth when it so often feels like the world around me is crumbling. I’m also aware of how lonely, sad and exhausted I feel sometimes, and yet I know that I do not experience those feelings alone. People find ways to connect with each other even when circumstances make it seem impossible. If I’ve learned anything this year, it’s that we are resilient to a fault and will always find a way to keep going. The vaccine is rolling out and someday soon we’ll be able to do normal things again, but I think this year will color the years to come. I hope we continue to learn.

— Audrey Prescott

A YEAR
WITHOUT A GAME

The pandemic took away my favorite form of exercise — but also something more important

I REMEMBER THE MOMENT when I realized that the coronavirus was going to unsettle our lives in unexpected ways. On the evening of Saturday, March 14, I texted my friend Nate to ask if he would lace up for our regular Atwater Village basketball game the next morning. “You gonna play?” I asked.

“I probably won’t,” he responded. Had the median age of people in our game not been around 45, we might have included emojis.

Neither of us played Sunday morning, and that evening Mayor Eric Garcetti stunned L.A. by announcing the halt of dining at restaurants and the shutdown of all bars, theaters and many other businesses due to the emerging threat. From that moment on, the doors to the court we reserved each week were locked. Except for a few April and May outdoor shooting sessions with my son, I haven’t played ball with another human since then. Actually, I haven’t put up a shot since August, when I arrived one morning at a local park to see that the rims had been removed from the backboards, a response to all the unmasked games happening. It was the same at every other city-run park I visited.

We have all lost unfathomable amounts in the year of COVID-19. More than 20,000 L.A. County residents have died from complications related to the disease. Paychecks have shrunk and too many jobs have evaporated. Kids have been robbed of



any semblance of normal youthful socialization because of the onset of distance learning.

The basketball that I no longer play is nothing in the grand scheme of all who have suffered. But it’s from 9-11 a.m. every Sunday that I most pine for the way things were. You can video-chat a book club or a cocktail with a friend. You can’t Zoom playing basketball.

The Sunday game has been part of my life for more than a decade, as well as the anchor of my (otherwise paltry) exercise regimen. It’s a heart-pounding full-court run, and by the end I feel sorry for the guy guarding me — not because I’ll dust him on my way to the hoop but because he may have to touch my sweat-drenched T-shirt.

To be clear, I’m not very good at basketball. I average about one three-pointer per year. A feisty jackrabbit could out-rebound me. I sometimes worry that my shot might dent the backboard.

Still, I love the game, and I play hard. I care about defense more than many weekend warriors.

“THE BEAUTY OF MY WEEKLY GAME IS THE GAME, BUT ALSO THE FACT THAT I HAVE GROWN FRIENDLY WITH PEOPLE I WOULD OTHERWISE NEVER MEET.”

I’m quick and can dart to the basket for easy lay-ups (which I still might blow). I can make myself valuable enough to belong — at least when the competition is other men in their 40s and 50s.

I miss the exercise and the competition, but what I have realized in this long year is that I

also miss the moments before and after games, and the times when I take a breather and chat with guys who started as opponents and slowly became friends. After enough time the conversation extends beyond, “You see Kawhi drop 30 last night?” We’ll talk ball, but bang under the boards with a sweaty 200-pounder enough times and you lay the groundwork to discuss kids’ birthdays, work troubles, personal challenges and, well, life.

As men age it becomes difficult to build new friendships, particularly if you don’t play golf — and I abhor golf. If you’re lucky you might find common ground with someone from work or a dad at a kid’s school. The beauty of my weekly game is the game, but also the fact that I have grown friendly with people I would otherwise never meet, guys who work in a plethora of fields. Sunday basketball means exercise, but hit the court with the same dudes year after year and you develop a competitive camaraderie, something of an organic roundball community.

Like everyone, I’m waiting to get the vaccine, for life to return to normal. My kids need to be back in a classroom. My wife needs to see her friends. We all yearn to go to restaurants, movies and concerts again.

But as much as anything else, I’m looking forward to those two hours each Sunday on the hardwood. I can’t wait to get some exercise and see people I never expected to miss so much.

I’m counting down the days, though there is some trepidation. I worry that after this time away, my shot now might actually dent the backboard. — Jon Regardie

ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR PHOTO BY EDGAR CHAPARRO/UNSPASH

THE COSTS OF WAR

How public opinion shapes war, and how research informs opinion

CAN — INDEED, SHOULD — ACADEMIC RESEARCH inform public debate and guide public policy? Of course. But the question is not so simple. Some research may pursue truth for the sake of truth; its effect on the public, much less policy, will be remote or even non-existent. Nonetheless, it might enlighten and enrich. Other research may bear directly on public policy, but it might be driven by politics or self-interest in ways that disqualify it from academic merit.

The effect of academic research on debate and policy is a priority at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs. Its dean, Gary Segura, sits close to the pinnacle of the intersection of academia and the public world. This focus is reinforced by his latest work. He is the co-author of *Costly Calculations*, a searching, book-length exploration into the most consequential of public decisions — whether, under what circumstances and for how long to wage war.

Segura and I spoke this spring about the role of policy research and public affairs, and specifically about his book, the full title of which is *Costly Calculations: A Theory of War, Casualties, and Politics*. (Note: Blueprint magazine is embedded at Luskin, making Segura akin to our publisher. Consider this a look inside one of our staff meetings.)

DO RISING CASUALTIES CAUSE THE PUBLIC TO SOUR ON A WAR? THE ANSWER, THEY DISCOVERED, WAS NOT ALWAYS.

Policy research, Segura said, “lays out evaluation criteria by which policies can be judged” and “explains how policy objectives came to be the way they are.”

It elevates the study of a policy beyond the metrics that politicians typically assign to it — such as its popularity or its impact upon certain interest groups. To take war as the gravest of examples, a politician might be inclined to favor the use of military force because the defense industry wants it, or because constituents favor it. The former would be crassly cynical, the latter more complicated. Responding to popular will is not the worst thing for a democratically elected leader to do, but how should a responsible politician evaluate the public’s will and take into account nuances such as the differing reactions among



people depending on their backgrounds or their shifting reactions over time?

Those are some of the issues at the heart of *Costly Calculations*, the result of a 25-year collaboration between Segura and co-author Scott Sigmund Gartner, provost at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

The two “cooked up the idea,” as Segura put it, when they were both young professors at UC Davis in the fall of 1991. Their initial interest was the relationship between casualties and public support for war. They asked the question: Do rising casualties cause the public to sour on a war? The answer, they discovered, was not always, and not in the ways one might expect. Neither “hawks,” nor “doves,” for instance, are much moved by casualties, since their views of a conflict already are fairly locked in.

That leaves swings in public opinion up to what the authors call “evaluators.” But even among them, opinion does not move in lock-step with rising death counts. Especially in the early stages of a war, support often increases even as the first Americans are killed; and over time, public opinion may treat casualties differently depending on other factors, such as the urgency of a conflict. Support may hold up in a contest for survival, while it might wane if the stakes seem lower. The war against Hitler’s Germany and the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 do not evoke the same level of urgency.

Equally groundbreaking is the book’s analysis of how information affects the public and leadership differently. Segura noted, for instance, the sharp difference in the lessons that the American public and its military leadership derived from the Vietnamese Tet Offensive in 1968. The incongruity reflected the information those groups received and the expectations against which they considered it.

The military was accustomed to considering comparative casualties, and Tet represented a

staggering disparity: North Vietnam and the Viet Cong lost some 33,000 soldiers in the first two weeks, roughly 10 times the losses inflicted upon the United States and its South Vietnamese ally. To the Pentagon, that made Tet an American victory. But the American public, assured for years that the war was nearing a successful conclusion, focused on American and South Vietnamese lives lost — 3,470 allied soldiers, about one third of them Americans. That reinforced fears that the war had entered what respected CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite memorably described as a “stalemate.” In political terms, Tet was an American failure.

Costly Calculations presents these findings with the cool neutrality of an academic study. And yet, its lessons are unmistakable: They are a reminder that the public is neither uniform nor stuck in time, that not all wars are the same, and that no war can be won without the support of the electorate, whatever form that takes.

Those are sound bases for evaluating the advisability and sustainability of war. They also demonstrate academic scholarship at the heart of public policy — and thus, at the heart of Blueprint.

— Jim Newton

“A LIGHTER LOOK” — EASE UP

Rick Meyer’s regularly appearing column takes a lighter look at politics and public affairs around the world. This month: A Bit of Blarney

EXCUSE ME, JOE.

In keeping with my New Year’s resolution to give you some good advice now and then, I have a suggestion.

Lighten up.
Seamus Heaney is wonderful: A Nobel Prize winner, the most important Irish poet since Yeats. You quote him often.
But he can be a little heavy.

History says, don’t hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

It’s one of your favorite verses. Ah, the Irish ...
You are proud, as you once said, “to have always been and will always be the son of Kitty Finnegan. The grandson of Geraldine Finnegan, ... a proud descendant of the Finnegans of Ireland’s County Louth. The great-grandson of a man named Edward Francis Blewitt, whose roots stem from Ballina, a small town in Ireland’s County Mayo... ”

By one count, eight of your kin on your mother’s side were from Ireland, as well as two on your father’s side.

That’s terrific.
I’m not suggesting you give up Irish poetry.
But kiss the Blarney Stone and slip in a laugh whenever you can.

They’re not hard to find. I picked these up on the Internet.

When Irish eyes are smiling,
They’re usually up to something.

Or how about this?
A true Irishman
Considers anyone who won’t come
around to his point of view
To be hopelessly stubborn.

Or this?
There once was an old man from Lyme
Who married three wives at a time.
When asked, “Why a third?”
He replied, “One’s absurd!
And bigamy, sir, is a crime.”

Maybe this:
O’Carroll drives a double-decker bus.
Molly climbs aboard, and he suggests
the upper deck.
She comes right back down.
“It’s too dangerous. There’s no driver up there.”

Or:
There was a wee lassie from Bright
Who traveled much faster than light.
She set out one day,
In a relative way,
And came back the previous night.

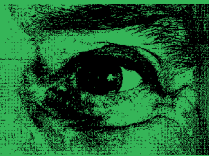
Or:
Why shouldn’t you iron a Four leaf
clover?
You don’t want to press your luck.

Or:
I’m not Irish,
But kiss me anyway

If you use this, don’t say I suggested it:
There once was a man from Esser,
Whose knowledge grew lesser and
lesser,
It at last grew so small
He knew nothing at all,
And now he’s a college professor.
— Richard E. Meyer



WHEN IRISH EYES
ARE SMILING,
THEY’RE USUALLY
UP TO SOMETHING.



The Work Starts Early

Barbara Lee’s life of service and forceful action

WRITTEN BY
JIM NEWTON

PHOTOS BY
DAVID BUTOW



BARBARA LEE AT A PROTEST AGAINST NUCLEAR WEAPONS. IMAGE COURTESY OF BARBARA LEE

MANY PEOPLE THINK BARBARA LEE, the veteran member of Congress from Oakland and an icon of modern progressive politics, began her activism when she refused to accept the segregation of her San Fernando Valley high school cheerleading squad. But that was not her first encounter with racism. It came the day she was born.

Her mother’s pregnancy had been difficult, and doctors ordered a Cæsarian section. But she was Black, and when she went into labor, the emergency room staff at the El Paso, Texas, hospital refused to admit her.

Desperate, she called for Barbara Lee’s grandmother, who could pass as White because Barbara Lee’s great-grandmother had been raped by a White man. The grandmother arrived and demanded entry for her daughter. The staff, confronted with someone who looked White, relented.

Once admitted, however, Barbara’s mother was forced to lie on a gurney, unattended, for hours. She grew increasingly distraught, then delirious and finally passed out. Only then was she taken to a delivery room, where her baby, now the congresswoman from California’s 13th District, entered the world.

“My activism,” Barbara Lee said, “comes from the very beginning.”

SHE SPENT HER CHILDHOOD IN EL PASO. The public schools were segregated, so she went to a Catholic elementary school. The local movie house, the Plaza Theatre, was a grand palace built in 1930, resplendent with mosaics and elegant carpeting. It, too, was segregated, so she skipped the movies.

“I always wanted to go,” Lee said.

Lee’s father, a lieutenant colonel in the Army, moved the family to the San Fernando Valley, north of downtown Los Angeles. At San Fernando High School, Lee decided to join the cheerleading squad. But again, she confronted the realities of racism. “If you weren’t blonde and blue-eyed,” she said, “you couldn’t join.”

Rather than accept the barrier, Lee turned to the local chapter of the NAACP. It encouraged her to challenge the school and pressed administrators to replace tryouts — which gave judges the opportunity to weed out threats to the color line — with elections. Lee and another non-White classmate, an Asian American girl, both won the right to cheer for the school that had tried to deny them the opportunity.

It was Lee’s first election and first victory. She was 15 years old. A picture of her in a cheerleader uniform appears on her congressional website.

Lee attended Mills College during the early 1970s, in the area where she would later establish her political base. As a young mother, she joined the Black Student Union and, memorably, invited Shirley Chisholm, a Black member of Congress, to speak on campus. Chisholm, stirring and barrier-challenging, sought the presidency in 1972 as the “unbought and unbossed” candidate determined to be a “catalyst for change.” Moved by Chisholm’s determination and promise, Lee helped organize her Northern California campaign.

Barbara Lee cast her first presidential vote for the first Black woman elected to the House of Representatives.

Lee graduated in 1973, received a master’s degree in social work from nearby UC Berkeley and landed a summer internship with Ron Dellums, the groundbreaking member of Congress whom she would later serve as chief of staff. In 1990, Lee was elected to the California Legislature, and in 1998 she took Dellums’ seat in Congress.



BARBARA LEE ON THE STEPS OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL, WHERE, JUST MONTHS EARLIER, PROTESTERS INTERRUPTED THE WORK OF CONGRESS IN AN ATTEMPT TO BLOCK ITS CERTIFICATION OF THE 2020 ELECTION.

At this history suggests, Chisholm was an inspiration, and Dellums was an influential role model. “He was a very smart man, of course,” Lee said. “He was eloquent, a statesman, progressive.” Moreover, he was committed to the idea that elected officials need to be true to their convictions but also open to working with others. “When you find common ground,” he would say, “work with it.”

LEE IS MANY THINGS. She is excited about America’s future but unromantic about its past. Cheerful and quick to laugh, she is also bracingly clear-eyed. We spoke to a group of business and civic leaders a few months ago. As we checked volume levels and camera lighting, Lee did her part, then suddenly asked about the group itself. Were participants familiar with White supremacy and the history of racial oppression? Assured that they were, Lee smiled and returned to checking the battery level on her laptop.

She represents one of the most liberal House districts in America, and she has held that seat for 22 years, making her one of the most senior members of Congress, as well as one of its most respected. She reaches across the complicated landscape of the Democratic Party, with its centrist and more liberal elements. She has plenty of critics but also legions of admirers. She often provides liberal cover for more moderate members willing to join her on issues. She even works with Republicans.

Issues she has taken up in recent years illustrate the point. Lee has championed easing travel restrictions on Cuba, a bipartisan notion until President Donald Trump stirred the pot with a Cold War redux. She has joined Republicans to extend the 2020 Census deadline and to make it easier for former prison inmates to earn Pell grants for their education. She has attracted Republican support for legislation to protect California parks and has reciprocated by co-sponsoring legislation to protect Florida’s coast. She supports racial truth-telling and reconciliation, but only for those willing to acknowledge responsibility and be held accountable.



“Let us pause, just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today so that this does not spiral out of control.”

— Congresswoman Barbara Lee on the resolution authorizing force in response to the 9/11 attacks. She cast the lone vote against the authorization. Twenty years later, American troops are still in Afghanistan

Not that anyone should mistake her for a centrist. Her bipartisan forays notwithstanding, Lee is a stalwart liberal, willing to seek common ground but not at the expense of principle. Indeed, she may be best known for her loneliest vote: Lee was the only member of either party to vote against the Authorization for Use of Military Force that was the basis for America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Only three days after the Sept. 11 attacks on America, she stood on the House floor and spoke about her vote. Her voice trembled. She said she had a “heavy heart” for those injured and killed.

But then she added:

“Let’s just pause, just for a minute, and think through the implications of our actions today so that this does not spiral out of control. I have agonized over this vote, but I came to grips with it today, and I came to grips with opposing this resolution during the very painful yet very beautiful memorial service. As a member of the clergy so eloquently said: ‘As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore.’”

In the days that followed, she amplified those comments, voicing concern that the authorization was so broad it would invite presidential overreach and entangle the U.S. in long, difficult conflicts.

The final House vote was 420-1.

The response was as withering as it was predictable. Conor Friedersdorf of the Atlantic read 12 boxes of Lee’s mail from that period and found reams of letters calling her a “dog,” a “mutt,” a “disgrace,” a “communist,” a “stupid woman” and a “crass, selfish politician.”

Twenty years later, American forces would remain in Afghanistan and Iraq, a testament to Lee’s fears of embarking on conflicts with no clear path to victory or disengagement. What she did and said in 2001 was controversial and isolating, but she was also largely correct.

Asked to reflect on her vote after two decades, Lee declined to claim vindication: “I’m sorry that what I said came true.”

LEE HAS BEEN FORCED TO FLEE THE CAPITOL TWICE, once on Sept. 11, 2001, and again on Jan. 6, 2021. Both times were in response to attacks on the American government, once by Al Qaeda and, more recently, from White supremacists and other supporters of President Trump. Like so many others, Lee was shocked without being very surprised. She wore tennis shoes to work on Jan. 6 because she was worried about the possibility of trouble from Trump’s unruly base.

With Trump gone, some Democrats are eager to turn the page, to focus on ending the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuilding the economy, which collapsed because of Trump’s failed response to the coronavirus. Others are less willing to move on, more preoccupied with getting to the bottom of the Capitol insurrection and other catastrophes during the Trump years. Characteristically, Lee argues for both, a reminder that this is someone whose birth was desecrated by racism and who launched her career in thrall of Shirley Chisholm’s promises of change.

Lee supported President Joe Biden’s \$1.9-trillion recovery package, while arguing that more was needed. She agrees the country must move forward, but she insists that it also reckon with other Trump calamities. She wants a day of truth and reconciliation. In that same vein, Lee visited El Paso a couple years ago. It brought her back in time, but she noticed evidence of change. She took in a movie at the Plaza. She saw *BlackKklansman*.

Still a student of Ron Dellums, she is determined to look for common ground but not to yield principle in search of it. Lee says Congress has to do two things at once: build progress and reflect.

“We have to learn the lessons of the past four years,” she said. “It’s vital to heal, but you can’t do that without the truth.” ▀

CONGRESSWOMAN BARBARA LEE AT THE AMERICAN CAPITOL. SHE HAS REPRESENTED THE EAST BAY AREA SINCE 1998.

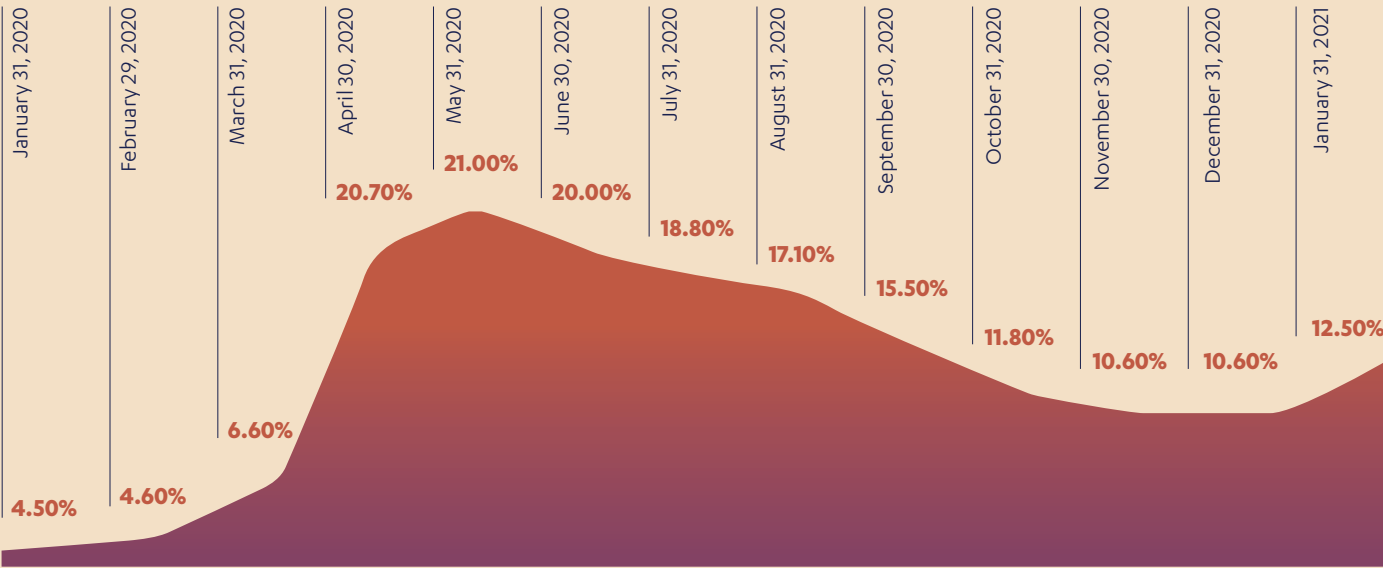
Note: Congresswoman Barbara Lee and Blueprint editor Jim Newton discussed some of these issues during a TownHallLA Forum on Jan. 15, 2021. Their conversation can be found here: <https://www.lawac.org/EventDetail/eventid/30819>

A YEAR OF TROUBLE AND MISERY

THE LOS ANGELES ECONOMY

Los Angeles began 2020 in fairly strong shape economically. Yes, the city and region suffered from dramatic inequality and a dizzying set of issues — from congestion to race relations to housing shortages. Nevertheless, job growth was respectable and unemployment low. That was true until last spring. The first COVID-19 cases showed up in March and by April, the economy was tanking.

Below, the county’s unemployment rate over a devastating year:

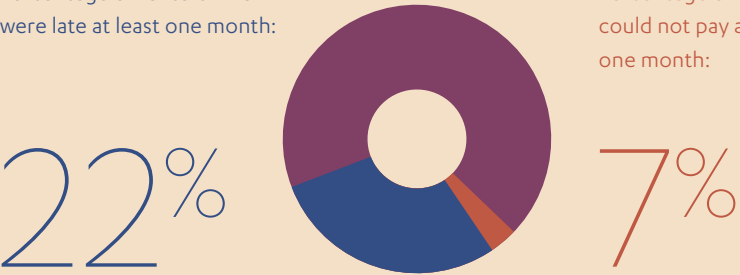


Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

FROM JOBS TO HOUSING

As Angelenos lost their jobs, they also fell behind on rent, stressing themselves, their families and their landlords. A UCLA study examined how renters have fared during the pandemic, focusing on three months in 2020: **May, June and July**.

Percentage of renters who were late at least one month:



Percentage of renters who could not pay at all at least one month:

7%

Estimated number of renters in L.A. County who are at least one full month behind:

137,000

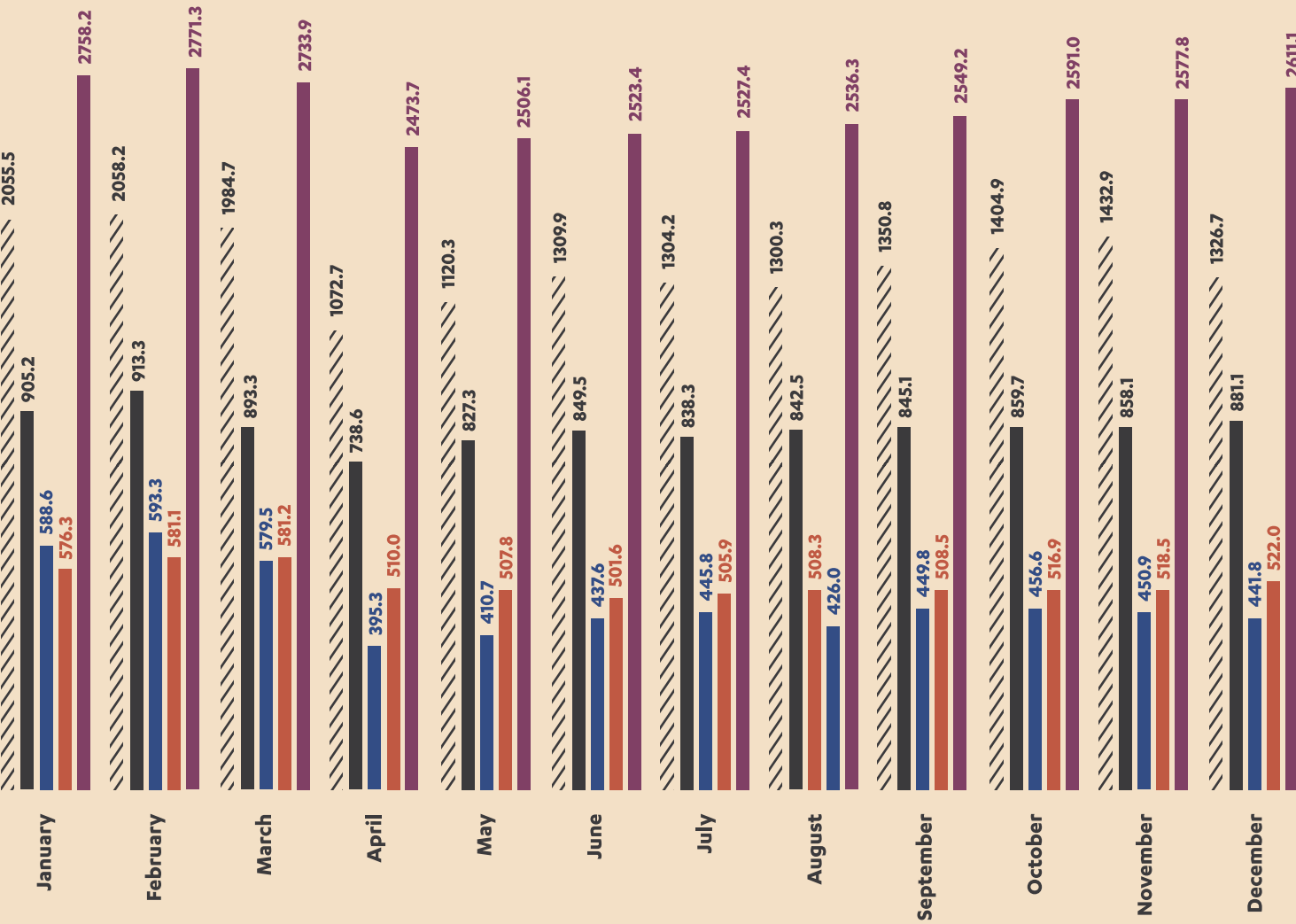
Estimated number of renters in L.A. County who may be three months behind:

40,000

Source: “COVID-19 and Renter Distress: Evidence From Los Angeles,” August 2020

THE CALIFORNIA ECONOMY

All of California’s major industries have been hurt by the pandemic, but the impact has been uneven, with some fields much harder hit than others. Here, a look at the impact in some key industries (all figures show the total number of workers, in thousands, by month):



Leisure and Hospitality Construction Other Services Information Professional & Business Services

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

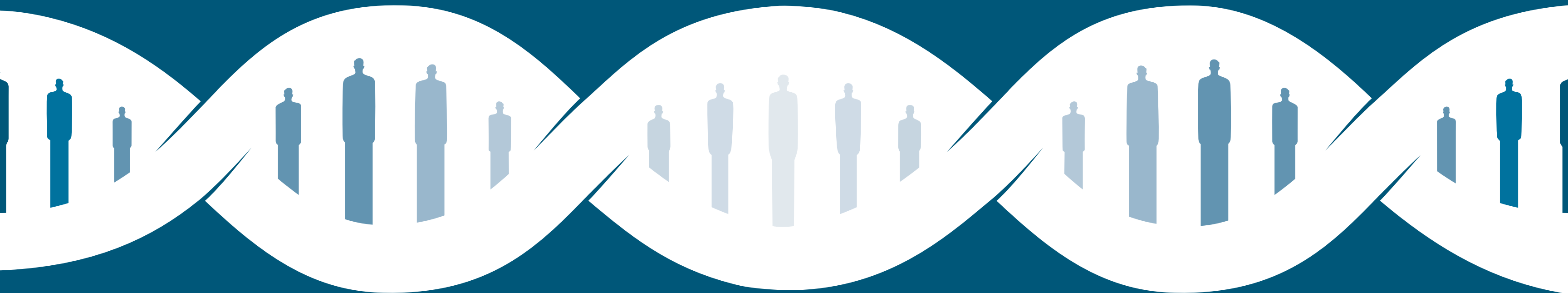
THE ROAD AHEAD

California’s economic health in 2021 will rest heavily on the state’s ability to control COVID-19 and emerge from the lockdowns that it forced. With vaccines becoming more available, that has given some analysts cause for optimism. As UCLA Anderson School forecasters concluded:

“A waning pandemic combined with fiscal relief means a strong year of growth in 2021 — one of the strongest years of growth in the last 60 years — followed by sustained higher growth rates in 2022 and 2023.”

RACISM ON THE ROPES

WRITTEN BY
MOLLY SELVIN



White supremacists confront evidence that they are not only wrong — they are not even White

EARLY IN HIS RESEARCH on how the Internet influences public understanding of science, Aaron Panofsky was sent a link to Stormfront, the largest White nationalist website on the Internet. It became essential as an entree into how White supremacists were sharing results of their genetic ancestry tests. Some were not as white as they had thought.

Panofsky, a UCLA sociologist, and his colleagues Joan Donovan, now at Harvard, and postdoctoral fellows Kushan Dasgupta and Nicole Iturriaga had won a National Science Foundation grant to explore how non-scientists make sense of scientific discussions on the Internet. On Stormfront, Panofsky and his team followed lengthy and sometimes heated debates.

Some of the debates were about whether a White man should date a woman with Native American ancestry. Others were about how Stormfront devotees could explain why they were not as European as they would like to be. “As we studied these threads of discussion,” Panofsky said in a recent interview, “Donald Trump announced his candidacy.

“And White nationalist groups mobilized.” On August 12, 2017, hundreds of self-identified white supremacists, anti-Semites and other far-right extremists battled counter protesters at a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The melee led to three deaths and more than 30 injuries.

Two days later, Panofsky reported on his research to an annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. Stormfront followers had not been simply chewing over their ancestry, he told his colleagues. They were using scientific language to construct alternative narratives about racial identity and, in the process, delegitimizing scientific expertise on other issues like childhood vaccines and the COVID pandemic.

As he left the stage, Panofsky said, his cellphone “blew up” with interview requests, and news accounts of his findings appeared in mainstream media across the country.

In the wake of the January 6 Capitol insurrection, Panofsky’s findings, and those of other social scientists, hold new implications for how to curb violent, extremist groups. The explosive growth and brazenness of these groups in recent years and the threat they pose to democracy have pushed combatting the rise of domestic terrorists to the forefront of the national policy agenda. Moreover, those groups will not exit the stage with President Trump. The 2020 election ended the tenure of a leader they admired, but White supremacists were heavily involved in the Capitol insurrection and remain a part of the American political landscape — on the fringe, to be sure, but a clear threat.

Restoring consensus and trust in expertise and government institutions will be slow and difficult. It will require stepped-up enforcement of existing laws and policies aimed at domestic terrorists, as President Joseph R. Biden now promises. It may also require new legislation and, hardest of all, it will involve engaging those most vulnerable to far-right ideologies before they tumble into the Internet’s darkest corners.

AS PART OF THEIR RESEARCH, Panofsky, Donovan, Dasgupta and Iturriaga and a team of UCLA undergraduate and graduate students searched every conversation about genetic tests posted on the Stormfront website over a decade, starting in the mid- 2000s. These discussions most often arose after posters took commercially available genetic tests, like 23andMe, and discovered they were not as “White” as they had believed or hoped.

Those revelations sometimes prompted Stormfront followers to insult and discredit users they deemed “non-White.” More often, however, Panofsky and his colleague found that these often-anguished conversations focused on what Panofsky calls “repairing” unwelcome results by discrediting the genetic tests as the products of a Jewish multicultural conspiracy, suggesting widespread statistical or technical errors in the tests, and urging posters to trust their physical appearance and racial self-identify.

Typical are these replies from Stormfront posters to revelations from other posters about their disappointing genetic results (with spelling and punctuation as written).

» Most WN’s [White nationalists] do not hold to a ‘one-drop’ rule. If you look White, live White, identify White, if your grand-parents and great-grand-parents looked White/lived White/identified White — that is often sufficient... .

from exercising their newly won civil rights. The Klan still exists, but its strength and influence have been dwarfed by a recent explosion of other white nationalist and nativist groups, self-proclaimed militias, religious extremists and conspiracy-soaked QAnon followers.

A series of violent incidents during the 1990s amplified the message and increased the ranks of these groups, including standoffs between armed religious fundamentalists and federal agents at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, and the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. More recently, white supremacists carried out deadly rampages in Charleston, South Carolina; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and El Paso, Texas.

The 2015 murder of nine African American worshippers inside a Charleston church by a 21-year-old White supremacist may have been a “turning point,” said Shirin Sinnar, a Stanford Law School professor who studies terrorism and national security.

“WHAT APPEALS TO PEOPLE WHO ARE ENGAGED IN THESE PLATFORMS IS THAT PEOPLE ARE LISTENING TO THEM, BUT I DON’T THINK THERE’S A LOT OF GLUE.”

— Heather Williams, RAND Corporation

» The only trustworthy way to find your ancestors is genealogy. Most of the time those DNA ancestry tests are out to prove that race does not exist and we are never “full white” just because a half evolved ancestor of ours resided in a non-european area, and because of that they claim that we are all racially diverse... .

Panofsky says these often-tortured rationales are “judo moves against the scientific community” with Stormfront posters “interpreting themselves as Galileo.” Their aim, he said, “is to establish themselves as dissident scientific martyrs against elites captured by political correctness.”

THE MOB THAT VANDALIZED THE CAPITOL is the direct descendant of a long line of organized, right-wing hate groups in this country, including the Ku Klux Klan, which was founded at the end of the Civil War and used violence and intimidation to block African Americans

The FBI has long had legal authority to investigate right-wing terrorists and broad power to charge and prosecute them, Sinnar said in an interview, but the agency has not taken those threats seriously enough. Instead, she said, it has paid “lopsided attention” to the activities of left-leaning groups.

Nonetheless, in 2017, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security identified White supremacists as the deadliest domestic terrorist threat to the United States. The agencies reviewed “lethal and potentially lethal incidents” of White supremacist violence from 2000 to 2016, noting “the often spontaneous and opportunistic nature of these acts that limits prevention by law enforcement.”

“It’s possible that the FBI is devoting more attention now than in the past,” Sinnar said, “but we don’t really know.”

What is clear is that the threat has grown. While the number of hate groups declined last year, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s annual census, the proliferation of extremist

platforms has allowed individuals to engage with followers of QAnon or the Boogaloo Boys without being card-carrying members. The result is a broader but more loosely affiliated movement of far-right extremists.

In addition, the threat of violence posed by these extremists has escalated. A report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, found that right-wing extremists, in contrast to those on the left, were responsible for two-thirds of the violent attacks and plots in the United States in 2019 and more than 90% during the first half of 2020 alone. Writing in June of last year, CSIS researchers were especially — and, it turned out, correctly — worried about violence around the November 2020 election.

In nearly half of the more than 200 federal cases filed in the weeks after the January 6 riot, authorities cited evidence that conspiracy theories or extremist ideologies inspired the insurrectionists, according to an Associated Press review of court records.

Moreover, many experts fear the Capitol attack will further embolden supporters of violent groups like the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers, rather than give them pause. While membership figures are hard to come by for these groups, many of which exist largely on the Internet, a bulletin issued in January by federal law enforcement agencies warned that the insurrection may well galvanize anti-government militias and extremist groups, swell their ranks, and “very likely pose the greatest domestic terrorism threats in 2021” and beyond.

PANOFSKY, 46, WHO JOINED UCLA IN 2008 and now splits his time between the Luskin School and UCLA’s Institute for Society and Genetics, struggles with how to respond to this growing threat.

“That’s one of my embarrassments about being in a policy school,” he said. “Sometimes I just wish I had a five-step program I could trot out for people.”

Panofsky is most surprised at the power of “ideology and repeated lies about the election that can move people to murderous actions.” He believes that countering these false narratives — and defusing extremist groups — will require a multifaceted, deliberative approach.

Start by doing more to root out extremist views among military and law enforcement personnel, says Heather Williams at the RAND Corporation. Her research specialties include civil-military relations and counterterrorism.

NEARLY 1 IN 5 OF THE CAPITOL RIOTERS CHARGED by mid-February have a history of military service. At least one carried a Marine Corps flag. Others displayed Army and Special Forces insignias on their clothing.

The Army bars its members from joining extremist groups or participating in extremist activity, the toughest standard in the military. The Defense Department is considering holding all service members to that standard and paying more attention to their social media postings.

Biden’s defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, has told military leaders to hold a one-day stand-down from other duties to address extremism within the ranks. Officers and supervisors at all levels, he said, must focus on “the importance of our oath of office; a description of impermissible behaviors; and procedures for reporting suspected, or actual, extremist behaviors.”

Like the military, police forces may need a stand-down. Some anti-government militias, The New Yorker reported this spring, “who are now among groups being investigated for planning the Capitol attack, make a special point of recruiting members from law enforcement.”

Williams supports improvements. “Certainly,” she said, “some patching needs to be done.”

Shortly after his inauguration, Biden directed law enforcement and intelligence officials to study the threat of violent extremism in the United States with an eye toward possible new legislative proposals, another signal of a more concerted focus on the risk at home.

However, Williams at RAND and Sinnar at Stanford also urge caution. Applying laws aimed at foreign terrorists to domestic extremists may not be a good fit and could be used to stifle dissent, especially by people of color and other marginalized groups. Interrupting the spread of disinformation may be more effective, Williams said.

In the week following actions on Jan. 8 by Twitter, Facebook and other mainstream social media outlets to ban Trump and some of his key allies from their sites, postings about election fraud plunged 73%, according to a study by Signal Labs, a San-Francisco-based analytics firm.

Williams was not surprised. “What appeals to people who are engaged in these platforms is that people are listening to them,” she said, “but I don’t think there is a lot [of] glue.”

Panofsky agrees, but he says his Stormfront research argues for a more pro-active approach to how we talk about science, especially around genetics and race.

People on the left often describe race as a social construct and focus on a history of racism,

politics and injustice, he said. But as scientists have identified genetically influenced traits that differ among racial groups, “that leaves an opening for White nationalists who overemphasize and reify those biological correlations in a way that makes it seem like science informs their position.”

Panofsky sees promise in efforts to develop tools and resources to dissuade people before they are seduced by racist ideologies. He cites ongoing curriculum reforms designed to help high school students understand human differences in socially responsible ways.

IN THE END, HOWEVER, HE BELIEVES that more people leave radical groups through love than out of shame or punishment.

He points to Derek Black, now 31, son of Don Black, the founder of Stormfront.

Derek grew up steeped in his family’s militant-ly White nationalist beliefs. However, after earnest and wide-ranging study in college and long dinner discussions with Jewish, African American, Muslim



BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTERS DEMONSTRATE AGAINST A GATHERING OF WHITE SUPREMACISTS.

and LGBT students, he became friends with these people he was taught to hate.

Derek ultimately renounced his White racist views.

“I can’t support a movement that tells me I can’t be a friend to whomever I wish,” he wrote in a 2013 online post, “or that other people’s races require me to think of them in a certain way or be suspicious at their advancements.”

His change of heart was slow and painful, and it caused a rift in his family, especially with his father.

For Panofsky, Derek Black’s evolution attests to the power of a liberal arts education and of tolerance and acceptance.

“It’s a beautiful and amazing story,” Panofsky said. It gives him hope. ►

COVID'S LOSSES: LIVES, JOBS, COMMUNITIES, HOPE

WRITTEN BY
JON REGARDIE

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON PEOPLE OF COLOR in Los Angeles County has been harrowing. On March 3, 2021, a year into the pandemic, the death rate for Black people was 175 per 100,000 individuals, compared to 111 for White residents. The figure was even starker for Latina/os: 316 per 100,000 inhabitants, with 10,753 Latina/o people dead, according to the County Department of Public Health.

As unnerving as the disproportionate health impact has been, it may be exceeded by COVID-19's economic battering of Los Angeles' communities of color. A staggering array of job losses and the corresponding ripple effect stand to exacerbate long-standing inequities. This raises the likelihood that, even as vaccines slow the spread and lethality of the virus, historically struggling communities will take far longer to recover than wealthier enclaves.

The picture that emerges from academic and government reports, along with interviews of service providers, elected leaders and others, is of physical and economic devastation. And though the arrival of vaccines has begun to turn the crisis, its effects will stretch into the future, with especially lasting implications for the region's Black and Latina/o communities.

"It is practically impossible for anybody who is breathing to ignore the economic hardships this [pandemic] has imposed, sector after sector," said Los Angeles 10th District City Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who has represented many communities of color during his 30 years in local elected politics. "It has racial as well as gender implications that are quite consequential in an adverse way."

ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR



The reason for concern is laid out in a 46-page report released in December by the UCLA California Policy Lab. A quartet of authors dove into unemployment insurance data accumulated since the onset of the pandemic. Their research reveals that 85% of Black people in the state labor force have filed for unemployment insurance (UI) or Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA, available to freelancers, independent contractors and others who may not qualify for traditional benefits) at some point during the crisis, almost double the overall statewide level of 45%. The median weekly benefits received by Black and Latina/o people (in a two-week sample period in November) was, respectively, about \$327 and \$333. This compares to a median benefit for White recipients of \$409. Men recorded a median benefit of \$446, compared to \$302 for women.

The suddenness of the coronavirus-fueled economic crisis put a twist on the common downturn. Till von Wachter, faculty director of the California Policy Lab and an author of the study, pointed out that in a traditional recession, many low-wage service jobs are safe havens, as even in a tanking economy people still eat at restaurants, shop and get haircuts. However, COVID-19 arrived with gale force, as on March 19, 2020, Mayor Eric Garcetti and Gov. Gavin Newsom both issued stay-at-home orders, shutting down business for restaurants, bars, theaters and other establishments. And while some white-collar work transitioned to Zoom, less-skilled positions disappeared altogether.

“Those vulnerable workers were being much more strongly affected than usual,” said von Wachter, who is also a professor of economics at UCLA. “So all the problems and inequalities that were pre-existing, in their access to wealth, to other sources of income, their inability to get on UI, all those were being strongly exacerbated.”

The UI and PUA payments were a lifeline for millions across the country, and the weekly \$600 supplemental benefit provided by the federal government through July helped families pay rent, buy groceries and cover bills. However, the California Policy Lab report shows that even as this money rolled, there was an underlying thread of inequality.

The analysis of UI data reveals that relatively wealthier neighborhoods saw a greater percentage of eligible claimants sign up for benefits than occurred in communities with higher poverty levels and more people of color. The report concluded that if all neighborhoods saw people file for benefits at the rate of the wealthiest areas, then an additional \$445 million a week would have flowed to needy Californians at the height of the crisis.

The researchers zeroed in on East Los Angeles, determining that if residents there filed at the rate of claimants in more affluent communities, as much as \$7 million more each week could have

been injected into the neighborhood. One theory is that participation levels are lower in predominantly Latina/o communities due to households with undocumented workers (who are not eligible for benefits) or people who don’t sign up because they mistrust government.

Whatever the reason, the economic impact extends beyond the household. If an eligible individual does not access unemployment benefits, then the “multiplier effect” of the funds being spent at area businesses — and perhaps keeping those entities alive — is never felt, further magnifying the downturn.

“We are already talking about individuals that were often struggling before the crisis, so them missing out on UI payment puts a strain on the community,” said von Wachter. “If individuals don’t have the funds to spend, or spend less, that will be hurting everybody’s purse, so to speak.”

A constricted UI stream is far from the only problem. A 10-page January report by the non-partisan state Legislative Analyst’s Office found that Californians whose incomes were impacted by the coronavirus owe a cumulative \$400

million in unpaid rent, and while eviction moratoriums have kept many people in their apartments for the time being, an estimated 90,000 households are behind in paying the landlord. The Los Angeles Housing and Community Investment Department in early March estimated that low-income renters in the city who have missed payments owe an average of \$4,200 to \$7,000. Although city leaders are directing hundreds of millions of dollars to local rent-relief programs, eventually aid will run out and protections will expire. Ridley-Thomas pointed to the long-term harm that can spin from an eviction.

“It ruins your credit. It is hard to get a leg up under those circumstances,” he said. “We need more creative, imaginative intervention strategies



SIGNS OF TROUBLE: EMPTY TABLES, MASKS, SHIELDS AND SOCIAL DISTANCING SUDDENLY BECAME FACTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN 2020, AS COVID-19 CUT ITS SWATH THROUGH LIFE AROUND THE WORLD.



PHOTOS BY FILIP BUNKENS/UNSPASH, FABIAN MAURIN/UNSPASH

that help people from being subject to practically a criminal sentence because they were evicted.”

Then there is perhaps the most daunting challenge: What happens to people who lost jobs, particularly low-wage earners in fields devastated by COVID-19?

That is the focus of another report, this one commissioned by the L.A. County Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services Department. Caroline Torosis, the department’s director of Economic and Business Development, said the February analysis, titled “Pathways to Economic Resiliency,” identified where jobs have been lost and seeks to help the county determine strategies of recovery — with the idea of addressing inequality.

“We’ve seen the pandemic has really blown wide open the racial wealth gap and has highlighted the inequities we have specific to L.A. County,” said Torosis. “We’ve had a significant job loss, and it’s really affected our communities of color and women.”

The 50-page report (with a 300-page appendix) was conducted by the Los Angeles Economic Devel-

opment Corp. It paints a nightmarish portrait of the economic crisis, and of the long road to recovery.

One finding notes that 20,000 county residents became homeless between last February and November. That was on top of the 66,000 people already experiencing homelessness in the county.

The report also states that 1 million county living-wage jobs (defined as paying \$14.83 an hour for a single adult with no children) disappeared at the height of the crisis. Though some positions have returned, the authors found that the county will not reach the pre-pandemic level of 4.16 million living-wage jobs until 2024.

Similar to the California Policy Lab report, “Pathways to Economic Resiliency” reveals that the people hit hardest are those who can least afford a diminished paycheck: tens of thousands of low-wage restaurant workers, retail sales clerks and more. It’s a situation where frustration is exacerbated by ineptitude that dealt communities of color a further blow; Stephen Cheung, chief operating officer of the LAEDC, noted that in the first round of Paycheck Protection Program grants, it took an average of 62 days for Black-owned

businesses to receive approval from participating banks, and 57 days for Latina/o-owned businesses. Meanwhile, funds for White-owned businesses flowed in an average of 43 days.

Maps provided with the report show that areas with the most job losses are in lower-income communities.

“Already there is poverty in those areas, and now you add unemployment. That’s why we’re so concerned,” Cheung said. “The statistics showed us that the most vulnerable of our populations are worse off.”

As communities struggle, von Wachter, Torosis and Cheung all mention one often-overlooked discrepancy that may further harm impoverished neighborhoods: lack of affordable or reliable broadband service. The connectivity many people take for granted impacts everything from kids wrestling with distance learning to registering online for a coronavirus vaccine.

“Due to COVID-19, a lot of folks are basically asked to work remotely, and if you don’t have reliable and affordable Internet access, you’re basically being asked to be displaced out of a job,” Cheung said.

The challenges facing lower-income communities are no secret; there has been ample discussion of a “K-shaped” recovery, the term that refers to the number of Americans whose wealth has risen at the same time that others struggle mightily.

Yet some worry that the full scope of the economic divide is still not being grasped. UCLA’s von Wachter questions what occurs when people exhaust unemployment benefits or the PUA program ends, particularly if it takes years to return to pre-pandemic employment levels.

“What will happen to these communities as we move into the recovery” he asked. “Will we be able to get them back into the workforce? And how will they be affected by changes that will be occurring in these lower-wage sectors?”

Torosis said the county is looking not just at getting people who lost jobs back into the labor pool but at how to move them into stable, well-paying positions. “Pathways to Economic Resiliency” identifies sectors primed for growth such as healthcare — “there is always a shortage of registered nurses,” Torosis said — and construction, particularly for major infrastructure projects. Ridley-Thomas points to opportunities for historically underrepresented communities in the biosciences field.

Still, moving displaced workers into next-level jobs requires a functioning pipeline and protocols that match employers with eligible candidates. Some systems exist, including training programs at community colleges, but everyone involved recognizes the need for improvements.

“We have a system, but we need to really match our dislocated workers with, depending on their skill set, the growth opportunities,” Torosis said.

Therein lies the challenge that will face the region, long after the pandemic ends. ▀

“WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THESE COMMUNITIES AS WE MOVE INTO THE RECOVERY? WILL WE BE ABLE TO GET THEM BACK INTO THE WORKFORCE? AND HOW WILL THEY BE AFFECTED BY CHANGES THAT WILL BE OCCURRING IN THESE LOWER-WAGE SECTORS?”

— Till von Wachter, faculty director of the California Policy Lab and UCLA professor of economics

WEDGE ISSUES

THE FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE, THEN AND NOW

VOTERS LINED UP AT CHRISTIAN CITY, AN ASSISTED-LIVING HOME IN UNION CITY, GA ON JUNE 9, 2020.

PHOTO BY DUSTIN CHAMBERS/REUTERS

WRITTEN BY
JEAN MERL

OVER THE TWIN CRISES OF THE PAST YEAR

— the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic collapse — loomed the nation's deep political and cultural divides, inflecting debates that seemed matters of common sense and science rather than political discourse, yet fell into the chasm of division. To mask or not to mask? To shut down businesses or allow them to stay open? To continue online lessons and closed campuses or send kids and teachers back into classrooms?

The pandemic shadowed voting in 2020, while the political divide helped push turnout to the point where a record 158 million voters cast ballots in the November 3 election. People unwilling or unable to vote by mail sometimes waited for hours in long lines or drove many miles to reach a polling place.

After losing both the popular vote and the electoral college tally, President Trump and his allies continuously claimed the balloting was fraudulent. Even after recounts in some key states failed to change the result and after nearly all of the more than 50 lawsuits they filed had been thrown out by numerous courts, they insisted that the election was stolen and that Trump had “won by a landslide.” Their “stop the steal” rallying cry led to the deadly assault on the nation's Capitol on January 6.

As with so much of a paradoxical year, the challenges themselves have helped demonstrate the convincing sweep of Joe Biden's victory — and of the reckless campaign to question it. The high turnout and the forceful rejection of the challenges by dozens of courts produced a convincing result despite the complaints of Trump supporters, said Mark Peterson, a UCLA professor of public policy.

“Despite the pandemic, and despite the very high levels of participation, and despite that much of this was done by mail and with election officials

in some states having to ramp up for a very different kind of new experience, this was,” he said, “by all credible reports, probably the freest, fairest, most fraud-free election in American history.”

AND YET, THE NATURE OF ELECTIONS is that they are dynamic and competitive. One barely ends before the next one begins, and the opposing parties gird again for a contest. Some of those unhappy with the 2020 results have responded with scores of bills intended to make voting more difficult — election security, according to proponents; voter suppression in the eyes of critics. Peterson said bills in various states would create more stringent identification requirements and eliminate ballot drop boxes, two ideas certain to disproportionately affect people of color and those with lower income.

With division thus pivoting to 2022 and beyond, a substantial amount of work is going on around the country to learn more about what motivates people to vote, how they make balloting decisions and what can be done to improve voter participation and thus broaden representation.

UCLA political scientists Lynn Vavreck and Chris Tausanovitch were principal researchers on Democracy Fund+UCLA Nationscape, which has surveyed about half a million voters to get a nuanced view of their attitudes and priorities. Vavreck said the data will be publicly available starting April 1 and will form the basis of a book she and Tausanovitch are working on about the 2020 election.

The project began in July 2018 and lasted into January 2019, with interviews of 6,250 people per week. It focused not on voting processes but on people's views on policy matters, Vavreck said. Overall, respondents listed Trump's priorities, including the border wall and immigration items, as most important (regardless of whether they agreed with Trump).

LONGTIME COUNTY SUPERVISOR AND DIRECTOR OF THE LOS ANGELES INITIATIVE AT THE LUSKIN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS.

“BRICK BY BRICK, WE’VE BEEN REMOVING THE BARRIERS TO VOTING. REGISTRATION IS UP; WE’VE MADE IT EASIER TO VOTE. A LOT HAS CHANGED, BUT WE STILL HAVE A WAYS TO GO.”

— Zev Yaroslavsky, longtime county supervisor and director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the Luskin School of Public Affairs

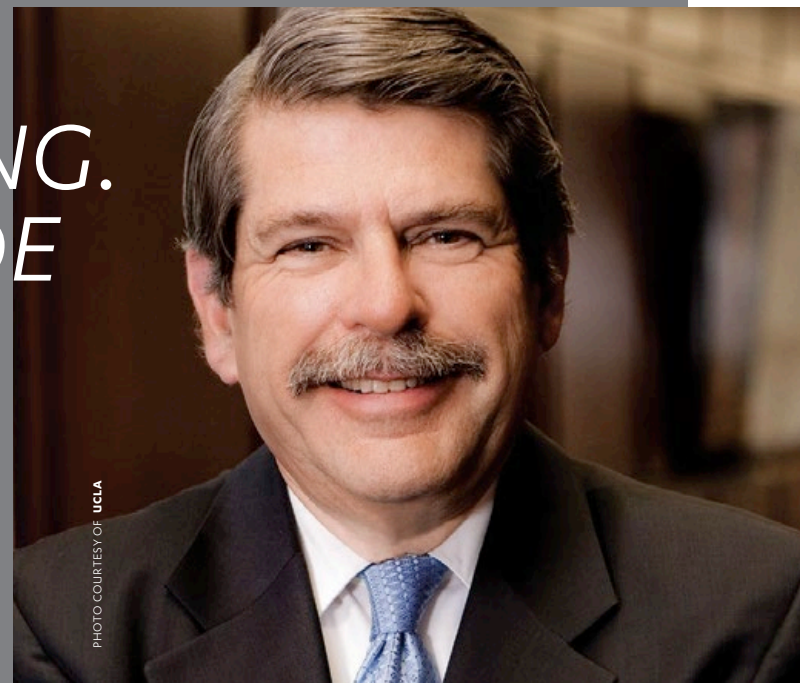


PHOTO COURTESY OF UCLA

Other academics have focused on the processes of voting and what motivates — or discourages — participation in elections. A report last fall by the UCLA Luskin Center for History and Policy revealed that even in liberal, diverse California, the electorate remains markedly whiter, wealthier and older than the state's population as a whole.

“A LOT OF THINGS HAVE CHANGED,” said Zev Yaroslavsky, a former longtime Los Angeles County supervisor who is currently director of the Los Angeles Initiative at the Luskin School of Public Affairs. He is a co-author of the report, “Reckoning With Our Rights: The Evolution of Voter Access in California.”

California has taken steps to make it easier to vote, Yaroslavsky noted, including allowing registration at DMV offices, no longer purging registration rolls of voters who missed elections, loosening the rules on absentee voting, adding early voting options and, during the pandemic, sending a mail ballot to every registered voter.

“Brick by brick, we’ve been removing the barriers to voting,” Yaroslavsky said. “Registration is up; we’ve made it easier for people to vote. A lot of things have changed but we still have a ways to go.

“WHAT WOULD SATISFY ME is if everyone who is eligible were registered and voted. That’s what we strive for,” he said. “That way, a democracy works at its maximum effectiveness, when everybody is represented.”

Alisa Belinkoff Katz, associate director of the Los Angeles Initiative and the report's lead author, said California spent much of its first 100 years finding and inventing ways to limit access to voting. As the report notes, some of California's devices for restricting the voting power of Chinese immigrants found their way to the Jim Crow South, where they were turned against would-be Black voters.

In California, that emphasis began to change shortly after World War II, when the state reveled in its growth and adopted a more welcoming posture toward immigrants. According to the report, whose authors also included UCLA students Izul de la Vega, Jeanne Ramin and Saman Haddad, voting exclusion policies started to reverse during those years, when California was under the leadership of a series of progressive governors, including Republican Earl Warren and Democrat Pat Brown.

“Beginning in the late 1950s, there was a steady stream of improving voter access,” Katz said, “until we got to where we are today.”

Still, she said, the three stages of voting — holding citizenship, registering and casting a ballot — continue to be practiced unequally. Take Los Angeles County, California's largest: Its five supervisorial districts have roughly equal population sizes, but “wealthier, whiter districts cast as many as 40% more votes than those with heavily

lower-income Latina/o, working-class populations.” The study also found that vote-by-mail participation increases with age, median income and education.

Katz said continuing the universal vote-by-mail system — sending a ballot to every registered voter in every election — would make voting more convenient. Six states currently use such a system, and it was done statewide for the first time in California during the last election. Moving to an automatic registration system — adding every citizen to the rolls when he or she turns 18 — might engage more voters at an early age.

AND YET, RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT SOME REFORMS may not affect voting participation as much as one might assume.

Before joining the UCLA faculty in July, political scientist Daniel Thompson co-authored research as a doctoral candidate at Stanford that found switching to all-mail balloting increased voter turnout by a modest 2%. The study also found that universal mail voting does not favor one major party over the other.

Thompson and his co-authors collected data from 1996 to 2018 in three states that had implemented universal vote-by-mail systems on a staggered basis across counties: California, Utah and Washington. That way, researchers could make comparisons between counties that had mailed ballots to all voters and those that had not.

Partisans in both parties had expressed fear that their side would suffer, a worry that results of the study belied in its research article, “Universal Vote-by-Mail Has No Impact on Partisan Turnout or Vote Share.” In fact, the study's more sobering conclusion was not that the efforts helped one side or the other but rather that the efforts did not help anyone very much.

“We find that implementing universal [vote-by-mail] has no apparent effect on either the share of turned-out voters who are Democrats or the share of votes that go to Democratic candidates, on average,” the authors reported. “We also find that it increases turnout by roughly 2%, on average.”

Recent improvements in research design techniques have allowed more precise results, Thompson said in a recent telephone interview. Thompson has since worked on more studies, including a just-released report on whether recent expansion of absentee ballot eligibility in Texas led to increased voter turnout. In essence, it found that voters who had been practicing in-person voting switched to mail balloting but not that wider access to mail balloting increased overall participation.

“Offering this method is really valuable to voters,” Thompson said. “They will switch [voting methods] if given a more convenient opportunity. But the idea that a lot more people would turn out to vote? That does not appear to be the case.” ►



ILLUSTRATION BY NOMA BAR

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

The Struggle to Stay Housed

WRITTEN BY
LISA FUNG

EVERY MORNING, Natherine wakes up with knots in her stomach, worried about how she will pay the rent. “I have lost my appetite,” she said. “I can’t eat half the time. The stress is beyond belief.”

Even before the pandemic, the South Pasadena resident, who asked that her full name not be used, was struggling financially. Natherine, 62, has been largely out of work for much of the past 18 months because of health issues and, more recently, COVID-19 concerns. Now, the prospect of losing her housing is a terrifying possibility.

“I’ve never ever missed one rent payment in the almost 11 years I’ve been here. My first missed payment was in December,” she said. “I had some savings — I can’t do anything but pat myself on the back that I managed to have some savings to carry me through. I’ve got maybe one more month of rent, and after that, then what?”

Natherine's situation is not unusual. Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, millions of people across the country have faced illness or job loss that has made it difficult to pay their rent and has left them in jeopardy of eviction. For thousands living paycheck to paycheck, the pandemic has added a new level of stress to their already tenuous situations. Desperate tenants are draining their savings accounts or further amassing debt by seeking loans from friends and family or using credit cards to pay their landlords.

Federal, state and local governments are providing some rental assistance or enacting "eviction moratoriums." But in many cases, the payments are not enough or arrive too late and still leave tenants in precarious positions that may only delay an inevitable displacement. Some housing officials fear that Los Angeles, which has more than 2 million renter households, could face a flood of evictions once the moratoriums run out and rent repayment comes due.

A 2020 UCLA-USC STUDY FOUND that 1 in 5 renters in Los Angeles was unable to pay rent on time during the early months of the pandemic. About 7% — which translates to about 137,000 households — were unable to pay any rent at all for at least one month during that period. And those numbers are unlikely to improve in the near future.

"On the one hand, the numbers are surprising because you see the amount of lost work and lost income. On the other hand, it's not that surprising, only because housing is just so important — people are resilient and in the sort of hierarchy of needs, people will give up a lot to make sure they still have a roof over their head," said Michael Manville, associate professor of urban planning at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs and one of the study's authors. "They may forgo a lot of other expenses. They may borrow from their families; they may go into their savings. Even people who didn't report being late did report this uptick in using credit cards and family members and savings to help pay."

Expanding on a Pulse Survey by the U.S. Census that measured how lives were impacted by COVID-19, Manville, along with UCLA associate professors Paavo Monkkonen and Michael C. Lens, and Richard K. Green, a professor and director of the USC Lusk Center for Real Estate, conducted their survey of 1,000 people to gauge renter distress in Los Angeles during May, June and July 2020. They are currently analyzing data from a second survey, which covers later months of the pandemic.

"We were interested in how many people were not paying, how much trouble renters are having and what factors seemed to be associated with that," Manville said. "And we were interested in its consequences. Eviction is the biggest and most dire consequence, but there are other consequences as well."

At the Los Angeles-based Housing Rights Center, one of the oldest and largest nonprofit fair-housing organizations in the country, Natherine's situation is an everyday reality. The center provides education and legal assistance to tenants throughout the county and administers the Emergency Renters Assistance program for the city of Los Angeles, which last year issued more than \$103 million in rental assistance, with payments going to more than 49,000 tenant households.

Chancela Al-Mansour, executive director of the center, said she recently spoke with a landlord who came to the center's Koreatown office to pick up rental assistance checks on behalf of her tenants. "She has tenants who owe \$20,000 in back rent," Al-Mansour said. "\$20,000! And we're not talking about luxury apartments.

"Under normal bad times, you may have one person in the household who has lost their job. Many of these situations are in families where everybody in the household lost their job," she said. "People are feeling it, and calls are definitely more desperate now: 'I really have no money at all. I've gone through my savings. I've gone through everything completely.'"

Not surprisingly, the study found a direct correlation between job losses, cutbacks in hours and illnesses — and the late, partial or nonpayment of rent, as a result. Renters sick with COVID were twice as likely to report not being able to pay rent in full by the end of the month. Renters who lost jobs, contrasted with those who didn't, were 2½ times more likely to be unable to pay their rent. A key finding, Manville said, was that those who lost jobs but received unemployment assistance were more likely to have paid rent.

Late payment was most common among households earning between \$25,000 and \$50,000, while nonpayment was higher among households earning \$25,000 or less. In addition to being concentrated among low-income tenants, the survey found, rates of nonpayment and late payment were consistently higher among Black and Hispanic renters (Note: Blueprint generally identifies Hispanics as Latina/o, but is using "Hispanic" in this instance to conform to the language of the study). Black renters, the survey found, were about 250% more likely than White renters to report being late on rent, while Hispanic tenants were about 150% more likely.

That came as no surprise to Al-Mansour, who noted that in some parts of the county, such as South Los Angeles, Inglewood, Pacoima or El Monte, there was once a high concentration of Black and Latina/o property ownership. When the foreclosure crisis hit in 2008, these communities felt the impact of predatory lending that stripped away value and resulted in homeowners losing their properties. Many of these Black and Latina/o owners rented to family members or other people of color, so when they lost their properties, their tenants also were displaced.

"Oftentimes what happens is the person who buys the property is going to try to evict that family or that tenant who has been living there. And more than likely in South L.A., that's a Black family that's living there. That's a story we hear over and over again," Al-Mansour said.

"The more that our apartment buildings are lost to developers or lost off the rental market altogether, the more that hurts Black renters and the more that increases unhoused Black people in Los Angeles. That's why the homelessness rate in L.A. County is over 40% Black," she said. "I see that in the evictions. I see that in the displacement."

Among tenant households renting from family members, late payment and nonpayment were more common, according to the survey. "The smaller the landlord, the more likely the tenant wouldn't pay. You could surmise that, especially with people who rented from friends and family, that person might just be more forgiving," Manville said. "But those landlords were also the most likely to evict. Eviction threats were much more common among smaller landlords."

Natherine felt comfortable approaching the couple who owns her unit when she knew she wouldn't be able to pay her December rent in full. "She told me, 'Well, just keep doing the best you can. I understand what you're going through. Just do what you can.'"

The survey found that repayment plans like Natherine's were fairly common because of the pandemic. "I would not be

"PEOPLE ARE FEELING IT, AND CALLS ARE DEFINITELY MORE DESPERATE NOW: 'I REALLY HAVE NO MONEY AT ALL. I'VE GONE THROUGH MY SAVINGS. I'VE GONE THROUGH EVERYTHING COMPLETELY.'"

— *Chancela Ai-Mansour, executive director of the Housing Rights Center*

surprised if the real prevalence of repayment plans during the pandemic is a product of the landlords being aware that 'the next person I get for this unit might have the same problems. I might as well just try to work this out,'" Manville said. "Especially in this period where you have a moratorium."

The federal moratorium, enacted in March 2020 as part of the CARES Act, put a temporary hold on eviction filings until 30 days after its July 24 expiration date. That moratorium has been extended twice. State and local governments also have enacted measures to protect tenants. In recognition of COVID-19's toll on renters, courts put eviction cases on hold, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, which serves tenants with notices to vacate, temporarily paused those actions.

Moratoriums are important, Manville said, but they don't solve the problem. "The tenant continues to amass debt one way or another. Then the landlord is not having any income either."

At the end of January, California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a law that pauses evictions for tenants who claim an inability to pay all or part of their rent for COVID-related reasons. It also established a \$2.6-billion rental assistance fund aimed at helping income-qualified tenants who are most at risk with unpaid back rent. Under the plan, property owners would agree to waive 20% of unpaid rent to become eligible for 80% in rent reimbursements for amounts owed between April 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021.

But there's a catch. "The program said they couldn't evict for a year if they took the rent money, so some landlords opt out," Al-Mansour said. In those cases, the tenant could receive 25% of the rent to go toward payment. "That's supposed to be an incentive to the landlord to take the money — they get 80% and not maybe the 25% that the tenant may give."

Manville calls the moratorium "necessary but not sufficient," because even though it stalls the payments, the tenants eventually will have to find a way to get out of debt. "The problem

is bigger than unpaid rent," he said. "It's unpaid rent, it's rent that's been paid on a credit card, it's rent that's been paid with a 'payday' loan. People owe money to more than their landlords."

The survey found that more than 20% of households have gone into their savings and more than 10% have sought help from friends or family. Just under 10% have tapped credit cards. And more than 40% of households unable to pay rent took out high-interest emergency loans.

"Usually when tenants get into trouble, it's the household that's having trouble," Manville said. "We're an economically segregated country, so if you're a low-income person, you probably have low-income friends and family. They can really help you only so much, [as] much as they might like to help you more."

Al-Mansour said some tenants move out because they are cutting their losses or taking care of a family member. If that means moving someone in, she said, landlords might claim overcrowding and use that as a cause for eviction.

The survey found that about 20% of respondents reported harassment from their landlords, such as turning off utilities, Manville said. About 15%, or about 98,000 households, were threatened with evictions and another 5%, or 40,000 households, reported having eviction initiated against them. "Of course, none of those evictions during this time could be carried forward," he said. "But they could be threatened."

The mere threat of eviction has led to increased reports of depression, anxiety and other stress-related illnesses. "Not having confidence in the ability to pay rent was strongly associated with reporting either severe depression or being very anxious," Manville said. "You just have people who are deeply worried and unhappy because of the position they've been put in. And one thing we know about depression and anxiety is that it continues. It's hard to recover from long bouts of depression or anxiety."

Manville and his co-authors say their findings suggest that renters who can pay will pay. Delivering assistance to renters will not only stave off looming evictions in the short term but also prevent "quieter and longer-term problems that are no less serious," such as renters struggling to pay credit card or other debt, slaving to manage a repayment plan or emerging from the pandemic with little savings left.

"If you're making \$25,000 a year as a household, and you were probably having a hard time paying your rent to begin with, and you're still facing a landscape with a lot of unemployment, the idea that you catch up on rent and pay down your debt without some sort of help is crazy," Manville said. "It's a problem that has been created because pre-COVID renters had enough money to pay their landlords, and now they don't. You've got to fill in that lost money."

After Natherine lost her job working for Los Angeles County, she began using her savings to pay her rent and other needs. A local food bank provides some of her groceries. At one point, she was receiving unemployment, but those payments have stopped. Though she has adult children who live nearby, they are in a position to help her as she continues to search for a job.

"I've got bills I can't pay. My car is just begging for attention — I can't drive it. My health is deteriorating, slowly but surely. But I'm trying to keep it together," she said. "There's no extras. It's just basically trying to keep food on my table. And thankful that I have a roof over my head and can continue to look for work." ▀

LEARNING OVER

As COVID-19 shut down California, UCLA embraced remote education — and discovered new possibilities



WRITTEN BY
JIM NEWTON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
EDMON DE HARO

CALIFORNIA RECORDED ITS FIRST COVID-19 death on March 4, 2020.

The following day, Santa Clara County recommended canceling major events. On March 9, a cruise ship carrying dozens of infected passengers belatedly docked in Oakland. Meanwhile, Italy, buckling under an uncontrolled outbreak, announced a nationwide quarantine.

At UCLA, top officials monitored those events with growing concern. Finals week was in mid-March, and Chancellor Gene Block initially hoped to keep the campus open during the exams. As the data poured in, that grew untenable.

“It became evident that for every day we waited, we put the community at risk,” said Michael Beck, administrative vice chancellor.

On March 10, Block ordered in-class instruction halted. UCLA’s bustling campus suddenly fell quiet. As students vacated Westwood, within two weeks on-campus housing went from serving nearly 13,400 students to about 700.

“Things happened very quickly,” the chancellor said, looking back on those events months later.

The wrenching changes at UCLA were felt in all walks of life. The campus, after all, is something of a small city, with nearly 45,000 students and 42,000 staff and faculty. Additionally, with \$1.4 billion in annual research funding, projects across campus have broad implications for society. But could UCLA maintain safety while carrying out its core mission of education, research and service?





The answer, it turns out, is yes. After years of evaluating the implications of remote education, UCLA was abruptly compelled to embrace it wholesale. With barely a moment's notice, classes moved overnight to remote learning, thanks to a monumental effort to support the transition. The campus procured Zoom licenses, ramped up IT capacity and lent students hardware such as laptops and mobile internet hotspots. The accumulated lessons of this period include significant insights that may help expand UCLA's educational offerings in the future and may also provide new opportunities for adult education and alumni engagement.

BRACING FOR THE WORST

In the years before COVID-19, the idea of remote education was sometimes greeted skeptically. The coronavirus dramatically altered the equation, and Block braced for the worst. "I thought there might be an uptick in faculty retirements," he said. There was not.

Still, stresses were immediate. Traditional lecture courses, built around professorial presentations to note-taking students, moved online without much effort, but more interactive courses — theater and music classes and science labs — were more difficult to conduct on digital platforms such as Zoom. Nevertheless, teachers adjusted.

By the summer, UCLA had built up a

formidable library of content in the form of lectures, webinars, chats and other communications. Much of what had once transpired in the classroom now found a home online, and professors experimented with new ways of connecting, such as breakout rooms on Zoom and online office hours.

Students, already familiar with digital communication, were often more nimble than faculty. But the pandemic also

“THE LEARNING HAS BEEN PROFOUND.”

— *UCLA Chancellor Gene Block on the experience of remote education during COVID-19*

exposed the disparate resources of UCLA students, one-third of whom will become first-generation college graduates.

For some, bringing a camera into crowded houses was difficult. Not all students have sturdy internet connections, and many were in crowded homes, where it was difficult to find privacy and space. Block, a first-generation college graduate himself, recalls a stark contrast during a spring course he taught: One student signed in from a well-appointed kitchen, while another was connected from a car,

piggybacking on Wi-Fi while during a work break.

Professors initially insisted that students turn on their cameras so that the Zoom room would feel more like a classroom, but they learned to ease off. Similarly, courses that were still held at their original times proved difficult for those in other time zones, so many were recorded.

Despite some setbacks, advantages also emerged from the online experience. Every professor knows that in a class of more than 100 students, a dozen or so — often seated up front — will dominate discussions, while those who are less inclined to participate gravitate to the back rows. In the remote classroom, all faces are lined up in Zoom boxes, which means shyer students may feel more comfortable about taking part in an online discussion.

"Classrooms have dynamics," Block said. "Some faculty are reporting that those dynamics change with remote education."

Many startup frustrations gradually eased. "Students are resilient," said Monroe Gorden '94, vice chancellor for student affairs. Moreover, the administration learned. "Technology and equipment are now seen as basic needs for students," Gorden said. In fact, they're as essential as books. So UCLA is helping those who might otherwise find Internet access out of reach.

CHANGING THE EQUATION

UCLA is limited by space. It has the largest student body in the University of California system, and yet it has the second-smallest acreage. Classroom space is at a premium, limiting the number of students who can enroll in popular courses, which sometimes affects how quickly a student can complete major requirements to graduate.

Remote education, however, changes the equation. "The only way to do more on our 419 acres is by using technology," Block said.

Imagine, he says, if UCLA students took one out of every four of their classes remotely. Larger numbers of students could join Zoom courses, some from home in the U.S. and others from locations around the world. The physical classrooms, meanwhile, could be repurposed for courses that require in-person sessions, allowing more students to participate in those as well.

Creating new space would, in turn, allow UCLA to address a fundamental constraint on its mission. Today, UCLA is one of the nation's most selective universities, which means it is unable to accommodate

thousands of qualified applicants who could thrive as Bruins if there were room.

As demonstrated over the past year, technology can offer ways to expand opportunities and help UCLA fulfill its broader social mission, without diminishing the experience. That would represent a powerful validation of the university's COVID-19 experience.

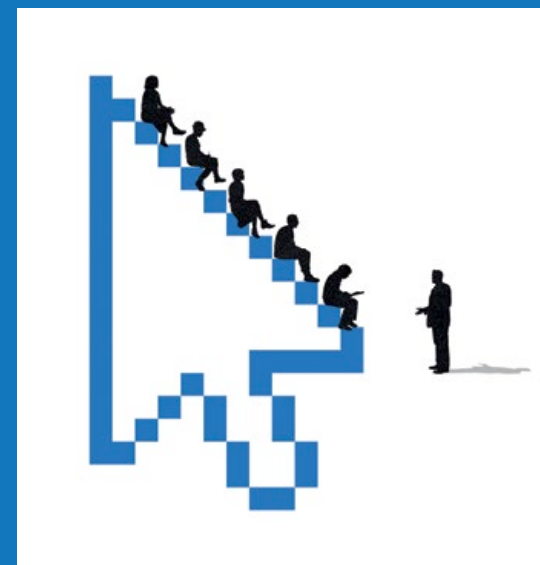
FROM WESTWOOD TO WALES

There are some 500,000 UCLA alumni scattered around the world and in every profession. For most, the chance to reconnect with UCLA's educational offerings may have appeal, but it is often impractical. Most live too far from Westwood and manage busy schedules that wouldn't accommodate a return to college.

Now, however, UCLA is offering almost all of its educational and alumni programs through online platforms, which are as accessible from Westwood as they are from Wales. That shift, says Julie Sina, Alumni Affairs associate vice chancellor, has "given us the incredible opportunity to strengthen our alumni community." In 2020, the UCLA Alumni Association presented 955 events, which included webinars and Zoom events as well as job search and networking forums. One event last May has been viewed more than 20,000 times by alumni in 70 different countries.

Going forward, more academic programs could be available to alumni who are contemplating changes in jobs or careers. This is where Block envisions a "lifetime warranty" that would be part of a UCLA education.

A UCLA alumnus who works as a lawyer might, years later, decide that her real calling is to be a writer, but she worries that it might be too late to make a change.



“IT GIVES US AN OPPORTUNITY TO RETHINK THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF BEING AN ALUMNUS. IT'S NOT JUST COMING BACK FOR A FOOTBALL GAME OR A TAILGATE.”

— *UCLA Chancellor Gene Block on one of the benefits of remote education*

What if, by enrolling in a series of courses on Zoom, she could get the education she needed to land a job working for a media company? Or what about the alumnus who is wrestling with complicated family matters? Or those looking for insights into the worlds of politics or investments? UCLA offers courses with some of the world's most brilliant people, but until now, connecting with their teaching meant coming to campus. What if that's no longer required?

"It gives us an opportunity to rethink the value proposition of being an alumnus," Block said. "It's not just coming back for a football game or a tailgate." The bottom line, he notes, is that "you have to meet people where they are."

THE LOSS OF PERSONAL CONNECTION

Jan Reiff is a professor of history who teaches a well-regarded course on the 1960s. She also serves as a special assistant to Chancellor Block and Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Emily A. Carter for online teaching and learning. As a result, she is better acquainted than most with the tensions that have existed around the online learning debate over the years. She's heard the concerns and complaints of faculty who worry about the loss of personal connection with students. She's heard students worry about the threat to a residential college experience. And she's seen other institutions experiment and struggle with the same issues.

When UCLA quickly moved to online classes last March, Reiff says the initial reactions reminded her of those stuffed animals stuck on car windows, grimacing while gamely hanging on. And yet, all concerned persevered. It was a whirlwind of new experience, sometimes overwhelming, but guided by a mutual determination to address the coronavirus while at the same time maintaining UCLA's commitment to top-quality education.

As life has somewhat settled down, Reiff has seen the campus adjust and adapt. One consequence is that the old reservations are now tempered and informed by actual experience.

"The battle over whether online is evil and face-to-face is good has changed," she said. In its place has arisen a recognition that a blend of personal and online education may create "a much more flexible environment that can benefit both."

For example, online courses may allow calculus students to find the level at which they are challenged but not overwhelmed. Interns scattered around the world could join an online seminar about the vagaries of living abroad. Gaming software could be adopted for classes on dance or movie production or ensemble performance. All of this would enhance education, not diminish or demean it.

Moreover, these new configurations might allow some students to occasionally join from home. That would free up space and resources at UCLA to expand other areas of teaching and research. As part of a blended model, technology then becomes a way of exploring behavior, Reiff said, rather than "a platform that forces behavior."

In that light, UCLA's experience with technology during this crisis is not pushing leadership to upend the fundamental relationship between teachers and students, nor is technology a vehicle for diluting the experience of going to college — living with other young people and immersing in a life that's grounded in learning. Instead, this experience suggests there are new ways to expand the educational environment, address questions of inequality, connect more firmly and lastingly with alumni, and perhaps do more good in the world.

To Block, those are powerful inducements to do more — carefully, to be sure — with appreciation for the potential to make UCLA an even greater contributor to education and culture. "The learning," he said, "has been profound." ►

On Politics and History

Dukakis and Boyarsky: Reflections on crisis, recovery and challenge

“HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT RETIRING?”

I asked Michael Dukakis, who is stepping down after teaching at UCLA’s Luskin School of Public Affairs and at Northeastern University in Boston, running for president of the United States and serving three terms as governor of Massachusetts.

“Kind of mixed. We’re both the same age, we’ve been active. I suppose I would throw the same question back. How do you feel about it?”

How do I feel about retirement? Actually, by not thinking much about it, by looking ahead to my next activity. Dukakis, it turns out, has somewhat the same view of life. It made for an enlightening conversation between two people of the same generation who continue to have a deep interest in politics and public policy.

We were Zooming. He was at his Mas-

sachusetts home. I was in Los Angeles. The editors at Blueprint thought it would be interesting for us, two veterans of politics, to get together for a conversation about what we’ve learned in our long careers, and to offer readers lessons that will guide them to a better future.

I had doubts about advising people on how we can reach a brighter tomorrow. I’ve spent my life in journalism, a trade well known for being negative. But Dukakis, whom I have known since the mid-’70s, has a sunnier view, which made him a good teacher for generations of students.

Dukakis was born in 1933. He served as governor of his native state, was the Democratic nominee for president in 1988 and then taught at Northeastern and Luskin. I’ve been a reporter and editor since 1956. We spoke earlier this spring.

INTERVIEW BY
BILL BOYARSKY



PHOTO BY WEBB CHAPPELL PHOTOGRAPHY

Bill Boyarsky: What has been the impact of the COVID pandemic on America?

Michael Dukakis: It certainly has been different, and it's like nothing most of us have had to live through. Interestingly, in the early 1900s my family settled in Lowell, Massachusetts. All of them got the Spanish flu in 1918. All of them, including my dad. Two of them died: his father and his oldest brother. And I'd heard that story occasionally but it never really registered the way it has now.

Did the Spanish flu have an impact on my father? I suspect so. He was 15 years old, just arrived in the United States from a predominantly Greek town in western Turkey. He became a doctor and practiced medicine for over 50 years in the city of Boston. But our family didn't talk a lot about the Spanish flu.

Boyarsky: Tell me more about what you think of COVID's impact.

Dukakis: I think the jury is still out on that. Remember that the response to the pandemic, while it was slow and badly done under Trump, certainly got massive public attention. It was focused; it was televised; it involved pictures. It certainly was the issue for all of us over the course of the past year. It also gave public leaders an opportunity to lead if they wanted to lead, or not to lead if they didn't want to. We have had an interesting division of public opinion in this country that I don't think we had in 1918, with certain states objecting [and others] trying to push a response aggressively. I don't think that was the case back in 1918.

Boyarsky: We weren't as divided then, one state doing one thing, another doing something else.

Dukakis: There was plenty of division. Remember, we had anarchists, who were blowing up houses of attorneys general. It's not as though that was a nice time, but it just didn't have the kind of intensity of pressure. Wilson was president. He himself was having serious physical problems. He was not a well person and he was unable to take a dynamic leadership role.

But people didn't face what we faced, the response of Trump, his repeated assertion that this was a stolen election, that he really won overwhelmingly, all of which is nonsense. But it certainly played a major role in the period between the end of the election and Biden's inauguration. And that's been quite different [than in 1918]. And there are people, amazingly, including Trump, who still think he won.

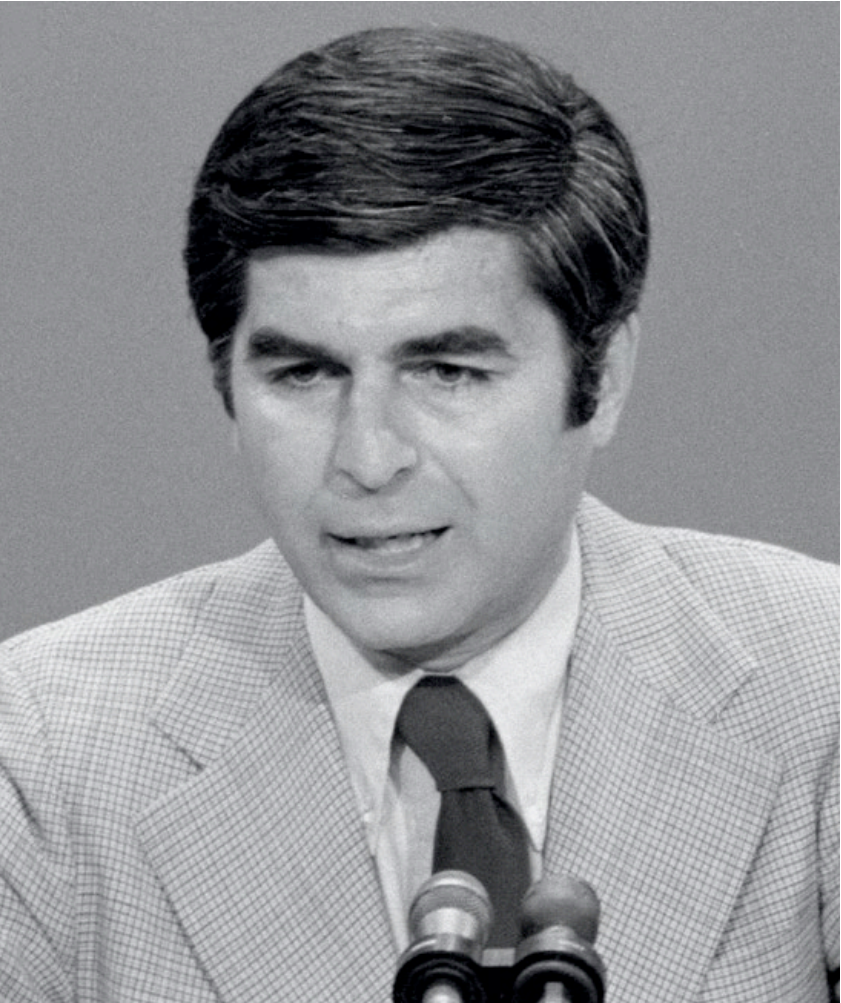
Boyarsky: I think the country is going to come out of this a more disturbed place. Young people will be more cynical, disillusioned.

Dukakis: We'll have to see in terms of how Biden will handle it. I think he has done an impressive job, certainly far more effectively than Trump did, who I think has always been kind of a disaster. He can't manage his way out of a paper bag. But at the same time, he kept minimizing the importance of what was going on, that it really wasn't serious, that it was going to be over in a relatively short period of time.

If, in fact, Biden is right, and in the next month or two we're going to be getting closer and closer to a solution to the problem, if you will, that gets us back to normal again, then that will make a difference. But it's still very early at this point.

Boyarsky: What about Trump's lasting impact? Personally, I think Trump will fade away like some old Borscht Belt comic, pushed aside when audiences tire of his act.

Dukakis: I don't think he is going to fade away. Will he be a force? I don't think anyone can answer that question at this point. It's still too early. He's still a very divisive kind of guy. But he does have a very strong, loyal following. It will be interesting to see, as the Biden administration increasingly takes over and takes responsibility for handling the crisis, whether or not even [Trump's] so-called base begins to recognize how competent [Biden] has been. But remember these things change very quickly. Let's assume that in six months the country is back in relatively good shape, in part or in large part because we



“We’re facing some existential issues when it comes to the future of the planet, and I hope we can play a very constructive role and a collaborative role.”

— Michael Dukakis

have a new administration that has done a good job. Well, we'll move on to other things, and public attention will focus on them, so this is still very much a fluid situation. As I've said to you, I think Biden and company and the Congress have done a pretty impressive job.

Tomorrow there will be something else. We still have a situation internationally, I'm sorry to say, that continues to be pretty contentious. We've got a new player — China. And they're formidable. One of the things I am particularly interested in is whether the United States and also the EU, our allies, have the good sense to try to make that a constructive relationship, rather than get us back into another Cold War, which is something that you and I, at our age, don't want to get into again. We lived through a cold war for decades.

And we're facing some existential issues when it comes to the future of the planet, and I hope we can

play a very constructive role and a collaborative role, even with folks who don't agree with us on certain things, when it comes to the planet's future. I hope we can do that. It's so important.

Boyarsky: Is the Biden optimism catching?

Dukakis: I think people are reacting to what he is doing in a positive way. Can he turn this country into an optimistic country again that deals with both our domestic and international issues effectively and positively and well? We shall see. It's not going to be easy, but it's essential. I know Biden thinks it's essential, and the people around him think it's essential.

Boyarsky: At this point you don't think it's a positive country, then?

Dukakis: Well, we've gone through a very rough year. Are we positive? More positive than we were six months ago. Or three months ago. But can we get a sense of optimism back, and can people begin to feel strongly and positively about our future and the world's future and the planet's future? That remains to be seen.

Boyarsky: Finally, what are your plans for the future?

Dukakis: This is a new situation for me. I have always been a very active person, from boyhood. And all of a sudden, I find myself retired. Not really, because I'm still staying reasonably active. And as restrictions lift, hopefully, and we positively resolve our public health problem, we'll move on to other things. I am going to stay as active as I possibly can, and be as helpful as I possibly can. I am going to work with a lot of the folks that I was able to work with, not just as governor but



PHOTOS BY DAVID SPRAGUE AND THOMAS J. O'HALLORAN

CLOSING NOTE: TOWARD SOMETHING BETTER



PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN likes to talk about “building back better,” political shorthand for rebuilding after COVID-19 with an eye toward fixing not just the damage that the virus has wrought but addressing the problems that pre-existed it. Like much in politics, that is both simplistic and promising, as the crises documented in this issue of Blueprint suggest.

The economy was uneven before the pandemic, as any close look at employment, wages and housing in Los Angeles makes clear. Then, as a study by the California Policy Lab reported, COVID-19 struck that vulnerability with staggering force. The result was as tragic as it was predictable: People of color lost their jobs at higher rates and died in disproportionate numbers than White residents of Los Angeles. Even those who were hit less severely suffered consequences in ways that preyed on pre-existing inequality: A worker or a student who was blessed with the opportunity to work from home but could not afford a sturdy Internet connection was destined to suffer yet again.

The insidious assault of the coronavirus on society’s existing weaknesses spared few walks of life: Families who struggled for income fell behind on rent;

political divisions fanned by President Donald Trump and his allies deepened after an election that turned largely on public responses to his handling of the pandemic; White supremacy, a plague on American life long before COVID-19, flared in the aftermath of the election when marauders stormed the Capitol, howling racial epithets and carrying a Confederate battle flag through the building that an earlier generation of soldiers bearing that same flag sought to destroy.

What the studies and reports and analyses examined in this issue make clear is that “building back” is vital, but so is “better.” There is not much point in rebuilding a society that is divided and mean; the greater mission is to learn from the experiences of this past year and to correct everything that can be corrected. The work of researchers such as Alisa Belinkoff Katz on voting, Aaron Panofsky on race and Mark Peterson on politics offers hope.

Their investigations and those of others explored in this issue suggest ways forward. Some are matters of policy: how to better deliver unemployment benefits or renter assistance, to name two; how to protect and extend democracy, to name a third. Others combine elements of psychology and even spirituality: What does race mean, and how does society most successfully confront a White supremacist deluded about his own genetic makeup and dangerous to those around him?

Moreover, the pandemic also has served to remind society, however troubled, that it also is resilient. As this issue’s Special Report demonstrates, people and institutions responded to radical changes of life required by isolation in ways that also gave birth to creativity, in this case through the experiment of remote learning that UCLA has explored for more than a year.

Research sometimes spotlights a problem — and sometimes, but not always, points toward progress. Either way, it is at the core of understanding, and the work presented in this issue highlights at least two undeniable realizations: that society has suffered immensely, and that there are ways to make this society better.

— *Jim Newton*



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