

RACIAL HEALING

Rebuilding Trust in Public Institutions: A Path Toward Racial Healing for African Americans

Mark McKinney

Persistent distrust between Black communities and public institutions remains a critical barrier to achieving social equity in the United States. This commentary explores the historical and contemporary roots of institutional distrust, emphasizing how legacies of exclusion, systemic bias, and administrative neglect continue to fracture relationships between Black citizens and the public sector. Drawing on recent events and policy shifts, the essay argues that racial healing must be central to any effort to rebuild legitimacy and trust. It highlights the role of public administrators as agents of change—capable of fostering transparency, accountability, and culturally responsive governance. By framing trust-building as both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity, this piece offers a pathway for institutions to engage in restorative practices that honor lived experiences and promote justice. The urgency of this moment demands bold reflection and action to transform public administration into a vehicle for healing and equity.

Keywords

racial healing, public administration, Black Americans, institutional trust, social equity

The Trust Crisis

Black Americans have long endured an oppressed relationship with public institutions, shaped by centuries of systemic exclusion and racialized governance. From law enforcement (Jenkins 2023) to education and healthcare (Albert et al. 2024; McKinnon et al. 2024), institutional failures eroded trust and legitimacy. This profound erosion of trust is not merely a matter of historical grievances but is continually reinforced by contemporary inequities (Bearfield et al. 2023; Vázquez et al. 2024). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 reignited national conversations about racial justice, but the underlying distrust remains deeply entrenched, validated by persistent disparities.

This essay argues that racial healing must be a central strategy in rebuilding trust and legitimacy in public administration, as this is not just about isolated events but about a systemic crisis of faith in the institutions designed to serve the public (Brady and Kent 2022; Johnson and Benavides 2023). To address this crisis, public administration must move beyond performative ges-

tures and engage in deep, systemic change. It requires an honest reckoning with historical complicity and a commitment to creating equitable systems.

The consequences of inaction are profound, leading to civic disengagement, further social stratification, and the inability of public services to effectively reach and serve marginalized communities (Coupet 2023; Gooden 2023; Scott and Rodriguez-Leach 2024). For instance, in healthcare, documented racial bias in medical diagnoses and treatment contributes to poorer health outcomes for Black Americans, with clinicians' implicit biases leading to the undertreatment of pain and higher rates of limb amputations (Hall et al. 2015; Ray 2022). In education, institutional failures, such as disciplinary disparities cause Black adolescents to lose trust in schools, which in turn predicts future disciplinary issues and affects college enrollment rates (Del Toro and Wang 2023; GAO 2024; Yeager et al. 2017). In policing, persistent issues of racial profiling and excessive force continue to fracture police-community relations (Bruhn 2025). Research shows that high-profile incidents of police violence directly cause a substantial

reduction in trust among Black residents, leading to lower rates of civic engagement and a decreased likelihood of calling emergency services, thereby undermining public safety (Ben-Menachem and Torrats-Espinosa 2024; Strom and Wire 2024). Acknowledging the pain and harm caused by these systemic failures is the first step toward a restorative approach to governance.

Sources

African Americans have long endured a fraught relationship with public institutions, shaped by centuries of systemic exclusion and racialized governance. From law enforcement to education and healthcare, institutional failures have eroded trust and legitimacy (Cox 2024). The killing of Breonna Taylor in 2020 served as a painful reminder of systemic failures in law enforcement and public accountability, reigniting demands for racial equity and exposing the enduring mistrust between marginalized communities and the institutions meant to protect them (Martin 2021; Scott and Rodriguez-Leach, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, exposed and exacerbated deep inequities in public health responses, further eroding trust (CDC 2020; Yaya et al. 2020). With the pandemic increasing societal apprehension, rebuilding public trust and institutional legitimacy demands a deliberate and sustained commitment to racial healing—not as a reaction to isolated incidents, but as a strategic response to a pervasive crisis of confidence in governance structures. This approach recognizes that systemic racism has eroded the moral authority of public institutions, and that healing must be embedded in policy, practice, and civic engagement to restore democratic integrity (French et al. 2023; McNair 2024; Scott and Rodriguez-Leach 2024).

Since 2020, commencing with the Biden administration, a series of attempts to address these deep-seated issues have been undertaken. On his first day in office, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985, *Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*, which directed federal agencies to create “Equity Action Plans” to address systemic barriers to opportunity (Aaron et al. 2025; Brown 2024; Ojeda et al. 2024; The White House 2023). Utilization of a “whole-of-government” approach aimed to embed racial equity into all aspects of federal policy, from economic justice to public health

and criminal justice. However, when President Biden left office, the Trump administration rescinded Executive Order 13985 and several related equity-focused orders including: termination of all Equity Action Plans, environmental justice offices, and DEI-related grants and programs; elimination of federal commitments to language access, racial data disaggregation, and support for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); and the disbanding of the White House Steering Committee on Equity and agency equity teams (Aaron et al. 2025; Brown 2024).

Moreover, the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act were cited as landmark legislation aimed at closing wealth gaps and investing in underserved communities, with federal funding specifically allocated to HBCUs and minority-owned businesses (Walcott 2022). Nevertheless, the Trump administration purposefully attacked this (and other) legislation to ensure it could undue any progress made by the Biden administration.

Given that, the efficacy of such top-down, federal initiatives in restoring local trust remains a subject of debate. While some civil rights leaders have praised the administration’s efforts, including the Department of Justice’s focus on voter protection and banning of certain police tactics, many Black adults remain skeptical. A 2021 Pew Research Center study found that most Black adults believe the nation’s institutions need to be “completely rebuilt,” highlighting the deep-seated nature of the distrust that executive actions alone may not be able to resolve (Pew Research Center 2021). To truly address this crisis, public administration needs to advance beyond superficial actions and commit to meaningful, structural transformation driven by and aligned with the communities most affected and led by the communities most impacted (Strange et al. 2025).

Contemporary Failures and Fractures

Despite reforms, many public institutions still fail to serve Black communities equitably. Disparities in healthcare access, educational outcomes, and policing practices persist. The onset of COVID-19 identified public health inequities, highlighting Black community distrust as Black communities were disproportionately impacted by the virus and had less access to testing and treatment (Hall et al. 2015).

Recent studies show that racial identity and expe-

periences of discrimination significantly impact engagement with public systems. These findings underscore the need for culturally responsive and equity-centered approaches in public administration. In healthcare, studies have documented how racial bias in medical diagnoses and treatment plans contributes to worse health outcomes for Black Americans (Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019). Implicit biases lead to unequal treatment and poorer healthcare outcomes, and research shows that clinicians hold implicit biases that lead to inequitable care, such as the undertreatment of pain and higher rates of limb amputations due to diabetes complications (Ray 2022).

In the education system, disparities in school funding, teacher quality, and disciplinary practices disproportionately affect Black students. Research indicates that awareness of racial bias in disciplinary decisions leads to a significant loss of trust in schools among Black adolescents, creating a “trust gap” by the seventh grade. This loss of trust has measurable, long-term consequences, predicting students’ subsequent disciplinary infractions and even impacting their four-year college enrollment rates (Yeager et al. 2017).

In policing, persistent issues of police brutality, racial profiling, and disproportionate arrests continue to fuel the cycle of distrust (Alexander, 2010; Muhammad 2010). “We find that . . . Blake’s shooting caused substantial reductions in Black respondents’ trust in the police, concentrated among younger residents and criminalized residents, according to (Ben-Menachem and Torrats-Espinosa 2024).” The consequences of this fractured relationship extend beyond individual interactions: after fatal incidents of police use of force, resident calls to 911 declined in majority-Black neighborhoods, signaling a decay in community legitimacy and trust and creating dangerous public safety consequences (Lucero 2025; Lynch and Shaw 2025; Moore 2017).

Toward Racial Healing: What Public Administration Must Do

Racial healing is not a metaphorical concept but a deliberate process that requires intentional action. Public administration must move beyond a focus on “diversity and inclusion” and instead embrace a framework of radical healing, which acknowledges the deep-seated trauma caused by systemic racism (Adames et. al. 2023; French et al. 2023). This approach requires public insti-

tutions to engage in five key practices: collectivism, critical consciousness, radical hope, strength and resistance, and cultural authenticity.

1. **Collectivism** involves a shift from an individualistic to a communal focus. Public administrators must recognize that the harm inflicted on one African American citizen is a harm to the entire community (Berry-James and Berry-James 2023; McNeil-Young et al. 2023). This means moving beyond a model of individual complaint resolution and instead engaging with communities. Community-based participatory research, for instance, allows public agencies to collaborate with community members to identify problems and co-create solutions (Adames et. al. 2023; McNeil-Young et al. 2023). This approach not only builds trust but also ensures that interventions are culturally relevant and effective. In Chicago, for example, a youth-led program worked with the police department to develop a more equitable community policing strategy, demonstrating that when public agencies cede some power and authority to the community, it can lead to more legitimate and effective outcomes (Adames et. al., 2023; Berry-James and Berry-James, 2023).
2. **Critical consciousness** requires public administrators to engage in deep and ongoing self-reflection about their own biases and the historical role of their institutions in perpetuating injustice (Bussey et al. 2024; Mosley et. al. 2021). This is not about guilt but about a clear-eyed understanding of how the past informs the present. It involves acknowledging that public administration has been a tool of oppression and committing to a new path. Training in racial literacy and anti-racism is a crucial component of this, but it must be more than a one-time workshop. It must be an ongoing process of professional development and organizational culture change (Taylor et al. 2022). For example, police departments that have successfully reduced the use of force have often done so by implementing continuous, scenario-based training that forces officers to confront their implicit biases and rely on de-escalation tactics (Bussey et al. 2024; Mosley et al. 2021; Taylor et al. 2022).
3. **Radical hope** is the belief that a more just and equitable future is possible, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Public administrators must be a source of this hope, not just by acknowledging problems, but by demonstrating a genuine commitment to solving them (Edmond 2017; Fix and Cooper 2024). This requires moving beyond

performative gestures and engaging in authentic dialogue with Black communities. It means providing tangible resources, investing in community-led initiatives, and celebrating progress, however small (Fix and Cooper 2024; French et al. 2023). The opening of a new, state-of-the-art public library or community center in a historically under-resourced neighborhood, for example, can be a powerful symbol of a renewed commitment to equity and can serve as a catalyst for future collaboration (Edmond 2023; Fix and Cooper, 2024; French et al. 2023).

4. Strength and resistance honor the historical and ongoing resilience of African American communities. Public administration must not approach these communities as broken or in need of saving (Bergman et al. 2023; Lowery 2022). Instead, they must recognize and leverage the existing strengths, social networks, and cultural assets that have allowed Black communities to survive and thrive despite centuries of oppression (Spencer 2007). This means shifting from a deficit-based model to an asset-based one, where public agencies see themselves not as the sole problem-solvers but as partners in a collaborative effort (Rhoden-Neita et al. 2023). For instance, public health agencies working to address health disparities should not just focus on illness but should also support community-based wellness initiatives, such as local food co-ops or urban gardens.

5. Cultural authenticity is the final, crucial anchor. It requires public institutions to engage with Black communities in ways that are respectful of their culture, language, and lived experiences. This means ensuring that public-facing staff reflect the communities they serve, that communication is culturally competent, and that policies are designed with the unique needs and perspectives of African Americans in mind. It is about creating a space where African Americans do not have to abandon their identity to be served by the public sector (Elias, Holmes, and D'Agostino 2025; Sellers et al. 1998). A city planning department, for example, should not just hold a meeting in a community center but should work with community leaders to design a process that is culturally appropriate, perhaps incorporating a community meal or a storytelling session to facilitate dialogue (Gearin and Hurt 2024; Lansing, Romero, and Siantz 2023).

The work of racial healing in public administration is not a quick fix; it is a long-term commitment. It requires a fundamental rethinking of what it means to be a public servant. It is about moving from a role of control

and enforcement to one of partnership and collaboration (DiPetrillo et al. 2024). It is about building a public sector that is not just efficient and effective but is also just and equitable. This transformation is essential not only for the well-being of African American communities but also for the continued legitimacy of our democratic institutions (Zeraatpisheh and Aggarwal 2025).

Call to Action: Legitimacy Through Justice

Trust cannot be demanded—it must be earned. Public institutions must demonstrate a commitment to racial healing through action, not rhetoric. This includes acknowledging past harms, investing in community partnerships, and embedding equity into every facet of governance (Moloney and Lewis, 2023). The legitimacy of public administration depends on its ability to serve all communities fairly. For Black Americans, this means dismantling barriers and building systems that reflect their lived experiences and aspirations.

Public administrators have a unique opportunity to act as catalysts for change. This involves listening to community members, admitting institutional failures, and being willing to cede power and control to those who have been historically marginalized. It requires a fundamental departure from such a mindset to one demanding community engagement and management (Castellani 2025; Kenyon and Gordon 2009). This is a difficult but necessary journey toward building truly legitimate and trusted public institutions. The principles of radical healing (French et al. 2023) provide a critical framework for this transformation, emphasizing the need for authentic engagement and a commitment to justice.

For public administrators, this means moving beyond a reliance on traditional, top-down bureaucratic models. It involves a willingness to engage in difficult conversations about race and power, and to recognize that the very structures of public institutions have often been sources of harm (McGee and Stovall 2015). This requires a new kind of leadership, one that is not afraid to confront historical complicity and work with communities to design solutions that are both effective and just. For example, instead of simply deploying more police to high-crime areas, a trauma-informed approach would involve partnerships with mental health professionals and community leaders to address the root causes of violence and distrust (Johnson-Lawrence et al. 2024; Thompson and Henderson 2025). This approach rec-

ognizes that communities are not just passive recipients of services but are active agents in their own well-being.

Ultimately, the goal is to create institutions that are not just *impartial* but are actively *anti-racist*. This means going beyond treating all people the same and instead implementing policies that actively counteract the effects of historical and systemic racism. The legitimacy of public administration in a diverse society depends on its ability to demonstrate, through concrete action, that it is committed to justice for all (Coupet 2023; Moloney and Lewis 2023). As institutions begin to engage in these restorative practices, they can begin to repair the fractured relationships and build a foundation of trust that is resilient and authentic. This is the only path forward for a truly equitable and functional public sector.

Conclusion

Rebuilding trust in public institutions is a moral and strategic imperative. It is the bedrock upon which an equitable society is built. Racial healing offers a pathway to restore legitimacy, promote justice, and transform public administration by addressing the deep-seated historical and contemporary harms that have fractured relationships between Black communities and the state. As the nation grapples with its racial legacy, public administrators must lead with courage, empathy, and vision, recognizing that their actions today will shape the public's perception for generations to come.

This work requires a fundamental shift in institutional culture. Instead of a defensive posture that seeks to protect the status quo, administrators must adopt a posture of humility, accountability, and genuine partnership. This means actively engaging with communities, listening to their experiences, and admitting institutional failures. It requires a willingness to cede power and control to those who have been historically marginalized, allowing them to co-design the systems that serve them. This is not just a matter of improving public relations but of fundamentally reimagining public administration as a vehicle for restorative justice. By embedding equity into every policy and practice—from budgeting and resource allocation to service delivery and community engagement—institutions can begin to build systems that reflect the lived experiences and aspirations of Black Americans. The journey toward building truly legitimate and trusted public institutions is difficult, but it is the only path forward for a just and equitable society.

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Mark McKinney (mckinney.mark@spscollege.edu) serves as the Dean of the College of Computer & IT at St. Petersburg College, bringing over two decades of experience in academic leadership and technology integration. He is recognized for his strategic vision in advancing digital learning environments and fostering innovative curriculum development that aligns with industry standards. Mark is a passionate advocate for equity-focused initiatives, working to expand access to technology education for underrepresented communities. His leadership has been instrumental in building partnerships with local and national organizations to support workforce development and inclusive excellence. With a commitment to student success and institutional transformation, Mark continues to lead efforts that bridge the gap between education and emerging technologies, preparing learners for the future of work.