

Boosts and Blocks Timeline Activity

The Roots of the Racial Wealth Divide in the U.S.

Trainer's Guide

OVERVIEW:

This activity gives participants an opportunity to review the impact of various laws, policies, events, and trends on the accumulation of wealth among various racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Participants reflect on and share their own family and ancestral stories, placing them on a historical timeline from colonial times to the present.

TRAINER'S GOALS:

Explore the history of racial wealth inequality in the U.S.

Help participants connect their families' stories to the larger history of wealth and inequality.

Help participants grapple with the long history of racialized policies that boosted opportunities for white people while blocking wealth accumulation for other groups.

PREPARATION:

This activity works best with a printed timeline approximately 4.5 wide by 7 feet long that is attached on the wall lengthwise prior to the start of the workshop. The full large-format version of the timeline can be downloaded for free at [www.faireconomy.org/boostsandblocks] and sent to a print shop. Printing in color is best.

Also have on hand a few pads of sticky notes and several Sharpie-type markers.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Ask the participants to take a few minutes to think about their family and ancestral history.

Talking Point:

We recognize that some people may not know a lot of details about their family's history or they may know only their parents' or grandparents' stories. Other people – particularly recent immigrants – have a relatively short family history in the U.S. or histories that are unknown to some extent. We also want to acknowledge that aspects of one's family history may be particularly painful to share (stories of slavery and other forms of oppression or persecution, for example). This is fine. We only ask people to reveal what they are comfortable sharing.

2. Distribute sticky notes to all, and ask participants to take one or two. Then ask pairs of participants to share with each other, to the best of their knowledge, the story of why, when, and how the first member of their family came to the U.S. Pose questions that will help the participants share the parts of their family histories that relate to racial wealth inequality. Give each member of the pairs a couple of minutes to tell their stories.

3. After 5-6 minutes, ask the participants to take a marker and write the name of this ancestor or family member on a sticky note and affix it in the appropriate decade on the Timeline.

Ask participants to look at the Timeline, sharing what they know about particular events, laws, or trends, and what they imagine might be their significance (economically) for their families and their communities. [It is important that the facilitators familiarize themselves as much as possible with the items on the Timeline. It is also desirable to draw from local histories and current events to make the Timeline more relevant.]

Talking Points:

It is very important to examine history when we try to figure out why things are the way they are today. History helps us understand that the way that things are today is not "natural," the way they have to be, or pre-ordained. By examining our history, we learn that economic, political, and cultural forces have made things what they are today. When we examine history we should pay close attention to the fundamental role that government policies played in shaping the distribution of wealth, especially the racial wealth divide.

When we examine history we must pay close attention to the role that government policies played in creating and reinforcing inequality, especially racial wealth inequality.

When we study our history we must also try to learn about the social movements that helped make possible the "positive" things we enjoy today. For example, history reminds us that the 8 hour work day was something that everyday people organized to make possible. Our history reminds us that people organizing across race, class, gender, and other differences with respect can bring about positive social transformation.

Racialized groups have been impacted by public policies created specifically to limit their rights as human beings and as citizens. These discriminatory public policies have often systematically blocked wealth accumulation while opening opportunities for white people.

Even so-called "color blind" policies have had racialized outcomes. For example, although Black people who had served in the U.S. military during World War II were entitled to free college education thanks to the GI Bill, many universities systematically blocked Black people, other people of color, and women from becoming students. It is important that we ask not only whether there is equality of opportunity but whether there is equality of condition and equality of outcome.

If we want to understand why there is an enormous racial wealth gap we must examine the numerous government policies that provided opportunities for whites to accumulate (not in equitable fashion) while simultaneously blocking racialized people from those same opportunities.