We should be talking about class in America as much as race issues

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Martin Luther King Jr's message was also about helping the poor and those being left behind in the US economy

• [Civil rights stories: "Such struggles are never over"](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/28/march-on-washington-anniversary-civil-rights)

 America's long-term unemployed. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

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Much has been said about the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's dream speech, and it has been [said very eloquently](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/28/martin-luther-king-barack-obama). But as I re-read King's addresses, I can't help but think that if he were alive today, he would be preaching and organizing first and foremost about income inequality.

To be that another way, he would be talking about class in America as much as he would about race.

I don't mean to belittle the racial problems that remain in the US. From the Trayvon Martin case to the [mocking of the African-American man](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/09/charles-ramsey-interview-hero-cleveland-race)who saved the kidnapped girls in Cleveland to sick jokes about President Obama, racial prejudices are all too often on display. We like to say that every generation gets more colorblind, but a cursory glance of Twitter calls that into question. There have been topics trending such as [#blackpeopleactivites versus #whitepeopleactivities](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/10/us-still-has-long-way-to-go-to-be-post-racial) and [#blackpeoplehobbies versus #whitepeoplehobbies](http://www.dailydot.com/society/blackpeoplehobbies-whitepeoplehobbies-twitter/) that devolve into the worst of racial stereotyping. For all our talk as a nation about our great melting pot, we're too often clinging to the sides of the bowl instead of mixing.

But when you look at the data, the most pernicious problem in society today is the haves and have nots. Race plays a factor, but middle class blacks live fairly similar lives to middle class whites. Middle class blacks and whites work together. Their children have playdates and go to same prep schools and colleges. What you are far less likely to see is a lower income children of any race mixing with a middle or upper income child.

If you are born in poverty in America, you are likely to stay there. A recent [Harvard and University of California-Berkley](http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/) study looked at whether America is really the "land of opportunity" by examining how often children born into families in the bottom fifth of the income scale make it the top fifth. Not surprisingly, the answer is rarely. In the most economically mobile cities in America, Salt Lake and San Francisco, barely more than 1 in 10 children will really escape poverty. In some places like Atlanta, it's only 1 in 25.

Where you are born predicts a lot about your life – the kind of schools you attend, the opportunities you have and the type of life you are likely to lead.

In his 1963 dream speech, King talked about more than freedom. He talked about the need for economic opportunities:

*We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.*

He hit that topic again and again. In his final big sermon [in 1968 at the National Cathedral in Washington DC](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/remaining_awake_through_a_great_revolution/), he said:

*If a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness. He merely exists.*

There's been a lot of "existing" lately in the US. It's been pointed out often that the gains of the past two decades went to almost exclusively to the richest Americans. The country didn't just leave the poor behind, it left about everyone behind. The incomes of the top 1% [grew almost 60% since 1993](http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/saez-UStopincomes-2011.pdf) (pdf), while the incomes of *everyone else*grew less than 6%.

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Race is [a factor](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/50-years-after-the-march-the-economic-racial-gap-persists/2013/08/27/9081f012-0e66-11e3-8cdd-bcdc09410972_story.html%29) in poverty. Blacks, Latinos and families headed by single mothers are far more likely to earn lower wages than average and [live below the poverty line](http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411956_transitioningpoverty.pdf). It's an ever bleaker picture when we consider "household wealth", which takes into account whether a family owns a house, has a retirement account and any other investments. As the [Urban Institute reports](http://www.urban.org/publications/412802.html): "In 2010, whites on average had two times the income of blacks and Hispanics, but six times the wealth."

Education is often touted as the way out of poverty, but American students mostly attend neighborhood public schools that are funded heavily by property taxes, so if you're born into a low-income area, your school is often subpar. According to[America's Promise Alliance](http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx), a quarter of black students attend "drop out factories", high schools where close to half (or more) of the students aren't graduating in four years. And numerous studies document how even high-achieving poor students[rarely apply to top colleges](http://siepr.stanford.edu/?q=/system/files/shared/pubs/papers/12-014paper.pdf).

For all the gains African-Americans have made from entertainment and sports stars to heading companies and Ivy League schools to the White House, there is clearly a poverty trap that too many are still caught in. But it's a problem that extends to other races as well, and it's the issue [Martin Luther King III stressed in his op-ed](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/martin-luther-king-iii-fifty-years-later-work-still-to-do/2013/08/27/a40b361a-0aa2-11e3-8974-f97ab3b3c677_story.html?hpid=z2) in the Washington Post this week on the unfinished work of his father.

While King is remembered most for his dream speech, he spoke often of the plight of the poor. And that was in era of tremendous growth for Americans across the income spectrums. Imagine what he would think of the disparities today.

Perhaps the most powerful image from the dream speech is when King spoke of his hope that one day, even in Alabama, black and white children "would be able to join hands … as brothers and sisters". Today it seems as far off of a dream for a poor kid of any race to be side by side with kids from the middle class, let alone the wealthiest neighborhoods.