More than a half century after Martin Luther King's death, his work is still unfinished. Sadly, despite his efforts and those of many others, inequality remains a reality along multiple, interrelated dimensions: race, income, and geography. Inequality is not merely economic; it involves differences in health and life expectancy — and in exposure to pollution and the risks of climate change.

As the Washington Post recently reported, "Today, the divide in life expectancy between the nation's poorest and wealthiest communities is dramatically wider than it was in the 1980s." Indeed, "In the early 1980s, people in the poorest communities were 9 percent more likely to die each year, but the gap grew to 49 percent in the past decade and widened to 61 percent when covid struck."

Given the extent of economic inequality, these differences in health outcomes may not be too surprising. The top twenty percent of the income distribution makes about twice as much as the entire rest of the population combined. And the top ten percent of households owns three-quarters of all wealth, compared with the one percent owned by the bottom half of the population. Economists disagree about whether income inequality has grown over the past sixty years or whether we merely remain as unequal as we were in 1962.

In terms of race, the black infant mortality rate is twice as high as the rate for whites. Part of the reason is the income-gap in health, which plays out in the racial context. Black median household income is only 60% that of white households.The wealth gap is much bigger than the income gap, with the typical black household having only the wealth of its white counterpart. Even without other factors, this economic inequality would translate into very unequal health outcomes.

Exposure to pollution is another form of inequality that is tied to income and race. Low-income individual, blacks, and Hispanics are consistently exposed to higher levels of dangerous $PM_{2.5}$ pollution, resulting in more deaths among those groups. Increased mortality is especially pronounced in areas where the black and Hispanic populations are most concentrated. While $PM_{2.5}$ levels declined nationally during the last decade, the rate of decrease was highest in white areas.

Thus, although pollution levels in both predominantly white and predominantly black or Hispanic areas have declined, the relative disparity between them has actually increased. Perhaps most strikingly, one study found a clear connection between redlining decades ago and current levels of air pollution in U.S. cities.

We need to be periodically reminded of the serious implications of inequality, which extend to one’s very health and mortality. Many year’s after King’s death, much remains to. be done.