

Gary Officer, CWI Labs founder & CEO:

My name is Gary Officer, founder and CEO of CWI Labs. Welcome to the CWI Labs Equitable Recovery series. Our guest today is Malcom Glenn, our Senior Fellow in residence. Our special guest moderator for this series is Ramona Schindelheim, a nationally recognized and respected journalist. Today Ramona is responsible for the editorial content of WorkingNation. Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Gary. And welcome Malcom to the conversation. Malcom Glenn is a Senior Fellow at CWI Labs and the Director of Public Affairs at Better.com. Previously, he worked for Uber and for Google. And in all of his roles, he has been working to improve the outcomes for underserved communities. You could read more about Malcom at malcomglenn.com. Malcom, thank you for joining us.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Thank you, Ramona. It's great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'd like to start the conversation by talking about the impact COVID-19 has had on communities of color. Right now we have 10 million people out of work looking for work. We have 12 million people collecting unemployment insurance, and this is a really hard time. And even before now, the communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by joblessness. How are they being impacted right now? Is that still the trend?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Well Ramona, unfortunately it is the trend. And I think the reality of this situation is it didn't have to be this way. COVID-19 does not impact black people in a vacuum any differently than it impacts anyone else. This is a respiratory disease that has similar impacts on all different types of people. But the challenge for the black community and other communities is that black people are disproportionately likely because of systemic issues of racism that have been going on for generations to be overweight, to have underlying health conditions, to be essential workers. These are all attributes that contribute to the damaging impact of COVID-19, both from a physical impact, as well as an economic impact.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And so the challenge for black families and black households were significant before COVID. But what COVID has really done is that it has exacerbated all of those issues. So black people were less likely to own their homes. Black people were more likely to be living paycheck to paycheck. Black people were more likely to have underlying health conditions that they needed to have covered by their health insurance. COVID has made all of those things worse.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And so I think it's really not surprising that in addition to the impact of COVID-19 from a public health and an economic perspective, we've seen this confluence of a really existential interrogation and questioning of the role that racism plays in American society because racism has exacerbated COVID. And so we're having these conversations concurrently because in fact, they are inextricably linked. And I think as the pandemic rages on, you're going to continue to see that disproportionate impact on black

families. Particularly if we don't look to and receive from various levels of government, the requisite interventions that are necessary to make this horrible situation easier for black families.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

So it was bad before the pandemic. The pandemic has really just exposed all of the underlying challenges that come with being a black family are a member of the black community in the United States of America.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's a lot to unpack in there. Why is it that black workers would be having a more difficult time finding work?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

I suppose my response to that question would be how much time do we have? Because if you really want to get to the foundational reason, it goes back 400 years to slavery. And the fact that we built a country based on a system where we fundamentally undervalued the existence of black people. It started literally as black people being considered three fifths of people. It continued over the course of slavery. Even after slavery ended, there was a period of reconstruction. And then what followed reconstruction was Jim Crow.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And over the course of the entire second half of the 19th and 20th century, you had these massive movements of black people looking for basic rights in terms of voting, in terms of civil rights, in terms of being able to eat at integrated lunch counters. And the reality of all of that fighting was in the aftermath of government being able to post civil rights, institute explicit forms of racism, they went to more implicit forms. And so you had things like red lining, which meant that governments and private enterprises were able to systemically exclude black people from buying property or participating in the economy, which meant that when a family that was able to buy a home, passes that family on to the next generation in their family. They're able to build this extended intergenerational wealth, that to many degrees black people have been left out of.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And so when it comes time to look for jobs, when it comes time to live in certain neighborhoods, the number of options that black people have are significantly restricted because of countless generations long systemic issues of segregation and discrimination. And so black people have access to fewer jobs because of where they live. Black people have access to fewer jobs because of being systemically left out of the education system. Black people have access to fewer jobs because many job hirers simply are less willing to take black people on for jobs that they're qualified for.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Again, this is all stuff that happened in the hundreds of years before we got to COVID-19, and then COVID-19 comes along and really just lays bare all of these issues. It exacerbates these foundational inequities that have always existed. And to whatever degree, we felt like we were in the process of mitigating some of those gaps around income, home ownership, access to equitable and sustainable work. Those gaps have actually become wider in the last seven months as a result of this pandemic. And

it's not just black families, it's black families, brown families. It's families with disabilities. There are a whole host of folks who just have a more challenging shot at getting equitable and sustainable work than many of their counterparts do.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah. The COVID-19 really exposed that there's more than one America out there. We have an image that we have gotten beyond some of this, except probably for the people who are living it. The black families, the people of color that do find they have still those difficult times finding jobs in their own communities probably. Let's talk a little bit about the type of jobs that blacks generally have. I saw a number that 27% of the people who are in jobs that are at risk during COVID-19 are being held by blacks.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Yes, black families are more likely to occupy the jobs that require them to go out into the world and expose themselves to other people. And by extension, the risk of COVID-19. One of my former roles was leading policy for accessibility in underserved communities at Uber. And we used to look at the data all the time to determine what our driver population at Uber looked like. And a large proportion of the drivers, bigger than any other proportion, were black and brown folks.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And when the pandemic hit, I think that was a real shock to their ability to make their money. Of course, people were less likely to want to get in a car with a stranger, particularly before we were aware of the value proposition of masks and people weren't wearing them. This was a real challenge for them. I think black workers have a real challenge in the context of the types of jobs they're most likely to occupy, but the real group that's finding this experience challenging is older black workers. Older black workers make up a disproportionate part of what we call the gig economy.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

In fact, almost half of Uber and Lyft drivers in the United States are 50 and older. For a lot of folks, this was a really valuable opportunity for them to make money on their own time, to be able to have the flexibility to work whenever they needed to work. It's not to say they can't do that now, but the risk factors involved with doing that now are, of course, orders of magnitude greater than they were before COVID. And so, so many people had their work related to servicing some other people. And we're seeing this disparity in what types of work exists for other types of people.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

We look so much at the unemployment rate and it's to some degree, a valuable indicator of how we're doing as an economic society. But what we don't look at as much is the quality of the jobs within that. The ability to have flexibility around those jobs. So many of these older black workers are now forced to transition into a situation where they have to seek work that is remote, that requires an internet connection and they can do from home. Older black folks are disproportionately likely not to have access to high speed internet at home. They're disproportionately likely to not have access to the devices that can sustain a Zoom call or a Google Hangout call. Notwithstanding, perhaps not even having the skills to perform some of the duties that are required for some of these roles.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

So there was definitely at the very least a dichotomy of different types of jobs that exist for different types of people in this country. And what we've seen is particularly for black families, the types of jobs that they were more likely to have before the pandemic are more likely to be the types of jobs that they're either not going to be able to do now, or at the very least are going to have to do with a significantly elevated risk of going out in the world and potentially contracting COVID. And then by extension, potentially bringing that virus back to their families and spreading it within their communities, which is part of the reason you've seen more black people than we are as a proportion of the population coming down with the virus.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how do we close this gap? How do we get black workers prepared for the jobs of the future? With everything leading toward digital, digital knowledge, digital skills. How do we as a society make sure that people are not left out?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Well, I think there are a couple of things that we can do to help improve the transition to a more digital first future, particularly for the people who have historically been left behind by some of these transitions. One of them is holding companies to account around their ability to give out devices and services that offer that digital skillset. One of the real challenges of the COVID pandemic has been the fact that when the transition initially happened in March, a lot of people were stuck at home and they didn't have the devices in order to continue whatever they were doing. Whether it was work or school or supporting a family member's work or school. And I've been really heartened to see to the degree to which as the pandemic has raged on, more companies have been thoughtful around the things that they can do.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

So I know in a number of places, companies like... Another one of my former employers Google, have donated Chromebooks to certain school districts in order to make sure that kids, particularly those who qualify for free and reduced lunch actually have access to the devices that they need in order to get their virtual schooling. Because I think there are multiple parts of this conversation. There's of course, the fact that things are transitioning into a digital first nature and there's creating the systems and the infrastructure to support that. But people need access to the basic services in order to get that. So you need the devices, you need high speed internet access. And to the degree that we can start to pinpoint the communities that don't have that now. Get them those devices and services that they need today, and will help the continued transition be a whole lot easier for those kids.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah. The number is I believe 18 million homes, individuals don't have broadband access. 14 million of those are actually in urban communities. We think a lot about no broadband in the rural areas, but there's 14 million people in urban communities that don't have them. So if you don't have a laptop to begin with, you can't do your homework. You can't apply for a job. But if you don't have broadband, you're not going to be able to connect anyway. So I think that's... I've heard people describe that as the new civil right, to make sure everybody has that access because it's going to be even more important in the future.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So when we talk about jobs, we talk about local and a lot of jobs are local. So how do we get the government and business to work together in local communities to make sure that people have the training they need for those local jobs?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Well, I think that's actually a real opportunity because in a lot of ways, the government systems that we've been able to rely on most in the context of a crisis like the pandemic, have been local governments. And I think part of that is because Mayors and Councils and people who are of the community, oftentimes the relatively small community where they live and work, understand the pain points of the people in that community. They've been impacted by this pandemic as well.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And so when the people are of the community, when the people have a better sense of the ramifications for their community, when the people are less likely to play politics, I think that gives them a real opportunity to start to fill some of these gaps. Again, at the very least in the short term. The other challenge that they have is these massive shortfalls as a result of spending money on basic goods and services over the course of the pandemic. So some of these places that have really robust testing for COVID are also facing really significant shortfalls in order to pay for the things that they're going to need to pay for as time goes on.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And how do we make sure that there's equal access for education? Because I think that's been a barrier too. And a lot of times colleges you go to, you make connections, you make friends. And a lot of jobs, people hire people they know. That opportunity that is out there created by that community of college and university. So how do you make sure there's equal opportunity for black community to get into these schools?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

There are tons and tons of exceptionally qualified black people graduating from high school, graduating from college every year. And the reality is it's less about educational attainment and it's more about the private sector broadening their view of where they look for talent. Because I know from some of my experiences, both in the higher education sector and then when I transitioned over to the workforce, oftentimes employers are looking at a really myopic group of colleges and universities from which they recruit. And you hear so much from folks in the private sector about the so-called pipeline problem. This what I believe, patently false notion that part of the reason so many of these private institutions lack diversity is because there is not a sufficient pipeline of black skilled workers in the context of the fields that these people are trying to find jobs for. That's just not true.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Now, there may not be as many black workers at the five universities where these institutions usually recruit, but if you broaden the pool. You make recruiting at historically black colleges and universities a point of emphasis, you're actually going to find that there are tons and tons of really talented people all

around the university sector. I think geographic diversity is another really significant part of this. When I used to work in Silicon Valley, I was struck by the degree to which so many of the employers there were so focused on only recruiting people who are willing to move to the Bay Area. Well, the reality is I lived in San Francisco. There are not a lot of black people in San Francisco, and it's not a great incentive to ask black people to move oftentimes across the country to a place where they're not going to see a great deal of representation of people that look like them.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Now, this could perhaps be one of the real value propositions in the midst of what is really a nightmare situation of the COVID pandemic. We're realizing the degree to which employers see that productivity can continue if we're working remotely. It doesn't matter so much that you live in a specific space if you're able to log on every day and get your work done. And so my hope is that as time goes on and particularly as we emerge from the pandemic, employers will recognize, "Hey, listen. I don't have to tell these folks who are super talented and are going to be a super valuable asset to the company. I don't have to ask them to move across the country. I can in fact, hire them and have them prosper wherever they are."

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

I think that's going to make a meaningful difference on the diversity of some of these institutions, but you have to do it in tandem, as you mentioned Ramona, with the educational component as well. Making sure that folks have access to the education they need, and then making sure as recruiting efforts take place, particularly in the private sector, they're targeting a broad swath of the university population because the talent is evenly distributed, but the opportunity is not.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's also this movement through some companies, including Google I believe, that degrees are not as important as skills. So finding ways to test for what the skills somebody might have and no matter where they attained it is, I think is emerging as an important trend as well. And back to the idea that people can work remotely. Again, it goes down to do they have access to the equipment and the broadband?

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

And Ramona, I think that's exactly right. I think there's a really important question around infrastructure, right? Not just are the devices there, but not just is the... Can you afford the service, but is there the fundamental internet infrastructure in place if you live, say in a rural community to support your ability to work from home. You're talented, you have access to the resources. But is the underlying infrastructure there. It's been a conversation in pre-COVID circles, but of course it's been exacerbated like so many other things as we become so much more reliant on that internet infrastructure as a means of doing just basic things in the course of our lives.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think the other infrastructure issue there too is transportation. Public transportation is a very key component of that, especially for lower income folks.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

One of the most challenging parts of the beginning of the pandemic was how are these essential workers, how are these service workers going to get to their jobs? It is really challenging to ask a person to make a choice between either continuing to keep their job and feed their families or in the midst of a pandemic that we haven't seen in a century to get on to a densely packed tube for an extended period of time, sharing the air with a bunch of strangers. And that's really the option that so many people have. It's do I continue to take my job? And if the answer is, yes. I do so at pretty significant risk to myself.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Now, the good part of this is as the pandemic has waged on, what we've seen is that we haven't seen these so-called super spreader events taking place on public transportation. We've looked at data in places like New York, as well as outside of the United States. I've seen a recent study from the country of Spain. And what we've seen is that particularly when you have widespread mask usage and you have that in both of the places that I just mentioned, public transportation is relatively safe. And so public transportation was, I think is, and certainly will continue to be a real linchpin of success for people who live in low income areas.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Malcom, I'm going to give you the last word on that. So thank you so much for joining us. I really appreciate it.

Malcom Glenn, 2020 CWI Labs Senior Fellow:

Thank you, Ramona. I really appreciate the conversation.

Gary Officer:

Thank you, Ramona and Malcom. And thank you for joining our discussion today. I invite you to view other episodes of an equitable recovery and to browse the competitive library of articles, podcasts, and commentaries at both cwilabs.org and workingnation.com.