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“Racism in Death”

The idiocy of racism and discrimination is no more apparent than at birth and death. At birth, at least physically and *ceteris paribus*, Black and White infants have the same life prospects. At death, behind a veil of ignorance concerning the mystery of death itself, there is no distinction between Black and White deceased. Black and White deceased can be no more or no less dead than the other. Death is the great equalizer.

Yet, just as the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. signaled that “11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America,” preliminary research and anecdotal evidence reveal that the funeral/mortuary services industry remains highly segregated. Cultural hysteresis has ensured that services for the bodies of deceased Blacks are usually provided by Black funeral directors, while services for the bodies of deceased Whites are usually provided by White funeral directors. This is particularly true for certain regions of the nation.

The National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association (NFDMA)—a predominantly Black organization—has no data on the extent to which there is crossover in the provision of funeral/mortuary services; i.e., Black funeral directors providing services for White deceased. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA)—a

predominantly White organization—indicates that, while about 50 percent of its membership provides services for Black deceased, no data are available on the volume of those services; i.e., information about the propensity of Blacks to utilize the services of White funeral directors.

No doubt there are a plethora of reasons why there is constrained crossover in the consumption and provision of Black versus White funeral/mortuary services. As economists, we ask whether the uptake of these services is driven purely by economics (selecting a service provider based on price and on the dimensions and quality of service); location (selecting a service provider based on ease of availability); culture (selecting a service provider based on culturally related knowledge and skill); racism (selecting a service provider based on race); or a range of other factors. Keep in mind that all funeral/mortuary service providers are held to an identical standard by state regulators.

Preliminary research and anecdotal evidence hint that Black Americans are slowly increasing our consumption of funeral/mortuary services from White firms largely due to purely economic and location factors. However, White Americans’ use of Black firms’ funeral/mortuary services is progressing at a snail’s pace.

Relatedly, the following important questions come to mind concerning Black funeral/mortuary service firms, which have a very rich history as a source of prestige, wealth, income, and employment in Black areas of influence:

- To what extent is the ownership of Black funeral/mortuary service firms being lost to Whites or to White-owned conglomerates?
- Where they exist, is there too much competition among Black-owned funeral/mortuary service firms?
- When setting price, do Black funeral/mortuary service firms over-exploit Black Americans' proclivity to utilize their services?
- Why do White Americans not consume more funeral/mortuary services from Black firms?

In a nation reeling from Black-White income and wealth inequality and a need for more even treatment of Black and White Americans in educational, health, financial, and criminal justice systems (just to name a few), there may be no more of an iconic symbol of division and racial separation today than how Black and White Americans lay their dead to rest. Clearly, the door is open to interested scholars to perform research that explains this phenomenon more completely. However, given the history of the industry and Black and White Americans' use of it, racism may be an important factor in accounting for current outcomes.

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07/26/21

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