Statement on Racist Violence and Social Exclusion
By the Faculty and Chair of the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Black Lives Matter. We declare and affirm this truth in the face of any verbal or material attempt to deny it. The current tragedies and structures of violence, exclusion and exploitation of Black people were made by human actors. They date back to colonial times and slavery but persist to today. Teaching and research in the economics profession have often served to legitimate such structures by portraying them as the outcome of the free and fair play of the market. The UMass Economics Department has a long tradition of research dedicated to uncovering structures of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and violence. This tradition must be rethought and adapted to place racial injustice at the center, as a dimension that should not be overlooked.

Only by recognizing structural oppression, exclusion, and violence can we see how punitive policing, dysfunctional health care, pollution and environmental injustice, unemployment and discrimination, enforced segregation, underfunded public schools, and inadequate housing have created the conditions for Covid-19 to run rampant through communities of color. The economic crisis tears livelihoods away from many Black people while the pandemic exposes many other Black people to the front lines of infection. At the same time, the structural effects of racism continue to allow police officers to commit murders -- of George Floyd in Minneapolis, of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and of many others -- or to act in complicity with the violence of other officers. They permit racist intimidation and violence to steal human life, as of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, and to deny human rights and access to public spaces, as of Chris Cooper in New York City. And they enable violent crackdowns on peaceful protest.

For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, a police officer kneeled on George Floyd’s neck and took his life, while his colleagues watched. This scene is symptomatic of how institutionalized racism and complacent silence by individuals and institutions have held Black people in oppression and bondage for centuries. To honor the lives of George Floyd and the countless other Black people who, before him, lost their lives due to police brutality and institutionalized injustice in this country, the economics profession must commit to no longer stand by and watch while its members from the Black community and other underrepresented minorities suffer from discrimination, exclusion, disrespect, and other forms of injustice. While the economics profession cannot control the police and the justice system, it has full control over how much and what type of attention it focuses upon Black and Brown communities and those of other underrepresented minorities.

It is commendable that the economics profession is finally recognizing its failure to establish a fair system for all its member-economists. A few members of the profession’s current leadership have acknowledged greater inclusion of professionals from underrepresented groups would enhance the effectiveness of research and policy in economics. It is essential the profession translates this recognition into true reforms that
dismantle the walls of exclusion, discrimination and injustice. In particular, the profession needs to commit to explicitly expand educational and professional opportunities for Black and Brown people, and to promote and fund research on structural oppression and discrimination against Black people and other underrepresented minorities.

Social science, especially economics, has special capacity, and therefore special responsibility, to identify, express, and work towards transcending the profound and pervasive social exclusion of Black people in America. A pluralistic approach to economics reveals the vicious cycle that, contrary to predictions that rely on competitive-market models as the best way to understand and to organize economic life, shows no sign of abating without organized and committed collective action. Now we need to organize, commit, and act. The Economics Department at UMass Amherst commits to engaging open dialogue on racism, discrimination and exclusion, and to implementing genuine reforms to empower its faculty, graduate and undergraduate student members from underrepresented minorities.

Our students include future managers, executives, entrepreneurs, organizers, public planners, engineers, police officers, teachers, and public administrators, among others. We also train new economists, reproducing our profession. We bear responsibility to break cycles of unequal access to knowledge and skills and to help our students develop ethical principles and practices to uphold fundamental human rights and to respect public service and the public trust.

Recent events suggest we have not done enough. We are ready to rethink what, how, and whom we teach, what and how we do research and how we can overcome structures of exclusion in our own institution. We are ready to redefine the important questions and to dedicate ourselves through our discipline of economics to fostering a more just society. To honor George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others lost to racist violence, we must redouble our efforts to finally end the violence and racism that diminish our society.

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