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## First-Year and Common Reading Guide

# The Sum of Us

What Racism Costs Everyone and  
How We Can Prosper Together

by Heather McGhee

Guide written by Rachael Zafer

### One World

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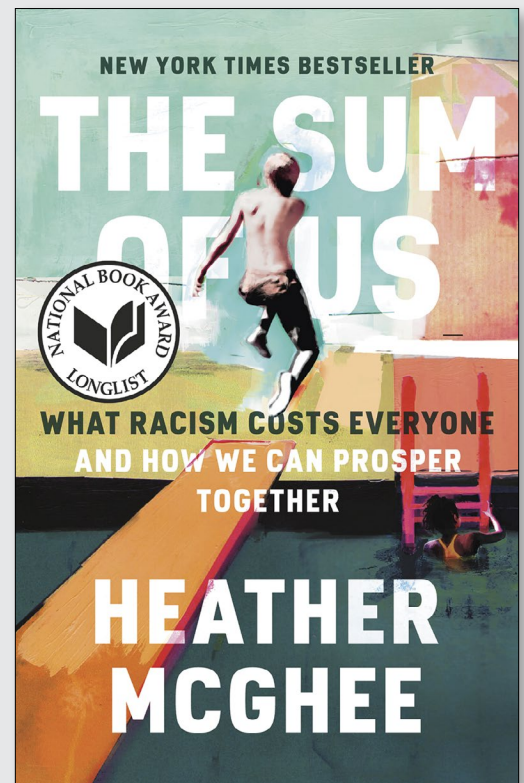
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### ABOUT THE BOOK

Heather McGhee's specialty is the American economy—and the mystery of why it so often fails the American public. From the financial crisis of 2008 to rising student debt to collapsing public infrastructure, she found a root problem: racism in our politics and policymaking. But not just in the most obvious indignities for people of color. Racism has costs for white people, too. It is the common denominator of our most vexing public problems, the core dysfunction of our democracy and constitutive of the spiritual and moral crises that grip us all. But how did this happen? And is there a way out?

McGhee embarks on a deeply personal journey across the country from Maine to Mississippi to California, tallying what we lose when we buy into the zero-sum paradigm—the idea that progress for some of us must come at the expense of others. Along the way, she meets white people who confide in her about losing their homes, their dreams, and their shot at better jobs to the toxic mix of American racism and greed. This is the story of how public goods in this country—from parks and pools to functioning schools—have become private luxuries; of how unions collapsed, wages stagnated, and inequality increased; and of how this country, unique among the world's advanced economies, has thwarted universal healthcare.

But in unlikely places of worship and work, McGhee finds proof of what she calls the Solidarity Dividend: the benefits we gain when people come together across race to accomplish what we simply can't do on our own. *The Sum of Us*



## ABOUT THE BOOK

(CONTINUED)

is not only a brilliant analysis of how we arrived here but also a heartfelt message, delivered with startling empathy, from a Black woman to a multiracial America. It leaves us with a new vision for a future in which we finally realize that life can be more than a zero-sum game.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Heather McGhee** is an expert in economic and social policy. The former president of the inequality-focused think tank Demos, McGhee has drafted legislation, testified before Congress, and contributed regularly to news shows including NBC's *Meet the Press*. She now chairs the board of Color of Change, the nation's largest online racial justice organization. McGhee holds a BA in American studies from Yale University and a JD from the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the zero-sum paradigm? Who currently benefits from the belief that progress for people of color must come at the expense of white people? Where in society do you observe this story being communicated, and by whom? Do you believe that it is possible to build a fairer economy? What are the most promising signs that another way is possible?
2. What are some of the ways that the U.S. economy has been dependent upon systems of exploitation and harm? How did white people, including people in northern states where slavery was abolished, profit from exploitation? How did this history advance the idea that liberation and justice for people of color would require taking something away from white people?
3. How did New Deal public goods like mortgage assistance and Social Security benefits help white people? How did these same benefits exclude Black people? How did these forms of discrimination, sanctioned by the federal government, contribute to the racial wealth gap that exists today? McGhee writes that "wealth is where history shows up in your wallet." How have you seen wealth shape opportunity in your community or your life? What policy interventions are needed to close the racial wealth gap? For resources on understanding the racial wealth gap, go to [tinyurl.com/WealthGapResearch](https://tinyurl.com/WealthGapResearch).
4. Why were so many of America's public swimming pools drained and closed? How did this impact entire communities? What replaced these benefits of public life? What benefits of public life still exist today, and to what extent are they integrated spaces?
5. How did political storytelling about welfare and poverty in the 1980s lead to a decline in support for the government? How did this impact the government's ability to challenge corporate power and concentrated wealth? What widespread stories diminish trust in government today, and what role does race play in those stories?
6. Why has the average public college tuition nearly tripled over the past three decades? How has this impacted student debt? Do you think a college degree should be affordable to everyone, as it used to be? Why or why not? How do you think student debt should be managed?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

(CONTINUED)

7. How has racial prejudice impacted healthcare policies and access to health insurance across the country? How has a shift in healthcare policies and access to insurance had a disproportionate impact on people in rural regions? How have poor white Americans been impacted by this shift?
8. How did redlining promote white homeownership while disadvantaging people of color? How did this impact who received mortgages and who was blocked from purchasing homes? What lessons were you taught about homeownership, at home or in your community? How were those lessons impacted by your identity?
9. Who were the first victims of predatory mortgage lending? Why were subprime loans marketed to existing homeowners who could have qualified for less expensive loans? Before you read the “Ignoring the Canary” chapter, what was your perception of the causes and consequences of the crisis, and what role did race play? Where do you think you learned that story?
10. How have labor unions transformed entire industries? How have unions organized across race and class, and how do anti-union forces benefit from racist beliefs? What tactics have unions utilized to demand things like better pay, benefits, and safety measures?
11. Why does McGhee assert that we have never had a real democracy in America? How has political power been kept in the hands of a narrow white elite, and how have attempts to thwart Black voters created dysfunction across the system?
12. How are white children impacted by living in segregated communities and attending segregated schools? How do students benefit from attending diverse schools? What have your educational experiences up until now been like? Were the schools you attended racially diverse or racially segregated?
13. Why do you think that white people are less likely to rank environmental problems as a pressing concern? How is racial resentment correlated with climate change denialism? How do you think climate change denialism should be addressed?
14. What is the moral conflict that white Americans face today? Why does McGhee assert that we may have reached the moral limit of the zero-sum belief in the U.S.? What was your own experience witnessing the “tidal wave of recognition about the reality of systemic anti-Blackness” in 2020?
15. What is a Solidarity Dividend? What commitments can you make to live your life in solidarity across color, origin, and class? How can you encourage others to make similar commitments?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES****1. Let America Be America Again**

Read the poem “Let America Be America Again” by poet Langston Hughes (referenced on page 241) at [poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again](https://www.poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again). How does Hughes describe the American Dream? What has been your own experience learning about the American Dream? How has your identity shaped how you think about the American Dream today? What do the American ideals of equality, freedom, liberty, and justice mean to you?

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

(CONTINUED)

**2. Just Transition**

The Just Transition Alliance (JTA) seeks a just transition of communities and workers from unsafe workplaces and environments to healthy, viable communities with a sustainable economy. Break students into groups and assign each group one of the six primary principles from the JTA, found at [jtalliance.org/what-is-just-transition](http://jtalliance.org/what-is-just-transition). Have students explore the Alliance's materials and resources and report back on the following questions:

- Why is this principle important? How does the JTA work to actualize this principle?
- What policy demands is the JTA making in support of this principle?
- What challenges do you think the JTA is facing as it works to actualize this principle? How can these challenges be overcome?
- What would actualization of this principle look like? How would it impact you and your community?

**3. The Hard History of American Slavery**

The Southern Poverty Law Center surveyed high school seniors and social studies teachers across the country and found that U.S. schools are failing to teach the hard history of African enslavement (referenced on page 245). Have students test their own knowledge by taking either the short six-question quiz at [tinyurl.com/SPLCQuiz](http://tinyurl.com/SPLCQuiz) or the full 45-question quiz at [tinyurl.com/SPLCFullQuiz](http://tinyurl.com/SPLCFullQuiz) and report back on their results. What questions did students answer incorrectly? What answers were students surprised by? Was the quiz harder or easier than expected? Have a conversation about existing resources and actions students can take to deepen their knowledge of this history.

**4. Debate the CEO-to-Worker Pay Gap**

Break students into two groups. Group one will defend the perspective that both CEOs and workers make an appropriate wage. Group two will argue that there should not be an enormous pay gap between CEOs and workers. Have each group read the latest Economic Policy Institute report entitled, "CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,322% since 1978" at [tinyurl.com/CEOPayReport](http://tinyurl.com/CEOPayReport). Students should then respond to the following questions:

- How does CEO pay contribute to rising inequality?
- What economic impacts would there be if CEOs were paid less and/or taxed more?
- How should shareholders be involved in making decisions about compensation?
- Is there a role for workers in making these decisions?
- Are the racial and gender disparities in the corporate executive ranks reasons to reform CEO pay? (According to *Fortune*, as of 2017 white men accounted for 72 percent of corporate leadership at the Fortune 500 companies that disclosed detailed demographic information about employees.)

## RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

**1. Letter to the Editor**

Choose an economic issue impacting your local community that could be solved or improved by a Solidarity Dividend. Research possible solutions and select one that you feel passionate about. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper that makes the case for change in your community and the need for a Solidarity Dividend. For tips on how to write a successful letter to the editor, visit [indivisible.org/resource/write-letters-editor-really-get-attention](https://indivisible.org/resource/write-letters-editor-really-get-attention).

**2. Racism Drained the Pool**

Select one of the closed pools that McGhee references in chapter 2: the Oak Park pool in Montgomery, Alabama; the Audubon Pool in New Orleans, Louisiana; or the Fairground Park pool in St. Louis, Missouri. Research the history of this location and the surrounding town's history of racial hatred. What issues is the town facing today? What kinds of cross-racial organizing exist in this geographic location and what changes are organizers fighting for? What exists in the former location of the closed pool?

**3. Race and COVID-19**

Learn more about how the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted and continues to impact people of color. What are some of the ways that governments and corporations failed to protect Black, brown, and Indigenous lives across the country and in your community? Deepen your knowledge of the national response to the pandemic by watching *America's Pandemic*, a three-part documentary from *The Washington Post*: [tinyurl.com/AmericasPandemic](https://tinyurl.com/AmericasPandemic).

**4. Air Quality**

Learn more about the impacts of air pollution on poorer people and people of color around the country and in your community. Learn more about who is at greater risk from air pollution by reading the American Lung Association's descriptions of impacted and vulnerable groups at [www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk](https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk). Check the quality of the air in your region at [www.airnow.gov](https://www.airnow.gov). Compare the air quality in your community with nearby regions that are segregated by race. Are there organizations or groups working to improve the air quality in your region?

**5. Medicaid in Your State**

Who qualifies for Medicaid coverage in your state? What are the income requirements to qualify for coverage? Are working people living at or below the poverty line excluded from coverage? Start by downloading fact sheets about your state created by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities at [www.cbpp.org/medicaid-works-a-state-by-state-look](https://www.cbpp.org/medicaid-works-a-state-by-state-look) and by the Kaiser Family Foundation at [tinyurl.com/MedicaidFactSheet](https://tinyurl.com/MedicaidFactSheet).

**SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS**

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

**1. Voter Registration**

Research the history of voter disenfranchisement in your state, including past and present laws that have prevented people from voting. How can people register to vote in your region? Does your state have automatic or same-day voter registration? Can residents vote from home or do they have to vote at the polls? Survey a group of people in your community about your local election laws. Do all or most know how to register to vote? Identify a local organization and volunteer your time to help distribute accurate and timely information about voter registration in your area.

**2. Organize for Racial Justice**

Join a local or national organization of young people working for racial justice. Find organizing resources and FAQs from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at [snccdigital.org/today](https://snccdigital.org/today) and explore research and funding opportunities from the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing at [fco.org/resources](https://fco.org/resources). Consider joining a chapter or starting your own with resources from a national racial justice organization:

- Alliance for Youth Action: [allianceforyouthaction.org/take-action](https://allianceforyouthaction.org/take-action)
- BYP 100: [www.byp100.org](https://www.byp100.org)
- Color of Change: [colorofchange.org](https://colorofchange.org)
- Movement for Black Lives: [m4bl.org](https://m4bl.org)
- Showing Up for Racial Justice: [surj.org](https://surj.org)
- United We Dream: [unitedwedream.org](https://unitedwedream.org)

**3. Raise the Minimum Wage**

Do you know the minimum wage in your home state? Research the history of wages in your region and identify the groups that are working for positive change for working people. Support the front lines by helping to spread the word on social media, support striking workers, and educate your community about the importance of a living wage. Learn more about why workers go on strike and the fight for a living wage around the country at [fightfor15.org](https://fightfor15.org).

**4. Unions in Your Town**

From fair wages to health insurance to the 40-hour work week, labor unions have shaped the workplaces that we know today. Learn more about the unions in your geographic area and the issues they are fighting for. Reach out to a local union rep to find out how you can support current campaigns and learn more about how you can show your support on the picket line. Learn more about unions at [aflcio.org/what-unions-do](https://aflcio.org/what-unions-do).

OTHER RESOURCES  
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,  
AND PROGRAMS

Further Reading, Watching & Listening

- “The Way Out of America’s Zero-Sum Thinking on Race and Wealth” in *The New York Times*: [tinyurl.com/ZeroSumThinking](https://tinyurl.com/ZeroSumThinking)
- Heather McGhee’s talk “Racism has a cost for everyone” at TEDWomen 2019: [tinyurl.com/McGheeTED](https://tinyurl.com/McGheeTED)
- “What If Every American Voted?” from Inequality Media: [tinyurl.com/WhatIfEveryAmericanVoted](https://tinyurl.com/WhatIfEveryAmericanVoted)
- Heather McGhee on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*: [tinyurl.com/McGheeDailyShow](https://tinyurl.com/McGheeDailyShow)
- Heather McGhee in conversation with Dave Davies on NPR’s *Fresh Air*: [tinyurl.com/McGheeFreshAir](https://tinyurl.com/McGheeFreshAir)
- “Our kids need us to act fast on climate change” in *Grist*: [tinyurl.com/GristArticle](https://tinyurl.com/GristArticle)

Educator Resources

- Resources about how to talk about race and inequality using the Race Class Narrative framework, created by We Make the Future: [www.wemakethefuture.us](http://www.wemakethefuture.us)
- Resources on the Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) framework: [healourcommunities.org/resources](http://healourcommunities.org/resources)
- Resources on the Integrated Schools movement: [integratedschools.org/resources](http://integratedschools.org/resources)

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

**Rachael Zafer** is a writer, educator, and social change consultant. Rachael provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country and has led hundreds of classes and workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Colorado. Rachael is the author of discussion guides for nearly two dozen books, including *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. You can view all of her discussion guides at [www.rachaelzafer.com](http://www.rachaelzafer.com).



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