



# “It’s Not For Us”: Understanding How Meta-Oppression Influences Black Americans’ Experiences with the Credit System

*Kassandra Martinchek and Rose Mary Brown*  
URBAN INSTITUTE AND WORKING CREDIT

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**People of color in the US, particularly Black Americans, have long experienced exclusion from key systems of support and opportunity. This structural racism—the system of policies, institutional practices, and other cultural norms that perpetuate racial inequality—has permeated American society, shaping not only how policies are applied, but also how people of color approach their daily lives. Whether it’s decades of legalized school segregation, redlining policies that blocked Black Americans from living in certain neighborhoods, or discrimination in traditional credit markets, structural racism has led many Black Americans to distrust and avoid industries necessary for wealth building (Lawrence et al. 2004). As a result, significant wealth and credit health disparities have persisted between Black and white Americans.<sup>1</sup>**

The history of exclusion of and extraction from people of color by traditional US credit markets, or the set of government agencies, banks, and credit-reporting agencies involved in making decisions about whether people can access credit, has contributed to an ongoing distrust of the system today (Baradaran 2019; Kijakazi et al. 2019). Several historical policy choices served to systematically undermine Black families’ financial stability and security, leading to the current inequitable credit market. These policies include but aren’t limited to the following:

- **Post-emancipation sharecropping**, which kept Black tenant farm families severely indebted to white landlords and merchants. While policymakers promised Black families their own land during Reconstruction, these promises were left unfulfilled, leaving Black freedmen without

pathways to build wealth and financial stability (Oliver and Shapiro 2013). Instead, Black families engaged in sharecropping, where white families would lease the land and materials Black farmers needed to plant crops at high interest rates and often under unfair terms, reaping the profits and keeping Black families from building wealth over time (Baradaran 2019; Irwin and O'Brien 1998; Oliver and Shapiro 2013).<sup>2</sup>

- **Mid-20th century redlining**, which codified racial discrimination in housing lending and contributed to under- and disinvestment in communities of color. By deeming Black communities as risky investments, redlining maps effectively redirected wealth away from those communities (Bragg 2022; Lynch et al. 2021; Squires 1997). Redlined maps used by the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) explicitly prioritized bolstering property values by maintaining racial housing segregation. They also served to constrain the mortgage credit available to Black families while making mortgages more affordable and accessible to white families (Mitchell and Franco 2018; Oliver and Shapiro 2013). These policy choices maintained housing segregation and curtailed opportunities for Black families to build wealth through housing, the biggest asset on most households' balance sheets (Oliver and Shapiro 2013).
- **The subprime housing crisis of the late 2000s**, during which communities of color were disproportionately targets of unsustainable predatory mortgage loan marketing—a phenomenon known as “reverse redlining” (Burd-Sharps and Rasch 2015; Hill 2021; Rheingold, Fitzpatrick, and Hofeld 2000). These loans were characterized by higher fees, interest rates, and penalties, making them harder to repay (Herring and Henderson 2016; Shapiro 2006). When the market crashed in 2008, Black families were more likely to be in a precarious financial situation as a result. Specifically, Black families lost more housing wealth in the Great Recession than other families and struggled to recover from these losses over the following decade (Oliver and Shapiro 2013).

Although redlining was outlawed by the late 1960s and reverse redlining mortgage lending practices were curtailed after the subprime meltdown in 2008, racism in the US credit system remains pervasive. The cumulative disadvantages Black families have had in the credit system have fortified and maintained persistent disparities in wealth and credit health for Black Americans across age, educational attainment, occupation, savings levels, and income (Oliver and Shapiro 2013). Significant bodies of research document how federal housing, tax, and transportation policies created and maintained longstanding housing segregation between Black and white families, despite both sharing similar financial aspirations and goals (Massey and Denton 2019). Although several of these policies are no longer in place today, they have left an entrenched legacy, reproducing stark disparities in mortgage loan rejection rates, interest rates, and housing appreciation (Oliver and Shapiro 2013).<sup>3</sup> Overall, the system embeds a tacit acceptance of white peoples' creditworthiness, where flaws in white consumers' credit reports are more likely to be overlooked while constraining Black families' credit access (Munnell et al. 1996).

For the past 50 years, mainstream financial institutions have also divested from low-income communities of color, leaving mostly unregulated, high-interest, and often predatory financial services providers in their place (Baradaran 2019; Charron-Cheiner 2020; Gallmeyer and Roberts 2009).<sup>4</sup> For example, fewer Black families have credit cards with favorable terms (e.g., with low interest rates and

fees), resulting in persistent gaps in credit health between communities of color and majority-white communities (Baradaran 2019).<sup>5</sup> Families of color are also more likely to lack connections to mainstream financial services and credit because of targeting of high-cost options in communities of color, costing Black families billions of dollars in aggregate (Oliver and Shapiro 2013; Stein 2001).

Ultimately, institutional divestment in communities of color has led to a bifurcated credit market for Black and white families. Whereas Black communities primarily have access to “high-interest, non-bank, installment lenders,” white families have access to a “low-cost, securitized, and revolving credit card market” (Baradaran 2019, 101). The implications of this dual-credit market are consequential—Black communities can end up paying 300 to 400 percent in interest when accessing these high-cost loans, which can undermine their long-term financial stability and mobility.

Under such a system, Black consumers can lose hope, self-confidence, and the agency to envision and pursue a new and more equitable system. These feelings of stress and despair experienced by Black Americans as a result of barriers and discrimination enacted by structural racism are collectively known as “meta-oppression” (Scott 2023).<sup>6</sup>

In this brief, we explore how structural racism in the credit system—which we define as the policies and institutions that engage in borrowing, lending, and generating credit reports, including banks, credit unions, government agencies, and credit-reporting agencies—shapes people’s visions for their financial future. We connect the theory of meta-oppression to experiences of 16 Black Chicago residents. Through this empirical discussion, we find that viewing consumers’ experiences with the credit system through the lens of meta-oppression demonstrates how institutional structures leave people feeling the following:

- **Lack of hope.** Black consumers reported feeling that good credit behaviors were futile, as the credit system seemed slow to reward good financial behaviors but quick to punish others. They also described feeling overwhelmed and stuck with current options, leaving them constantly coping with financial emergencies and unable to imagine a better path forward.
- **Diminished self-confidence and self-worth.** Although Black consumers acknowledged that they may have been targeted by lenders or institutions or lacked options to make more informed choices, many reported feeling fully responsible for their financial circumstances. They described feeling behind where they would like to be, which weighed on their self-esteem and left many feeling “unworthy” or like a “bad person” because of their poor credit.
- **Lack of agency.** Black consumers reported feeling apathetic about combating structural racism in the credit system, as previous efforts seemed to make no difference in their day-to-day life. They saw acceptance of the current system as the only option.
- **Shame.** Some Black consumers internalized these narratives and felt a strong sense of guilt for their current economic circumstances. They reported feeling the need to keep their credit private, anxiousness in discussing credit, and shame in their past choices.

Despite the ways that structural racism has affected how people see themselves and what they think is possible, policymakers and programs can explore ways to interrupt meta-oppression and

reexpand Black consumers' future possibilities. By interrupting meta-oppression, we envision a pathway for policies and programs that can expand Black Americans' opportunities in life and close racial wealth gaps when paired with other interventions.

## What Is Meta-Oppression?

The theory of “meta-oppression,” which was created by Dr. Jacqueline Scott, seeks to expand on the idea that structural racism restricts the availability of the necessary tools for creating meaningful lives (Medina 2012, 68–71). Meta-oppression describes the psychological consequences of the gulf between the American Dream and the lived reality of Black Americans (Scott 2023). According to Scott, meta-oppression is characterized by feelings of “profound resignation, weariness, and despair at the looming realization that American racism will not change significantly—ever.”<sup>7</sup>

This theory builds on prior work by critical philosophers of race and sociologists that emphasize the importance of questioning the neutrality of white institutions. Many research fields initially presented race as an unchangeable individual characteristic, often coding Blackness as inherently inferior (Galton 1892; Yule 1899; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Critical approaches have challenged this view, revealing that the cause of differential outcomes between Black and white Americans has arisen from discriminatory practices by institutions and not the race of people themselves (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). As such, when Black Americans interact with institutions and systems shaped by this structural racism, they may experience “internalized oppression,” where they begin to believe negative and distorted messages about themselves (DuBois 1996; Williams 2012; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). As Black Americans experience internalized oppression, they also feel a tension with their own beliefs that challenge these narratives, described by DuBois as “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Bruce 1992; DuBois 1903, 1996; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Scott 2020). Overall, prior scholarship has emphasized how institutions and societal actors socially construct race and has postulated that this willful discrimination can meaningfully affect how Black people see themselves.

As a theory, meta-oppression explores the effects of micro- and macro-level influences on a person’s social imagination, or what a person believes is possible now and into the future (Medina 2012; Scott 2020; Mills 2000). Micro- and macro-level influences, such as family, friends, culture, experiences, surroundings, and societal systems, can all shape a person’s social imagination (Medina 2012; Scott 2014, 2023). Although many factors can shape what Black Americans believe is possible, Scott’s theory of meta-oppression focuses on how prolonged and incessant oppression from structural racism constrains Black American’s social imagination in four key ways:

- lack of hope, or feeling that a different path is not probable or possible
- decay in confidence and self-worth, or taking on blame for systemic issues, resulting in a diminished sense of self-worth
- decay in self-agency, or feelings of apathy toward making change and resisting structural racism

- shame, or internalization of racist narratives in ways that internalize feelings of guilt and blame for current circumstances

Importantly, these symptoms of meta-oppression articulate clear emotions and thoughts that Black Americans may have with respect to systems imbued with structural racism. Consequently, **meta-oppression is a valuable framework to guide empirical studies that strive to develop a deeper understanding of how systemic oppression affects people.** Ample evidence has shown where gaps exist in various systems as a result of structural racism, but few empirical studies have shown how these gaps affect people psychologically, stripping them of agency. Through meta-oppression theory, empirical researchers can contend with the structures that shape structural racism by providing key context rather than advancing individualistic explanations (Bruce 1992; DuBois 1996; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Scott 2020).

In this brief, we focus on how structural racism in the credit system affects Black Americans' perceived access to opportunity (Kijakazi et al. 2019).<sup>8</sup> To do so, we apply Scott's conceptual framework to the ways that Black Chicago residents describe their experiences with credit and the credit system. This analysis reveals the complexities in Black consumers' experiences with credit and illuminates how structural racism not only shapes people's outcomes, but also the possibilities they can imagine.

## Methodology

To better understand how structural racism affects consumers' experiences with meta-oppression in the credit system, we conducted semistructured interviews with 16 Black residents of different neighborhoods in and surrounding Chicago, Illinois. Each interview lasted 60 minutes and focused on consumers' experiences in the credit system, including their perceptions of their credit health, what products and services they used and why, experiences of judgment and discrimination, and effects on their future financial goals, interpersonal relationships, and mental health.

We focused primarily on Black Chicago residents because existing meta-oppression theory framed by Scott (2023) focuses on structural racism as it produces and perpetuates barriers for Black Americans. To identify interviewees, we used purposive sampling strategies and partnered with Working Credit—a nonprofit that provides credit-building education, counseling, and access to financial products—to find interview participants who identified as Black or multiracial Black and were enrolled in financial coaching offered through their employer (Creswell and Poth 2018; Mason 2017; Parker and Lynn 2002). As several employers in different industries began offering Working Credit services to their employees, we invited all employees who were interested in participating in Working Credit services the opportunity to participate in an interview. All interviewees included in the sample self-identified as Black or multiracial and Black, resided in the city of Chicago or its suburbs, and worked with employers who offered Working Credit services in 2021. Interviewees reflected a range of incomes, occupations, and credit histories, and lived in diverse neighborhoods across the Chicagoland area.<sup>9</sup> In terms of interview timing, we interviewed respondents before they started any credit-building counseling with Working Credit so that their experiences with the nonprofit organization's counselors did not shape their impressions and experiences with the credit system.

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## **Working Credit as a Partner to This Research**

### ***Who Is Working Credit?***

Working Credit is a not-for-profit organization, founded in 2014, whose mission is to partner with people and communities to interrupt structural racism by providing credit-building education, counseling, and access to the products people need to thrive financially. Although based in Chicago, Illinois, Working Credit provides services to people all across the US. Working Credit provides in-depth group workshops on the inner workings of the credit-scoring system, followed by 12 months of personalized one-on-one counseling and coaching that helps participants gain knowledge, access to affordable financial products, and ongoing support. The program seeks to help participants achieve (1) prime credit scores (above 660), which can improve access to quality rental apartments, car loans, credit cards, mortgages, and small business loans at reasonable interest rates; and (2) a financial cushion in available credit on one or more credit cards, which can better position them to withstand or avoid emergencies without relying on high-cost credit products or services.<sup>a</sup>

### ***What Role Did Working Credit Have in This Research?***

Working Credit was a funder and thought partner in each stage of this research project. Working Credit contributed to recruiting and interviewing participants using cocreated interview protocols. Both Urban Institute researchers and Working Credit staff contributed to analytic coding and synthesis. Urban Institute and Working Credit coauthors maintained independence over research findings and the research report. Dr. Jacqueline Scott is a board member at Working Credit and provided input for this research report.

<sup>a</sup> Elliott, Diana, Ricki Granetz Lowitz, and Working Credit NFP, "What Is the Cost of Poor Credit?" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2018).

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After conducting interviews, our team used the theory of meta-oppression developed by Scott (2023) to analyze the narrative content from interviews.<sup>10</sup> We developed a framework for thematically coding interviews and surfacing the ways that Black Chicago residents' experiences with the credit system reflected different dimensions of meta-oppression. We conducted several levels of coding, including in-vivo codes (or analytic codes that are developed from the ground-up based on interviewees' experiences) and thematic codes capturing symptoms of meta-oppression, experiences with structural racism, and constrictions of social imagination (Creswell and Poth 2018; Crotty 1998; Kahlke 2014; Maxwell 2013). After each research team member separately coded interviews in-vivo and thematically, the team met and discussed each excerpt, arriving at a set of master codes to use for synthesis with full intercoder agreement (Creswell and Poth 2018; Lincoln 2002).

Once the team agreed on the analysis of the interviews, we developed further subthemes, which characterized how Black Chicago residents experienced meta-oppression with the credit system. These subthemes were placed in context of our core ideas and included supporting qualitative evidence from interviews conducted with Black Chicago residents. We then had expert reviewers skilled in qualitative methods and critical theory review the subthemes, further refining them based on the experts' input.

In the analysis presented here, we present themes that emerged across multiple interviews alongside interviewees' illustrative quotes that describe their experiences and perspectives in their own

voices. We have done some copyediting of participants' quotes for clarity, including removing repeated words or interjections and moving phonetic language to reflect written form, but maintain participant voices throughout. We have made these adjustments to improve readability of quotes in written format and intentionally balance the need for clarity against asserting white cultural supremacy in presenting participants' voices (Oliver et al. 2005). Finally, Black residents were invited to a Data Walk, where the research team shared our insights and garnered community input (Fine et al. 2000; Freeman et al 2007; Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxana 2015). This convening enabled the research team to feel confident about the trustworthiness of findings and grounding in communities' lived experiences. Please see the About the Authors section at the end of this brief for more information about our identities and how they shaped our research work.

## Structural Racism in the Credit System

Before exploring how the Black Chicago residents we interviewed experience meta-oppression in the credit system, we first sought to understand the specific ways that residents encounter structural racism in the credit system. Through our interviews, we asked how residents viewed the extent to which structural racism has shaped their opportunities, access to information, and interactions with today's credit system. We find that residents lack key information about credit, feel targeted by predatory credit actors, lack access to affordable asset-building credit products, and feel little power within the broader credit system.

### Lack of Information about Credit

Many interviewees mentioned that they felt their education on credit and finances as teenagers and young adults was insufficient. Whether from parents or schools, many interviewees expressed that what little information they did receive left them ill equipped to leverage credit as a tool for economic mobility. Some specifically called out how they did not fully understand credit or get the same level or type of education as their white counterparts, which left them feeling behind:<sup>11</sup>

I believe [having banks in the neighborhood] does have an effect [on how people handle their finances], because if you're not taught or given certain information, as far as banking and saving and trying to build a nest egg or whatever you want to call it, most people are going to [shy] away from it because they don't have that specific knowledge.—Black interviewee on the effect of local banks on communities' finances

Pretty much the same thing I learned from family and high school—basically, we had a finance class that was three months long, and overall you pretty much [passed] that specific course if you knew how to write a check, balance a checkbook, and knew how to negotiate to buy a car...there wasn't much of anything [taught] about credit and how to leverage anything and how to use your credit in any type of way. So, to me it was a waste of three months. **When I look back on it, it wasn't much of anything.** (emphasis added)  
—Black interviewee on prior financial education

## Targeting by Predatory Actors

Interviewees described that their local communities had a different mix of financial services available than white communities. They noted that more high-cost lenders were located in their community, and mainstream financial services were sometimes far away and challenging to access. Other interviewees described feeling targeted by high-cost financial services because of their race or as a result of living in a particular neighborhood. They described high-cost products as being so prevalent that some people in their neighborhoods did not realize other types of financial products and services were available to them:

Yeah, I mean if you're looking at an area where there are majority African Americans, [I] call those [financial service providers] predators—they're always in our [neighborhoods]. All the ones you listed are in the [area].

—Black interviewee on the presence of alternative lenders in their neighborhood

As one interviewee described, high-cost lenders (such as payday lenders, pawn shops, and auto title lenders) located in low-income communities of color are seen as go-to resources. These high-cost lenders are often as mistrusted as mainstream financial institutions, with interviewees acknowledging these lenders to be costly to consumers and intentionally targeting communities of color:

Predatory...I just don't [have good views of alternative financial services providers], like really. I mean that's the best word, but using...just taking advantage of people who already don't have income or [are] low-to-mid income, and it's like they need [some help] and then you charge 25 percent, or something crazy like on a loan or car title, you know. [It's a whole system that] America has planned diligently for democracy—you have to have rich and poor people. And so, to work, you have to have people who want to work these jobs so that you can keep a certain population in a certain income bracket. And so, when you put these things in neighborhoods where people really have limited access to funding, and then you set them up to where they can't get a high-paying job or employment because of their education or criminal background, whatever the situation is, then you get stuck in those kind of systems where [when] you finally make enough money you pay something off, you feel like you're getting ahead. But then you lose a job or something and then you're right back at square one. So you're right back at these places, who are going to give you things...like [a loan shark] and put these, these extra fees [when I borrow] like \$1,000 and [I have] to pay you like \$1,500 back, but I don't have the thousand.

—Black interviewee on their impression of alternative financial services providers (payday, auto title, and pawn shop lenders)

## Lack of Access to Asset-Building Products and Services

Interviewees described that they felt they had ready access to high-cost services and products but lacked access to more-effective, higher-yield products that support mobility and wealth-building, such as mortgages or business loans. Some interviewees reported that it felt like the lack of access was intentional and did not reflect their own creditworthiness:

You know that the hardest things for people to get [are the] things to help [you] grow. You know those home loans, those lines of credit, those business loans—those [are the hard things]. It's easy to get the car loans, things that [ruin you]—you know those types of things that are easy



to get...but [the type] of credit that helps you—it's [like] those type[s] of things are [hard to get].  
(emphasis added)

—Black interviewee describing their experience applying for loan products

I mentioned earlier...trying to get a loan from a bank. And it's like...your credit is better than most people's. But why can't you get a [loan]?...and your place of employment, which is connected to your finances, you've gotten passed over for raises. And you've been with the company longer and have more experience, and someone else [is] brought in younger than you without your education [and] can get [put] over you, and to me that affects your finances, right, because you missed out maybe on the \$20,000 raise to a different position.

—Black interviewee describing their experience applying for loan products and working to improve their financial position through employment

## Power Imbalance

Throughout American history, structural racism is characterized by an imbalance of power. During post-emancipation sharecropping, for example, the white landholders and merchants held power over the Black farmers who had no choice but to rely on the terms given them.<sup>12</sup> Interviewees described how they experience that power imbalance today—feeling very little power as consumers, especially as Black consumers. Many interviewees pointed to banks and other organizations in the credit system as having the power and making decisions on who receives access to credit, how much credit they have access to, and at what cost. We heard interviewees say, if they had any power at all, it was essentially limited to the choice of whether to participate in a system that dictates opportunity:

Is it really about credit or is it really about you [the bank] just giving money to [who you] want to [give it] to, when you want to [give it], and because **you're the bank, you have the power to do that**. So you're essentially affecting [people's lives] and deciding who gets to be a business owner and who doesn't. (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on how they feel about the credit-scoring system

I believe that every one of those [banks, government, credit-reporting agencies] have power, except for the consumer. I mean, let me take that back. I think the consumer[s] have power to a certain extent, [the] consumer[s] have the power to agree to the terms [or] not agree to the [terms]. So that's the power, that's the only power that [the consumer has]...you do have the power to negotiate, again, you know you're negotiating the [terms] that you are given. So...I guess everyone [has] power I guess it's just a chain...the more I think about it, and I think [that the consumer is on the lower part of the chain].

—Black interviewee on who has power in the credit system

## Meta-Oppression in the Credit System

Despite interviewees' acknowledgment of structural racism's role in shaping the opportunities and resources they have access to in the credit system, the people we spoke with also internalized and felt responsible for their financial position. This internalization drives meta-oppression, as people see the role of structures in their lives but still feel a loss of hope, self-confidence, and agency. Meta-oppression allows people to hold two contrasting views—that structural racism in the credit system constrains their

opportunities and that they are personally responsible for their financial future, representing a form of dual consciousness (Bruce 1992; DuBois 1996; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Scott 2020). In this section, we describe the four main symptoms of meta-oppression defined by Scott (2023) and the different ways Black Chicago residents experienced meta-oppression in the credit system.

## Symptom of Meta-Oppression 1: Despair about the Future

For many, structural racism can cause feelings of hopelessness, limiting Black Americans' ability to imagine an alternative path. As a result, a person's vision for the future constricts. In the credit system, we see this symptom emerge in several ways: (1) feelings of being overwhelmed by finances with little way out, (2) feelings of being stuck in current circumstances, and (3) struggling to imagine a new path.

### OVERWHELMED BY FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS

Many interviewees reported feeling extremely overwhelmed by their financial obligations and felt that it was impossible to escape from them. They reported feeling hopeless about the prospect for their economic fortunes to change and desperately sought to get out of their dire financial circumstances. In particular, they felt it was challenging to stay on top of so many different financial obligations, making it harder to envision a better financial future:

Yeah, I went bankrupt. I filed for bankruptcy...because it was like, okay, this is getting overwhelming you know...I know it was those credit cards, it was those credit cards and then once upon a time owing the IRS because of a grant I received. Then it was like, oh, I didn't file my 1099 and you owe so much back, and I'm like wait a minute, so yeah **it got overwhelming**.  
(emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on their experience with bankruptcy

### FEELING STUCK

Several interviewees felt stuck, with few options to turn to when they faced financial and life challenges. They reported that they often had few options to cope with challenges, especially in terms of credit, and often turned to payday loans and other high-cost credit products. Although payday loans were seen as lenders of last resort, many interviewees felt that they had no other choice to deal with an emergency expense. They reported how having few options also deepened their feelings of “stuck-ness,” where they felt that the options they did have left them even worse off with fewer prospects for future change:

Yes, payday loans hinder you...the interest rates are [ridiculous]. Unfortunately, I had to use one—not proud of it, **but I had to because I had no other way. And that's what a lot of people [experience], and then they get stuck**. Unfortunately, they'll take the loan out and they're like no [I'll] pay it back but the interest rate is double what they're paying back. So, instead of them just taking a loan and just paying it back in one lump sum, they take [their] time and they don't understand that's the part that's knocking them on [their] tail. (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee sharing their experience using payday loans

### STRUGGLE TO IMAGINE A NEW PATH

Many interviewees echoed how their experiences with the credit system made them feel like it was impossible to imagine an alternate future. Specifically, they expressed that they needed to focus their

attention on current emergencies, rather than look forward and plan for future responsibilities. Many interviewees expressed how challenging it was to imagine what else they could do to change their economic future:

In the various neighborhoods, the demographics are so limited....we are the crabs in the bucket, pulling one another down. And we, we can't see the light. And when we can't see the light when we don't know, [when] we don't know another way, **[we'll] never get, [we'll] never move forward because we don't know another way to get to the top.** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee describing alternatives to high-cost credit

## Symptom of Meta-Oppression 2: Decay in Self-Confidence and Self-Worth

When encountering persistent barriers to wealth-building, people's self-confidence can deteriorate, and they can begin to blame themselves for their economic circumstances, even if those circumstances are influenced by structural factors. Thus, meta-oppression shapes how people see themselves (as personally to blame for systemic issues) and their worth as people. Their internalization of blame leads to critiques of their choices and admonishment that they should have “known better,” because they feel fully responsible for these choices. We see this symptom emerge in Black Americans' experiences with the credit system in five ways: (1) feeling it is their fault they are in certain economic circumstances, (2) feeling behind on where they want to be in life, (3) having lower self-esteem, (4) perceiving that the credit system has determined their worth, and (5) credit influencing their interpersonal relationships.

### “IT'S MY FAULT”

Many interviewees described feeling responsible for their current economic circumstances despite acknowledging that they had few alternatives or often lacked the information needed to make well-informed choices. Interviewees frequently blamed themselves for their financial well-being and were intensely critical of their own financial choices. Importantly, they described this financial responsibility as “heavy,” and it bore significant weight on how they felt about themselves. They identified the solution as needing to impose greater self-control and discipline—that they needed to be better themselves to avoid economic hardship, even while acknowledging the role that broader systems play in limiting their choices and resources:

I feel like having a lack of resources is absolutely a part of [not reaching my financial goals], so yes I do feel like that. But in that same breath...I do still feel heavy responsibility for a lot of my financial choices. **So I do feel [in part] heavily responsible for a lot of...where my credit is today. But I do think like that lack of resources [is] absolutely a factor, yes.** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee describing factors that shape their access to credit

**I need to discipline myself better,** I need to have more control over how I spend my money and be able to put money away without touching it. And I can. I know that I have work to do when it comes to saving. And also, a lot of times...if I am taking out money for this advance or if I am paying off a debt, **I am always spending more money than I'm receiving. So it's really hard for me to put money away** when that's going [on] constantly. (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee describing experience with using credit to meet financial needs

## FEELING BEHIND WHERE YOU WANT TO BE

Interviewees also lamented that they are not as far along in meeting their financial goals as they would like to be. They described that they felt as if their progress and “good behaviors” were not adequately recognized in the credit system. Although they acknowledged structural barriers, like crushing student loan debt, that prevented them from achieving their goals, they still felt responsible for not living up to their expectations and internalized these negative feelings into their conception of self:

Not a sense of confidence, but like...**I always felt like at a certain age I thought I was going to be making a certain kind of a certain amount of money** and I should have this or this amount in the bank...And so you feel kind of like self-conscious in that way...But it just can prevent you from, like if you don't have money and you don't have credit, it just prevents you from doing things... taking certain vacations or buying certain things that you feel like you want—it may not necessarily be a need or want, but it's just one of those things you just let it go. **My time will come, I guess, I guess, hopefully, right?** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee sharing if they felt they were meeting their financial goals

I owe money now for student debt—student loans, but I feel like right now I should have had like what I wanted by now. So I feel like the fact that I'm not there does kind of make me feel like, wow, **even though I've done all this I still haven't accomplished much, I still haven't. What do I have to show for it?** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee describing their experience with student loans

## LOWERED SELF-ESTEEM

Overwhelmingly, interviewees described a close tie between achieving their financial goals and their own self-worth. They described how achieving stable and good credit felt like a marker of a “good person” and that poor credit can be a painful reminder of perceived character flaws. Some respondents even reported that they avoided looking at their credit reports and credit scores because it made them feel so bad about themselves. These feelings undermined their self-esteem, even as they acknowledged that others' judging may be rooted in structural racism:

Sometimes [my credit would] play on my [confidence], my self-esteem, because it was just like, okay, this doesn't make sense—you're this old and you can't do this because your credit is this, so...**it plays on your mental, your confidence level**, especially when you're a single parent.

—Black interviewee describing how their mental health is impacted by credit

Yeah, I mean psychologically [it's] good [to receive credit card offers]. You feel like...you're doing okay or that you deserve or have earned that right—sometimes seems like to me as you get older you might get letters in the mail saying, **hey we want to give you a [credit card], you're a good person**, or you...seem like you've got a good [credit].

—Black interviewee on receiving credit card offers in the mail

## THE CREDIT SYSTEM DETERMINES YOUR WORTHINESS

Several interviewees described how they felt like the credit system determined their worthiness as a person, not just their creditworthiness. They described the lack of control they felt and how they felt as if their credit score communicated something about their own worth or value as a person instead of simply being a measure of prior financial behavior:

I use worthiness because a lot of...credit card companies look at your [worth, what] do you have to bring to the table, in order to give [you] credit so those are the three [that I would use]...I feel if you do have a credit card [or] some sort of credit, you could get just about anything you want, to a certain extent.

—Black interviewee describing how notions of worthiness are associated with the credit system

### INFLUENCE ON INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Finally, many interviewees described how credit affected their relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners. They described how their feelings of self-worth associated with credit made them feel anxious and want to hide their credit score from others in their lives, leaving them feeling more alone with these feelings. Additionally, interviewees described how mixing credit with close relationships was risky and lamented the tension between wanting to help family and friends in need and potential long-term effects of any missed payments on incurred debts. Several respondents had direct experiences using their credit to help family and friends and are working on building their credit back up in the aftermath:

Girl, I'm African American, [alright? You] know unless you come from a fluid environment where people can afford to do things for you until you can really do for yourself...you know, for me, I stepped out at, at maybe 18, 19 [went to] college, and still you're struggling as a college student. **So finances play a big role in your relationship—play a big role [in] how you interact with other people; how you feel about your own self-worth.** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on how credit impacts their relationships

### Symptom of Meta-Oppression 3: Decline in Agency to Address Structural Racism

Although people understand structural racism to be a root cause of many barriers and difficulties they face, they can lose the willingness to confront this system. Witnessing or participating in relentless efforts to overcome these barriers without significant positive shifts in outcomes can bring on this sense of apathy. In our interviews, this symptom presented itself in three ways: (1) Black consumers did not see themselves as change agents, (2) assumed that any effort to make a change would be in vain, and (3) regarded acceptance as the only option to move forward.

### BLACK CONSUMERS DO NOT SEE THEMSELVES AS CHANGE AGENTS

Many interviewees described the barriers inhibiting them from achieving their financial goals and connected these to systems that reproduced worse outcomes and opportunities for people of color. At the same time, many interviewees saw themselves as passive agents within the credit system and did not see themselves as having any agency to effect change. Although interviewees named institutional changes they thought would improve outcomes for people of color, they expressed little hope that things would actually change in society and their own lives. Interviewees who expressed that they had some power clarified that they had limited forms of power within the system through their roles as parents and mentors in guiding younger generations through the pitfalls of credit. Many interviewees expressed feeling so overwhelmed, and even intimidated, by their circumstances that it paralyzed their sense of agency and ability to make a change:

I felt that way for a long time, but like, they're going to give you whatever credit they want you to have regardless. So like, what can you do about it, how can [you] really impact, you know.  
—Black interviewee on why they think credit is not for everybody

### ANY EFFORT TO MAKE A CHANGE WILL BE IN VAIN

We heard a resounding frustration among interviewees that when they tried to exercise agency, it did not yield positive or significant results. Many interviewees expressed wanting to invest their time and effort into building their credit score to meet their financial goals but felt that the system itself thwarted their efforts and undermined their faith that they could be successful. Some interviewees attributed this perspective to how long it took to see positive changes in their credit score, while others attributed it to broader economic factors, such as insufficient income to meet their financial needs. Overall, many interviewees expressed feeling discouraged by the lack of progress they were able to achieve in improving their credit and financial well-being, despite the level of effort they were dedicating to this goal:

Absolutely. There's been times where...I would just kind of just say forget it. It's like I work so hard for my credit to improve and it will go up by one point, or [it'll] go down...**What's the point? It's not even working.** (emphasis added)  
—Black interviewee on their experience working on improving their credit

It's frustrating because I'll feel like okay, I'm finally in a good place, and then the next day I'll get like, oh, your credit went down 100 points, and I'm like whoa what happened, what did this, you know? So, at least for my experience...it's not like a little fluctuation for me—it bounces and it's very discouraging, especially when you have a family and you want to purchase a home and you get connected with these different places that can help you purchase a home. But then it's based on your credit, and **it's just overwhelming. It's overwhelming how much it fluctuates.** (emphasis added)  
—Black interviewee on how they feel about the credit-scoring system

### ACCEPTANCE IS THE ONLY OPTION

Interviewees also expressed feelings of despair, targeting, and lack of progress and blame, resulting in acceptance and resignation. Structural racism in the credit system felt inevitable, and interviewees did not see any alternatives beyond accepting this as fact. Many interviews ended with the perceived thought or literal phrase “but you have to do it,” meaning that they have to participate in the credit system, reflecting interviewees’ shared perspective that acceptance was their only option:

I think [alternative financial services] are very predatory in nature. I think obviously you're in neighborhoods that are very low income, experience a lot of trauma and violence, and people [need] certain things—they may need to have access to some money. But like I said, [they're] charging these exorbitant interest rates, and so they end up [owing] more than they even got, and it's very predatory [in] nature, but **sometimes people feel like they don't have another way, they don't have any other choice.** (emphasis added)  
—Black interviewee describing how the presence of alternative lenders impacts neighborhoods

The car that I had before that was a little rougher. [They] kept wanting me to get a cosigner. They wanted me [to put down] these large amounts of money that I wasn't going to do. And then they kept saying, oh no, [the] bank will take you or this or that and whatever, but I ended up getting the car without putting the down payment. Now, I think my car note [may have] been a little bit more expensive, and I was very determined to finance it on my own. **So I took a higher [interest rate].** I

mean it was...maybe 15 or 16 percent...which that's high for [a car payment]. But I felt like that was my only option, [and] I needed a car at the time and so [I just took it]. (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee recalling their experience applying for a car loan

## Symptom of Meta-Oppression 4: Shame and Internalization of Oppression

As a result of the many barriers and discrimination Black consumers face in the credit system, many of our interviewees internalized the racist assumptions others made about them, which manifests in feelings of shame. These feelings of intense shame keep people trapped in a cycle of oppression, reaffirming narratives that any degraded economic or social state they experience is solely their fault. Though years have passed for some since first experiencing the pitfalls of credit, feelings of regret and disappointment are still salient for many interviewees in the present day. Their experience with meta-oppression resulted in them feeling (1) ashamed of their financial choices, (2) anxious about discussing credit with anyone, and (3) guarded in their thoughts on credit.

### ASHAMED OF THEIR CHOICES

Some interviewees described a profound sense of shame around their credit and other financial circumstances that they felt impeded their economic opportunities. Often, interviewees talked about how they felt guilty and to blame for their current economic circumstances. A few interviewees said they were ashamed of their choices, even when they recognized such choices were influenced by factors beyond their control:

I definitely have friends who are more now cognizant of their credit score [and] they check [it]. I think [it] is something that has been a source of shame, [and I'm] a little bit attached to it because I'm [X age] and I should have [a certain score by now]...If I would have known then what I know now, always, I would have been more cognizant of it, and I think like, it's always been something I've kind of avoided.

—Black interviewee on checking their credit score

Yes, absolutely, absolutely. Again, I mentioned that [I was] overwhelmed, like there were times that...I felt so insecure because my, I didn't have a bank account. And then...it affected my [self-confidence]...You would be surprised how much even having a bank account will make you feel better about yourself. **I went through a period where I was just so insecure about that, so ashamed of a lot of my financial decisions.** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on credit affecting their confidence

### ANXIETY ABOUT CREDIT CONVERSATIONS

Many interviewees were more guarded generally, reporting that they did not feel comfortable discussing their credit and finances with others at all, but a few interviewees said that talking about their choices or credit score brought on feelings of intense stress, anxiousness, and sadness. Anxiety over credit conversations did not diminish when they were talking with close family and friends, and some interviewees reported that their hesitation to talk about credit stemmed from not wanting to feel judged or ashamed:

[It's] been [a while] since I actually really looked at my [score]. I did have Credit Karma at one time. But then, that was a lot for me, so I just like got out of it. **And, yeah, so I haven't looked at it**

**for a while. [It just] stresses me out to even think about it.** (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on checking their credit score

[With] my friends I'm not going to be dishonest about my credit or what it is or what it isn't...but **the conversation always, it always brings me a little anxiety because I know my credit score is bad, so just even talking about it brings me a little bit of stress and anxiety,** like this conversation. I feel [a little] stressful and anxiety, but I'm going to be honest [and] have integrity in my relationship, so...I'm not going to lie about it, like oh yeah I got great credit. [I would never do that]. (emphasis added)

—Black interviewee on discussing finances with friends

### GUARDED IN THEIR THOUGHTS ON CREDIT

That some interviewees felt guarded when discussing their finances and credit is no surprise in a larger society that often deems financial topics taboo (Atwood 2012; LeBaron et al. 2018; Romo 2011). Many interviewees reported that they felt they needed to guard their feelings about credit, which left them isolated and alone in dealing with their financial problems. Some interviewees expressed that they didn't want to share with others because they didn't believe that others would understand their specific experience with the credit system. A few interviewees expressed that sharing their financial and credit struggles felt intensely vulnerable and risky, especially if others did not share their economic position and did not understand their perspective:

I mean there's only certain people that I would actually have that type of conversation with anyway, so most people won't know what my issues are, as far as credit is concerned.

—Black interviewee on discussing finances with friends

I think sometimes you think you're the only one. [So] you just really don't talk about it.

—Black interviewee on discussing finances with friends

## Interrupting Meta-Oppression through Research and Practice

Although meta-oppression provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how structural racism shapes a person's sense of self and future possibilities, the evidence we found that Black Chicago residents experienced symptoms of meta-oppression in their interactions with the credit system begs another question: now what?

First and foremost, policymakers and other practitioners can work toward changing the systems that are marred by structural racism. By embedding racial equity, we can move toward a more equitable society. But these efforts should be complemented by intermediate steps to overcome meta-oppression and improve Black consumers' financial lives. Although there are many compelling papers on how structural racism can be dismantled in wealth-building financial and credit systems, in this section, we explore how this empirical study can provide a jumping off point for interrupting meta-oppression in policy and practice (Brown et al. 2023; Kijakazi et al 2019).



## The Theoretical Framework for Interrupting the Systems of Meta-Oppression

The seeming permanence of racism in US society has led to a “feeling of racialized stasis, [that] has left many people of color feeling as though our dreams are merely continually being ‘deferred’ that can be challenging to overcome” (Scott 2023). Although this perception has constrained many Black consumers’ visions for the future, this reality is not set in stone and there is potential for policy and practice to expand the possibilities Black Americans see for their financial future. In addition to addressing the root causes of structural racism, Scott highlights the importance of “interrupting” structural racism to narrow “the space between the ideal of the American Dream and the societal dream offered to most African Americans” (Scott 2023).<sup>13</sup>

Scott contends that one way to interrupt meta-oppression is to be the “sunshine” that helps people see these structures. By understanding that systems embedded with structural racism were created by people (and those systems are not “normal” or “natural”) and by reinforcing that the present condition is not primarily of their own making (as systemic racism had convinced them), Scott says that the targets of systemic racism can begin to overcome the effects of meta-oppression (Scott 2023).

Scott proposes four opportunities for interruptions, each of which begins by alleviating the symptoms of meta-oppression: renewing hope, building self-worth, becoming an agent of change, and building pride.<sup>14</sup> By alleviating these symptoms, Scott says that people of color can begin to feel positive about future possibilities again and take strategic control of their own financial lives. Scott presents these as possible ways to disrupt the connection between structural racism and the constraints of a person’s social imagination but does not frame these as ways to dismantle systems of structural racism.<sup>15</sup> Despite theoretical work exploring potential avenues to disrupt structural racism’s impact on the social imagination of people of color, this theoretical framework has not yet been applied or tested in relation to policies and programs, which leaves the door open for opportunities to consider how new and existing policies and programs could act as interruptions for the symptoms of meta-oppression.

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### BOX 2

#### Working Credit as a Potential Example of an Interruption of Meta-Oppression

Working Credit has used the theory of meta-oppression to hypothesize how its programs and services improve people of color’s access to the information and tools needed for financial resilience and wealth-building. Prior research on Working Credit’s program has found rapid, significant gains in credit health for Black participants, which exceeded credit score gains observed among their white counterparts.<sup>a</sup> After 18 months in Working Credit’s program, credit scores increased by 44 points for Black participants and 11 points for white participants. Additionally, the share of participants with prime credit scores, or credit scores above 600 that often reduce people’s borrowing costs, increased 14 percentage points for Black participants compared with 11 percentage points for white participants.<sup>a</sup> Another study found that Working Credit participants increased their financial literacy, reduced their use of alternative financial services, and increased their sense of financial self-efficacy, with the effects strongest for young Black men.<sup>b</sup>

Working Credit hypothesizes that the success of its program can be attributed in part to changes in participants’ social imagination in relation to the credit system. By working with credit-building

counselors and seeing proof that the information and tools work in a system that seem stacked against them, Black participants begin to experience a renewed sense of self-worth and have expanded views of their financial futures. In short, Working Credit's intervention may affect Black participants' credit health outcomes in two ways: by shedding light on key information about how to build credit and by acting as an interruption to meta-oppression. Future studies seek to test this hypothesis and understand how sharing the rules and tools of the credit system can potentially help people of color improve their own, their families', and their communities' financial health.

<sup>a</sup> Diana Elliott, Christine Heffernan, and Aadaeze Okoli, "Credit Building at the Workplace" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/credit-building-workplace-assessing-outcomes-participants-working-credit-nfp>.

<sup>b</sup> Alicia Sasser Modestino, *Boston Youth Credit Building Initiative Report* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2019).

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## Using Research to Expand Our Understanding of Meta-Oppression and How It Affects Communities

In addition to informing practice, research can build on this study's findings to develop measures of meta-oppression, better understand experiences of meta-oppression in other demographic groups, integrate an intersectional lens in theory and evidence-building, and extend the analysis framework into other systems affected by structural racism.

### MEASURING META-OPPRESSION

This study bridged theory to practice, revealing that Black Chicago residents experience meta-oppression through their interactions with the credit system. Future research planned by Working Credit and the Urban Institute will develop and test a survey-based measure to better understand the distribution and incidence of people's experiences with meta-oppression. Developing a measurement framework to capture people's experiences with meta-oppression can empower programs to interrupt experiences of meta-oppression and enable financial resilience stakeholders to understand how it shapes consumers' financial outcomes.

### UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCES OF META-OPPRESSION ACROSS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

The theory of meta-oppression ties the concept of structural racism to people's sense of self and social imagination. Although it is specifically grounded in the experiences of Black Americans, other groups, including Hispanic/Latinx, Native, and Asian-American communities, have also experienced persistent structural racism and consequently may experience meta-oppression in different ways given the varying histories of structural racism unique to each community. Future research could describe different demographic groups' experiences with meta-oppression and tailor the theory to each group's unique history of structural racism.

### UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN META-OPPRESSION

In this study, we focused on Black Chicago residents specifically and how structural racism shapes their sense of hope, self-worth, agency, and shame with respect to credit and debt. Through a larger sample study, research could reveal heterogeneity within Black Americans' experiences with meta-oppression

and better understand how intersecting identities (gender, sexual orientation and identity, multiracial identities) experience structural racism differently.

#### UNDERSTANDING META-OPPRESSION IN OTHER SYSTEMS

Structural racism pervades all systems in US society and shapes the resources, opportunities, and experiences of people of color. Although this study focuses on meta-oppression within the credit system, the pervasiveness of structural racism across systems suggests that meta-oppression may play a role in shaping the experiences of people of color in other systems as well. Future research can investigate the presence of meta-oppression in the education, financial, health care systems, and other systems. By expanding the analysis of meta-oppression to other systems, we can better understand the multitude of ways meta-oppression constrains people's social imaginations through their engagement in and with those systems and limits the possibilities they envision for themselves and their futures.

### Bringing It All Together: Using Meta-Oppression to Deepen Policy and Practice

Overall, we find that Black Americans' experiences with structural racism in the credit system shaped their self-concepts and visions for the future in important ways:

- Interviewees reported **lacking hope** that the credit system could and would work for them and felt like they couldn't imagine an alternate path forward because they were overwhelmed and stuck with a lack of alternatives to improve their financial circumstances.
- Interviewees expressed that they felt that their **self-confidence and self-worth were undermined**, as their credit worthiness and personal worthiness became yoked and left them feeling that they couldn't make good financial choices because they were "bad people."
- Interviewees described feeling **apathetic toward combating structural racism**, as nothing seemed to shift when they tried to change their financial circumstances.
- Finally, interviewees reported **feeling ashamed and to blame** for their current economic position, leaving them feeling anxious and judged for their financial behaviors and circumstances.

Despite the ways that structural racism has constrained the possibilities that Black Chicago residents see for their financial futures, policies and programs can explore ways to interrupt meta-oppression by turning resignation to agency, weariness to willingness, and despair to hope. Research can also develop measures of meta-oppression to help practitioners understand the impact of their work on the social imaginations of participants, expand the theoretical application of meta-oppression to other racial and ethnic groups and intersecting identities, and expand analyses of meta-oppression to other systems shaped by structural racism. By interrupting meta-oppression, policies and programs have the potential to expand the social imaginations of Black Americans, what they truly believe is possible, and as a result, help close racial and ethnic wealth gaps.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cassandra Martinchek, Alexander Carther, Breno Braga, Caleb Quakenbush, and Signe-Mary McKernan, “Credit Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Urban Institute, February 25, 2021, <https://apps.urban.org/features/credit-health-during-pandemic/index.html>; Signe-Mary McKernan, Caroline Ratcliffe, C. Eugene Steuerle, Caleb Quakenbush, and Emma Kalish, “Nine Charts about Wealth Inequality in America,” Urban Institute, updated October 5, 2017, <https://apps.urban.org/features/wealth-inequality-charts/>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Sharecropping, Black Land Acquisition, and White Supremacy (1868–1900),” Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy, World Food Policy Center, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/north-carolina/durham-food-history/sharecropping-black-land-acquisition-and-white-supremacy-1868-1900/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Black mortgage applicants are nearly 60 percent more likely to be rejected than white applicants, and if they do secure a mortgage, Black applicants on average have an interest rate 0.5 percent higher than white peers, costing them about \$4,000 more on a \$35,000 loan (Carr and Megolugbe 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> Meegan Dugan Adell, Kathie Kane-Willis, Spencer Cowan, Hala Kourtu, Vanessa Rangel, “Ill-gotten Gains: Predatory Lending and the Racial Wealth Gap in Chicago,” *New America*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.newamerica.org/chicago/reports/ill-gotten-gains-predatory-lending-and-the-racial-wealth-gap-in-chicago/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Specifically, the share of residents in majority-Black communities with a subprime credit score, using alternative financial sector loans such as payday loans, and with debt in collections is more than twice as high compared with residents living in majority-white communities. See Martinchek et al., “Credit Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic.”
- <sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows,” Academia.edu, no date, [https://www.academia.edu/43428450/On\\_Meta\\_Oppression\\_Deferred\\_Dreams\\_the\\_Fire\\_and\\_Movin\\_to\\_the\\_End\\_of\\_Rainbows?email\\_work\\_card=view-paper](https://www.academia.edu/43428450/On_Meta_Oppression_Deferred_Dreams_the_Fire_and_Movin_to_the_End_of_Rainbows?email_work_card=view-paper).
- <sup>7</sup> Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows.”
- <sup>8</sup> Margaret Simms, “Say African American or Black, but First Acknowledge the Persistence of Structural Racism,” *Urban Wire* (blog), February 8, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/say-african-american-or-black-first-acknowledge-persistence-structural-racism>; Margaret Simms and Elaine Waxman, “To Talk about Structural Racism, We Have to Talk about White Privilege,” *Urban Wire* (blog), February 23, 2016, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/talk-about-structural-racism-we-have-talk-about-white-privilege>.
- <sup>9</sup> Interviewees were between 30 and 70 years old, and most identified as Black, with two identifying as multiracial Black and white. Eleven of the sixteen interviewees identified as female. Educational attainment ranged from high school diplomas to master’s degrees, and the majority of interviewees were single (nine of sixteen interviewees), with most of the interviewees having children younger than 18 in their household. All interviewees worked full time in nonunion positions and had a range of credit scores from 550 to 800 (spanning the subprime, prime, and super-prime credit tiers). Seven interviewees had a current or prior bankruptcy. Interviewees ranged from having no open lines of credit to having more than 20, with varying levels of credit utilization, from zero to nearly 100 percent. Most had an open car loan (ten of sixteen interviewees), few were currently using payday loans (two of sixteen interviewees), and most had open student loans (ten of sixteen interviewees). None of the sixteen interviewees served in the military.
- <sup>10</sup> See also Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows.”
- <sup>11</sup> When we present quotes, text in brackets represent text added or substituted by authors to improve the clarity of interviewees’ quotes.
- <sup>12</sup> “Sharecropping, Black Land Acquisition, and White Supremacy (1868–1900),” World Food Policy Center.
- <sup>13</sup> Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows,” p. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows.”
- <sup>15</sup> Scott, “On Meta-Oppression, Deferred Dreams, the Fire, and Movin to the End of Rainbows.”

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## About the Authors

**Kassandra Martinchek** is a research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute and an expert on financial well-being and food access and security. At Urban, she leverages qualitative analysis, econometrics, and “big” data to understand disparities in families’ financial health, structural barriers to financial security, and policies that can reduce these gaps. She is the principal investigator of a study examining the effects of APR caps on consumers’ credit health; directs a study of how young adults respond to economic shocks; and leads several studies examining racial equity in the provision of innovative food access models. She has written more than 30 research publications, which have been cited in *NPR*, *NBC4 Washington*, *BBC*, *Buzzfeed*, *NextAdvisor*, *MarketWatch*, and *Forbes*. She holds an MPA from the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is a PhD candidate in public policy and administration at George Washington University, focusing on young adults’ debt and credit during recessions.

**Rosemary Brown** is Working Credit’s chief strategy officer, a former board member, and a former program participant. She became connected with Working Credit through her former employer Boston Medical Center and has worked ever since to improve her financial health and that of others. She spent most of her professional career as a certified senior applications analyst working with clinical stakeholders to design and optimize health systems that promote safety and quality and reduce health disparities. Specializing in regulatory program adherence and reporting, she analyzes data, identifying systems trends, and offers recommendations for often complex and multidisciplinary improvements. She is also civically engaged in her community as a long-time member of both the Franklin Field/Franklin Hill Dorchester Healthy Boston Coalition and the Church of the Holy Spirit in Mattapan, Massachusetts. She is an Afro-Latina woman who holds a BA in health care administration and an MS in health informatics from Northwestern University.

## Positionality Statement

The authors' lived experiences and social positions contribute to their interpretations of interviewees' experiences and influence their research approach and warrant critical reflection to reveal how this shapes the research process (Van Heertum 2005; Fine et al. 2000; Berger 2015; Hellawell 2006). Below, please find the authors' reflections on their positionality and its meaning in the research presented:

Our team includes one cisgender white woman and one cisgender Afro-Latina woman. Our educational attainment includes master's degrees and doctoral candidacy and covers the fields of health informatics, health administration, and mixed-methods program evaluation. Together, we bring lived experiences to our work and research, including financial insecurity, whiteness, and internalized racism. We explicitly draw on frameworks of critical theory, structural lenses, and community-engaged methods in our research and are motivated to elevate the voices of our interviewees in all phases of research so that it fully reflects their experiences. We work in nonprofit organizations that focus on applied social and policy research and improving the credit health of people of color. Collectively, we are passionate about contributing to work that nurtures communities and families to be knowledgeable, healthy, civically engaged, and prosperous.

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### ABOUT WORKING CREDIT

Founded in 2014, Working Credit is a national non-profit with headquarters in Chicago with a mission to partner with individuals and communities to interrupt structural racism by providing credit building education, counseling, and access to the products necessary to thrive financially. We help participants acquire the upfront knowledge, affordable products, and ongoing support they need to achieve and sustain prime credit scores, and to establish a safety net of available credit.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW  
Washington, DC 20024  
[www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

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