

★ "Optimistically forward looking
and grounded in solidarity."

—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

ADAPTED FOR
YOUNG READERS

THE SUM
OF US
HOW RACISM
HURTS EVERYONE
HEATHER MCGHEE

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The *New York Times* bestseller, now adapted for a new generation of young readers, leaders, thinkers, and activists. A groundbreaking call to action that examines how racism affects and harms all of us and how we need to face racism head-on, together.

McGhee examines how damaging racism is, and offers real solutions so all prosper. An expert in economic policy, McGhee draws lessons both from her work at a think tank and from her travels around the country talking to everyday Americans fighting for a more just and inclusive society. The people she meets prove how the stories we tell ourselves about race and belonging influence the policies that determine our shared economic future.

Only if we address the problems of racial and economic inequality can the future be prosperous for everyone. McGhee believes that all people, of all ages and all backgrounds, need to rethink their attitude toward race and strive together to create opportunities that benefit everyone. *The Sum of Us* provides hope that with understanding and open-mindedness, the world can be more united and equitable than it is today.



Discover
The Sum of Us
Podcast!



Photo © Andreas Burgess

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.

INTRODUCTION

McGhee describes a conversation with a woman named Rachel about the fact that she was never taught about the Tulsa Race Massacre, despite being educated in Oklahoma public schools her entire life. (p. x) Why is Rachel angry?

How do the stories we are told and the histories we learn affect our understanding of the world and of our own and other people's place in it?

CHAPTER 1

AN OLD STORY: THE ZERO-SUM HIERARCHY

Chapter 1 presents several mathematical, economic, and historical connections. McGhee presents the passing of the Voting Rights Act and the Fair Housing Act as opportunities for Black Americans to see and reach advancement, giving this marginalized group a chance at the American Dream. As they did so, however, the “economic rules changed to dim the lights on it, for everyone,” leading us to now.

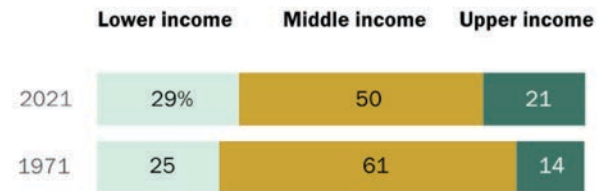
The Inequality Era we are currently in should be examined from the context of mathematics. Students can see percentages and ratios (that the CEOs of several major companies are currently paid a thousand times more than the average worker at their company, for example), but may not fully understand what those numbers mean in everyday life. By calculating the values (the actual salaries, for example), especially during lessons related to percentages and ratios, students will gain a firmer understanding of the true inequality of our time.

The Pew Research Center conducted similar research that illustrated the change in the middle class between 1971 and 2021.¹

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 331,449,520² Americans were in the labor force in 2020. Use this number to complete the following activities. (It is important to note that the data in the US Census Bureau's QuickFacts provides statistics for all states and counties and for cities and towns with a population of 5,000 or more. Therefore, small rural areas may not be accounted for in these numbers.)

Share of adults in U.S. middle class has decreased considerably since 1971

% of adults in each income tier



Note: Adults are assigned to income tiers based on their size-adjusted household incomes in the calendar year prior to the survey year. Shares may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (IPUMS).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Activity

- If “40 percent of adults were not paid enough to reliably meet their needs for housing, food, health care, and utilities,” how many Americans does that account for? (p. 3)
- Additionally, “only about two out of three workers had jobs with basic benefits: health insurance, a retirement account (even one they had to fund themselves), and paid time off for illness or caregiving.” How many Americans live without basic benefits? (p. 3)

Defining and Understanding the Zero-Sum Game

What is a zero-sum game? After reading chapter 1, discuss how the zero-sum game is upheld in your surroundings. Professors Sommers and Norton were unable to justify why white Americans feel threatened by “diminished discrimination against Black people.” (p. 5)

The concept of a zero-sum game has existed in American societies since colonization (“Why America's First Colonial Rebels Burned Jamestown to the Ground”). Vox producer Ranjani Chakraborty created this gif and subsequent tweets that provide a visual summary of the impact of colonization on the Indigenous people of the Americas, particularly through loss of land. The land stolen and the free labor provided by enslaved people made the colonizers rich, predicated the idea “that liberation or justice for people of color would necessarily require taking something away from white people.” (p. 7)

1 Kochhar, R., & Sechopoulos, S. (2022, April 21). *How the American Middle Class has changed in the past five decades*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved January 8, 2023, from [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/20/how-the-american-middle-class-has-changed-in-the-past-five-decades/](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/04/20/how-the-american-middle-class-has-changed-in-the-past-five-decades/)

2 Census Bureau, U. S. (2022). *U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: United States*. Retrieved December 26, 2022, from [census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/LFE041221](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/LFE041221)

Discuss how the norms and institutions created to empower and enrich white colonizers developed over time and how they continue to harm our society today.

Do you believe American society will ever entirely reject the idea of a zero-sum game? Why or why not?

Additional Resources

- [“When New York Wanted to Succeed”](#)

CHAPTER 2

RACISM DRAINED THE POOL

Too often, we hear how great America is without any acknowledgment of the dysfunction that lies beneath. Heather McGhee chose to research the “roots of our country’s dysfunction.” (p. 14) What are the benefits of introspection on a societal level? What could be the downside?

Before reading *The Power of Public Goods* in chapter 2, have students document what they know about the following:

- The Homestead Act of 1862
- The Great Depression
- The New Deal
- The GI Bill of 1944

After reading *The Power of Public Goods*, discuss how history lessons seldom center Black Americans. Therefore, few people outside the Black community are aware of how these acts impacted the Black community, further empowering the zero-sum idea. Discuss the idea that education as an institution further ingrains disparity.

Additional Resources

- [“Plunging into Public Pools’ Contentious Past”](#)
- [“How Slavery Became the Economic Engine of the South”](#)

CHAPTER 3

GOING WITHOUT

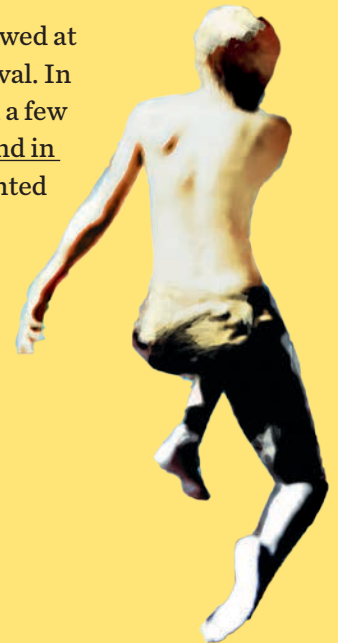
In chapter 3, McGhee states, “The flourishing of a society can in large part be measured by the education of its people. College attainment isn’t just beneficial for individuals; it’s vital for our democracy.” (p. 37) As more opportunities are presented to more people at younger ages—particularly social media-related opportunities, including easier access to the entertainment industry—why is it important for young people to consider their education as something beyond themselves?

Ginny Goldman, a veteran community organizer in Texas, shares a quote she offers her members: “There’s power in numbers. You’re the majority. You have to organize. You’ve got to get out. You’ve got to vote. You’ve got to be loud!” What do you want to “be loud” about? What steps can you take to organize? How can you contribute if you are not yet of voting age?

Chapter 3 discusses the stigma around receiving government assistance and how politicians pit communities against one another. How does education dispel such notions and discourage this kind of politics?

At the end of chapter 3, Solidarity Dividend is defined. Try to define it in your own words using an example from your community. How has the community worked together to achieve and strengthen these dividends? Do you know of any barriers keeping your community from achieving its goals?

Heather McGhee was interviewed at the Chicago Humanities Festival. In the interview, McGhee shared a few [examples of Solidarity Dividend in practice](#). These are also presented in future chapters. Are you aware of other examples? Consider researching some that have occurred since 2021 and beyond, both locally and nationally.



CHAPTER 4

IGNORING THE CANARY

In chapter 4, the author states, “In order to help craft new laws to change the world we inhabited, I needed to understand how government decisions had shaped it.” This speaks to the importance of understanding history and how it impacts the present and the future. Think back to your conversation about colonial laws from chapter 1, and discuss: “What is racism without greed?” (p. 69) How do the economic considerations of the few continue to perpetuate racism throughout our society? Are there examples in your community?

Janice Tomlin’s father used to tell her, “Drop a little good in the hole before you go.” She carried that saying with her throughout life. What does this quote mean to you? What steps can you take to “drop a little good in the hole before you go”?

CHAPTER 5

NO ONE FIGHTS ALONE

Chapter 5 provides a clear example of how the Solidarity Dividend is used to improve the lives of many. Unions benefit from the Solidarity Dividend, but it is often difficult to organize. Considering the number of barriers presented in the chapter and others you may be familiar with, what ideas and messages should be presented for individuals to realize the benefits of unions? What are the arguments against unions?

Members of unions often challenge nonmembers to think beyond race when voting to organize. Why is race so tangled in the union debate? Should it be? How do companies exacerbate the racial divide for their own benefit? How can white people learn about and commit to the Solidarity Dividend? Why is this important?

Additional Resources

- [“Where Do We Go from Here?”](#)
by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

CHAPTER 6

NEVER A REAL DEMOCRACY

Voter suppression is a constant and ongoing issue. Based on what you have read in chapter 6, what are some of the underlying reasons for voter suppression? Who benefits from voter suppression? Are there any stories of voter suppression in your community? If so, what are the ramifications of these efforts? Discuss any new legislation in your state concerning voting rights.

CHAPTER 7

LIVING APART

In chapter 7, the benefits of integration are discussed in the context of schools. Dr. Deborah Son Holoien cites several studies stating that “racially and ethnically diverse educational experiences resulted in improvements in critical thinking and learning outcomes, and the acquisition of intellectual, scientific, and professional skills.” (p. 129) When communities, including learning spaces, are integrated, more perspectives are shared, and deeper understanding can take place. How have you benefited from integrated learning spaces? What can you gain from being in diverse learning communities?

What discoveries did you make in chapter 7? How does this information shape your thoughts surrounding your school? Your community?

Additional Resources

- [NPR’s School Segregation Report](#)



CHAPTER 8

THE SAME SKY

Discovering how the environment is harmed by racism is alarming for some. Were you aware of the impact racism has on the environment? The key components presented in chapter 7 are also factors in the environmental issues surrounding racism. What environmental issues does your community face? How does racism factor into those issues?

Depending on where you live, you may have a different understanding of the Green New Deal. What perceptions do you have of the Green New Deal? You may need to do some research to deepen your understanding. Do you disagree with any aspects of the Green New Deal? If so, which parts and why?

CHAPTER 9

THE HIDDEN WOUND

After reading chapter 9, what is “the hidden wound” referenced in the chapter’s title? What keeps this wound from healing? How can you help begin the healing process?

CHAPTER 10

THE SOLIDARITY DIVIDEND

What are some benefits of small towns being repopulated by immigrants? Will these towns have a better chance of uprooting the zero-sum story by working together for economic prosperity for all? Why or why not?

Further Discussion

Discuss Heather McGhee’s role as she traveled the country investigating the stories shared throughout the book. Which parts of the book resonated with you? Have you discussed these sections with family or friends? Why or why not?

The drained swimming pool is a constant motif throughout the book. What does it symbolize?

This guide was created by Natalie Odom Pough, a veteran mathematics and social studies teacher and adjunct professor. With over seventeen years of experience in public and private schools and higher education, Dr. Pough has served as a middle school math and social studies teacher, assistant principal, college lecturer, and visiting clinical assistant professor. Dr. Pough’s research focuses on equitable mathematics instructional practices, preservice and in-service teacher preparation, and new teacher attrition. Her work has been featured in several publications, including Teaching Tolerance, Middle School Mathematics Lessons to Explore, Understand, and Respond to Social Injustice, NCTM’s Mathematics Teacher Learning & Teaching, and elsewhere.



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