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THE CURRENT: What steps is the Biden administration taking on racial equity?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

During its first week in office, the Biden White House has been rolling out a number of executive orders to start advancing its policy priorities. On Tuesday, one of these new orders highlighted the legacies of racially discriminatory housing policies and called on federal agencies to provide redress for past discrimination and protect equal access to housing opportunities going forward.

With us today to talk about this and the Biden administration's other goals for racial equity is Andre Perry, a senior fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program here at Brookings, and author of the recent book "Know Your Price: Valuing Black Lives And Property In America's Black Cities." Andre, thanks for talking to us today.

PERRY: Hey, thanks for having me.

PITA: With executive orders, some are very targeted action items that take immediate effect, like one recent Biden order that reversed the Trump administration's ban on transgender troops serving in the military. Others are broader, more statements of purpose. What can you tell us about this most recent executive order on housing equity issues?

PERRY: It's a little bit of both. It's targeted, looking at specific regulations that were enacted under the Trump administration or impacted by the Trump administration -- so they will be looking at preserving this community and neighborhood choice bill or legislation and housing legislation that certainly looks at zoning practices and other regulatory systems -- but it also widens the aperture, broadens the aperture a bit and really asks HUD to get to the business of creating fair and equitable housing systems. So, yes, it's very targeted, but in the main, Biden with this action introduces the value of equity into the housing department. And it's really been absent for the four years of Trump in terms of enforcement of very common discriminatory practices.

Now when you're talking about discrimination in housing, particularly as it pertains to HUD, you're really talking about discrimination against renters from landlords who don't want to pick or select a person because of the color of their skin. We're talking about incidents of harassment, which is certainly ongoing right now, because so many renters are unable to pay their rent. And so, you're seeing lots of incidents of harassment. But a lot of the complaints that are being found are not have not been heard, and so this policy reaffirms HUD to say, "hey, get to the business of enforcing and regulating your housing policies."

PITA: Thanks. I'd like to ask you to expand a little bit more on that. As you mentioned, this executive order focuses a great deal on HUD, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Fair Housing Act, which is a law that's been on the books since 1968. So, are the limits of the effectiveness of either the agency or the act a question of needing stronger enforcement, or is this really a question of a lack of will to enforce the existing policies, as you were saying?

PERRY: Yeah, I think it's more the latter. It's basically saying that we have got to enforce existing policies, and in some cases, they've been flouted for quite a long time, going back even before the Trump administration. We haven't seen this forceful of an ask from a president to demand equity. So, I think what it's doing is saying, let's not just look at the impacts of discrimination on housing, let's be proactive and find ways to create policies that are more inclusive in nature, so it's not just reactive. What I think this executive order is trying to do is trying to be proactive. And that's the major difference.

Now there's limits to what HUD can do. Know that housing involves many jurisdictions, different jurisdictions than the federal government. You're talking about local governments, state governments, you're talking about private industry, banking, all of which can be regulated by different bodies. The Federal Housing Finance agency; the OCC, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency; the Federal Reserve, these are all agencies that HUD doesn't necessarily have the levers to pull to enact change which would effectually eliminate discrimination in those areas. But it's a start say, "let's set the tone here" by reinforcing the laws and legislations currently on the books, but let's also be proactive and create anti-racist policy, policy that encourages inclusion and participation in fairness in the housing market.

PITA: On this idea of being more proactive and more broad-reaching across the federal government, another executive order that President Biden signed, one of the very first ones that he signed in fact, on the afternoon after his inauguration on January 20, was a broader call for the federal government to pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity, both for people of color and for other communities who have been historically underserved and marginalized. This was a much more sweeping executive order. What were some of the goals and ideas that were laid out in this one?

PERRY: This executive order really set the tone, even for the housing policy. Again, it introduced equity as a value that the federal government must act upon. And when you're talking about policy you really need to talk about budget. So, this particular policy called for the Office of Management and Budget to identify and report on the best approaches for measuring equity and examining the best practices for equity. So, it's charging a critical agency that touches every other agency to examine best practices and it's also asking them for this study the impact of discrimination on disenfranchised groups.

But we already kind of know the impacts of policies on disenfranchised groups. Many scholars at Brookings and worldwide have put out thousands of reports examining the impacts of discrimination. Darrik Hamilton and I just penned an op-ed a week after the release of this executive order, and it's titled, "Just as we score policies' budget impact, we should score for racial equity as well," and what this blog is asking for is, the same way we score bills as it pertains to their budgetary impacts, we should score bills to predict for discriminatory impacts or the impacts on racial and ethnic disenfranchised groups. And this is more again a more proactive stance to say, hey we're not just going to look retroactively at this problem. We're going to look ahead and say, these are the kind of policies we want and if a House bill, a Senate bill, goes through the wringer of the federal government and we detect that it is going to have a disproportionate impact on certain groups, then we should scrap that bill.

So, I like these executive orders. I particularly like this broader executive order, because it really does get at the plumbing, the infrastructure of policymaking, and if we do that, it will help these very specific, targeted executive orders, the ones that are targeted at particular departments like HUD, it will make that work all the more easier.

PITA: It does have phenomenally far-reaching repercussions. It could have a really incredible impact on the way that the federal government continues to do work going forward. Beyond this, what are some of the other next steps that you'd like to see the administration take in its first hundred days to address issues of racial equity.

PERRY: Well, I actually think Biden has said the word equity more than any other president I know of. And certainly more so than President Trump. The administration before that really avoided terms like equity. Now I would like to see Biden not just use equity or define equity as fairness. There's another definition of equity that's relevant here, and that's around the distribution of scarce resources. How do you distribute it, and at some point, you also need to deal with the financial side of that that issue. You know, how are we going to restore value that's been extracted by racism? How are we going to distribute resources when we see discrimination occurring? Are we going to give more race-based scholarships, are we going to build programs around race? Or are we going to have very targeted workarounds in order to achieve those ends?

So, we can't just talk about fairness, because that is more leaning on the side of regulation. We know that that investment in black and brown, indigenous and Asian-American communities is also needed. So, I'm hoping moving forward we can get to that business of investment, because it's not enough just to regulate. It's also important that we correct these wrongs and repair the wrongs by investing in these disenfranchised communities.

PITA: Alright. Well, Andre, thank you very much for being with us today and talking about this.

PERRY: Hey, thanks for having me.