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Race in the Heartland

Wisconsin's Extreme Racial Disparity

OCTOBER 2019

WISCONSIN'S EXTREME RACIAL DISPARITY uses data from *Race in the Heartland*, written by Colin Gordon. *Race in the Heartland* is a joint project of the Iowa Policy Project, Policy Matters Ohio, COWS, and the Economic Policy Institute that reviews the racial inequality in the Midwest. It is an update of COWS' series on the disparities between white and black Wisconsinites.

Introduction

Together with regional and national partners, COWS is releasing, *Race in the Heartland*, which provides critical regional, historical, and political context to help draw a more complete picture of the brutal racial inequality of the Midwest. The report highlights the distinct Midwestern structure of racial inequality:

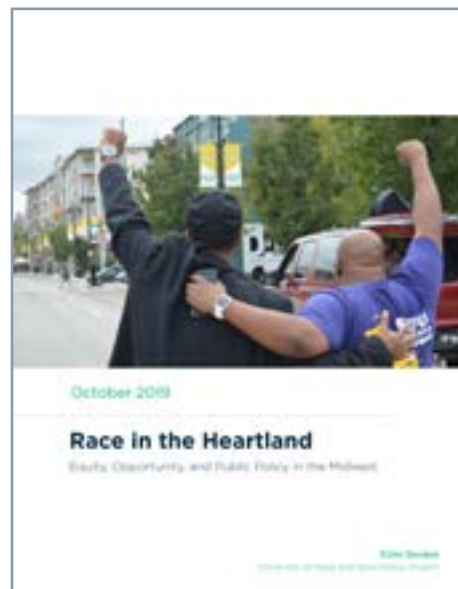
"...the Midwest is among the starkest settings for racial disparity or inequality. The result is a jarring juxtaposition: While Mid-western metros (Des Moines, Madison, Minneapolis) typically crowd the "best places to live" lists, they are also among the very worst places to live for African-Americans. In one recent analysis, ranking the states on an index of racial inequality, the twelve states of the Midwest census region (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) claimed eight of the bottom ten slots and swept the bottom five."

With this report, we focus on Wisconsin data from *Race in the Heartland* to focus in on and update our understanding of Wisconsin's racial inequality. On many measures, Wisconsin has the regrettable distinction of ranking among the worst states in the nation for racial inequality. Disparities among black and white residents of our state – spanning poverty, unemployment, educational attainment, and incarceration – have been documented consistently for more than a decade. Although activists and policymakers have increasingly focused on addressing these issues, they remain pressing.

This paper serves as a distillation of the Wisconsin data and policy ideas from *Race in the Heartland*. It also serves to update the data we have provided in our series on the state's racial inequality.

But more importantly, *Race in the Heartland* provides a careful historical context and a broadly informed policy framework that are critical to winning greater racial equity throughout this region. We encourage you to read the longer report and to be informed and, we hope, inspired by the information in it.

Read the full report at <https://www.epi.org/publication/race-in-the-heartland>.



The bottom line: Wisconsin's racial disparities are extreme.

Relatively good outcomes for Wisconsin's white population and worse-than-national outcomes for the African American population create a large divide. Extreme disparities are evident across a broad range of indicators. The gap between outcomes for white and African American residents is not isolated to any one area. Closing the gap will likewise require a broad focus and multifaceted approach.

Racial disparity in Wisconsin is not inevitable. Thirty years ago the state generated much better economic outcomes for blacks who, on average, did better in Wisconsin than the national average. But

across the last 40 years, opportunity and outcomes for black residents in the state have fallen below national averages and the racial divide has grown. (See COWS' State of Working Wisconsin, 2018 for data on wages by race over the last 40 years.)

We hope that Race in the Heartland and this Wisconsin report contribute to a sense of urgency and increased attention to the pressing issue of racial disparity. In particular, we hope to support and fuel the efforts of so many who are organizing, strategizing, and working to close Wisconsin's extreme gap. (See the text box on Resources.)

Resources on Racial Inequality in Wisconsin

Recent reports on racial disparity in Wisconsin have continued to highlight the severity of racial inequities as well as potential solutions for the state and localities within it.

The Roadmap to Equity: A Two Generation Approach to Reducing Racial Disparities in Dane County
by the Race to Equity Project, 2016.

<http://racetoequity.net/uploads/Roadmap-to-Equity.pdf>.

How Wisconsin Became the Home of Black Incarceration

by George Joseph for City Lab, 2016.

<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/08/how-wisconsin-became-the-home-of-black-incarceration/496130/>.

Race for Results: Wisconsin's Need to Reduce Racial Disparities

by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2014.

<http://kidsforward.net/assets/RaceForResults.pdf>.

The Wisconsin Racial Disparities Project

by Pamela E. Oliver – Professor of Sociology at UW-Madison, 2016.

<https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/soc/racepoliticsjustice/>.

From Birth to the Ballot Box: Wisconsin's Racial Disparities Across the Lifespan

In Wisconsin, racial disparity is evident in any life stage. From birth through schools and into the labor market, voting booth, and criminal justice system, extreme racial disparity is evident. We look across the life course in the data below.



INFANT MORTALITY: 4TH WORST

In Wisconsin, black babies in the state are three times more likely to die than white babies. The white infant mortality rate is 5.2 per 1000 births, compared to a rate of 15.7 for black babies. This is the fourth most disparity outcome among states. Further, at 15.7 per 1000 births, the mortality rate of black babies is the worst in the nation. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 16)

CHILD POVERTY: 4TH WORST

The federal poverty line provides a consistent benchmark to identify families living with insufficient resources to meet basic needs. The poverty line is adjusted for family size, and in 2017 it was set at \$24,600 for a family of four (two adults and two children).

One of every three black children in Wisconsin live in poverty, a rate that is 3.5 times higher than that of white children. Wisconsin's disparity of child poverty by race is the fourth worst in the nation. (Source: American Community Survey 2017)

8TH GRADE MATH SCORES: WORST

Wisconsin's 8th grade white students' average scores on math skills assessments are well above the national average. Black students in the state score well below the national average. The distance between black and white outcomes on the test is the highest in the nation. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 4)

OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS: 2ND WORST

In Wisconsin, black students are 7.5 times more likely than white students to face out-of-school suspension. That difference is second worst in the nation; only Illinois has higher disparity. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 5)

BACHELORS DEGREES: WORST

In Wisconsin, 14 percent of black adults hold a Bachelors Degree while 30 percent of whites do. With whites more than twice as likely as blacks to hold this level of education, Wisconsin posts the highest racial disparity in the nation. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 6)

INCARCERATION: 2ND WORST

Stark racial disparity in the US criminal justice system is well-known. But in this nation of extreme disparity, Wisconsin's racial disparity is nearly unmatched. Black Wisconsinites are more than 11 times more likely to be incarcerated than are their white neighbors. Only in New Jersey is incarceration disparity more extreme. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 15)

From Birth to the Ballot Box, continued



EMPLOYMENT: WORST

One measure of economic opportunity is the employment to population ratio for workers ages 25-54 (often called “prime age” workers). This measure helps measure the opportunity and engagement of groups of workers.

In Wisconsin, 85 percent of prime age whites are employed, compared to 61 percent of blacks of the same age. Thus, the state’s racial disparity employment of prime age workers is the worst in the nation. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 9)

UNEMPLOYMENT: WORST

Adults actively seeking work but without a job are “unemployed.” In 2017, nearly 9 percent of Wisconsin’s African Americans were unemployed compared to just 3.3 percent of whites. Black Wisconsinites were nearly three times more likely to be unemployed than white Wisconsinites, giving our state the worst unemployment disparity in the country. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 10)

INCOME: 3RD WORST

The median white household has annual income of just over \$59,500 in Wisconsin. The median African American household annual income, \$29,000, is a bit less than half the white level. Only two states post greater black/white inequality in household income. (See Race in the Heartland, Figure 12)

HOME OWNERSHIP: 8TH WORST

In Wisconsin, more than 70 percent of white families own their homes. At the same time, just 27 percent of black families do. That difference is the 8th largest disparity in home ownership rates by race in the nation. (See Race in the Heartland Figure 14)

VOTER PARTICIPATION: 3RD WORST

Even at the voting booth, disparity is evident and extreme in Wisconsin. In the 2016 election, 74 percent of eligible white voters showed up to the polls. That same year, just 47 percent of eligible black voters cast their ballots. The gap between white and black voter participation in Wisconsin was exceeded only by North and South Dakota. (See Race in the Heartland Figure 18)

Policy Recommendations

“Race in the Heartland” provides a full suite of detailed policy recommendations to address these disparities. We offer a very brief overview here:

Equal Opportunity in Education

Equal opportunity requires strong and equitable care and learning. High quality child care and strong public investment in education from 4K to the college degree is essential to closing racial disparity. In addition to a strong system, the public education system should close racial disparities. Within schools, school assignment and school boundary policies, training and retaining a diverse teaching workforce, and implementing alternative discipline models aimed at more preventative and positive interventions are all strategies to close help the gap.

Pay Equity

Closing the racial wage gap requires interventions on at least three fronts. First, we need to close the opportunity gap and the benefits of addressing educational disparities will ripple forward. Second, we need to raise the wage floor for all workers. And third, we need to address deep and pervasive patterns of labor market discrimination and racism.

Making Work Possible

Work-life balance—the ability to meet both employment and family obligations or expectations—depends upon an array of private and public resources and policies, including paid family leave, affordable high quality childcare, and fair scheduling of work hours. Supporting work-life balance is critical especially for lower-wage workers who do not generally have access to strong leave or other benefits.

Restraining the Safety Net

While the leanest public assistance is still in the South, Midwestern states have made deep cuts to our programs of support. We need a more robust and generous safety net, with fiercer attention to racial equity.

Combatting Discrimination

Ongoing patterns of discrimination in housing, employment, criminal justice, voting, and other areas need to be both addressed with strong attention to differential racial impact of policies.

Saving Places

Overcoming racial disparity requires focusing resources and supports on specific places. A first step is investment in policies that improve neighborhoods: inclusionary zoning, focused subsidies on transit-accessible, mixed-skill employment opportunities; or investment in public goods in those areas. We also need to make it easier—for those who choose—to get out of troubled or failing neighborhoods.

Equity & Security

We need to put in place mechanisms that will enable African Americans to build wealth through savings and assets. It is also important not just to help families build savings but also to remove the obstacles and penalties faced by many low-income families. Finally, we need to address the disproportionate advantages accrued by white families (especially wealthy white families) under current tax law.

Conclusion

Race in the Heartland, and this focus on Wisconsin data from it, make absolutely clear the extent to which racial inequality is a defining feature of Wisconsin. However, racial inequality in Wisconsin is neither natural nor inevitable. There are many steps that states can do take to begin to close the gap; these steps will by necessity be a mix of universal and targeted approaches.

Race in the Heartland lays out an ambitious state program for greater racial equity which “views racial equity as a fundamental goal.” The approach focuses on the political and policy roots of insecurity and inequality that shape the lives of most working families – policies that can help raise all working people’s wages. At the same time, the agenda attends to policies that are focused on reducing and addressing the discrimination and racism that have isolated Wisconsin’s black community.



About COWS

COWS is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. Through our various projects, we work with cities around the country to promote innovation and the implementation of high road policy. COWS is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.