

WISCONSIN'S EXTREME RACIAL DISPARITY

VAST CHASM SEPARATES WHITES AND AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE STATE
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INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin has the regrettable distinction of ranking among the worst states in the nation in terms of racial equality. Various aspects of the disparity – from education to jobs and income to incarceration – have been documented consistently for more than a decade. These disparities are gaining increasing attention from activists and policy makers. Even so, and despite considerable local and statewide efforts to close these gaps, too few in Wisconsin understand the way that Wisconsin's level of racial inequality is, in fact, dramatically more pronounced than in other states.

In this paper, we update our 2013 report Wisconsin's Extreme Racial Disparity. As in that report, we provide here a range of data from public sources to make the racial disparities in the state clear. Brutal inequities in the state span measures of poverty, unemployment, educational attainment, and incarceration.

WISCONSIN'S RACIAL DISPARITY IS EXTREME. Relatively good outcomes for Wisconsin's white population and worse-than-national outcomes for the African American population create a large divide. **EXTREME DISPARITY IS 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.** Indeed, thirty years ago the state generated much better economic outcomes for African Americans, a population group that did better in the state than the national average.¹ Opportunities and outcomes have diverged, however, to the disturbing chasm that now confronts the state.

We hope that by updating this litany of disparity we can help contribute to a sense of urgency and increased attention to these issues. In particular, this report seeks to support and fuel the efforts of so many who are organizing, strategizing and working to close the gap.

¹ For a comparison of labor market indicators between blacks and whites since 1979, see *State of Working Wisconsin 2016* (<http://www.cows.org/state-of-working-wisconsin-2016>)

Wisconsin Targets Racial Disparity

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.

For more information see:

1. [The Roadmap to Equity: A Two Generation Approach to Reducing Racial Disparities in Dane County](#), by the Race to Equity Project, 2016.
2. [How Wisconsin Became the Home of Black Incarceration](#), by George Joseph for City Lab, 2016.
3. [Race for Results: Wisconsin's Need to Reduce Racial Disparities](#), by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2014.
4. [The Wisconsin Racial Disparities Project](#), by Pamela E. Oliver - Professor of Sociology at UW-Madison, 2016.

ECONOMIC DISPARITY

UNEMPLOYMENT

Adults actively seeking work but without a job are “unemployed.” In this way, unemployment rates measure economic opportunity – can workers find jobs? The answer to that question is widely disparate by race in Wisconsin, as the second row on Table 1 makes clear.

In 2015, nearly 12 percent of Wisconsin’s African American workers were unemployed – actively seeking work but unable to find jobs. Just 3.9 percent of white workers were unemployed in 2015. Blacks were nearly four times more likely to be unemployed than whites. Only Connecticut and Minnesota generate a higher level of racial disparity in unemployment.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

When adults are working or actively looking for a job, they are “in the labor force.” The labor force participation rate, measured as the share of adults that are in the labor force, provides a sense of how connected a given population is to economic opportunity and jobs. In Wisconsin, racial disparity in labor force participation is the second highest in the nation (Table 1, line 4). Only Illinois posts higher disparity.

Labor force participation rate for African Americans in Wisconsin is 61 percent while whites post a rate of 67 percent. The disparity between these two rates of labor force participation is measured by the ratio of black to white labor force participation, a ratio of .91. The Wisconsin black labor force participation rate lags 9 percent behind the white rate.

Table 1

RACIAL DISPARITY IN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY 2015: WISCONSIN VS OTHER STATES

	Wisconsin					Wisconsin vs Other States			
	State overall	Blacks	Whites	Black/White Ratio	Ranking among US states (1 is worst)	Best		Worst	
						State	Ratio	State	Ratio
Total population*	5,771,337	362,290	4,965,524						
Unemployment rate†	4.6	11.6	3.9	2.97	3	Tennessee	1.44	Minnesota	4.90
Labor force participation*	66.9%	61.2%	67.0%	0.91	2	Washington	1.12	Illinois	0.90
Median household income*	55,638	29,223	58,232	0.50	3	West Virginia	0.75	Minnesota	0.46
Poverty rate: all families*	7.9%	31.0%	5.8%	5.34	2	Texas	1.61	Minnesota	6.38
Poverty rate: children under 18 years old*	16.4%	44.2%	11.6%	3.81	3	Texas	1.36	Minnesota	4.59
Individuals with no health insurance*	5.7%	8.6%	4.9%	1.76	7	California	0.79	Iowa	2.84

* American Community Survey 2015 one-year estimates

† Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey 2015 data

The vitality of our economy, the prosperity of our state, and the health and well-being of all our communities are each threatened by the racial disparity that plagues Wisconsin.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Comparing the median income between white and black households provides another measure of racial disparity in the state. The median white household has annual income of just over \$58,200 in Wisconsin. The median African American household annual income of about \$29,200 is about half the white level (see Table 1, line 5). Only two states – Minnesota and Louisiana – post greater black/white inequality in household income.

POVERTY: ALL FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

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 is currently \$24,300 for a family of four (two adults and two children). The standard of living for families in poverty is quite low; some experts find it too meager to be meaningful. Even so, it is a common standard that helps make the challenge of very low income clear.

In Wisconsin, three of ten African American families live in poverty. In absolute terms, this level of poverty is second highest in the nation. Only Iowa has a higher rate of African American poverty (32.2 percent). Compare this to the 6 percent of the state's white families that live in poverty. Wisconsin's black families are 5.3 times more likely than white families to live in poverty: that disparity in poverty outcomes is the second highest in the nation. (See Table 1, line 6.)

Turning our attention to children under 18 years old is more troubling. Almost half of African American children in the state live in poverty. Black children in the state are 3.8 times as likely as white children to live in poverty. This is the second highest racial disparity in the nation. Only Minnesota posts more extreme racial disparity in child poverty rates. (See Table 1, line 7.)

LACK OF HEALTH INSURANCE

Wisconsin has traditionally had high levels of health insurance coverage both because our employers are more likely to provide health insurance and because our public programs have provided a strong safety net of insurance for those outside the employer provided system. Still, even in health insurance, racial disparity is evident.

The population in Wisconsin that goes without health insurance is 5.7 percent. This is a relatively low proportion of the population; only 6 states have lower rates. Notably, this is one area where Wisconsin's racial disparity, while significant, is not among the very worst in the nation. African Americans are 1.8 times more likely than Wisconsin whites to go without health insurance (8.6 percent vs. 4.9 percent). Ranked by that ratio, Wisconsin has the seventh largest black/white gap in health insurance. (See Table 1, line 8.)

EDUCATIONAL DISPARITY

Black and white differences in educational attainment and outcomes are dramatic in Wisconsin. These indicators are critical, both because they are the result of economic disparity and a predictor of future disparities as well. Here, and presented in Table 2, we focus on three key indicators, though others show similarly stark differences.

HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION

Looking first to the adult population (age 25 and older), we show the share of that population that has completed high school. The white population in the state performs fairly well in this area, with almost 93 percent of white adults in the state completing education through a high school degree or more. This compares to about 82 percent of African Americans in the state.

The ratio between African American and white rates of high school completion in the adult population is the second most divergent in the nation. Only Minnesota shows greater racial disparity. (See Table 2, line 1.)

Table 2

RACIAL DISPARITY IN EDUCATION: WISCONSIN VS OTHER STATES

Index	Wisconsin					Wisconsin VS. Other States			
	State Overall	Black	White	Black/White ratio	Ranking among US states (1 is worst)	Best		Worst	
						State	Ratio	State	Ratio
Percentage of population 25 years and older with high school degree or more*	91.4%	81.6%	92.8%	0.88	2	Texas	1.07	Minnesota	0.85
Percentage proficient on state assessment in math in eighth grade (2014-15) [†]	40.8%	9.7%	47.6%	0.20	1	Virginia	0.75	Wisconsin	0.20
Graduation Rate (2014-15) [†]	88.4%	64.1%	92.9%	0.69	1	Alabama	0.96	Wisconsin	0.69

* American Community Survey 2015 one-year estimates

[†] Department of Education Data available at <http://eddataexpress.ed.gov/>;

EIGHTH GRADE MATH SCORES

We turn our attention now to the public school system, where standardized testing to all students provides another strong indicator of racial disparity in the state. Standardized eighth grade math scores provide a way to compare racial disparity across the nation. In the 2014-15 school year, Wisconsin posted the highest disparity in the country in terms of the share of students who were “proficient” on this math test. White students in Wisconsin were five times more likely than black students to be proficient on the test. That disparity was the most extreme in the nation. (Table 2, line 2).

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

Wisconsin’s racial disparity in graduation is worst in the nation. Again this is partly due to the good results for whites in our state. Indeed, at almost 93 percent, Wisconsin has the third highest white graduation rate in the nation (only exceeded by Texas and New Jersey). At the same time, Wisconsin’s African American graduation rate is 64 percent, meaning that nearly one in three black students in the state do not graduate on schedule, while nearly all white students do. No other state posts such a substantial disparity in graduation outcomes.

INCARCERATION DISPARITY

A recent report by Ashley Nellis of *The Sentencing Project*² details incarceration rates by state. Using data from the 2014 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics collection, Nellis found Wisconsin to have the second highest ratio of black to white incarceration in the country. With a ratio of 11.5 black prisoners to 1 white prisoner, Wisconsin is second only to New Jersey, with a ratio of 12.2 to 1 (see Table 3 for the five best and worst states by racial disparity in incarceration).

Table 3
DISPARITY IN INCARCERATION RATES, 2014

<i>State</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Ratio</i>	<i>Ranking</i>
Worst 5 States				
New Jersey	94	1140	12.2	1
Wisconsin	221	2542	11.5	2
Iowa	211	2349	11.1	3
Minnesota	111	1219	11	4
Vermont	225	2357	10.5	5
Best 5 States				
Hawaii	246	585	2.4	50
Mississippi	346	1052	3	49
Georgia	329	1066	3.2	48
Kentucky	431	1411	3.3	47
Alabama	425	1417	3.3	46

Source: Nellis, 2016, *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons* (<http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>)

² Ashley Nellis, “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons” (2016), The Sentencing Project, available at <http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>.

CONCLUSION

These statistics underscore that the state has a number of challenges to face. Wisconsin's first challenge is to direct increasing attention to the scale of racial disparity in the state, as too few in our state understand the size of the chasm. But a second critical challenge is to also understand that this disparity is not immutable. In the 1970s Wisconsin was a relatively good state for African Americans. As a state, we can make choices that will help close the current economic and educational gaps. The third challenge is to act in our schools and communities to extend opportunity to all Wisconsin residents.

For decades, diverse leaders across Wisconsin have taken on the evident racial disparity in the state. But that fight needs to be extended and embraced by more. At COWS, we hope this document will not discourage people, but rather help support efforts for equality and contribute to growing awareness and policy approaches to confront our leading status in racial disparity. There is no silver bullet to build greater equity in Wisconsin. But informed leaders must develop policies and strategies with closing this gap in mind. Whether the focus on funding and resources for kids in schools, or two generation strategies that help kids with school even as they extend economic opportunity to parents, or new approaches to juvenile justice, we hope that these data will help support leaders across the state as they seek to grapple with and close the gap.

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.