

Inequalities still facing african americans today



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According to the 2010 census, African Americans are less likely to marry or even graduate from college than Caucasian Americans, and black households on average earn \$18, 094 less per year than white households. The profound income and educational inequalities between African Americans and Caucasians in America today are strongly associated with the country's history of slavery and racial discrimination. Though slavery was eliminated over 145 years ago, its practice, along with ensuing racial discrimination has had a direct influence on African American culture and opportunity throughout the past century. Multiple social institutions such as Jim Crow Laws, segregation, intimidation and discrimination have created cumulative disadvantages for many generations of African Americans. There has been a domino effect to the extent that despite great strides in racial equality, the lasting consequences of slavery and racism are still apparent today. Although legal barriers to equality have been eliminated with the civil rights movement and affirmative action, the lingering social, economic, and educational effects of earlier discrimination have been difficult to overcome because of the numerous disadvantages compounded through history that African Americans must face.

Due to a long history of unequal educational opportunity, African Americans still lag behind other groups in their academic success. For example, only 20% of all African American students leave high school ready for college, compared with 37% of Caucasians (Noonan 40). When the slaves were freed in 1865, almost none of them had any formal education and therefore were at an extreme disadvantage to the generally educated whites at that time.

When these slaves were freed, they did not know how to read or write. Due to extraordinary racism

and the immediate need for money, education was unattainable and manual labor became their priority. This situation changed very little in the decades following emancipation. This was noted by the Richmond Planet, an African American newspaper, in 1936. It stated that “ In the United States today there are one million Negro children of school age that are not attending, because of the inaccessibility of schools” (Richmond Planet). This is significant because several generations of African Americans missed out on education just as the country was becoming increasingly industrialized and education increasingly important. Essentially, they were set back many years, remaining stagnant while the rest of the country progressed.

Although many people recognized the need for a thorough education to attain a higher quality of life, this was not possible considering most African American’s need to work following emancipation. People such as W. E. B. Du Bois recognized the unfortunate contradiction in this situation, noting, “ here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers. Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down. Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence” (W. E. B. Du Bois). This statement is extraordinarily insightful as the impact of educational disparities can be felt by society as a whole. Du Bois’ statement still holds true today as educational disparities impact all areas of society.

Since emancipation both formal and informal segregation has also greatly impacted the educational opportunities of African Americans. Perhaps the most unfortunate Supreme Court ruling in African American history was Plessy vs. Ferguson, which allowed for “separate but equal” schools. However, this was never the case. John Ogbu’s article in the Journal of Negro Education states that before 1954, “Schools for Blacks were characterized by inadequately Trained and overworked teachers; by different and inferior curriculum; and by inadequate funding, facilities, and services. In the south, the school terms for black students were shorter than those for whites” (Ogbu 50). This impacted not only the current generation of African Americans but all following generations as a student’s academic success is correlated with their parent’s academic experience.

Not only did African Americans have to fight the law in order to gain equal education, but they also had to deal with racial violence and intimidation. For example, after Brown vs. Board of Education ruled that segregation is illegal in 1954, a group of students in Arkansas nick-named the Little Rock Nine had to be escorted by guards when attending a white school. This can be seen in Figure 1. The threat of physical violence most certainly impacted these and other African American students pushing the boundaries of segregation, ability to perform in a classroom setting.

The informal segregation that still exists to some degree today is just as harmful. Many inner city schools have a much higher percentage of African American students. These schools tend to be larger and perform worse in comparison to other schools. In one Harvard study it was discovered that “a majority minority school was five times as likely to have weak promoting

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power [graduation rate] as a majority white school” (Orfield 36). In these neighborhoods there is a concentration of poverty that greatly impacts a school’s performance. If the majority of students are dealing with poverty or personal issues many are not focusing on education. In addition many students must work in order to help out their family, leaving less time for school work. It is obvious that economic and educational inequalities are extremely interrelated. Not only did the educational disadvantages African Americans faced hurt their chances of gaining economic equality but they also faced many other purely economic obstacles.

The fact that African Americans were thrown into a money economy without any resources following emancipation put them at an immediate disadvantage. In order to make ends meet, they were forced into low paying and often exploitative jobs such as sharecropping. Sharecroppers were taken advantage of and usually accumulated prodigious debts. Merchants then took advantage of the in debt farmers and made it harder and harder for them to make money and pay off their debt.

African Americans have also faced disadvantages in job opportunity due to outright discrimination, violence and intimidation. African Americans received intimidation by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. The KKK “ employed extensive violence and terror to thwart reconstruction and undermine black freedom.” In addition, black codes specified what jobs African Americans could hold and outlined strict conditions of their employment. These unrealistic conditions can be seen in the Texas 1866 Black Codes which state, “ In case of sickness of the laborer, wages for the time lost shall be deducted, and, when the sickness is feigned, for purposes

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of idleness and also, on refusal to work according to contract, double the amount of wages shall be deducted for the time lost and, also, when rations have been furnished, and should the refusal to work continue beyond three days, the offender shall be reported to a Justice of the Peace or Mayor of a town or city and shall be forced to labor on roads, streets and other public works, without pay, until the offender consents to return to his labor" (GWU). Though these African Americans were technically free their employment conditions often bordered those of slavery. These strict rules which do not even permit one to get sick made it practically impossible for African Americans to gain any sort of economic stability for many years. In the past century social mobility has been excruciatingly hard for African Americans because they started at the very bottom of the economic ladder and had little opportunity to move up. While many people argue that the decrease in income inequality since the turn of the century means that African Americans are catching up economically there still exists a large gap in wealth by race. There is an important difference between income, which has risen among African Americans, and wealth which mostly has not. Wealth is accumulated over time and consists of valuable assets people own and control, not necessarily money. While most whites start out adulthood with some sort of inheritance or property ownership, " Right now almost 80 percent of black kids begin their adult lives with no assets whatsoever" (Oliver). Since the majority of African Americans are entering adulthood without financial stability they are less able to grow wealth to pass along to their children. African Americans are less able to take financial risks in order to grow wealth such as investing or purchasing a house. In addition, it has

also been proven that blacks are less likely to have a home loan application accepted, and that blacks are given higher interest rates. (Oliver 17)

African Americans have been disadvantaged in business, which is another way to grow wealth. Black run businesses and entrepreneurs could not thrive in the poor socioeconomic conditions in inner city African American neighborhoods. “ While whites and other ethnic groups could do business with blacks, whites, and whomever else they pleased, black business was prohibited from entering into any but all - black markets”(Oliver 46). Since most African American businesses were restricted to poorer neighborhoods their ability to make a profit was reduced. These poor neighborhoods have made it very hard even to today for African Americans to move up socioeconomically. Clearly a large part of African American economic struggle today has stemmed from reduced opportunity to grow wealth through investments, home ownership or business.

Despite apparent advances in racial equality there has been a decline in economic equality in recent years. “ In 2004, a typical black family had an income that was only 58 percent of a typical white family’s. In 1974, median black incomes were 63 percent of those of whites” (msnbc). The increase in the economic gap between Whites and African Americans can easily be explained. In general, there has been a growing gap between the higher class and the lower class. Since African Americans often are lower on the socioeconomic scale, they have been the victim of a generally more impoverished lower class. Due to their poverty, in places like Detroit where the economy got very bad, blacks couldn’t afford to move out of these cities where there was little job opportunity. In addition, since the 1970’s, our <https://assignbuster.com/inequalities-still-facing-african-americans-today/>

economy has evolved in such a way that higher education is more important than it ever has been in order to achieve success. This has hurt blacks because they have always had lower education rates and as society changed it became much harder for them to attain success without higher education. As msnbc puts it, “ Black families have also been hurt by the decline of manufacturing jobs - the same jobs that helped propel many white families into the middle class after World War II” (msnbc).

In recent history, other societal forces have impacted gains in economic and educational equality such as increasing numbers of single parent households, trouble with the criminal justice system, and different expectations in American society. More African American households are run by single parents, and since marriage has been proven to give many economic benefits, blacks are at an economic disadvantage due to their lower marriage rates. (Oliver 122)

In addition, African Americans are more likely to be incarcerated than whites are. Ginwright shows that African Americans are unfairly treated in the justice system. He found that in Los Angeles County during 1990's, “ When charged with the same violent crime, blacks were nine times more likely to be sentenced; for drug offenses they were sent to prison 48 times more often than whites charged with same crimes”(Ginwright 4). Jail time and criminal records certainly make it harder for the African American to get a good job and often criminal offenses cause them to get fired from their job.

Lastly, there have been other attempts to explain differing motivations in education. One theory proposed by John Ogbu is that some African

Americans in society simply feel defeated by history and that, “ Black Americans, in particular, have witnessed many events in their history that have left them with the feeling that they simply cannot trust White Americans and their institutions” (Ogbu).

These societal problems compound upon each other. There is a vicious cycle where educational inequalities lead to economic inequality which holds back educational achievement. The simple truth is that this starts long before a child even enters school and “ children in low-income housing hear fewer words than children in more affluent households” (Noonan 19). Though some have managed to escape this cycle many have not. The lingering question is what can be done?

Perhaps it is simply a matter of time and that slavery was such a disruptive force that it may take much longer to reverse the damage done by slavery and many years of racial discrimination. Despite the many disadvantages they have faced, specifically unequal educational opportunity, segregation and outright discrimination, limited opportunities to accumulate wealth along with other societal forces; African Americans have been extremely resilient, managing to attain an impressive level of equality. However, there is much work to be done and tracing these compounded disadvantages through history allows us to analyze and understand the barriers facing African Americans in society today.

Figure 1:

Unknown " Little Rock Nine." Photograph. 1957. Accessed February 22, 2011. <http://www.ipelf.com/jefferson-thomas-of-the-little-rock-nine-dies/221424/>

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