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**STRUCTURAL RACISM  
AND COMMUNITY BUILDING**

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JUNE 2004

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE ON COMMUNITY CHANGE

## STRUCTURAL RACISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

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The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change<sup>1</sup> is a forum in which leaders working on some of the country's most innovative and promising efforts to revitalize poor communities can meet, share lessons they are learning, and identify and seek solutions to common challenges.

Since 1997, the Roundtable has been focusing on how the problems associated with race and racism in America affect initiatives aimed at poverty reduction in distressed urban neighborhoods. The Roundtable has explored how race shapes the social, political, economic, and cultural institutions of our society, and how those dynamics produce significant and ongoing racial disparities in the well-being of children, families, and communities. The work also has an applied dimension that describes how to incorporate racial equity into social and economic development work.

The premise behind all of the Roundtable's work on race is that adopting a more race-conscious approach to community building and social justice work will:

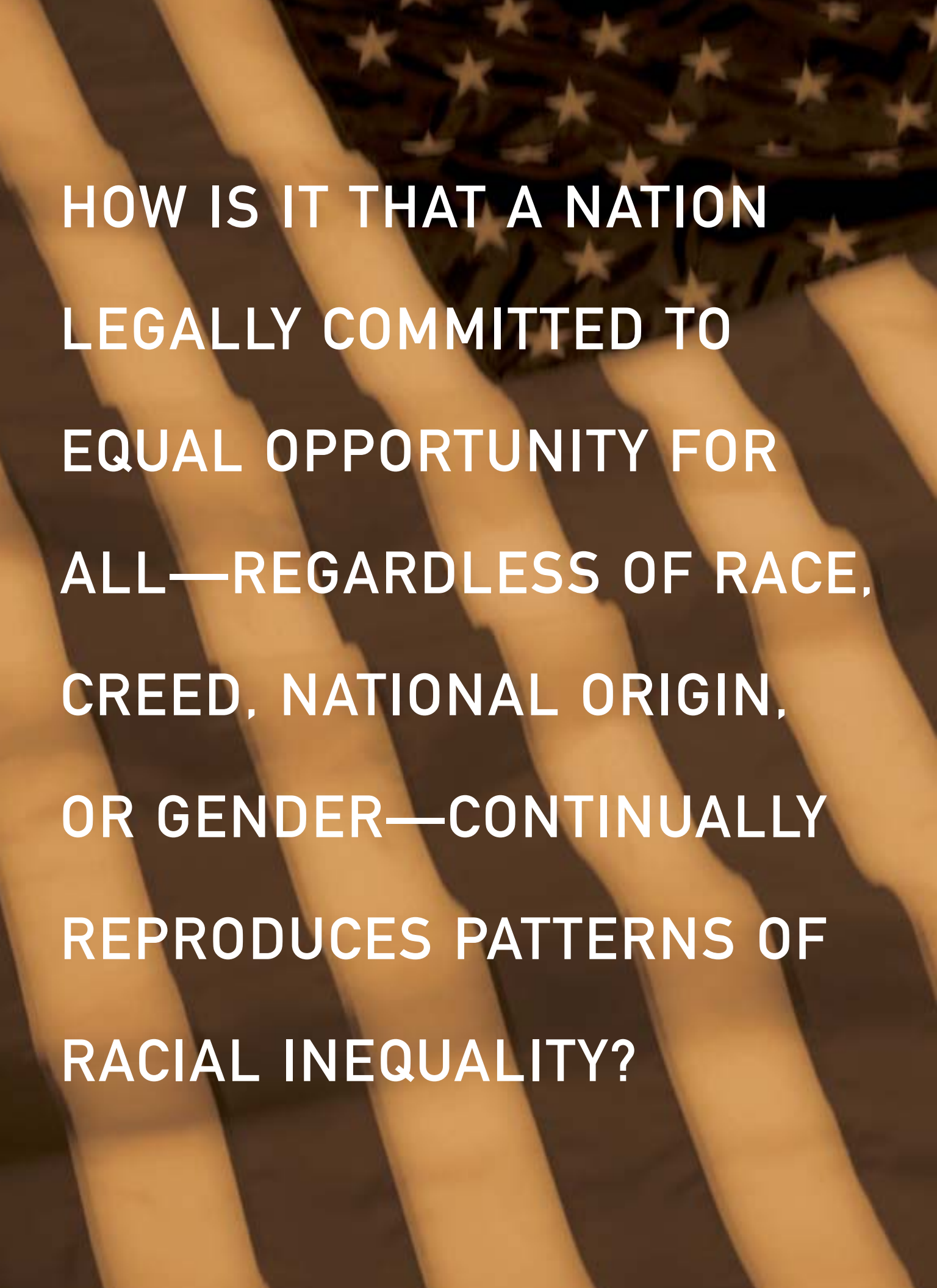
- **broaden our understanding of the causes of the problems of poverty, inequity, and community distress in America;**
- **clarify our understanding of the forces that maintain the racial disparity status quo and constrain the potential success of strategies for change;**
- **identify how and why an emphasis on racial equity might enhance the possibility of success of current and future social change efforts;**
- **highlight new approaches to poverty reduction and social justice that could complement and reinforce existing activities.**

This publication represents an effort to summarize and share the Roundtable's perspective on racial equity with a broader audience.

### AUTHORS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication is the result of collective learning by staff of the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change and advisors to the Project on Structural Racism and Community Revitalization. The authors are Keith Lawrence, Stacey Sutton, Anne Kubisch, Gretchen Susi, and Karen Fulbright-Anderson. But the messages have been developed with the invaluable input of Lisette Lopez, Manning Marable, Khatib Waheed, Andrea Anderson, and J. Phillip Thompson. The authors wish to thank them as well as the many members of the Roundtable and colleagues too numerous to mention for their feedback along the way as these concepts have been developed. The staff and cochairs of the Roundtable thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its financial and intellectual support of this work. We also thank the Mott Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which have also supported this work.

1. Formerly called the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives.

The background of the image is a close-up, slightly blurred view of the American flag, showing the stars and stripes in warm, golden-brown tones. The text is overlaid in a clean, white, sans-serif font.

HOW IS IT THAT A NATION  
LEGALLY COMMITTED TO  
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR  
ALL—REGARDLESS OF RACE,  
CREED, NATIONAL ORIGIN,  
OR GENDER—CONTINUALLY  
REPRODUCES PATTERNS OF  
RACIAL INEQUALITY?

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE TO POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE

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**R**ace and poverty are still strongly linked in America. Data from the 2000 U.S. Census show that a person of color is nearly three times more likely to be poor than a white person. Similarly, a neighborhood that is largely made up of people of color is more likely to be poor than a predominantly white neighborhood, and racial minorities are overrepresented in the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods.

These facts alone make clear that our national effort to promote a just society and vibrant democracy is not likely to succeed without an honest and unflinching appraisal of the role that race plays in all of our lives. At this moment in history, it is both appropriate and important to ask ourselves the following questions:

- **How is it that a nation legally committed to equal opportunity for all—regardless of race, creed, national origin, or gender—continually reproduces patterns of racial inequality?**
- **Why, in the world's wealthiest country, is there such enduring poverty among people of color?**
- **How is it that in our open, participatory democracy, racial minorities are still underrepresented in positions of power and decision making?**

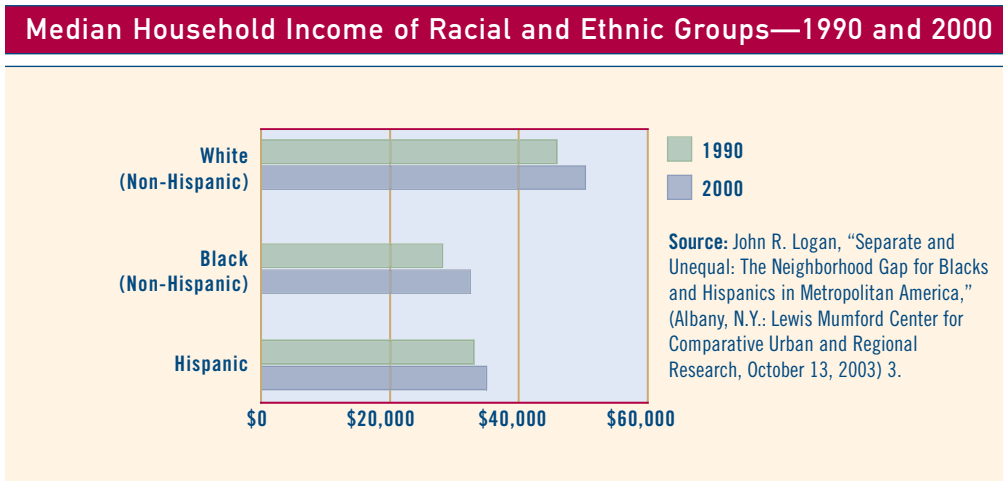
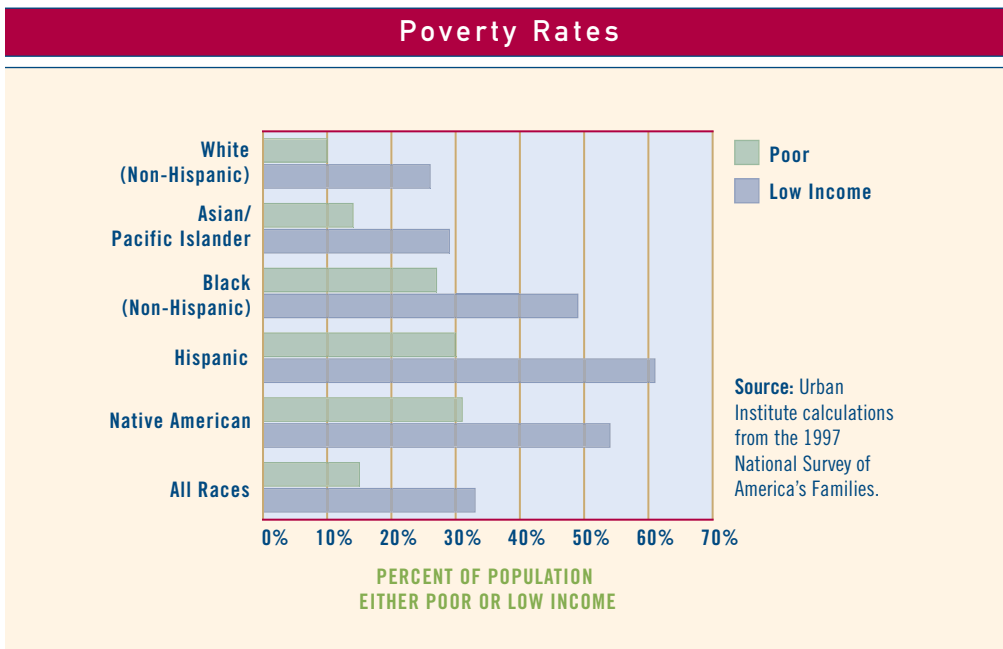
Focusing on these questions might seem to be a distraction, or worse, overwhelming, for those working to reduce poverty and build strong communities. To some, they may even seem unnecessary, since there are African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians who are highly successful, and many whites who are desperately poor. Yet the successes of a few individuals of color cannot obscure the overall pattern of opportunity and benefit that is defined by race: white Americans remain significantly more likely than racial minorities to have access to what it takes to fulfill their inborn potential to succeed in life, and to be rewarded fairly for their efforts.

Without fully accounting for the historical and ongoing ways in which racial dynamics produce inequities between whites and people of color, the social justice and antipoverty field risks pursuing strategies that are misguided, incomplete, or inappropriate to the challenge. The pages that follow review how race shapes political, economic, and cultural life in the United States, and offer insights for integrating a racial equity perspective into the work of community building and socioeconomic justice.

## THE RACIAL DISPARITY PICTURE

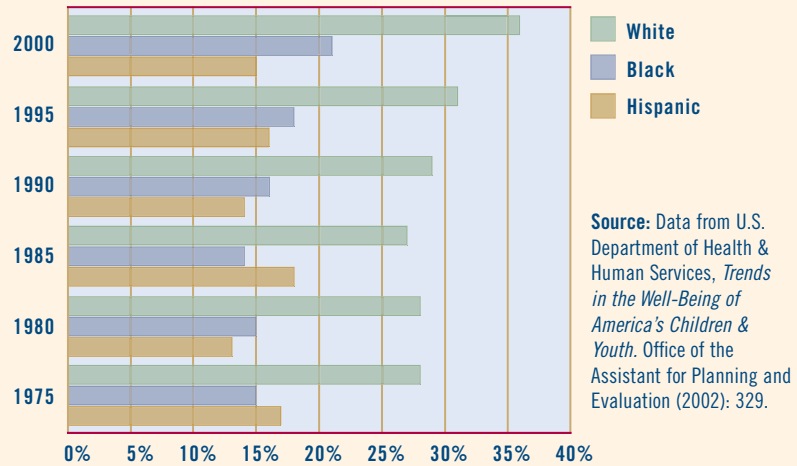
The statistical portrait of the American population broken out by race reveals persistent disparities between people of color and white Americans in almost every quality of life arena, the most basic being income, education, and health.

The racial patterns represented in the following figures are typical. Other indicators of social and economic status present a similar picture. In some arenas, racial disparities have shrunk over time, but the correlation between race and well-being in America remains powerful.

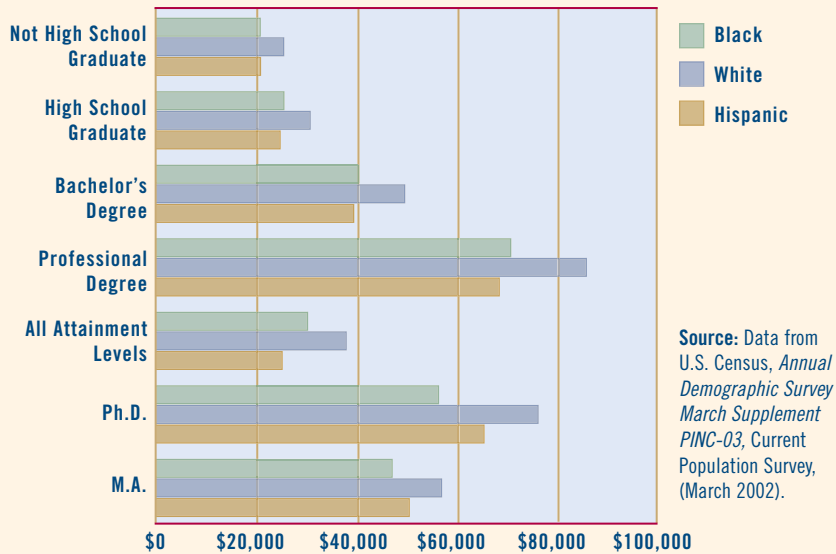




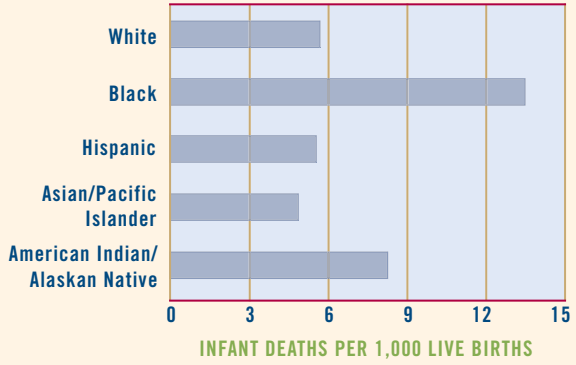
## High School Graduates Ages 25–29 Who Have Received a Bachelor's Degree or Higher



## Median Annual Earnings by Educational Attainment for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers 25 Years and Older—2001

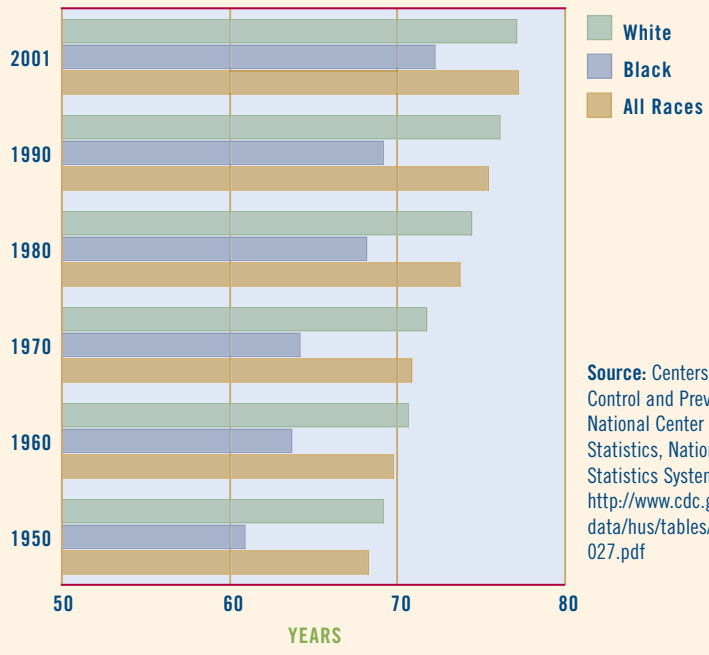


## Infant Mortality—2000

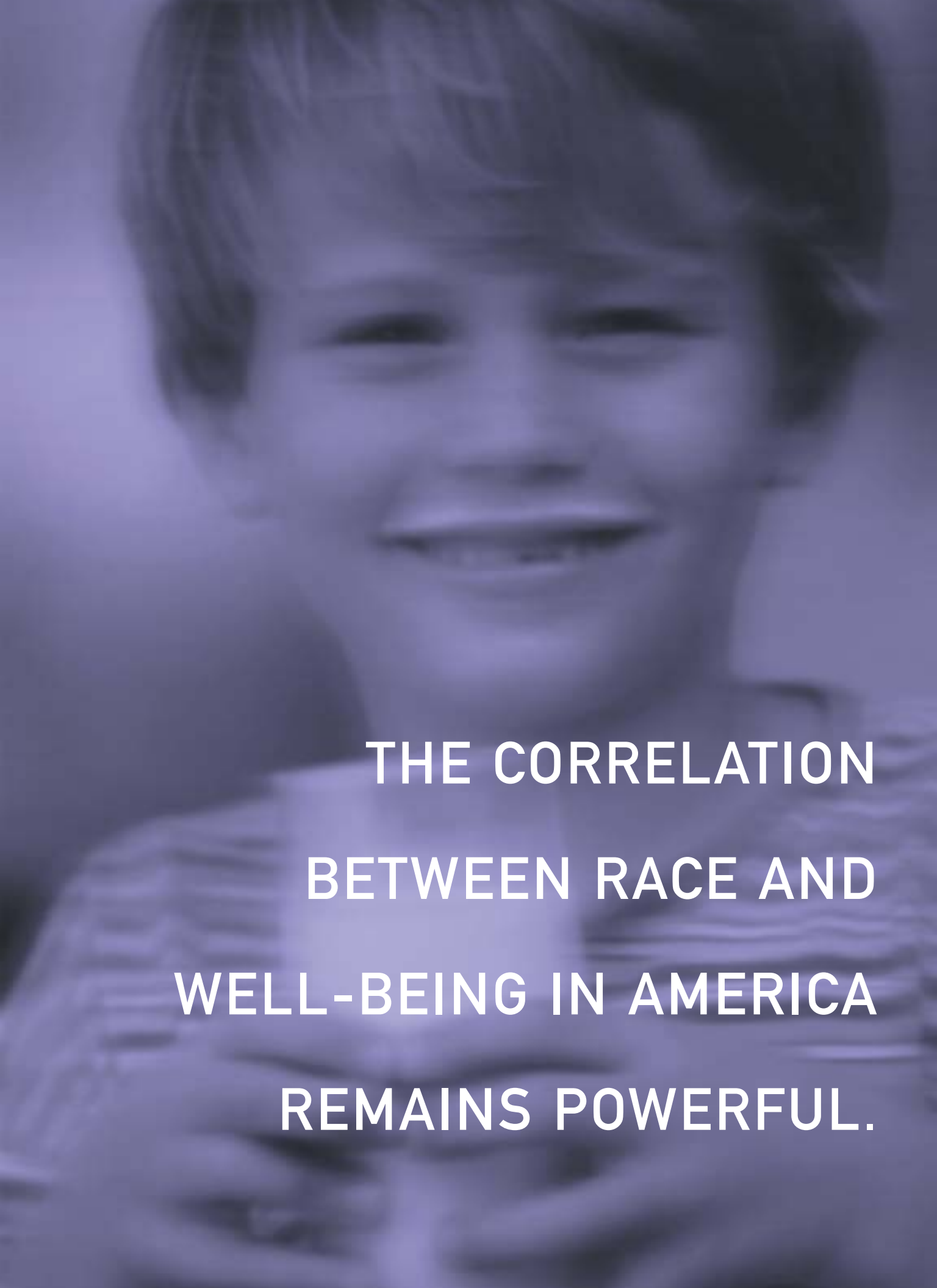


**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Linked Files of Live Births and Infant Deaths, 2003. <http://www.childstats.gov/ac2003/tbl.asp?id=4&iid=125>

## Life Expectancy at Birth, by Race



**Source:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, 2003. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/tables/2003/03hus027.pdf>

A young child with dark hair is smiling warmly at the camera. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. Centered over the lower half of the child's face and upper torso is white, bold, sans-serif text.

**THE CORRELATION  
BETWEEN RACE AND  
WELL-BEING IN AMERICA  
REMAINS POWERFUL.**

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## THE MEANING OF RACE

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Scientific studies conclude that race has no biological meaning or significance. The gene for skin color is linked with no other human trait. The genes that account for intelligence, athletic ability, personality type, and even hair and eye color are independent of the gene for skin color. In fact, humans are far more alike than they are different, and share 99.9 percent of their genetic material.

Race does, however, have social and political significance. Social scientists call the term *race* a “social construct,” that is, it was invented and given meaning by human beings. Why? Answering that question requires looking at the creation of racial categories in history, and what those categories have produced over time.

In the particular case of the United States, two primary racial categories—white Europeans and all nonwhite “others”—emerged early in our nation’s history. Beginning with the expropriation of Native American lands, a racialized system of power and privilege developed and white dominance became the national common sense, opening the door to the enslavement of Africans, the taking of Mexican lands, and the limits set on Asian immigrants.

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“Millions of Americans still think and talk about race in terms of fixed biological or genetic categories. A strikingly different way to view the concept of ‘race’ is as an unequal relationship between social groups based on the privileged access to power and resources by one group over another. Race is historically and socially constructed, created (and recreated) by how people are perceived and treated in the normal actions of everyday life.”

Manning Marable, *The Great Wells of Democracy: The Meaning of Race in American Life*. (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2002), 22.


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Over time, beliefs and practices about power and privilege were woven into national legal and political doctrine. While committing to principles of freedom, opportunity, and democracy, America found ways to justify slavery, for example, by defining Africans as non-human. This made it possible to deny Africans rights and freedoms granted to “all men” who were “created equal.” Only when white Southerners wanted to increase their political power in the legislature did they advocate to upgrade Africans’ legal status to three-fifths of a human being. Thus, from the earliest moments in our history, racial group identities granted access to resources and power to those who were “white” while excluding those who were “other” legally, politically, and socially.

Expressions of racism have evolved markedly over the course of American history, from slavery through Jim Crow

through the civil rights era to today. Racism in twenty-first century America is harder to see than its previous incarnations because the most overt and legally sanctioned forms of racial discrimination have been eliminated. Nonetheless, subtler racialized patterns in policies and practices permeate the political, economic, and sociocultural structures of America in ways that generate differences in well-being between people of color and whites. These dynamics work to maintain the existing racial hierarchy even as they adapt with the times or accommodate new racial and ethnic groups. This contemporary manifestation of racism in America can be called “structural racism.”

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**WHITENESS IS THE  
“DEFAULT SETTING”  
FOR RACE IN AMERICA.**

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## STRUCTURAL RACISM

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Many of the contours of opportunity for individuals and groups in the United States are defined—or “structured”—by race and racism. The term *structural racism* refers to a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time.

The concept of structural racism may not immediately resonate with everyone in our diverse society. Most Americans are proud of how far our nation has come on civil rights. Moreover, when most of us think of racism in the United States, two images generally come to mind. First, we see racism as a historical phenomenon, something that was part of America’s past, especially slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Second, racism is often understood as a dynamic between whites and African Americans. Few readily filter the histories of Native Americans, Chinese, Latino and ethnic European immigrants through a structural racism prism.

Structural racism, however, touches and implicates everyone in our society—whites, blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans—because it is a system for allocating social privilege. The lower end of the privilege scale, characterized by socioeconomic disadvantage and political isolation, has historically been associated with “blackness” or “color.” Meanwhile, the upper end of the scale that gives access to opportunity, benefits, and power has been associated with “whiteness.” Between the fixed extremes of whiteness and blackness there is a fluid hierarchy of social and political spaces that are occupied by different groups of color at various times.

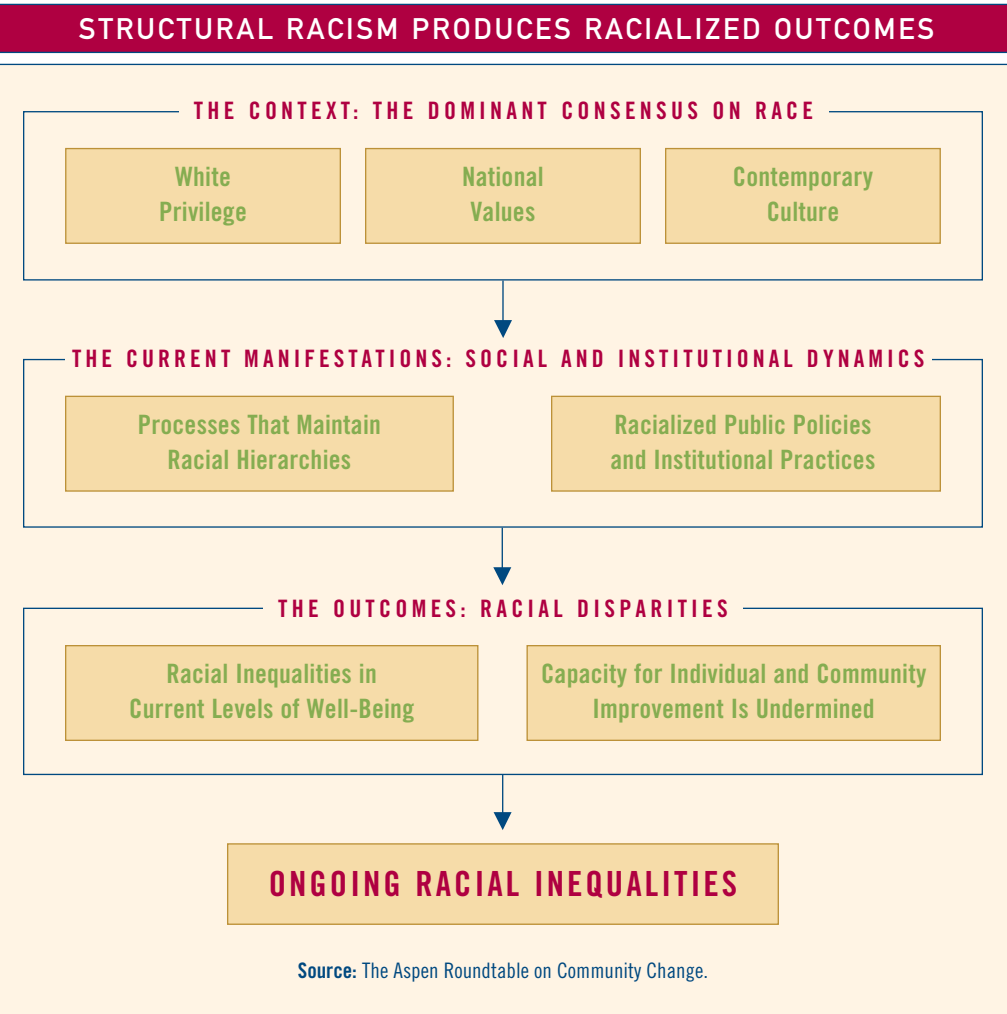
Racial group status can change, but not easily. A group that is subordinated in one era can move closer to power and privilege in another era. In the past century, groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews in America started low on the socioeconomic and political ladder and “became white” over time. More recently, “model minority” status has been given to some Asian groups, allowing group members to gain access to some of the privileges associated with whiteness.

It must be stressed that position and mobility within the racial hierarchy, which in some ways resembles a caste system, cannot be determined by the nonwhite or subordinated groups. How those who are at the lower end of the privilege scale perceive themselves, or how they behave, is less significant to their racial privilege status than broadly held perceptions about them. European immigrants to nineteenth-century America could not “become white” by simply adopting the mainstream habits and declaring themselves its members. They had to be allowed access into occupational, educational, residential, and other settings that had previously excluded them. In other words, racial and ethnic group position reflects the dominant group’s exclusionary or inclusionary exercise of political, economic, and cultural power.

The structural racism lens allows us to see more clearly how our nation’s core values—and the public policies and institutional practices that are built on them—perpetuate social stratifications and outcomes that all too often reflect racial group sorting rather than individual merit and effort. The structural racism lens allows us to see and understand:

- **the racial legacy of our past;**
- **how racism persists in our national policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations;**
- **how racism is transmitted and either amplified or mitigated through public, private, and community institutions;**
- **how individuals internalize and respond to racialized structures.**

The structural racism lens allows us to see that, as a society, we more or less take for granted a context of white leadership, dominance, and privilege. This dominant consensus on race is the frame that shapes our attitudes and judgments about social issues. It has come about as a result of the way that historically accumulated white privilege, national values, and contemporary culture have interacted so as to preserve the gaps between white Americans and Americans of color. We now turn to a discussion of each of these.

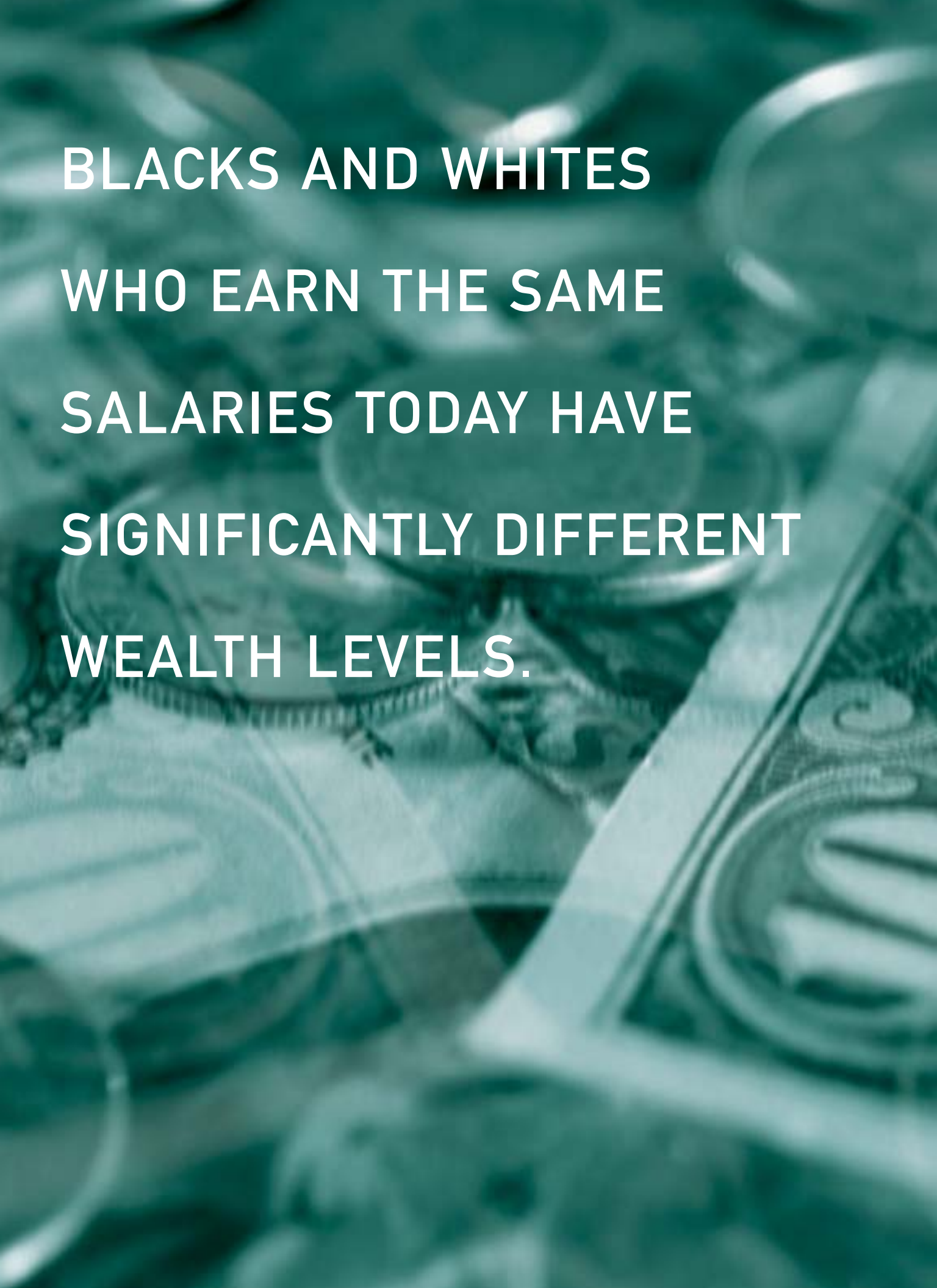




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**THE CONTEXT:  
THE DOMINANT CONSENSUS ON RACE**

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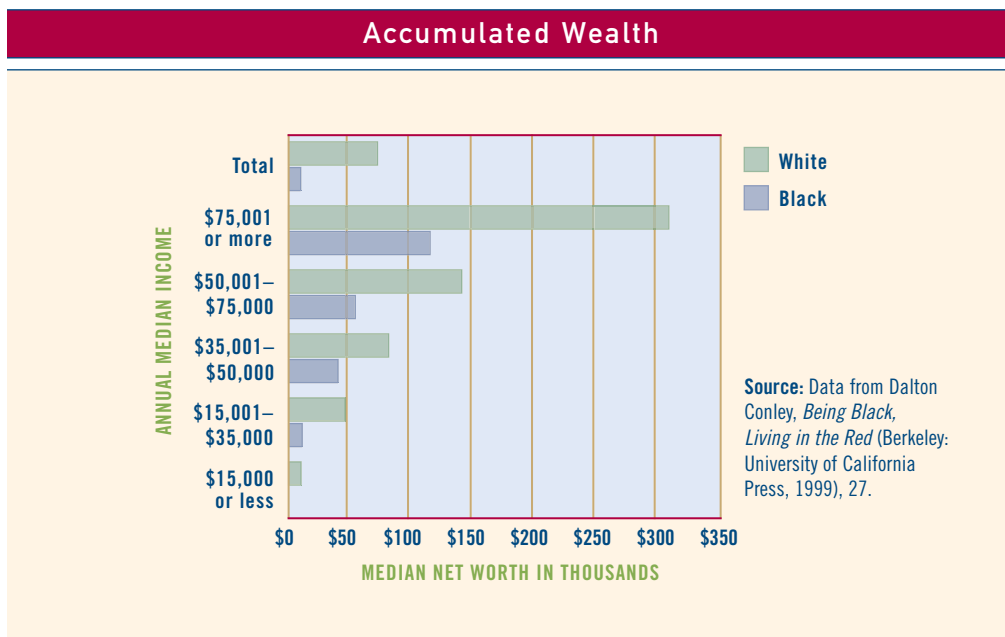


**BLACKS AND WHITES  
WHO EARN THE SAME  
SALARIES TODAY HAVE  
SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT  
WEALTH LEVELS.**

## WHITE PRIVILEGE: THE LEGACY AND ENDURING POWER OF OUR RACIAL HISTORY

**W**hite privilege refers to whites' historical and contemporary advantage in all of the principal opportunity domains, including education, employment, housing, health care, political representation, media influence, and so on. Whites' advantage in each one of those areas is significant, but the accumulated benefit across all domains adds up to a pattern that has concentrated and sustained racial differences in wealth, power, and other dimensions of well-being.

An example of the way in which historical privilege has a legacy that carries through to today can be found in comparing average levels of wealth accumulation among groups. Blacks and whites who earn the same salaries today have significantly different wealth levels (capital assets, investments, savings, and so on). As the following chart demonstrates, whites earning between \$50,001 and \$75,000 have a wealth level that is two-and-one-half times as high as their black counterparts.



What explains this difference?

Significant numbers in the current generation of adult white Americans, along with their parents, grandparents, and other forebears:

- benefited from access to good educational institutions;
- had access to decent jobs and fair wages;
- accumulated retirement benefits through company programs, union membership, and social security;
- benefited from homeownership policies and programs that allowed them to buy property in rising neighborhoods.

By contrast, significant numbers in the current generation of adults of color, along with their parents, grandparents, and other forebears:

- came from a background of slavery or labor exploitation;
- were limited by de jure or de facto segregation;
- were generally confined to jobs in areas such as agricultural, manual, or domestic labor, and excluded from jobs that allowed them to accumulate savings and retirement benefits;
- were discriminated against by lending institutions and were excluded from owning homes in economically desirable locations through redlining and other policies.

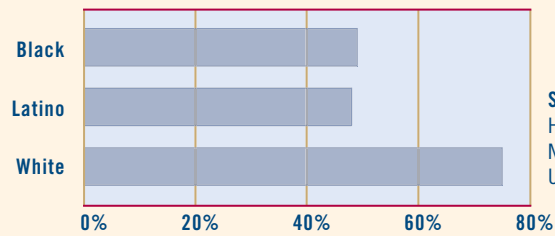
In other words, at pivotal points in U.S. history when socioeconomic factors produced abundant opportunities for wealth and property accumulation—such as the G.I. Bill and home mortgage subsidies—white Americans were positioned to take advantage of them, whereas Americans of color were systematically prohibited from benefiting from them.

And we can see that these inequalities are likely to continue for some time by examining statistics about one of the major avenues for wealth accumulation—homeownership—and about access to credit, which is a key stepping stone on the path to homeownership.

Lack of homeownership has social effects beyond wealth accumulation. Adults who do not own homes do not have access to home equity that might be tapped for important investments, such as education for their children. Parents who have not had a chance to pay off a mortgage may become dependent on their children in their retirement years and lack a valuable material resource to pass on to their children. In addition, research has shown that regardless of socioeconomic status children of homeowners are less likely to drop out of school, get arrested, or become teen parents than are children of families who are renters.<sup>2</sup>

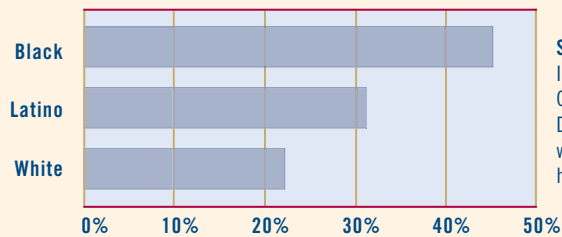
2. Richard K. Green and Michelle White, *Measuring the Benefits of Homeowning's Effect on Children* (Chicago: University of Chicago, Center for the Study of Economy and State, 1994).

## Home Ownership Rates—2002



Source: Joint Center for Housing Studies, "State of the Nation's Housing," Harvard University (2003): 16.

## Home Purchase Loan Application Denial Rates By Race—2000



Source: Federal Financial Institutions Examinations Council, Home Mortgage Disclosure Act Data. [www.ffiec.gov/hmcpr/hm00table3.pdf](http://www.ffiec.gov/hmcpr/hm00table3.pdf)

Race has been and continues to be a valuable social, political, and economic resource for white Americans. It grants them easier access to power and resources and provides them better insulation from negative prejudgments based on physical features, language, and other cultural factors than their nonwhite counterparts. For whites, whiteness is the "default setting" for race in America; it is the assumed color of America. But because the American mind-set is deeply invested with strong beliefs about opportunity, we tend to overlook the built-in advantages that whites have in most competitive areas.

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## NATIONAL VALUES

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The backdrop of core American values also sets the stage for our national consensus on race. We take great pride in our national values of personal responsibility and individualism, meritocracy, and equal opportunity, and we assume them to be race neutral. We understand these values to have the following significance:

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“As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. . . . I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

. . . whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us.’

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage . . . is kept strongly inculcated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all.”

Peggy MacIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom* (July–August 1989): 10–12.

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### **PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

**AND INDIVIDUALISM:** The belief that people control their fates regardless of social position, and that individual behaviors and choices determine material outcomes.

**MERITOCRACY:** The belief that resources and opportunities are distributed according to individual talent and effort, and that social factors—such as access to inside information or powerful social networks—do not play a significant role.

**EQUAL OPPORTUNITY:** The belief that arenas such as employment, education, and wealth accumulation are “level playing fields” and that race is no longer a barrier to progress in these areas.

In a perfect world, with all else held equal, the ideal represented by these national values would translate directly into the reality of daily experience for all Americans. In our imperfect world with its many inequities, however, these values inevitably lead to different outcomes for different individuals.

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“. . . a child born in the bottom 10 percent of families ranked by income has a 31 percent chance of ending up there as an adult and a 51 percent chance of ending up in the bottom 20 percent, while one born in the top 10 percent has a 30 percent chance of staying there.”

Alan B. Krueger, “The Apple Falls Close to the Tree,” *New York Times*, 14 November 2002.

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While we treasure notions of individual accomplishment, meritocracy, and equal opportunity, in fact, individuals are members of families, communities, and social groups, and their individual trajectories will be affected—though not necessarily totally determined—by the overall status of their group. Those born into disadvantaged communities cannot be blamed for the insufficient education they receive in their local public schools

and the consequent challenges they face as unskilled job seekers. Where one starts out in life affects where one ends up to a greater degree than our national sense of economic mobility would have us believe.

Ironically, when one member of a minority group “makes it” and rises to the highest positions in public administration, the judiciary, or the corporate world, that person’s success is taken as evidence that the system is working, that our national values do indeed create an equal playing field and opportunities. But of course, a star performer from any racial or ethnic group is just that: a star performer. While we should applaud the fact that a highly gifted person of any racial group should be allowed to succeed in this country, we need to pay attention to the averages. On average, a person with a resource-rich background has a greater likelihood of succeeding than one without. And many of those resources are correlated with race in this country.

A structural racism lens does not call for the abolition of our national values. It calls instead for the rearticulation of those values in ways that recognize and take into account, rather than ignore, the historical experiences of all Americans on these shores. The tension here is that our core national values emphasize social, economic, and political philosophies that are centered on the individual, while the structural racism framework illuminates the ways unequal group outcomes are reproduced.

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## CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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While national values help to organize broad views about what is fair, just, and equitable, Americans rely on many other common sense cues as they make everyday judgments about other individuals and groups. These cues, which consist of bits of information about racial, ethnic, gender, immigrant, and other groups, accumulate and become stereotypes that are reinforced in multiple aspects of the mass culture.

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“The frames that we rely on are embedded deep in our psyche such that understandings are involuntary. Therefore, to interpret individual actions or images differently, or outside of dominant frames, requires significant work in recoding.”

Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1998).

“Cultural representations include images, symbols, and language used not only to describe but also to explain the social, economic and political position of a group of people or place.”

Christopher Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate and Resistance in New York City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

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Hispanics. In contrast, only 4 percent of the same white survey respondents believed that other whites preferred to live on welfare. The survey also reported that whites were more than twice as likely as blacks to believe that blacks “lacked commitment to strong families.” Similar stereotypes were reported by whites throughout the survey as evidenced by the percentage who concurred with statements that blacks “tend to be violence prone” (51%), “lazy” (40%), or “intelligent” (27%).<sup>3</sup>


While information and entertainment media, art, language, religion, and commerce have the potential to contribute to progressive social change, they are too often avenues for stereotype formation and reinforcement. Television and print media have a particularly strong influence on American culture, and they act both to contribute to negative generalizations about people of color and to perpetuate the invisibility of people of color in legitimate venues, prestigious positions, and ordinary life. Television coverage often

Over our nation’s history, many of the negative stereotypes associated with various demographic categories have become dominant and enduring. They now operate as the default cultural representations, or “frames,” that organize many of our ways of understanding and interpreting individual behavior and group tendencies. Moreover, whether or not they are accurate, these cultural representations have become integral parts of the societal crucible in which public policies and institutional practices are fashioned and refined.

With respect to group attitudes, for instance, the 1990 General Social Survey found that 60 percent of whites surveyed believed that blacks preferred to live on welfare, and 46 percent believed that the same was true for

3. Data from General Social Survey Cumulative Data File (1990). <http://sda.berkeley.edu:7502/D3/GSS02/Doc/gso2.htm>.





**“RACE” IS AN UNEQUAL  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
SOCIAL GROUPS BASED ON  
THE PRIVILEGED ACCESS TO  
POWER AND RESOURCES BY  
ONE GROUP OVER ANOTHER.**

represents blacks in circumstances of crime, lasciviousness, or on issues related to affirmative action, which may contribute to the maintenance of racial stereotypes.

- **Crime coverage: A black defendant is four times as likely to have a mug shot shown on local TV than a white defendant, twice as likely to be shown physically restrained, and twice as likely to have his/her name displayed on the screen.**<sup>4</sup>
- **Youth portrayals: Youth of color appear in crime news 52 percent of the time while white youth appear 35 percent of the time. By contrast, white youth were more likely to appear in health and education stories (13%) than youth of color (2%).**<sup>5</sup>

Racial stereotyping is unhealthy for whites as well as blacks. Negative stereotyping of people of color can produce an unfounded sense of entitlement and superiority among whites, and an internalized sense of failure or hopelessness among people of color. Psychological studies of African American adolescents have demonstrated that consistent

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“Representations play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of representations determines not only how outsiders think about a group but how group members, or insiders, think about themselves.”

bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

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negative imaging contributes to negative self-acceptance and mental health problems.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, the attitudes that manifest themselves at the individual level can also aggregate all the way up into a national consensus about race that, in turn, influences policies, practices, and representations. Experimental studies of the effects of news stories on the public suggest that television images have the potential to catalyze and reinforce opinions about public

policies that contribute to racially disparate outcomes: “A mere five-second exposure to a mug shot of African American and Hispanic youth offenders [in a 15-minute newscast] raises levels of fear among viewers, increases support for ‘get tough’ crime policies, and promotes racial stereotyping.”<sup>7</sup>

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4. Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

5. Lori Dorfman, “The Roles of Speakers in Local Television News Stories on Youth and Violence,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (summer 1998).

6. Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, et al., “Racial Identity, Maternal Support, and Psychological Distress among African American Adolescents,” *Child Development* 73, no. 4 (2002): 1322.

7. F. D. Gilliam Jr. and S. Iyengar, “The Superpredator Script,” *Nieman Reports* 52 (1998): 46.

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**THE CURRENT MANIFESTATIONS:  
SOCIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS**

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## PROCESSES THAT MAINTAIN RACIAL HIERARCHIES

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Our history, national values, and culture are the backdrop for understanding structural racism. But it is important to recognize that the racial status quo is maintained in part because it adapts and changes over time. Racism in America has its own particular dynamics that sometimes move us forward toward greater racial equity, sometimes move us backward, and sometimes change the nature of the problem itself. The two most important of these dynamics are “racial sorting” and “progress and retrenchment.”

### RACIAL SORTING

*Racial sorting* refers to both the physical segregation of racial and ethnic groups and the psychological sorting that occurs through social and cultural processes and stereotyping.

Although federal legislation barring racial discrimination in key domains such as housing, employment, and public accommodation was passed in 1964, racial and ethnic groups are still largely isolated from one another in contemporary America. Analyses of the 2000 census show that despite increasing racial and ethnic diversity in national-level statistics, the country remains as segregated as ever. Most visible is the consistent relationship between race and residence: white Americans live in neighborhoods that are, on average, more than 80 percent white and no more than 7 percent black, while the average black or Hispanic person lives in a neighborhood that is about two-thirds non-white.<sup>8</sup> Because a person’s place of residence is strongly linked to access to schools, business districts, jobs, and so on, this residential “hypersegregation” translates directly into racial sorting in education, commerce, employment, and other public venues.

Physical proximity to other racial groups may not necessarily create social equity, but hypersegregation is clearly problematic. When groups do not interact, their knowledge of one another is less likely to be based on personal experience and more likely to be informed by hearsay, media portrayals, and cultural stereotypes. Lack of genuine interpersonal contact contributes to a psychological distancing from those who are perceived as “other,” which, in turn, undermines opportunities for trust, empathy, and common purpose to develop. This psychological sorting reinforces and compounds the physical and geographic sorting process. Face-to-face interaction among diverse groups, on the other hand, helps to reduce prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

In theory, physical and psychological racial segregation does not need to equate with advantage and disadvantage. But in the United States, historically and today, racial

8. John Logan, “Separate and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan America” (Albany, N.Y.: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, October 13, 2003), 3.

9. Nathalie F. P. Gilfoyle et al., *Brief Amicus Curiae of the American Psychological Association in Support of Respondents*. In the Supreme Court of the United States, *Barbara Grutter, Petitioner v. Lee Bollinger et al.*, Respondents, and *Jennifer Gratz and Patrick Hamacher, Petitioners v. Lee Bollinger et al.*, Respondents (2003): 14.

homogeneity of neighborhoods has been highly correlated with income and overall well-being. For the most part, neighborhoods that are predominantly white enjoy better schools, lower crime, better transportation access, better environmental conditions, and so on. Moreover, this racialized “neighborhood gap” in equality actually grew in the past decade as whites who earned more moved to neighborhoods that matched their own economic status while blacks and Hispanics continued to be less mobile and less able to move to better neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>

As a nation, we have not found a way to make “separate but equal” work. In 1954, the Supreme Court concluded that racially segregated schools were “inherently unequal,” and the Court has gone on to reconfirm this opinion with a number of decisions since then. Nonetheless, in our political economy, groups of color are continually “sorted” and experience marginalization, isolation, exclusion, exploitation, and subordination relative to those who are white. The link between whiteness and privilege and between color and disadvantage is maintained, even today, through these sorting processes.

### PROGRESS AND RETRENCHMENT

Perhaps the most discouraging characteristic of structural racism is its adaptability and resilience. The forces that permit structural racism to endure are dynamic and shift with the times. So as progress is made toward racial equity on a particular policy front, a backlash may develop on another front that could undo or undermine any gains. Or powerful interests may move to preserve the racial order in other ways. The net effect tends to be a repositioning of the color line rather than its erasure.

The clearest examples of this retrenchment have been in the consistent challenges to affirmative action, but there are many more subtle and less direct ways in which equity gains can be counteracted. For example, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 guaranteed equal access to housing for all, but people of color continued to be quietly excluded from high-quality suburban housing by discriminatory lending practices, zoning regulations that dictated the size of a house or restricted multifamily dwellings, and public underinvestment in mass transportation between cities and suburbs. Or while the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision prohibited racial segregation in public schools, it was undermined by subsequent judicial, legal, and administrative actions.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these and continued residential segregation, black and Latino students are more isolated from whites in their schools today than just twenty years ago.<sup>12</sup>


It is helpful here to remind ourselves that race is a social construct. Racial hierarchy preserves a social order in which power, privilege, and resources are unequally distributed, and no individual, institution, or policy needs to be activated to preserve the current way of operating: it is built in. Structural racism identifies the ways in which that system is maintained, even as it is contested, protected, and contested again.

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10. Logan, “Separate and Unequal.”

11. For a short summary of leading court decisions on desegregation between 1895 and 1995, see Applied Research Center, *46 Years after Brown v. Board of Ed: Still Separate, Still Unequal* (Oakland, Calif.: Applied Research Center, 2000, research brief), 10–11.

12. Erica Frankenberg and Chungmei Lee, “Race in American Public Schools: Rapidly Resegregating School Districts” (Cambridge, Mass.: Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, August 2002), 5.

A group of diverse graduates in caps and gowns, smiling, with a teal overlay. The text is centered and reads: 

**MODERN RACISM IS  
EMBEDDED IN THE  
NORMAL ROUTINES OF  
OUR PRIVATE LIVES AND  
OUR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS.**

## RACIALIZED PUBLIC POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

The backdrop of white privilege, national values, and contemporary culture is the context within which our major institutions, or opportunity areas—such as health care, education, the labor market, the criminal justice system, or the media—operate today. While we expect the policies and practices of public and private institutions to be race neutral, they are inevitably influenced by this racialized context and, therefore, contribute to the production of racially disparate outcomes.

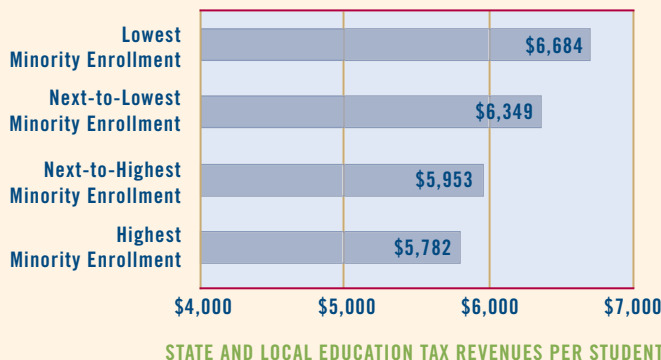
If background forces go unrecognized and unexamined, racial disparities such as those typically seen in the labor market and criminal justice systems are understood simply as unintended consequences of “neutral” or, by and large, “fair” industry policies and practices. Sorting and stereotyping reinforce this, as they work to legitimize, or at least explain, the inequitable outcomes in employment, housing, health care, education, and other opportunity areas.

Following are some examples of how structural racism operates within the key areas of education, the labor market, and the criminal justice system.

### EDUCATION

Public education is probably the national system that holds the greatest potential for reducing racial inequities over time. It is universally available and invests in children at an early age when, in theory, environmental influences are less deterministic and thus children can achieve according to individual talents. However, examination of educational systems across the nation reveals that black and Latino students are more segregated now than two decades ago, that the schools they attend are comparatively underresourced, and that within the schools they are provided fewer academic opportunities and are treated more punitively than their white counterparts. The link between these features and educational outcomes is strong.

#### National Education Dollars by District Minority Enrollment: 1996–2000



**Note:** Dollars are adjusted for student needs and regional cost differences. Districts are divided into quarters by enrollment.

**Source:** Education Trust.  
<http://66.43.154.40:8001/projects/edtrust/FinancialInvestment.jsp>

Nationwide, the school districts with the highest minority enrollment have, on average, \$902 fewer dollars to spend per student than school districts with the lowest minority enrollment. This adds up to a difference of \$22,500 per class of twenty-five students.

Looking closely at specific school districts reveals even greater inequities in investments. In the predominately white school district of Manhasset, just outside New York City, students receive twice as many resources as their predominately black and Latino counterparts in or close to New York City’s urban core.

<b>School Funding in Selected School Districts in the New York City Area</b>			
<b>SCHOOL DISTRICT</b>	<b>WHITE STUDENTS</b>	<b>STUDENTS OF COLOR</b>	<b>SPENDING PER PUPIL</b>
<b>Manhasset</b>	<b>80.0%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>\$20,981</b>
<b>Jericho</b>	<b>85.7%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>	<b>\$17,255</b>
<b>Great Neck</b>	<b>77.6%</b>	<b>22.4%</b>	<b>\$18,627</b>
<b>Mt. Vernon</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>90.1%</b>	<b>\$11,095</b>
<b>Roosevelt</b>	<b>0.3%</b>	<b>99.7%</b>	<b>\$10,320</b>
<b>New York City</b>	<b>15.0%</b>	<b>85.0%</b>	<b>\$10,469</b>

**Source for spending data:** New York State, Statistical Profiles of School Districts, June 2002.  
**Source for racial demographic data:** New York State, Statistical Profiles of School Districts, 1997.

These expenditure data are relatively reliable indicators of all of the resources that are needed for schools to create settings that promote academic success for students: smaller class sizes; experienced teachers trained in their assigned subjects; high-quality academic, social, and physical development materials and infrastructure; up-to-date curricula; enrichment opportunities; and so on.

Differences in school financing by race are not the only indicator of unequal educational experiences between students of color and white students. As one example, public schools where white students are in the majority are more than twice as likely to offer a significant number (nineteen or more) of advanced placement classes than schools where black and Latino students are in the majority.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, there are racial differences in the ways in which students are treated within the schools themselves. Studies show that black and Latino students with the same test scores as white and Asian students are less likely to be placed in accelerated courses and more likely to be placed in low-track courses.<sup>14</sup>

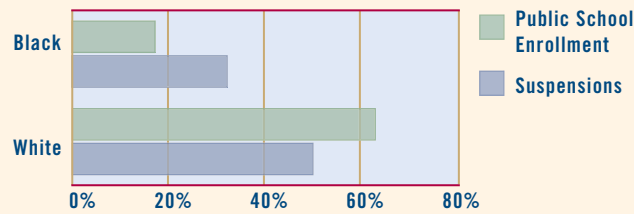
Finally, school disciplinary actions vary by race. Black students are suspended at rates that far exceed their proportion of public school enrollees.

13. Applied Research Center, *46 Years after Brown*, 9.

14. Jeannie Oakes, “Two Cities’ Tracking and Within-School Segregation,” *Teachers College Record* 96, no. 4 (summer 1995): 686.



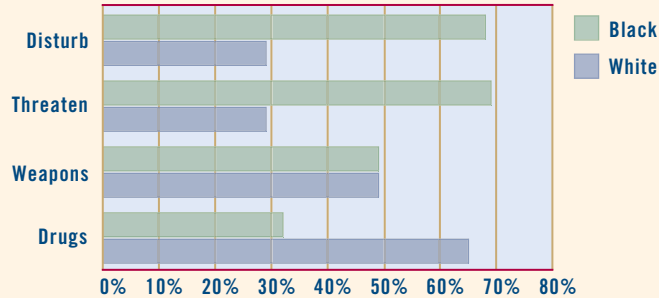
## Public School Enrollment and Suspensions by Race



Source: Data from The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, "Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline," Harvard University (2000): 7.

One recent study examined school discipline statistics in more depth and found that black students are identified as committing proportionately more infractions when the misconduct is subjectively determined—that is, when a faculty or administrator judges that a behavior is disturbing or threatening—than when the misconduct is identified according to a more objective standard such as weapon or drug possession.

## South Carolina Student Charges of Misconduct by Race



Source: Data from The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, "Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline," Harvard University, (2000): 8.

The educational system of the United States has not yet achieved its potential as an "equalizing" institutional investor in our nation's youth, or as a stepping stone on the path to upward mobility. Instead, many of the system's policies and practices continue to produce racially disparate educational outcomes. By the end of the public school experience, 7 percent of white students have dropped out of school compared with 13 percent of black students and 28 percent of Latino students.<sup>15</sup>

15. Phillip Kaufman, Jin Y. Kwon, Steve Klein, and Christopher D. Chapman, "Dropout Rates in the United States: 1999" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2000): 12. For the National Center for Education Statistics.

## LABOR MARKET

Theoretically, the labor market should be race neutral: supply and demand are not racialized concepts. Yet there are myriad examples of how workers of color are excluded, exploited, and marginalized relative to white workers.

Although illegal, active discrimination against workers of color still occurs. Social science studies and newspapers regularly report on experiments where similarly qualified applicants, or testers, of color and testers who are white apply for the same jobs with unequal results. (These experiments are also conducted in the rental, purchase, and mortgage markets and produce similar findings.)

Discrimination also comes in more passive forms. Examples include:

- **Zip-code or name-based discrimination: Job seekers perceived to live in undesirable locations or perceived as people of color based on their names may be excluded from consideration for job opportunities by employers.**

### Everything's in a Name

A recent study found that job applicants with the same qualifications who had common black names on their résumés were less likely to be called for an interview than applicants with common white names.

Percentage receiving interview requests\*

COMMON WHITE NAMES		COMMON BLACK NAMES	
Kristen	13.6%	Ebony	10.5%
Carrie	13.1%	Latonya	9.1%
Laurie	10.8%	Kenya	9.1%
Meredith	10.6%	Latoya	8.8%
Sarah	9.8%	Tanisha	6.3%
Allison	9.4%	Lakisha	5.5%
Jill	9.3%	Tamika	5.4%
Anne	9.0%	Keisha	3.8%
Emily	8.3%	Aisha	2.2%
<b>Average</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>6.9%</b>

\*Based on 3,761 job applications

Source: Alan B. Krueger, "Economic Scene: Sticks and Stones Can Break Bones, But the Wrong Name Can Make a Job Hard to Find," *New York Times*, 1 December 2002: C2.

- **Occupational segregation based on race, ethnicity, or gender: Racial minorities and women are overrepresented in the lowest paid and least desirable jobs. Researchers have found that occupational segregation has been most pronounced for black male youths.<sup>16</sup>**
- **Hiring through informal mechanisms such as social networks: These employer practices often disadvantage people without insider connections. Since inside connections for high-quality jobs have been and continue to be racially disproportionate, this is one mechanism that perpetuates labor market differentials.<sup>17</sup>**

Finally, there are seemingly race-neutral actions taken by employers that end up producing racially inequitable outcomes. Often, these are explained as “legitimate” industry procedures or norms that are hard to challenge because they are time honored. But the outcome data are revealing.

The following example presents data from a sample of a large study done regarding racial disparities in corporate firing practices during the recession of the early 1990s; nearly five hundred firms were included in this study. It shows that the net job loss for black workers was disproportionately high compared to that for white workers. This case is instructive because the rationales for the job cuts—standard downsizing, last hired-first fired, subcontracting of noncore tasks, globalization—are commonly seen as race neutral, although their effects clearly are not.

Labor Market Firing Patterns during the 1990s		
COMPANY	BLACK % OF WORKFORCE	BLACK % OF TOTAL DECLINE
Coca Cola	17.89	42.06
Sears	15.85	54.32
American Cyanamid	11.17	25.19
TRW	8.95	13.88
BankAmerica	7.90	28.11

**Source:** Rochelle Sharpe, “Losing Ground: In Last Recession, Only Blacks Suffered Net Employment Loss,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 1993: A1.

Ten years later, the same patterns are still in evidence. In the recession of the early 2000s, blacks lost jobs at twice the rate of whites and Hispanics. Nearly 90 percent of the jobs that were lost were decent-paying jobs in manufacturing that are unlikely to return.<sup>18</sup>

16. Paul E. Gabriel et al., “The Relative Occupational Attainment of Young Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics,” *Southern Economic Journal* 57, no. 1 (July 1990): 35–46.

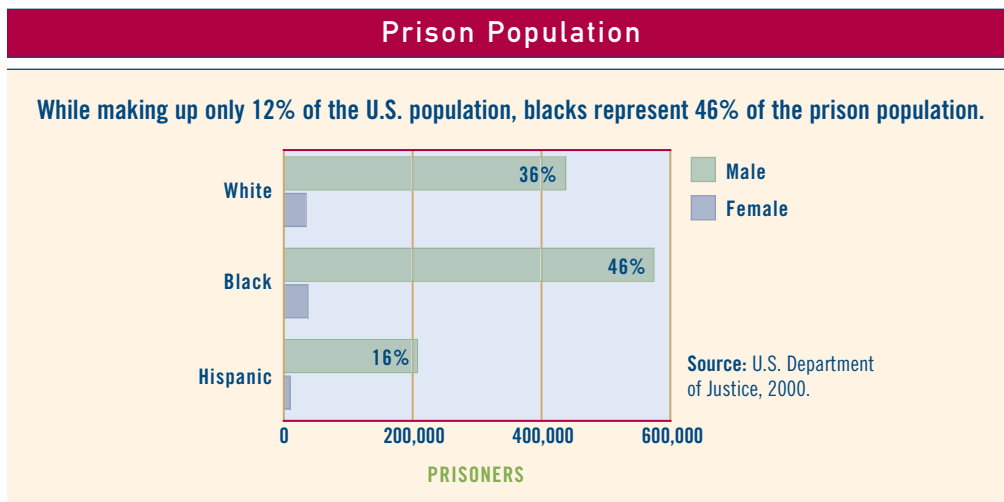
17. Katherine O’Regan and John Quigley, “The Effect of Social Networks and Concentrated Poverty on Black and Hispanic Youth Unemployment,” *Annals of Regional Science* 27, no. 4 (December 1993): 327–42.

18. Louis Uchitelle, “Blacks Lose Better Jobs Faster as Middle-Class Work Drops,” *New York Times*, 12 July 2003.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

It is in the criminal justice system where policies and practices produce some of the most highly visible racialized outcomes.

Racial inequities plague every significant decision point in the criminal justice process—including suspect profiling, arrests, indictments, access to adequate legal representation, verdicts, punishment, incarceration, and parole—and have a cumulative effect that culminates in dramatic racial disproportionality in the prison population.



In some cities, one out of three black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine is in prison, on probation, on parole, or awaiting trial. This proportion is so high that the effects can be detected at the aggregate level in, for example, the demographics of families and neighborhoods, in the composition of the workforce, and voting rates (felons are barred from voting in many states).

The tragedy of racial differences in the criminal justice system is that they start at such an early age. Black youth are referred to juvenile court at two times their proportion in the population. Once there, black youth are more likely to be kept in detention, waived to adult court, and incarcerated. Comparing white youth with minorities charged with the same offenses, we see that Latinos are three times as likely and blacks six times as likely to be incarcerated as their white peers.<sup>19</sup>

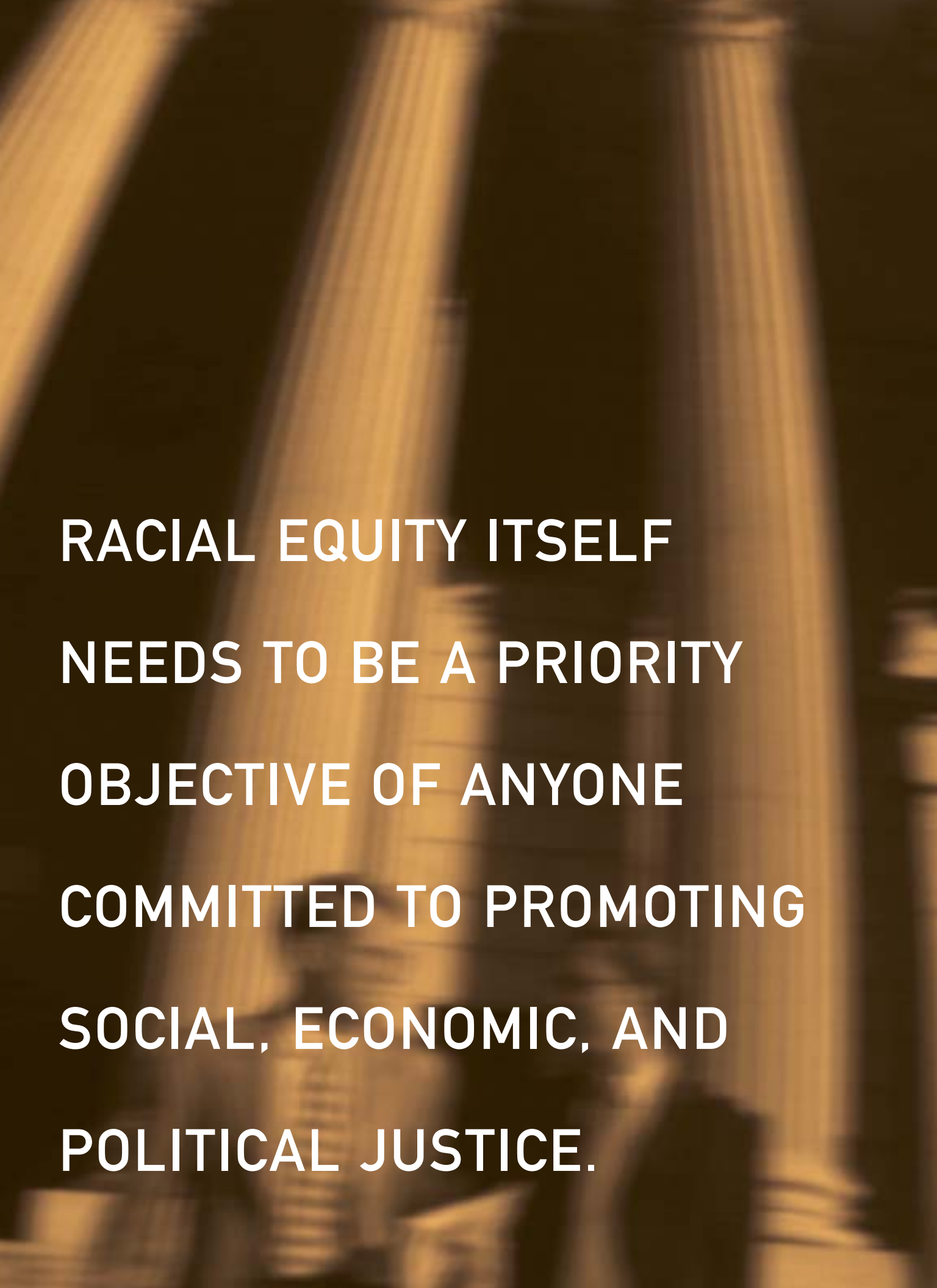
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19. Eileen Poe-Yamagata and Michael A. Jones, "And Justice for Some," *Building Blocks for Youth* (April 2000): 12.

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## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

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**RACIAL EQUITY ITSELF  
NEEDS TO BE A PRIORITY  
OBJECTIVE OF ANYONE  
COMMITTED TO PROMOTING  
SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND  
POLITICAL JUSTICE.**

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## WHAT DOES A STRUCTURAL RACISM PERSPECTIVE IMPLY FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING AND RELATED SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK?

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**T**he structural racism framework describes the many mechanisms that perpetuate the link between race and well-being in America. It looks critically at the socioeconomic, political, cultural, geographic, and historical contexts in which people of color are located, and demonstrates how and why those contexts affect individual and family outcomes.

For those in the community building and social justice fields, the structural racism framework specifically highlights the ways in which racialized institutional, political, and cultural forces can counteract or undermine efforts to improve distressed communities, reduce poverty, and promote equity.

The implication for action is that social change leaders must adopt an explicitly race-conscious approach to their work: they must factor race into their analysis of the causes of the problems they are addressing, and they must factor race into their strategies to promote change and equity.

But what exactly does *race-consciousness* mean, and how should practitioners working at the community level—as well as those who support and partner with them—actually begin to apply the insights that are revealed by looking through the structural racism lens? It is often hard to see how individual or organizational actors with limited reach and resources might make any significant difference. Structural racism can seem overwhelming and abstract, and racial equity, idealistic. Without question, these are formidable issues that will not be resolved overnight. Change will not come without deliberate attention and effort, however, and the work ahead can be thought of in four parts.

### **1. RACIAL EQUITY MUST BE A CENTRAL GOAL OF THE WORK**

Racial equity can only be achieved if whites and Americans of color are equally likely to have positive or negative experiences in employment, education, homeownership, criminal justice, and all the other arenas that determine life outcomes in the United States.

The structural racism analysis demonstrates that people of color are so disproportionately harmed by racialized public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations that racial equity itself needs to be a priority objective for anyone committed to promoting social, economic, and political justice. This means that racial equity should not be just one of many elements of the analysis and one of many goals of the work but, rather, should be located at the core, forming part of the mission statement and programmatic goals of all who are active in the field.

It is counterintuitive to consider that individuals, organizations, and initiatives dedicated to improving outcomes for disadvantaged groups need to be encouraged to make racial equity an explicit part of their work. After all, their target populations are often people and communities of color. But analyses of the work of large segments of community building and allied fields reveal underattention to racial factors.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the race-related issues that do surface tend to focus more on interpersonal dynamics, emphasizing strategies and actions that address diversity, proportionality, and cultural competence. The structural dimensions of racism are rarely addressed. Some of the hypotheses explaining the relative absence of focus on structural racism include:

- **Race and racism are uncomfortable topics to put on any agenda at any time, and the social welfare field, despite deep commitment to justice and equity, is no exception.**
- **Because antipoverty work often focuses on individuals and communities of color, race is assumed to be well integrated into strategies and programs; this, in turn, works to relieve pressure to address race deliberately and explicitly.**
- **Strategies and solutions in the social services, economic development, and community building fields tend to be oriented to enhancing individual, family, and community capacities to do better. A structural racism analysis suggests that these strategies are necessary but not sufficient, and that system-level change needs to be accorded higher priority.**
- **Community building approaches are built on principles of cooperative problem solving, collaboration, and common enterprise, whereas the structural framework raises issues that imply challenging power and privilege.**
- **Many of the key leadership institutions in the social and economic development field (such as foundations, banks, corporations, research institutes) are themselves products of historically racialized inequities in this country, and their ability to take leadership on racial equity issues may not come naturally.<sup>21</sup>**

A first step is for organizations in the field to ensure that they have their own house in order. It is important for organizations to model racial equity internally if they are to take responsibility for achieving such ends in the wider community. Resources exist to guide organizations aiming to improve their ability to address racial issues and offer strategies for leadership development, staff training, workforce diversification, developing knowledge about constituents, and so on. For those who work in the social change field, there are a number of training and technical assistance programs that are particularly relevant.<sup>22</sup> There are, however, few guides for those in the community-building field who

20. Rebecca Stone and Benjamin Butler, *Core Issues in Comprehensive Community Building Initiatives: Exploring Power and Race* (Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, 2000).

21. Stone and Butler, *Core Issues*.

22. Ilana Shapiro, *Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute, 2002).



wish to address racial equity,<sup>23</sup> and tools for addressing the structural dimensions of racism are only in the earliest phases of development.

Adopting racial equity as a central tenet of the work suggests that, in addition to attention to internal organizational factors, social change actors need to keep focused on racially equitable outcomes produced at all stages of effort. This means that all of the work must be filtered through the lens of “How will this program (initiative, investment, or strategy) contribute to reducing racial inequity?” Racially disaggregated data are a critical first step. Since the notion of equity is a comparative one, it should be clear that the basic commitment is to closing outcome gaps between people of color and whites in key opportunity areas, with goals, interim outcomes, and benchmarks specified. Because some of the arenas assumed to provide opportunity and justice in the United States actually work to produce greater racial disparity, no area should remain unexamined.

To be clear, recognizing the importance of race may or may not imply racially explicit interventions. Disadvantages experienced by people of color are often also associated with class, nativity, gender, language, and other factors. While race is inextricably linked to all these, it may sometimes make strategic sense to craft interventions or build alliances that do not “lead with race” explicitly. What ought not be negotiable, however, is the priority placed on racial equity outcomes.

## **2. EMPHASIZE CAPACITY BUILDING AMONG CHANGE AGENTS**

The experience of the most recent generation of community-building efforts has demonstrated that community and other social change agents do not have the capacity to promote neighborhood change at a scale that promises to make a significant dent in socioeconomic or racial inequity. The structural analysis explains why this occurs by highlighting how historic and contemporary macro forces overwhelm local efforts, however meritorious they might be, that are designed to intervene at the individual, family, and community levels. One scholar has described community-based work as “swimming against the tide” of major systemic and institutional trends that undermine progress in distressed inner-city neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup>

One immediate strategy is to invest in building the capacity of local organizations to maximize their ability to produce whatever kinds of change that are within their reach and control. Currently, for the most part, local-level community development, social service, and other community-building organizations are strapped for resources and, as a result, can barely attain modest programmatic results in fairly narrowly defined arenas. Yet these thousands of organizations, staffed by millions of workers, is a potentially powerful network for achieving significant change. Viewed in this light, investment in their capacity is a critical step toward promoting true democracy, social justice, and racial equity.

Racial equity goals also nudge all strands of the community-building field toward a paradigm that assumes that civic capacities deserve equal priority to functional ones.

23. Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change Anti-Racism Initiative, *A Community Builder's Tool Kit* (Claremont, Calif.: Institute for Democratic Renewal, Claremont Graduate Center, n.d.). See also Hedy Nai-Lin Chang, *Community Building and Diversity: Principles for Action* (Oakland, Calif.: California Tomorrow, 1997).

24. Alice O'Connor, “Swimming against the Tide,” in *Urban Problems and Community Development*, ed. Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1999).

Broadly, this means accessing and participating in the policymaking and governance processes that allocate public resources. To do this, organizations and individuals first must identify their actual and potential civic engagement capacities: their abilities to gauge the impacts of new policies, to frame their concerns effectively and get their messages out, to get the attention of policymakers and powerbrokers, and to mobilize support among peers and across other levels.

There already exist organizations engaged in efforts to document and address structural factors that contribute to racial inequities, and there is a need to raise up their work and push the boundaries of current agendas as far as possible given financial and human resources. At the same time, more of those within the community-change field could help lay the groundwork for the type of social change that is needed. Institutions with high national profiles and resources for research and analysis might, for example, be more effective at defining and promoting policy or regulatory alternatives to the status quo. Individuals or smaller organizations with fewer resources, on the other hand, might exercise responsibility by pressuring peers, and others within their reach who are powerful, to act responsibly.

### **3. IDENTIFY KEY PUBLIC POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES THAT NEED REFORM AND DEVELOP ALLIANCES THAT HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE THEM**

A central insight of the structural racism analysis is that racial disadvantage is driven by interrelated policies and systems operating at multiple levels. This makes it unlikely that any single organization would possess all the capacities and resources required to achieve most equity outcomes. Reducing racially biased outcomes when child welfare workers make decisions about removing children from their homes might, for example, call for the development of tools that introduce a greater degree of objectivity into the decision-making process. Getting child welfare systems to utilize these tools may require legal intervention.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, we must take into account all that is required to reach our objectives, recognize what we can do effectively, and identify others with capacities we lack who might be potential allies. Addressing the policy, institutional, and cultural barriers associated with racial inequities may almost invariably require networking, communicative, legislative, research, civic, legal, and other kinds of expertise that are unlikely to be found in any single organization.

There are tools and strategies that can assist in this work. One is to map out where key institutional policy and administrative decisions are made, understand how and when they are made, and how the key actors and processes can be reached and influenced. Another is to strengthen the power and the voice of grassroots constituents to hold key decision makers on that power map accountable for outcomes. Grassroots organizing and advocacy are strategies that have often been left to community organizers and single-issue organizations; the broader community-building field would benefit from developing a comfort level and expertise with that approach to the work. Participation in the electoral process will also be critical.

25. This example is drawn from the experiences of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency and the Children's Rights Institute.

Operationally, convergence of community building and related practitioners around racial equity would not necessarily compel everyone to meld their agendas and operations into one. Rather, what it might mean is:

- **a shared recognition of the systemic sources of disadvantages and disparities among the populations that all are trying to reach;**
- **identification of the multiple and interrelated levels—cultural, governmental, regional, local, institutional, individual, and so on—at which racist norms, assumptions, policies, and practices pertinent to people of color need to be tackled;**
- **commitment among the field's principal actors to work deliberately to dismantle or counter structures, policies, and practices that contribute to racial inequities;**
- **forging alliances with other fields that are concerned about these issues, such as civil rights, social justice, environmentalism, and so on.**

Convergence around these ideas would suggest that the community-building field is committed as a whole to making our democracy work for all people, even as it pursues its traditional objectives. In concert with others in allied fields, the community-building field seems well positioned to harness an array of civic resources that could be used to influence policies in education, employment, criminal justice, health, the environment, and other public and private institutions that directly shape the life chances of poor people.

#### **4. COUNTER POPULAR ASSUMPTIONS THAT WORK TO REPRODUCE THE STATUS QUO**

While few Americans alive today openly sanction racism or consciously engage in practices that maintain structural racism, many benefit from its existence and help to maintain it as they follow society's conventions and participate in its routines. In hundreds of ways—by acquiescing to negative cultural stereotypes, by moving to segregated suburbs, by taking advantage of exclusive job networks, by accepting regressive tax reforms, by neglecting to participate in democratic citizenship, and so on—Americans, in their everyday lives and roles, end up sustaining racial hierarchy. Difficult though this may be to accept, we are responsible in differing degrees for racial inequities simply because we generally participate uncritically in the systems and processes that sustain them.

Note here that taking personal, organizational, and political responsibility for racial equity is not the same as acceptance of blame for racial disadvantage.<sup>26</sup> Rather, taking responsibility for racial equity is the willingness to acknowledge that the nation's enduring racial disparity patterns are inconsistent with its ideals, and thus are unacceptable. It is also a willingness to challenge publicly and privately what may seem to be “normal” and “race-neutral” norms and values in our culture and political economy. Who gets to define what we mean by *equal opportunity*, *meritocracy*, and *individualism*, and who is responsible for how they play out in the real world?

26. Iris Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity: Sweatshops and Political Responsibility,” *Dissent* (spring 2003).

Understanding precisely where and how we fit into a structural racism system requires careful reflection. Demystifying the complex structures and arrangements that are a part of our lives by locating ourselves in them is a critical first step in assessing our capabilities. We might start out by asking ourselves simple questions that focus on different levels of intervention, such as the following:

- **In what ways do we—as individuals—accept the notion of the inherent “fairness of the system,” that is, that American ideals of equal opportunity and meritocracy work in much the same way for everyone? What mechanisms work to encourage the notion that poor outcomes are the fault of unmotivated individuals, family break up, or the culture of poverty, without connecting that information to broader structural factors? Do we find ourselves making racial or cultural group generalizations, or allowing such generalizations to go unchallenged?**
  - **Where do we fit into, and help sustain, for instance, a media industry that continually underrepresents or produces negative images of Americans of color?**
  - **What role do social service, community development, or philanthropic organizations play in the maintenance of racial inequality? Do programmatic and funding priorities that focus only on remediating racial inequities distract us from the need to address the sources of such inequities? What role do we expect employment initiatives to play in a private sector that keeps African Americans and Latinos at the vulnerable end of the workforce? What role do we expect schools to play in a public education system that underinvests in our poorest children and our children of color?**
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HOW IS IT THAT IN OUR  
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## CONCLUSION

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**T**he structural racism framework offers community builders and social justice workers not only a powerful and promising intellectual tool, but valuable insights for individual, organizational, community, and collective action toward racial equity. The framework can be thought of as a lens that brings into focus new ways of analyzing the causes of the problems that community builders are addressing and new approaches to finding solutions to those problems. Specifically, the structural racism lens highlights:

- **chronic racial disparities, not just race relations;**
- **specific power arrangements that perpetuate chronic disparities, especially as they exist in public policies and institutional practices;**
- **general cultural assumptions, values, ideologies, and stereotypes that allow disparities to go unchallenged;**
- **the dynamics of progress and retrenchment, which highlight how gains on some issues can be undermined by forces operating in other spheres or by oppositional actors;**
- **political, macroeconomic, regional, and other contextual factors that have enormous influences on outcomes for children, families, and communities.**

The promise of this framework lies in its understanding of the embeddedness of modern racism in the normal routines of our private and public lives. Racial hierarchy is interwoven with the laissez-faire processes and mechanisms of twenty-first century America's commerce, politics, and popular culture. Virtually all Americans, in some way, accommodate to the realities of white privilege and operate within socioeconomic templates that guarantee its continuation. Regardless of whose ancestors bear principal liability for our inequitable social evolution to this point, we are now all so invested in the norms and procedures of the status quo that it will not change without the dedicated efforts of everyone—both its beneficiaries and victims.

To community builders, already hard-pressed by many funding and operational challenges, this call to responsibility for racial equity should not be perceived as the proposal of a heavier workload. Rather, it is a call to reexamine current goals and methods from a racial equity vantage point, which would bring public policies, institutional practices, and cultural assumptions into the foreground. Thus, for example, those who now seek to expand provision of human services, or low-income housing, might come to see policy analysis, and collective action on various levels to shape policy, as higher priorities. They may also see more value in building strategic alliances beyond the field's imagined boundaries to address other related policies and issues—such as tax and regulatory practices, trade policies, social “safety net” provisions, or federal transportation

investment priorities—that tend to be off their screens. Or they might choose to work more directly with the media to counteract negative racialized beliefs and images about welfare or other public support programs and, more generally, to reframe dominant images of poverty and disadvantage in America.

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. . . in post-World War II U.S. society, the racial attitudes of white Americans involve a shift from Jim Crow racism to laissez-faire racism. As part of this change, we witnessed the virtual disappearance of overt bigotry, of demands for strict segregation, of advocacy of government-mandated discrimination, and of adherence to the belief that blacks are the categorical intellectual inferiors to whites. The decline in full-blown Jim Crow racism, however, has not resulted in its opposite, a thoroughly antiracist popular ideology based on an embracing and democratic vision of the common humanity, worth, dignity, and place in the polity for blacks alongside whites. Instead, the institutionalized racial inequalities created by the long era of slavery followed by Jim Crow racism are now popularly accepted and condoned under a modern free market or laissez-faire racist ideology. Laissez-faire racism involves persistent negative-stereotyping of African Americans, a tendency to blame blacks themselves for the black-white gap in socioeconomic standing, and resistance to meaningful political efforts to ameliorate U.S. racist social conditions and institutions.

Lawrence Bobo, James R. Kleugel, and Ryan A. Smith, "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a 'Kinder, Gentler' Anti-Black Ideology," in *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, ed. Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin (Greenwood, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), 15–44.

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Inattention to racial equity has limited the success of community builders. Continued underattention to race risks undermining future work. The structural racism framework posits that raising the profile and centrality of racial equity will increase the likelihood that community builders will succeed in improving the well-being of children, families, and communities.

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## STRUCTURAL RACISM AND COMMUNITY BUILDING: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What is structural racism?**

The term *structural racism* is used to describe the ways in which history, ideology, public policies, institutional practices, and culture interact to maintain a racial hierarchy that allows the privileges associated with whiteness and the disadvantages associated with color to endure and adapt over time.

### **What is the structural racism framework trying to address?**

A structural racism lens or framework explains the big picture of racial disparity—the chronic gap between Americans of color and whites when it comes to jobs, housing, health, education, and other indicators of well-being. It examines how and why racial minorities experience the most severe and most intractable disadvantage in a nation where everyone is meant to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

### **What is race and how do we understand it?**

Race is a social construct—it was invented and given meaning by humans. It is best understood in social and political terms: it is a yardstick for allocating power, and for distributing society's material benefits and burdens. There is no biological or scientific basis behind the concept. America's racial system favors its majority population's European ancestry, culture, and physical features over those of people from other regional backgrounds. "Whiteness" is a highly valuable social resource that confers unearned privilege on its possessors, while "color"—and especially the "blackness" of those of African origin—carries stigma.

### **What about ethnicity? How does it relate to race?**

Ethnicity refers to social characteristics that groups of people may have in common—language, religion, regional background, culture, foods, etc. Ethnicity is revealed by the way one behaves, the traditions one follows, the language one speaks at home, and so on. Race, on the other hand, describes categories assigned to demographic groups based mostly on observable physical characteristics, like skin color, hair texture, and eye shape. Race and ethnicity can overlap or they can diverge. For example, people with dark skin and African features can be ethnically American, Caribbean, or African; or, individuals with Hispanic ethnicity may be of African, European, or indigenous American ancestry.

The significance we attach to either race or ethnicity depends on social context. Either labeling system can be misused as a basis for social hierarchy and inequality. In Northern Ireland where virtually the entire population is white, Catholic or Protestant ethnicity is a highly significant marker. Race is the dominant marker in America. While many Americans can choose to embrace, disguise, ignore, or even transcend their ethnicity, racial labeling removes this option for many others. People of color are not able to opt out of the racial classification system because it is a deep-rooted, universal identifier sustained through institutional policies, values, and social stereotypes.



### **Are there times when the structural racism framework does not make sense?**

As a macro-level analysis, structural racism can't possibly address all the complexities of the race system in America. When you look closely at racial categories and outcomes, many individual cases do not fit the general patterns of success and disadvantage. But this doesn't mean that we should ignore the broad patterns. They account for the lives of millions of individuals and represent a fault line in the realization of our democratic ideals.

### **Why should those working to end poverty and community distress pay attention to structural racism?**

In America, concentrated poverty and race are so closely intertwined that one can't properly deal with one and not the other. African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are disproportionately represented in our nation's poorest communities, as are some Asian groups. This is not mere coincidence. We know that high unemployment, poor educational opportunity, lack of affordable housing, and other problems all have important racial dimensions. Reformers cannot hope to find lasting solutions to these problems without attending to their root causes—a powerful one of which is the racial bias embedded in the policies and practices of major opportunity arenas and the social context that allows those biases to persist.

### **Wouldn't it be better to approach poverty and disadvantage from a class perspective? Wouldn't it be more pragmatic, especially since adopting race-based strategies alienates some constituencies?**

The convergence between race and class is well documented and widely known. Ironically, the fact that the two are so tightly intertwined can actually make it more difficult to discern the independent effect of race on poverty, and more difficult to determine which strategies for change are most appropriate.

Race is a label and a judgment about who you are that is based on the physical characteristics you were born with. Class, on the other hand, is mostly a function of income, wealth, education, and social manners. As such, class barriers are much more permeable; individuals can move from one class status to another through effort and luck. Nineteenth century European immigrants to the U.S. provided classic examples of class mobility. In contrast, race cannot be transcended completely in America. And when race coincides with lower class status, it compounds the barriers to easy class mobility.

Politically, there's no question that class is a lot more appealing as a mobilizing idea for liberal reformers. But focusing on class may not address the unique features of race that are critical to the success of anti-poverty efforts. The structural racism perspective of America's equity dilemma reveals that even after significant national investment in anti-poverty (i.e., class-based) efforts, the race/class Gordian knot has not been untied. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians remain highly underrepresented within the ranks of the middle and upper classes and still represent a disproportionate share of the poor. Moreover, research continues to point out ways in which being a person of color brings disadvantages, regardless of income level or class. The pervasiveness of racial profiling in law enforcement, hiring practices, educational tracking, home mortgage lending, real estate appraisals, health care access, and many other areas suggests that we

cannot yet analyze our society in race-neutral terms if we seriously want to address its inequities.

### **Structural racism sounds like it refers to whites, African Americans, and Native Americans. Where do Asians and Latinos fit into this picture?**

Because it is a system for allocating social privilege, structural racism affects everyone in our society. There is no doubt that the historical building blocks of the American race system were formed by relationships between whites and Native Americans and whites and African Americans, creating a spectrum of privilege with “whiteness” at the top and “blackness” or color at the bottom. This spectrum affects Latinos and Asians, and interacts with their own independent racial experiences and issues.

America’s historical racial hierarchy defines Asians and Latinos as non-white, as people of color. But historically, the racial identities of many non-black ethnicities have been quite fluid. Most of those who are not “white” continually struggle to reduce their distance from that location of privilege through adaptation, emulation, and achievement. Historically, many “indeterminate” groups such as the Irish and the Italians have effectively closed that gap. For others, especially those of visibly black African descent, assimilation into whiteness has not been a viable option. Asians, Latinos, and others today must navigate a fluid, ever-evolving position in the American race system.

Latinos and Asians are also experiencing new and different racial problems than those that dominated our nation during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The sheer diversity within these groups has given rise to strong intra-group differences between those who are perceived to be doing well such as Cubans or Japanese and those who are perceived as doing poorly, such as Dominicans or Hmong. In this landscape, language and cultural issues interact with race in ways that are unique to particular groups.

This framework is also helpful in examining the impact of immigration and rapidly changing demographics on disadvantaged communities. Many poor urban neighborhoods have been shaped by the historic oppression of people of color and the resistance to that oppression. The influx of poor immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa both intensifies historic issues of oppression and racism and adds new layers of complexity to them. One of these is cultural and political rivalry between old and new residents. These inter-group tensions cannot be addressed effectively without considering them against the backdrop of America’s racial hierarchy. At the same time, a historical and institutional perspective can help local change agents keep their focus on the bigger systems and forces that subordinate everyone of color in distressed neighborhoods.

### **How does structural racism differ from institutional racism?**

Institutional racism is one manifestation of structural racism. Institutional racism describes the biased racial outcomes associated with public policies and institutional practices, some of which may be intentional but some of which may appear to be race neutral. For instance, the fact that 46 percent of the prison population is black, while blacks represent only 13 percent of the overall population, suggests that the criminal justice system must have some institutional features that end up criminalizing black men more often. Some practices are, by definition, racialized, such as racial profiling. Others,

such as differential sentencing for possession of crack cocaine versus powder cocaine, may appear race neutral but have racially disproportionate consequences.

The structural racism framework takes a step back from institutional racism, and recognizes the racialized cultural and historical context in which institutions and individuals are unavoidably embedded.

The structural racism framework also points out that there is national “common sense” about race—a widely shared set of beliefs and stereotypes—that is revealed in surveys of attitudes about racial groups and in cultural norms. For instance, there are the pervasive assumptions that African Americans are lazy, violence-prone, and disinterested in family formation. Beliefs like these are sustained by many aspects of our information, political, and entertainment cultures. They add up to a racialized “frame” or way of looking at the world that allows us, as a nation, to accept the fact that blacks make up 46 percent of the prison population as normal rather than as a national emergency.

**Structural racism sounds like it suggests that individuals have no power to affect their own well-being? Don't individuals have responsibility for their own outcomes?**

Some observers worry that a structural racism analysis doesn't say enough about the responsibility that all individuals, including people of color, bear for making the most of their lives. In a way, they're right: by its very nature, structural racism is mainly concerned with the role of public and private institutions that are supposed to allocate basic resources to groups and communities equitably. It assumes that the actions of these institutional actors significantly define the contours of opportunity for individuals.

Few themes are as powerful in the American psyche as that of individual responsibility. Moreover, the success of the civil rights movement reinforces the perception that all individuals now have the freedom and opportunity to succeed in America—that there is a level playing field and that personal achievement now depends solely on merit. Certainly, there are many whites who are poor and disadvantaged and there are many Americans of color who are wealthy or highly positioned in business, government, media, and other sectors. The success stories of individuals of color seem to suggest that anyone, regardless of race, can rise above poverty and disadvantage once they are prepared to work hard and take responsibility for their own successes and failures.

The structural racism lens helps us to see that individual responsibility alone is no substitute for the pathways of opportunity that only our political, economic, and educational systems can provide. It highlights how our nation's core values—and the public policies and institutional practices that are built on them—perpetuate social stratifications and outcomes that all too often reflect racial group sorting, rather than individual merit and effort. The structural racism framework is not meant to excuse individual responsibility; it only identifies how much harder it is for people of color to profit in ways that most whites can take for granted.

**What social outcomes does the structural racism framework aspire to? What is the vision of a racially equitable community?**

Undoubtedly, there is no single model of an equitable community that will satisfy everyone and a structural racism perspective conjures up a number of alternative futures

for social change—some more realistic than others. The desired outcome is racial equity: fair allocation of opportunity and resources, regardless of race and ethnicity, and no more than a fair share of society’s burdens. Put into practice, this would mean that all people, including people of color, have:

- a genuine voice in setting the agenda for policy and in decision making;
- real opportunity in the marketplaces of employment, housing, and education;
- equal opportunity to build wealth and invest in the future;
- no disproportionate concentration of involvement in the criminal justice system, poor health conditions, exposure to environmental hazards, victimization by predatory lenders, or other negative factors.

**The structural racism perspective seems like a huge challenge to current ways of working on equity and justice. Can we really expect community builders, social policymakers, and their colleagues to adopt this perspective?**

A structural racism framework does challenge many mainstream approaches to poverty. And to community builders already overwhelmed by multiple programmatic and operational challenges, deliberate incorporation of broad structural racial factors into the work is indeed daunting. Yet, we can see how structural racism undermines the success of community builders and others working to reduce poverty. Raising the profile and centrality of racial equity, though difficult at times, is not a choice: it is a requirement in order for us, as a nation, to be able to make significant improvements in the quality of life of children, families, and communities.

Though it can seem immense, the structural racism framework offers community builders and social justice activists a way to move forward. It is both a powerful and promising intellectual tool and it provides valuable insights for individual, organizational, community, and collective action toward racial equity—which is supportive of broader community building and social justice goals.

**What can we do, as individuals or as organizational actors, to integrate a structural racism framework into our work and to promote racial equity?**

Change will come only with deliberate attention and effort. Because the issue is so broad, it is not possible for any individual or any single organization to possess all the capacities and resources needed to achieve racial equity, but here are some key actions that should guide us all:

- First and foremost, take responsibility for racial equity. We all must educate ourselves about the ways in which structural racism plays out in our own personal and professional worlds. We must be willing to examine and challenge our own uncritical participation in the systems and processes that sustain structural racism.

- Model racial equity internally in our own organizations. Seek out resources to guide organizations aiming to improve their ability to address racial issues. (See, for example, *Training for Racial Equity and Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs*, by Ilana Shapiro, Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2002.)
  - Focus on racially equitable outcomes produced at all stages of the work. Examine our programs' impact on reducing racial disparities.
  - Use racially disaggregated data to uncover outcomes gaps between whites and people of color in key opportunity arenas.
  - Emphasize capacity building.
  - Identify key public policies and institutional practices that need reform and develop alliances that have the power to change them. Step outside traditional boundaries to form new relationships with other fields that are concerned about these issues.
  - Educate leadership groups, especially public and private funders, about the value of a structural racism framework.
  - Counter popular assumptions that work to reproduce the status quo in the media, in the community, and in everyday personal life.
  - Get political. Become aware of policies likely to worsen racial inequity and get involved in collective efforts to challenge those policies. Carefully scrutinize policies that seem peripheral or even irrelevant to local disparities, as they often have more influence on well-being than we recognize.
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