

The History and Impact of Racial Inequality and Disparities in Education, Employment, and
Housing

Wafa Mazhari

US HISTORY 1378H

December 1, 2020

The Great Migration was a result of the numerous difficulties African Americans in the South had to endure. The movement took place throughout the twentieth century, forcing American society to reevaluate the racial caste hierarchy that predated the beginning of the nation's history. It was a long and arduous struggle, but there were significant progress and changes made. However, despite the major progress brought about by the Civil War and Civil Rights movements for African Americans, there is still a noticeably large gap between black and white Americans today. Most of these racial gaps can be traced back to laws from the Jim Crow era as well as the mentality from that period. Americans would be wrong to believe that racism ended with the Civil Rights movement; recent research shows that this is simply not true. The history of blatant systemic racism and racial disparities in education, employment and the work environment, as well as in community and housing have had a far-reaching impact which continues to disadvantage African Americans today.

After the Civil War, African Americans were legally free to pursue what had previously been restricted to them as slaves. For a decade, there was some progress, but it fell short primarily due to the Southern backlash against Reconstruction efforts. The Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* of "separate but equal" was supposed to guarantee equal protection. However, even though things were separate, they were far from equal; this ruling was critically damaging in that it enabled states to legally sponsor segregation laws. This ruling would have a long-lasting impact, especially when it came to the education of African American youth in the following decades.

The educational facilities provided by the state to colored people were severely underfunded. To start with, the textbooks black schools received were always second-hand, poor

quality, outdated books that were discarded by white schools every few years¹. There was also a huge disparity in pay between white and colored teachers. For example, the average annual salary of a white teacher in Louisiana in 1933 was \$1,165, whereas a colored teacher in the same state was paid less than half of that, which was \$499. Similarly, in Mississippi, white teachers and principals were making \$630 annually while colored teachers were making \$215 a year². Additionally, most schools for colored children were only in session when these kids were “not needed in the field”. These schools were also not in session whenever there were “budget shortfalls”, which blatantly never occurred in white schools. Thus, these colored students were, at most, in school for six months³. Most black schoolhouses in the South also only consisted of a single room and included children from first to eighth grade. This meant few African Americans were able to pursue a higher education⁴. This and other tactics were generally used to save the school boards money and maintain control over the education of African Americans. Overall, white state legislators openly and brazenly diverted federal funding from colored schools to white schools, which thereby doubled the funding and quality of white schools.

Moreover, the small percentage of African Americans who did manage to get a college education found it difficult to practice their profession because of segregation in the work environment. White Americans believed that a large number of educated African Americans would “upset the whole balance of power”. Therefore, they strained to punish the “ambitious” African Americans while rewarding the “servile” to maintain white dominance⁵.

¹Wilkerson, Isabel, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 84.

² Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 85.

³ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 24,321.

⁴ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 25.

⁵ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 116.

The racial inequality in education and the mentality surrounding it has persisted well into the twentieth century, not only in the South, but the North as well. This continued until key changes were made during the Civil Rights era. The Supreme Court overruled the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1955 and told school boards to desegregate schools “with all deliberate speed”, which most states, especially those in the South, took to mean whenever they got around to it. States responded to the ruling by sacrificing federal funding and finding legal alternatives or loopholes to avoid integrating schools, and would only give in when pressured or forced by the Court⁶. The Court’s supervision and enforcement of racial integration in schools over the following years came too late and ended too early. Overall, the efforts proved to be ineffective and had subtle yet serious consequences on the educational quality of both white and non-white students in the years ahead.

Any major progress towards the desegregation of schools became ineffective around 1991 when the case of *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell* ruled that “a school district can be freed from an injunction to desegregate if it can demonstrate compliance”⁷. Since this ruling, court oversight has faded throughout the 90s and 2000s, which is important because prior to this, the Court had played a major role in maintaining integration. In recent years, research has shown that schools have become increasingly resegregated since then and this has had a detrimental impact.

Economic racial disparity directly and indirectly impacts the education of American youth. Property taxes contribute to the amount of funding schools receive, among other things. Therefore, if the property values and taxes for a given area are lower, the schools in that area will

⁶ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 436-437.

⁷ Jason M. Breslow, Evan Wexler, and Robert Collins, “The Return of School Segregation in Eight Charts,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, July 15, 2014), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-return-of-school-segregation-in-eight-charts/>.

receive less funding and, by extension, have “less qualified teachers....and shoddier facilities”⁸.

As a result of America’s previous discriminatory barriers, low-income families and families in poverty are the ones who typically live in such areas. These types of families are predominantly composed of non-white students, specifically Hispanics and African Americans. A UCLA study found that blacks and Latinos represent more than half of the children in schools facing the most poverty⁹. In other words, wealthy schools tend to have more whites and Asian students and fewer students who struggle with poverty. Meanwhile, low-income schools have a higher percentage of black and Latino students and a majority of the student population dealing with poverty.

Additionally, because of the demographics of wealthy and poor schools, another UCLA research has shown that white students, above all others, have had the least exposure to students of other races¹⁰. This lack of exposure to integration and diversity is problematic because it makes it difficult for these white students to understand the disparities, difficulties, and privileges that certain groups of people have over others and why it exists.

There has also been a trend in certain areas where more affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods want to branch off and create their own town in order to provide better funded schools for their children. While the intentions may be good, the impact of this plan being successful would severely damage and handicap the already declining progress of integration. One of the most obvious impacts would be school districts which are “racially and economically [less] diverse”¹¹ because of segregation along racial and class lines. Currently, a majority of schools that are already struggling financially rely on the wealthier neighborhoods to make up

⁸ Breslow et al., “School Segregation”.

⁹ Breslow et al., “School Segregation”.

¹⁰ Breslow et al., “School Segregation”.

¹¹ Mary Robertson, “Separate and Unequal,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, July 15, 2014), <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/separate-and-unequal/>.

for the funding they receive from low-income areas. With such a drastic cut to their spending budget, the already poorly funded schools would no longer have the ability to sustain the resources they need for a student demographic that is already at a disadvantage.

After the little progress that was made during Reconstruction failed, the South was able to maintain racial inequality and dominance primarily through the sharecropping system that changed little and lasted well into the 1950s. Former slaves were paid meager wages for back-breaking manual labor; because they were tenants on the farms they worked on, they always had rent or utilities to pay for which led them into a deep cycle of debt. As a result of the sharecropping system, the constant potential threats from white Southerners, and other major historical events, African Americans migrated North to find more freedom and better opportunities.

Although the Great Migration to the North, Midwest, and the West provided better opportunities than the South, African Americans still found themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Despite the fact that there were technically few, if any, legal barriers preventing African Americans from working and living in the same areas as white Americans, there was a sense of superiority among white workers that was reinforced in business and housing policies. To maintain the peace and morale of the white workers who were already working there, companies and unions would either provide “separate [working] quarters” or would not hire colored workers at all¹². Because higher paying jobs were implicitly forbidden, African American men were forced into taking menial, hard labor jobs, which were only slightly better than picking cotton because they got to keep their increased wages. African American women had an even harder time trying to get hired by businesses. Thus, they often had to resort

¹² Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 316.

to working in domestic service jobs, such as working as maids. These women would wait at street corners to see if the white housewives had some cleaning for them to do. African American women were especially exploited here because the white women, who already harbored assumptions and prejudices against them, controlled their wages and would sometimes cheat black women out of their money by setting back the clocks¹³.

The increase in the black population in Northern cities elevated the status of other immigrants and “diverted anti-immigrant sentiments”¹⁴ towards African American migrants. The introduction of colored labor also created a “rivalrous sense of unease and insecurity”¹⁵ in the existing working class. Similar to the arrival of Eastern immigrants to the U.S. in the century prior, colored workers were seen as a threat because they could be exploited and made to work for lower wages compared to the unionized white workers. The hierarchical system forced African Americans to accept “subsistence wages” as they had to “work more hours to earn less money than everyone else”¹⁶. Changes did not come until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, banning segregation and discrimination in public facilities. However, while now legally prohibited on a federal level, the enforcement of integration in the workplace came slowly due to resistance from employers and implicit biases.

The efforts to fully enforce integration policies in the workplace have fallen short throughout the decades following the passage of the Civil Rights Act; this lack of proper enforcement still has a significant impact today. African Americans and other people of color, particularly women, have been discriminated against, harassed, and have faced microaggressions and implicit biases in the work environment. A recent CNN poll found that 26% of blacks and

¹³ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 333-336.

¹⁴ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 419.

¹⁵ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 317.

¹⁶ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 317, 419.

15% of Hispanics have felt that they have been unfairly treated in their workplace on the basis of their race or ethnicity¹⁷. Women in STEM careers face the most challenges in having to walk a fine line between being assertive and being feminine in the workplace. This has often led to a double standard for genders when it comes to being assertive. A male employee is often praised for being outspoken while a female employee, especially one of color, is seen as aggressive and emotional for the same behavior simply because this behavior does not comply with “traditionally feminine roles” or racial stereotypes¹⁸.

African Americans and other minorities are discriminated against in the workforce, as well as during the employment process. Another recent CNN poll found that 27% of blacks and 20% of Hispanics felt that they were denied a job they felt qualified for¹⁹. Another report found that non-white applicants were given shorter job interviews and were treated in a less-friendly manner than white applicants. White applicants were also twice as likely to be offered employment than applicants of color²⁰. Other studies have shown that “black sounding names” on resumes are less likely to be accepted than “white sounding names”²¹. These various studies correlate with the fact that African American unemployment rates are higher while their household income is lower compared to that of other races. Interestingly enough, the disparity in the unemployment rate and annual income between black and white Americans tends to be higher in the destination cities of the Great Migration. So, despite the fact that there are federal and corporate anti-discriminatory laws and policies in place, these well intended regulations are

¹⁷ Tanzina Vega, “Working While Brown: What Discrimination Looks like Now,” CNNMoney (Cable News Network, November 25, 2015), <https://money.cnn.com/2015/11/25/news/economy/racial-discrimination-work/index.html>.

¹⁸ Vega, “Working While Brown”.

¹⁹ Vega, “Working While Brown”.

²⁰ Vega, “Working While Brown”.

²¹ Vega, “Working While Brown”.

failing significantly, which is especially damaging to African Americans and people of color. What's more is that the studies and statistics show that the average American has not really progressed in addressing and overcoming racial biases and tendencies. It is not necessarily the laws that are the issue, but rather the mentality that is ingrained and passed on through the generations that very much persists today and can be seen in the actions of people, both in their personal lives and their careers.

In addition to education and employment, *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" doctrine also allowed for abuse and misuse in the provision of community and housing for African Americans of the Great Migration. Black migrants to northern cities were met with hostile white residents who did not want them residing in their neighborhoods. Black people experienced intimidation and firebombings from white residents, as well as blatant discriminatory restrictions from white property owners²². When white landlords could no longer resist the overflow of black migrants, they decided to take full advantage of these newcomers. To start with, most property owners decided to cram black families into small housing units that were overpriced and overpopulated. They also tried to limit these black housing units to certain blocks or districts, so that regardless of a black individual's socioeconomic status, they were all confined to the same area. Property owners knew how desperate black people were and decided to rent their properties to colored people at higher prices, often "twice the rent charged" compared to their white counterparts²³.

After WWII, there was an increase of African American homebuyers, which was not without consequence. Because of the increase of African American buying homes, white people feared the integration of their all-white neighborhoods and the impact that would have. Panicked,

²² Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 249.

²³ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 270.

the white homeowners sold their property at lower prices to “salvage what equity they had left”²⁴. By extension, the homeowners who remained had little incentive to invest any further in the upkeep and maintenance of their properties. All this led to a decline in property values in the area, which enabled African Americans to afford homes. However, because of the decline in property values and the lack of ability or incentive to invest, these neighborhoods later on became ghettoized. It was not until the Fair Housing Act in 1968 that discrimination was legally prohibited in the housing market. However, this would not deter other, more subtle and systemic discriminatory practices from following through.

Overall, the overpricing and underinvestment in black communities laid the foundation for the existence of ghettos and amplified racial economic disparities, particularly in the destination cities of the Great Migration. Such practices persisted throughout much of the twentieth century and have had a major impact on the opportunities provided in the housing market for African Americans and other people of color, some of which can still be seen today.

Real estate agents today continue to sell with a discriminatory bias, whether it be intentional or not. African American customers are not given the same experience and knowledge as their white counterparts when it comes to the housing market. Complaints and investigations reported by the National Fair Housing Alliance demonstrate the vastly different experiences that black and white Americans have had when it comes to buying houses. To start with, black customers are often denied the opportunity to be shown housing they are interested in despite being more financially qualified than white people who are interested in the same properties. Additionally, more qualified African Americans and Latinos were shown “fewer homes than their white peers” and were denied access to information about “special incentives”

²⁴ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 376.

that would make purchasing a home easier²⁵. Real estate agents further enforce residential and school segregation by directing potential home buyers to neighborhoods based on race. In other words, white customers are encouraged to live in disproportionately white neighborhoods where the school population is also mostly white. Meanwhile, African Americans and Latinos are directed towards predominantly colored neighborhoods and schools²⁶. Coincidentally, there is an increased likelihood of biases not only in the South, but also in urban centers, including destination cities of the Great Migration. Homes are a major economic asset, and because African Americans as a whole are not given the same housing opportunities as whites, it disproportionately disadvantages black people in terms of their socioeconomic status.

The history and continued existence of discrimination in the modern era, which includes key areas such as education, employment, and community housing have collectively taken an enormous toll on the wealth and social standing of African Americans. For generations, African Americans have been deprived of full access to quality education, employment, and housing and, as a result, have and still continue to suffer economically. Those who dominate the caste system have had generations to build their wealth while African Americans have made only a small fortune. This has led to a wealth disparity in which white Americans have “an average net worth ten times that of black Americans”, with African Americans still struggling to catch up today²⁷. According to a CNN study, the wealth disparity between black and white Americans have nearly tripled in the past twenty-five years. The average household wealth of a black American is

²⁵ The Editorial Board, “How Segregation Destroys Black Wealth,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, September 15, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/opinion/how-segregation-destroys-black-wealth.html?ribbon-ad-idx=5>.

²⁶ The Editorial Board, “Segregation Destroys”.

²⁷ Wilkerson, *Other Suns*, 85.

\$11,030 while the average wealth for a white household is a staggering \$134,23²⁸. This is a massive gap that would take generations to close, but the possibility of that seems unlikely. Even those people of color who do have a good-paying job and have earned a college degree still lag far behind their white counterparts²⁹. The disparities continue to increase despite the progress that has been made, as the effects of the Jim Crow era laws are still felt today.

²⁸ Tami Luhby, “The Black-White Economic Divide in 5 Charts,” CNNMoney (Cable News Network, November 25, 2015), <https://money.cnn.com/2015/11/24/news/economy/blacks-whites-inequality/index.html?iid=EL>.

²⁹ Hoxie, Josh. “Blacks and Latinos Will Be Broke in a Few Decades.” Fortune. Fortune, August 5, 2020. https://fortune.com/2017/09/19/racial-inequality-wealth-gap-america/?utm_source=fortune.com

Bibliography

- Board, The Editorial. "How Segregation Destroys Black Wealth." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, September 15, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/opinion/how-segregation-destroys-black-wealth.html?ribbon-ad-idx=5>.
- Breslow, Jason M., Evan Wexler, and Robert Collins. "The Return of School Segregation in Eight Charts." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, July 15, 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-return-of-school-segregation-in-eight-charts/>.
- Hoxie, Josh. "Blacks and Latinos Will Be Broke in a Few Decades." *Fortune*. Fortune, August 5, 2020. https://fortune.com/2017/09/19/racial-inequality-wealth-gap-america/?utm_source=fortune.com.
- Luhby, Tami. "The Black-White Economic Divide in 5 Charts." *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, November 25, 2015. <https://money.cnn.com/2015/11/24/news/economy/blacks-whites-inequality/index.html?iid=EL>.
- Robertson, Mary. "Separate and Unequal." PBS. Public Broadcasting Service, July 15, 2014. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/separate-and-unequal/>.
- Vega, Tanzina. "Working While Brown: What Discrimination Looks like Now." *CNNMoney*. Cable News Network, November 25, 2015. <https://money.cnn.com/2015/11/25/news/economy/racial-discrimination-work/index.html>.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House.