



## **America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences, Volume 1**

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# An Overview of Trends in Social and Economic Well-Being, by Race

*Rebecca M. Blank*

This country's progress on race-related issues is often measured by trends in the economic and social well-being of the various racial and ethnic groups. During the first part of 1998, I headed an effort to pull together information on these trends from a wide variety of sources, as part of the work of the President's Initiative on Race, launched by President Clinton in 1997. This chapter offers a very brief overview of those data, providing an introduction to topics that other authors address in greater detail in later chapters of this report.

### INTRODUCTION

In general, there are many signs of improvement across all racial and ethnic groups in a wide variety of measures of well-being, such as educational achievement, health status, and housing quality. In some cases, disparities between different racial groups have narrowed, as all groups have experienced improvements. But in too many cases, overall improvement in well-being among all groups has brought about no lessening of racial or ethnic disparities. In a few key measures, disparities have actually widened. The primary conclusion of this paper is that race and ethnicity continue to be salient predictors of well-being in American society. To understand what is happening in America today and what will be happening in America tomorrow, one must understand the role of race.

### Indicators of Well-Being

This chapter discusses trends in seven areas:

1. population/demographic change,
2. education,
3. labor markets,
4. economic status,
5. health status,
6. crime and criminal justice, and
7. housing and neighborhoods.

Wherever possible, trends over time are presented for key variables, focusing on five major population groups: non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaska Natives. These data are taken almost entirely from U.S. government sources. In many cases, however, data for all groups are not available, or not available for the entire time period. Data available for as many groups as possible are presented in the 14 figures. The term “minority” is used to refer to a group that composes a minority of the total population. Although these five groups are currently minorities in the population, current trends project they will, together, constitute more than half the U.S. population by 2050.

This brief introduction does not attempt to provide anything like a comprehensive discussion of the available data.<sup>1</sup> Provided here is an overview of some of the more interesting trends, particularly focusing on issues that introduce key topics that will be addressed in this book. One particular limitation of these data is that they present averages across very large aggregate categories of racial and ethnic classification. This hides much of the rather important information about subgroups. For instance, although data for Dominican and Cuban Americans might show very different trends, they are both combined within the Hispanic category. Similarly, Japanese and Laotian Americans are grouped together in the Asian and Pacific Islanders category; Italian and Norwegian Americans are grouped together as non-Hispanic Whites.

### An Increasingly Diverse Population

The U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse. Hispanics, non-Hispanic Blacks, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and

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<sup>1</sup>See Council of Economic Advisers (1998) for a more comprehensive discussion of all data presented here, as well as other related data. Data and trends discussed in this paper are all documented and discussed in greater detail in this publication.

Alaska Natives currently constitute 27 percent of the population. By 2005, Hispanics will be the largest of these groups within the United States, surpassing non-Hispanic Blacks. These changes will present this nation with a variety of social and economic opportunities and challenges.

Recent high levels of immigration are also increasing diversity within these groups. At present, 38 percent of Hispanics are foreign-born; 61 percent of Asian and Pacific Islanders are foreign-born. This raises questions of assimilation and generational change. Will the second generation among these groups show a narrowing of the disparities that distinguish their foreign-born parents from the U.S.-born population?

Based on 1990 Census data, Figure 2-1 provides one view of this diversity, plotting projections of the minority composition of the population by region for 1995. Where people live and who they live next to is important in determining how individuals experience racial and ethnic diversity. The projections shown in Figure 2-1 indicate that the population in the West is the most diverse, with more than one-third of the population composed of racial and ethnic minorities. The West is also the

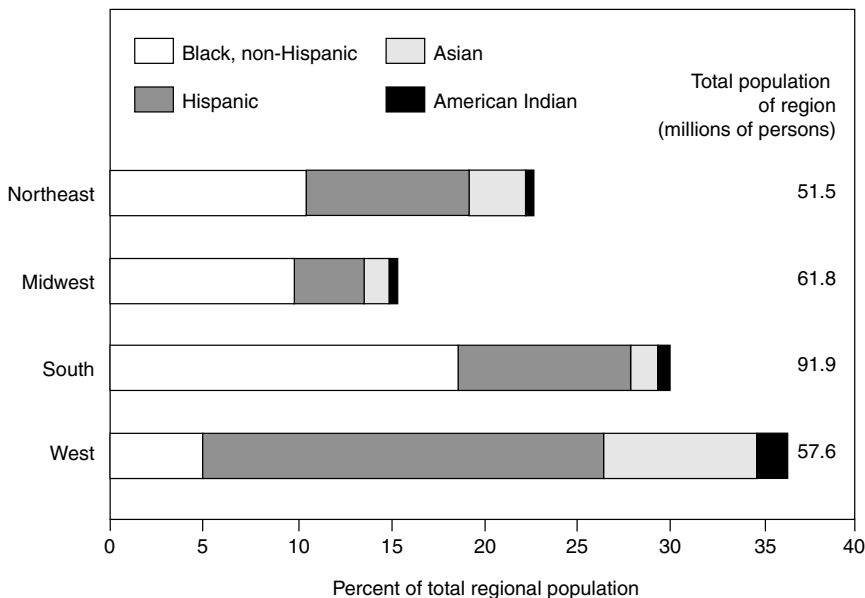


FIGURE 2-1 Minority population by region, 1995. Data for Asians exclude Hispanic Asians, and data for American Indians exclude Hispanic American Indians. Data are projections based on the 1990 census. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

region where a higher percentage of Hispanics, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaska Natives reside. The South is the second most diverse region and has the largest percentage of non-Hispanic Blacks. The Midwest is the region with the least population diversity; 85 percent of its population is non-Hispanic Whites.

The household structure of these different groups varies greatly, as shown in Figure 2-2. Household structure, based here on data for 1970 and 1996, correlates with a variety of other variables, particularly variables relating to economic well-being. More adults in a family means

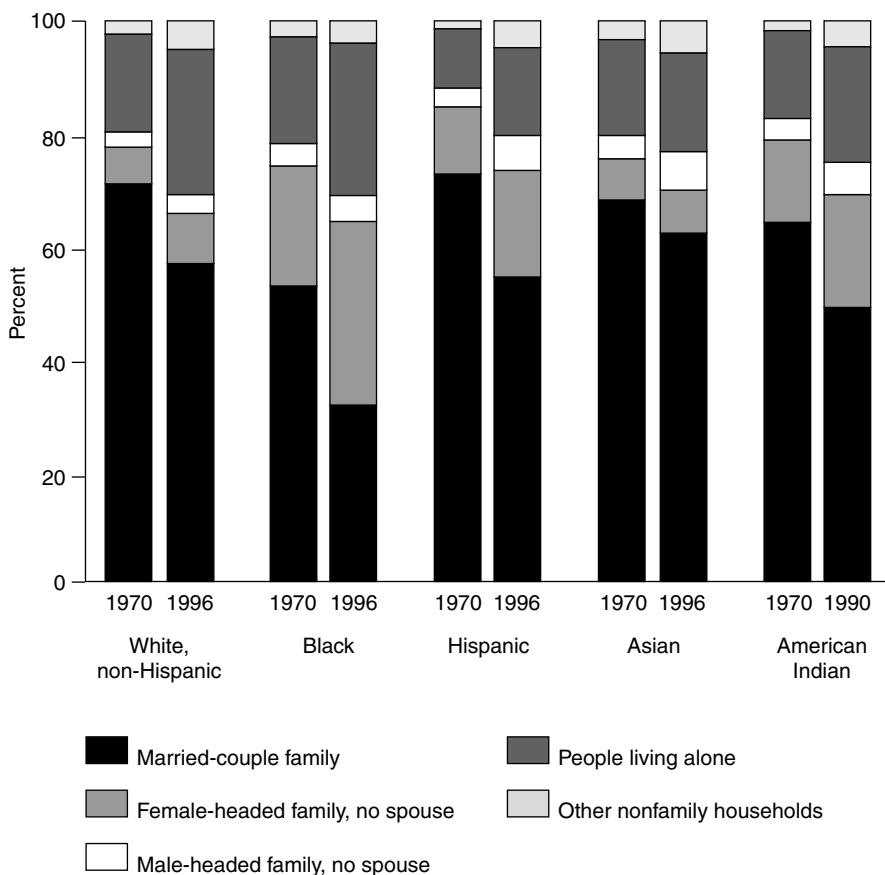


FIGURE 2-2 Household structure. In 1970, data for Whites include Hispanic Whites. In 1970, data for Asians are for Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos. Data for 1996 are not available for American Indians. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

more potential earnings as well as more available adults to care for children. Single-parent households are among the poorest groups in the country. Individuals who live alone are also often more economically vulnerable than are persons who live with other family members.

All groups show significant increases in the number of people living alone or in single-parent families between 1970 and 1996, but the percentage living in single-parent families is much larger among Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians and Alaska Natives. In fact, the biggest recent percentage increases are in single-father families, rather than single-mother families, although single-father families continue to be a small percentage of all families. The reasons for these trends—and why some groups have much larger percentages of single-parent families in particular—are much debated.

Household structure is closely related to age distribution as well. Minority populations have a significantly larger percentage of children under the age of 17 than do non-Hispanic Whites, whereas Whites have a much larger percentage of elderly persons. The result is that the school-aged population—persons aged 5 to 17—is more racially and ethnically diverse than the population as a whole, so that today's schools reflect tomorrow's more diverse adult population—and also mirror some of the conflicts and the benefits that accompany growing diversity.

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In a society growing increasingly complex, educational skills are key to future life opportunities. Disparities in education are fundamental because they can determine lifetime earning opportunities and influence an individual's ability to participate in civic activities as well.

The labor market of the twenty-first century will rely increasingly on computers; thus, obtaining computer skills is fundamental. Figure 2-3 shows how children's access to computers has changed over time, both in their schools and in their homes. Clearly, more and more children have access to computers, particularly in their schools; but there is an ongoing gap in computer use between White children versus Black and Hispanic children. Between 1984 and 1993, the years for which these data are available, this gap increased for computer use at home, leaving children in minority groups further behind.

Other more conventional measures of achievement in elementary and secondary schooling have generally shown narrowing gaps across racial groups. Mathematics proficiency scores, as measured among children of different ages by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, have shown ongoing gains, particularly by Black children. High school completion continues to inch up among both Whites and Blacks, with substan-

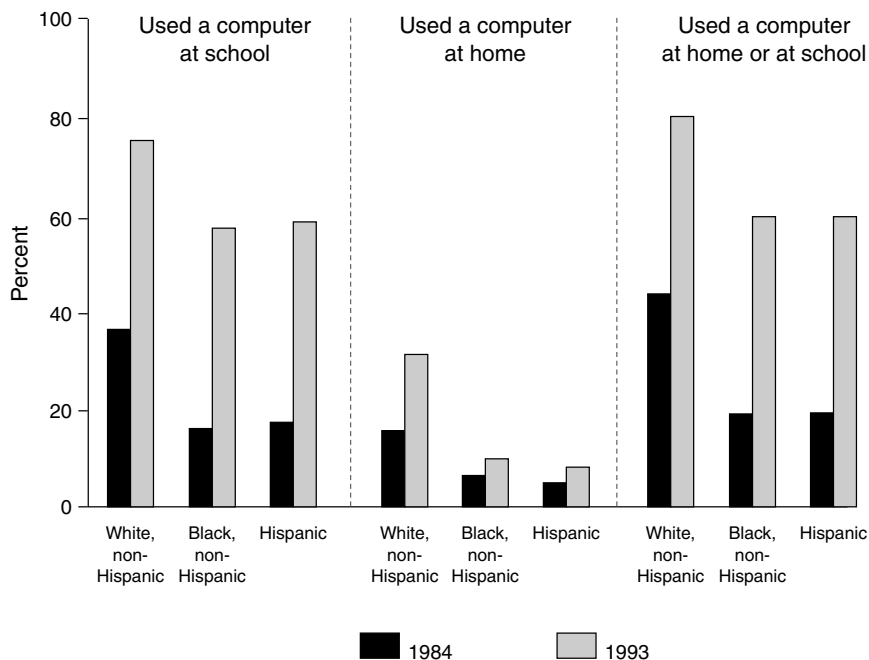


FIGURE 2-3 Computer use by children in first through sixth grades. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

tially greater progress among Blacks; so that the White-Black high school dropout rates are slowly converging over time. Among Hispanics, high school completion has been stagnant at approximately 60 percent since the early 1980s. Hence, the gap between Hispanics and other groups in terms of educational achievement is widening.

Figure 2-4 shows trends in attainment of college degrees, through 1997, among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics. Economic returns to a college education have increased dramatically in recent years, and college degrees continue to be an important credential for entry into many white-collar jobs. Although college completion has increased steeply among Whites, it has increased only modestly among Blacks, leading to a widening gap since the early 1990s. Among Hispanics, college completion rates are not much higher now than they were in the mid-1980s.

The more stagnant educational trends among Hispanics reflect, in part, the growing immigrant percentage of that population. Immigrants are less likely to hold high school or college degrees. U.S.-born Hispanics are making progress in increasing both their high school and college completion levels, but this progress is being diluted by the growing pool

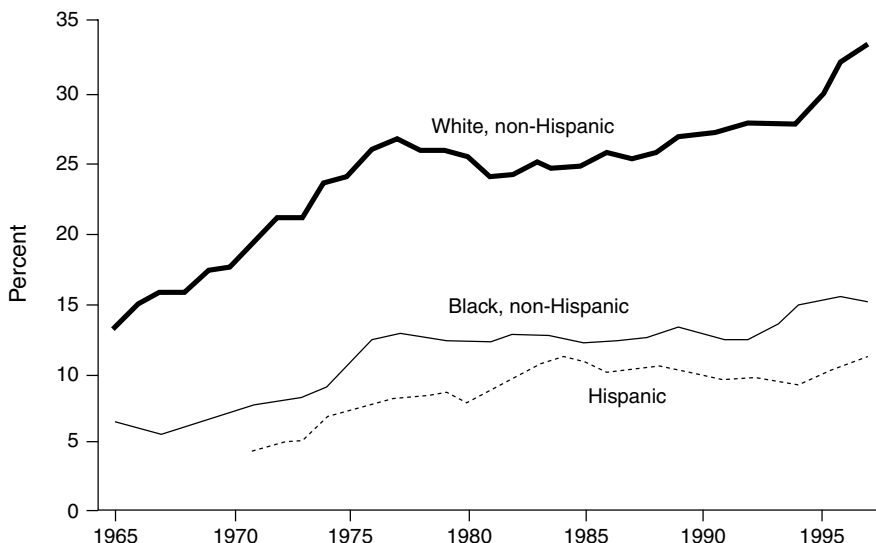


FIGURE 2-4 Persons aged 25 to 29 with a four-year college degree or higher. Prior to 1971, data for Whites include Hispanic Whites, and data for Blacks include Hispanic Blacks. Data for non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanics are three-year centered averages. Prior to 1992, data are for persons having completed four or more years of college. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

of less-educated immigrants. This re-emphasizes the question of how second-generation Hispanic children will fare. If they follow the trends of other U.S.-born populations, Hispanic educational attainment will start to increase over time.

### LABOR-MARKET INVOLVEMENT

Involvement in the labor force means integration with the mainstream U.S. economy. Earnings are the primary source of income for most persons. Although job-holding may create some stress, it also produces economic rewards. Access to jobs is key for economic progress.

Figure 2-5 plots the labor-force participation rates from the 1950s to 1997 for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, by gender. The chart shows rapidly increasing convergence in labor-force participation rates, as men's rates have slowly decreased while women's rates have increased steadily. White women, who used to be much less likely to work than Black women, are now just as likely to be in the labor force. In fact, both White women's and Black women's labor-force participation rates are rapidly

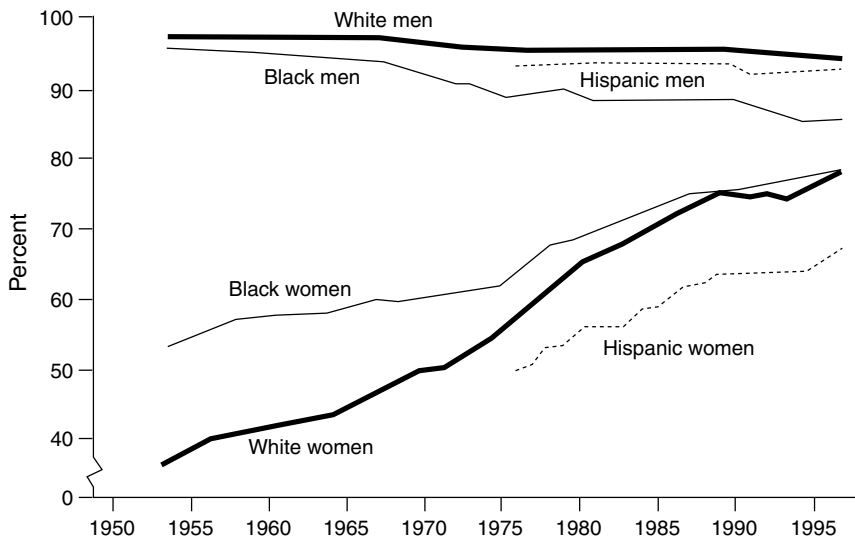


FIGURE 2-5 Labor force participation rates of persons aged 25 to 54. Prior to 1972, data for Blacks include all non-Whites. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

converging with those of Black men, who have experienced steady decreases in work involvement.

Hispanic women also have shown increases in labor-force participation, but remain much less likely to work than other women. A major question for the Hispanic population is whether adult women will show rapid increases in labor-force participation, to the level of women from other groups. Such changes in women's labor-market involvement not only mean changes in the economic base of families—and probably in the economic security and decision-making power of husbands versus wives—but may also mean substantial changes in family functioning and in child-rearing practices.

Along with labor-force participation, unemployment is another measure of access (or lack of access) to jobs. After two decades of higher unemployment rates, unemployment in the late 1990s was at 25-to-30-year lows among all groups. The differentials between groups, however, remained quite large. For instance, unemployment rates among Blacks have consistently been at least twice as high as those of Whites.

The labor-market issue that has received the most attention in recent years is wage opportunities. Figure 2-6 plots median weekly earnings among male and female full-time workers from 1965 through the first two quarters of 1998. Among all groups, men's wages decreased steadily

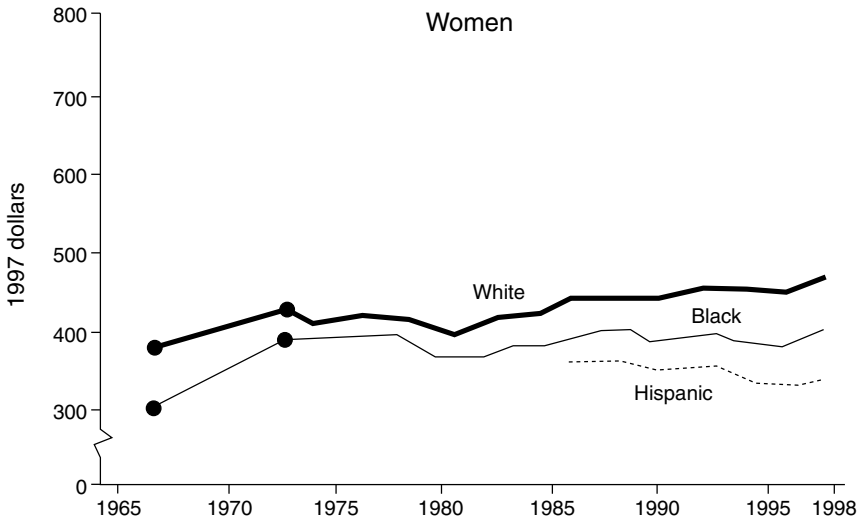
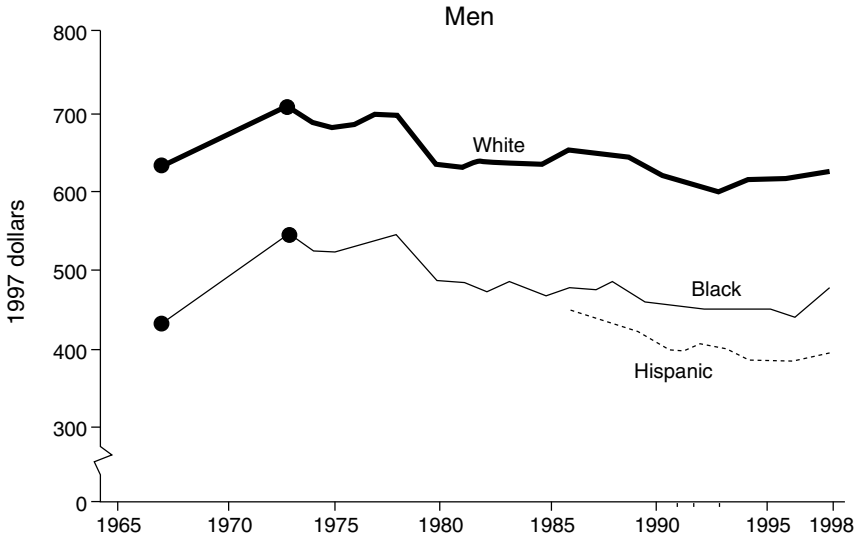


FIGURE 2-6 Median weekly earnings of male and female full-time workers. Straight line between dots indicates data are not available for intervening years. Prior to 1979, data for Blacks include all non-Whites. Data for 1998 are from the first two quarters. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

from 1980 until 1995, when there was evidence of an upturn. The pay gap between White and Black men changed little, however, with no sign of relative progress in wages for Black men. Hispanic men have actually seen decreases in both absolute and relative wages, compared with White and Black men. Again, this pattern is at least partially the result of the growing percentage of less-educated immigrants in the Hispanic population.

In contrast, women have not experienced wage decreases. In fact, White women's wages have grown slowly since the 1980s, so that they now earn more than both Hispanic and Black men. Black women's wages have been largely stagnant, although they show a recent upturn; and Hispanic women's wages have decreased slightly. Thus, the wage gap between White women and both Black and Hispanic women has increased.

### ECONOMIC STATUS

Continued and even growing gaps in earnings imply that the economic situation is not improving for minority populations relative to the White population. Other measures of family economic well-being reinforce this conclusion. Figure 2-7 shows median family income for Asian and Pacific Islanders, non-Hispanic Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks through 1996. Family income is probably the most widely used measure

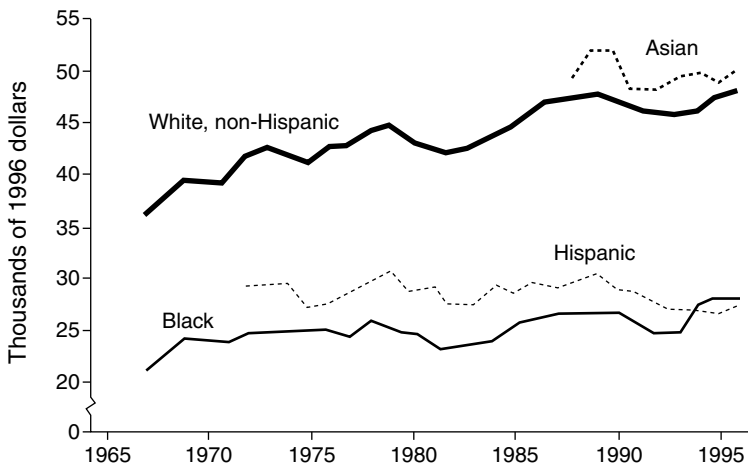


FIGURE 2-7 Median family income. Prior to 1972, data for Whites include Hispanic Whites. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

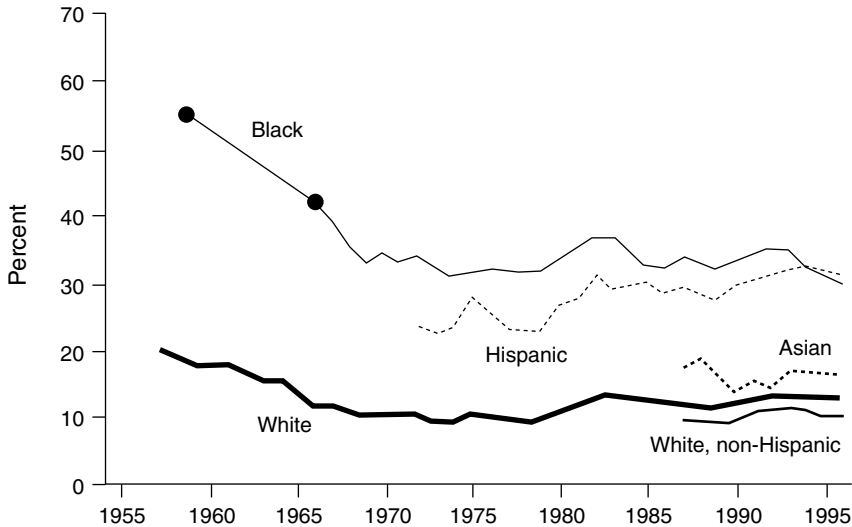


FIGURE 2-8 Poverty rates for individuals. Straight line between dots indicates data not available for intervening years. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

of overall economic well-being. Among non-Hispanic Whites, family income has been rising steadily. Essentially, the growth in female labor-force participation and increases in White women's wages have resulted in more family income, even though men's earnings have deteriorated somewhat. Asian families earn even more than Whites. Black family income has been relatively stagnant since the 1970s, although there were signs of increase after 1993. Hispanic family income decreased in the 1990s.

This means that income differentials have widened between Whites and Asian and Pacific Islanders on the upper end of the income brackets and Blacks and Hispanics on the lower end. American Indians and Alaska Natives, for whom we only have data from the 1990 Census, show lower income than Blacks in that year.

These median family income numbers hide very different experiences at different points in the income distribution. Households headed by less-skilled workers—particularly those headed by single parents—have generally experienced income decreases over the past several decades. Households headed by a person with a college degree have generally experienced income increases.

One might be particularly concerned with the number of families at very low income levels. Figure 2-8 shows poverty rates among individuals by racial group, indicating the percentage of the population in each

group living in families with incomes below the official U.S. poverty line, which was less than \$8,000 per year in the late 1990s. In general, poverty rates have been relatively flat since the early 1970s. About 10 percent of the White population has been poor over this period. Asian and Pacific Islanders show a slightly higher poverty rate, underscoring the diversity within the Asian and Pacific Islander populations—they have both higher median incomes than Whites as well as higher poverty rates, reflecting the fact that at least some Asian groups are experiencing economic difficulties.

Black poverty has also been relatively constant, but at nearly 30 percent—three times the White poverty rate. Hispanic poverty has increased somewhat since the mid-1980s; Hispanic poverty rates are now higher than Black poverty rates. Poverty rates among subgroups, such as children or the elderly, show similar differentials between racial and ethnic groups.

### HEALTH STATUS

Economic well-being is often closely linked to other aspects of well-being, such as health status. Interestingly, health differences do not necessarily show the same patterns as economic differences. Infant-mortality rates provide a primary indicator of both health status and access to health care in a population. Figure 2-9 plots infant-mortality rates by race from

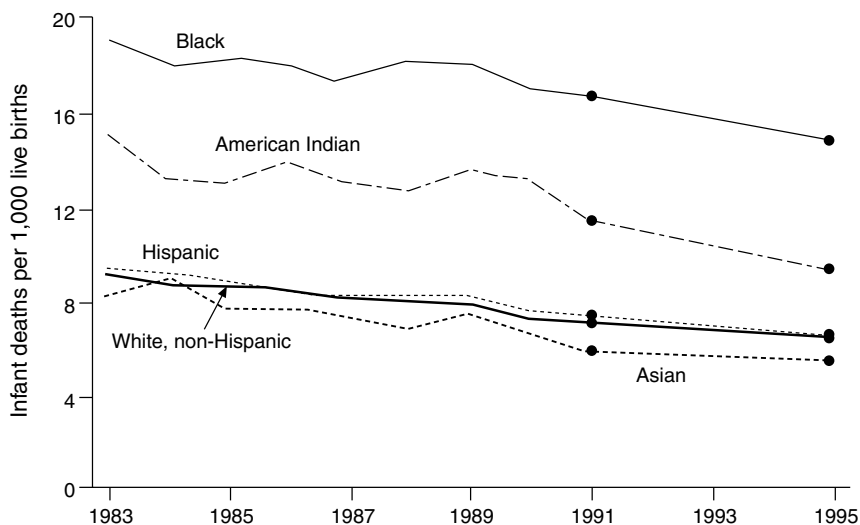


FIGURE 2-9 Infant mortality rates. Straight line between dots indicates data not available for intervening years. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

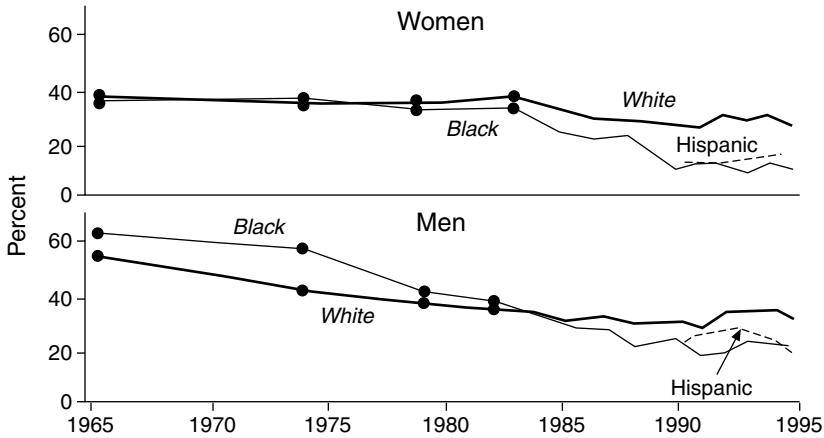


FIGURE 2-10 Prevalence of smoking among persons aged 18 to 24. Straight line between dots indicates data not available for intervening years. Data for Hispanics are for 1990-1991, 1992-1993, and 1994-1995. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

the early 1980s through 1995. Infant mortality has been steadily decreasing among all groups, indicating major health improvements within all populations. The disparities between groups, however, have remained largely constant. Black infant-mortality rates are about two-and-a-half times White rates. American Indian and Alaska Native rates have fallen a bit faster than other groups, but remain well above White rates.

Figure 2-9 also shows a pattern visible in much health data—namely, although Hispanics show substantial educational and economic differentials, they show far fewer health differentials. Hispanic infant-mortality rates are almost identical to White and Asian and Pacific Islander infant-mortality rates.

Figure 2-10 shows smoking prevalence for people aged 18 to 24, from 1965 through 1995. Clearly, smoking is a health issue that emerges in adolescence. Smoking is correlated with shorter life expectancy and greater health risks. In general, smoking rates have fallen for both young women and men over the past 30 years; and this is one of the few indicators where Blacks and Hispanics do better than Whites. Black smoking rates have fallen faster than White rates, so that young Blacks, who used to be more likely to smoke than Whites, are now less likely to smoke.

In contrast, Figure 2-11 shows death rates among 15- to 34-year-olds in the mid-1990s. There are very large differences in death rates by cause among different racial groups. American Indians and Alaska Natives are far more likely to die as a result of unintentional injuries—typically auto-

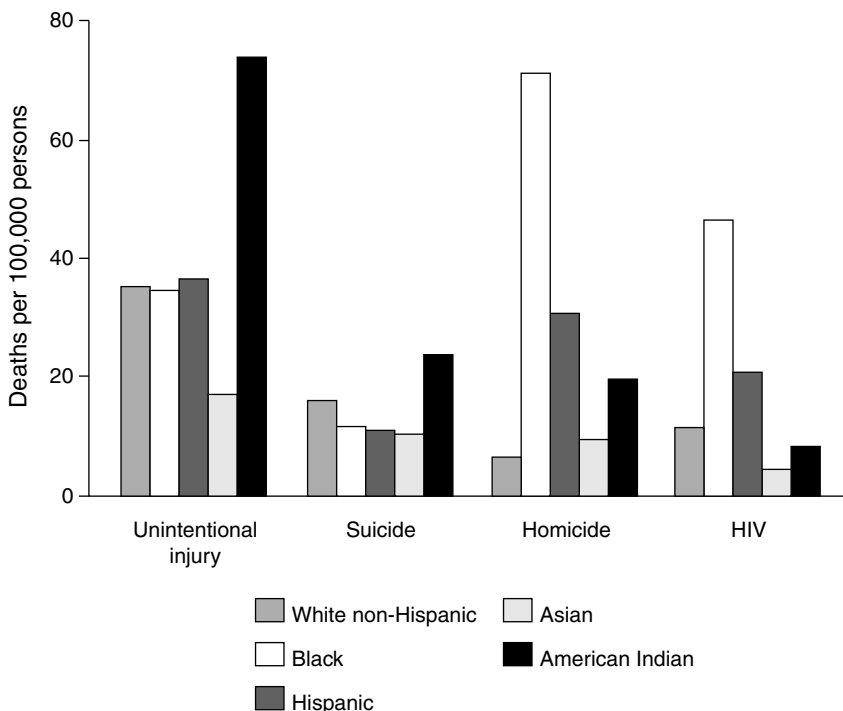


FIGURE 2-11 Death rates by cause, for persons aged 15 to 34, 1994 to 1995. Data for 1994 and 1995 are averaged to provide more reliable estimates. HIV data for American Indians are for 1993-1995. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

mobile accidents—and suicide. Blacks are far more likely to die as a result of homicide and HIV infection. These differences emphasize that living conditions and health-risk factors are quite different among different populations.

### CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

There is no single aggregate measure of the likelihood of being a victim of crime. Figure 2-12 plots homicide rates, which constitute a small percentage of all crimes but are among the best measured crime statistics (few homicides go unnoticed or unreported). Figure 2-12 shows that Blacks are far more likely to be homicide victims than is any other group. The homicide victimization rate of Blacks is more than twice that of Hispanics and six times that of non-Hispanic Whites and Asian and Pacific Islanders. American Indian and Alaska Native homicide rates are about

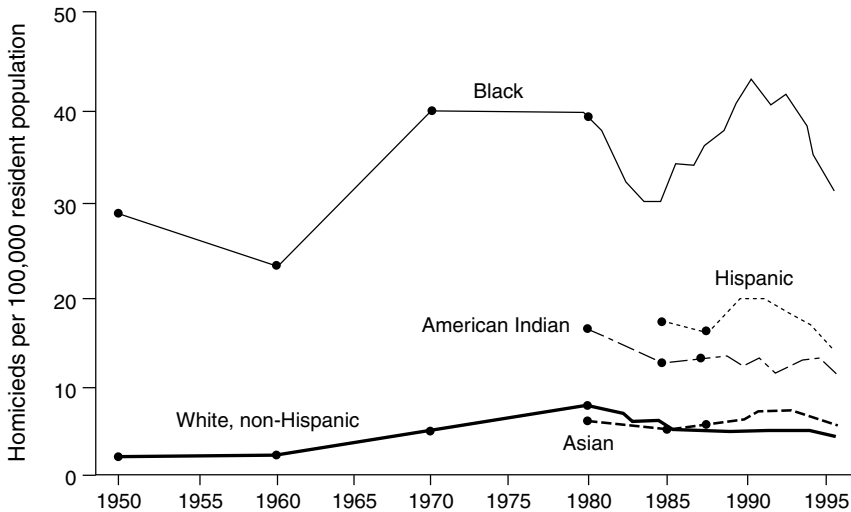


FIGURE 2-12 Victims of homicide. Straight line between dots indicates data not available for intervening years. Data include deaths from “legal intervention” (use of police force). Prior to 1985, data for Whites include Hispanic Whites. Prior to 1970, data include nonresidents. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

twice those of Whites and Asian and Pacific Islanders, and slightly below those of Hispanics. Although public discussion often focuses on the higher likelihood that Blacks will be arrested for crimes, there is little discussion of the fact that Blacks are also much more likely to be victims. There are large disparities by race in both the likelihood of being a victim of a crime, as well as in the likelihood of being arrested and incarcerated by the criminal justice system. Although other crime statistics, such as property crimes, show smaller racial disparities, they also show higher victimization among minority groups.

Data on experiences within the criminal justice system are largely tabulated only for Whites and Blacks, and hence provide less comprehensive measures across racial groups. Blacks are far more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than are Whites. Some of these differences reflect differences in the crimes for which Blacks are disproportionately arrested, and some may reflect discriminatory behavior on the part of police and other persons within the criminal justice system. In 1995, more than 9 percent of the Black population was under correctional supervision, either on probation or parole, or in jail or prison, compared to 2 percent of the White population. Among young Black men 20 to 29 years old, more than 25 percent are under correctional supervision. Because arrests and prison stays often fracture families and reduce future

labor-market opportunities, these high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system are correlated with the reduced economic opportunities of Black families.

### HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOODS

Where people live, and the housing they live in, is correlated with their health and economic status. Increasing concern among social scientists about “neighborhood effects”—the influence of peers and of neighborhood characteristics on individual health and behavior—has raised interest in housing and neighborhood issues. Figure 2-13 shows the percentage of populations living in housing units with physical problems, such as substandard plumbing or heating as well as electrical and other serious upkeep problems. All groups for which we have data, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, show substantial improvement in housing quality; but, as in other areas, large disparities remain across groups. Non-Hispanic Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians and Alaska Natives are far more likely to live in substandard housing than are Whites or

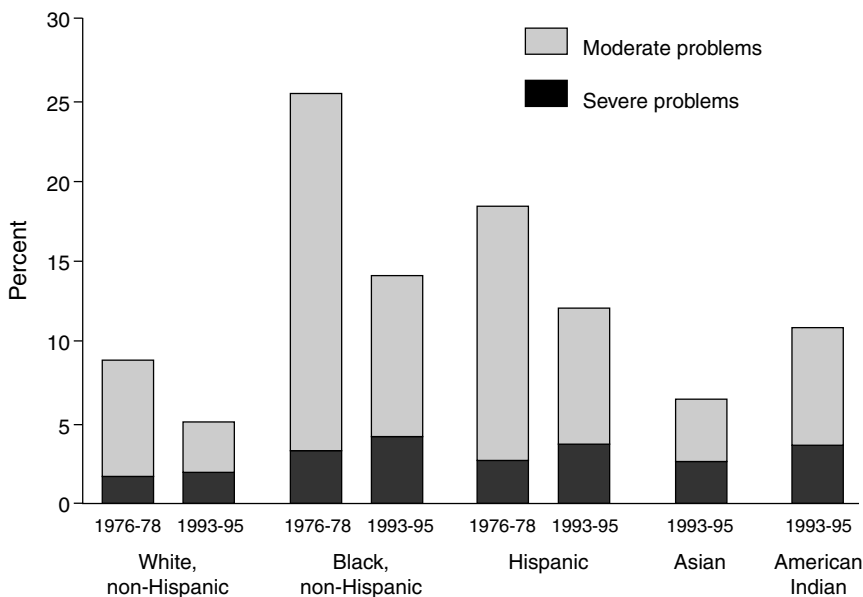


FIGURE 2-13 Housing units with physical problems. Data for 1976 and 1978, or 1993 and 1995, are averaged to provide more reliable estimates. Data for Asians exclude Hispanic Asians, and data for American Indians exclude Hispanic American Indians. SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

Asian and Pacific Islanders. Other measures of housing adequacy, such as crowding, show similar trends, with overall improvement among all groups, but continuing large disparities between groups.

Information about neighborhoods raises again the question of where people live and who they live next to. The diversity of a person's neighborhood can affect his or her overall sense of national diversity and knowledge of members of other races or ethnicities. Figure 2-14 shows the neighborhood composition of different groups in the United States. At the top is the overall population composition of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaska Natives. If all people lived in a randomly chosen location, the composition of neighborhoods would reflect the composition of the overall population. The bot-

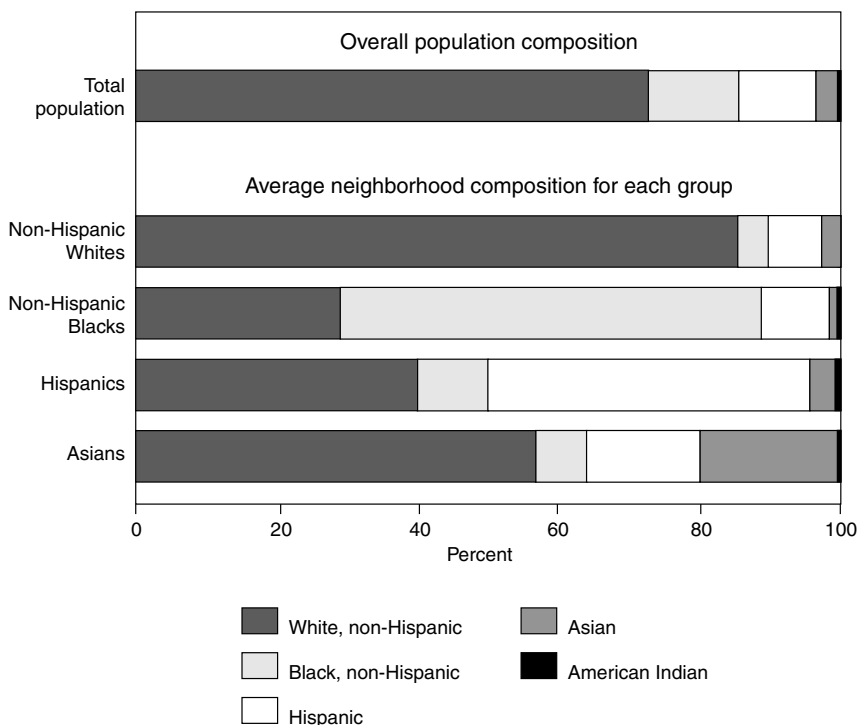


FIGURE 2-14 Average racial and ethnic composition of metropolitan neighborhoods, 1990. Data for Asians exclude Hispanic Asians, and data for American Indians exclude Hispanic American Indians. The American Indian category includes individuals classified as "other." SOURCE: Council of Economic Advisers (1998).

tom of the figure shows what the average neighborhood composition looks like for persons of each racial group.

Whites are by far the most segregated population, even more than their larger population percentage would justify. The average White person lives in a neighborhood that is more than 80 percent White. Blacks are the next most segregated, living in neighborhoods that are, on average, about 60 percent Black and 30 percent White.

Hispanics live in neighborhoods that have close to equal amounts (about 40 percent each) of Whites and Hispanics. Asian and Pacific Islanders live in the most diverse neighborhoods, composed of a mix of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and other Asian and Pacific Islanders. This suggests that these two population groups are experiencing and living in the midst of diversity in this country to a much greater degree than Whites or Blacks.

### WHAT DO THESE DISPARITIES MEAN?

This very quick and quite limited review of some of the key indicators of economic and social well-being underscores the ongoing importance of disparities by race and by Hispanic origin in U.S. society. Of course, there are multiple reasons behind these disparities. Many of the other chapters in this book summarize what the research literature indicates about the causes and effects of racial disparities in key areas of society. Three overarching conclusions, based on the data, are presented here.

First, race and Hispanic origin continue to be defining characteristics for many Americans. They are correlated with educational and economic opportunities, with health status, and with where people live and who they live next to. The magnitude of these differences, especially for Blacks and Hispanics, is extremely significant on average, suggesting that these disparities are widely experienced. Relative to the White and Asian populations, the Black population on average has only two-fifths as many college graduates, three-fourths as much earnings, and only slightly more than one-half as much income. The Hispanic population fares even worse. Although we do not have as much comparable information for American Indians and Alaska Natives, their data tend to be closer to those of Blacks and Hispanics than to those of Whites. Whatever their causes, these are substantial differentials; they shape our life opportunities and they shape our opinions about and behaviors toward each other. To repeat the point I started with at the beginning of this chapter, race continues to be a salient predictor of well-being in American society.

Second, the growing presence of Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islander populations is fundamentally changing the face of America. The displacement of Blacks as the largest minority group in the population in the early 2000s may cause some political and social tension. High num-

bers of immigrants within the Hispanic and Asian and Pacific Islander groups make questions of assimilation and second-generation progress particularly important in the years ahead. If second-generation Hispanic women behave more like other U.S.-born women, there will be many more Hispanic families with wives in the labor market two decades from now. If second-generation Hispanics acquire education at the rate of other U.S.-born populations, the education levels within the Hispanic community will rise substantially.

Third, Whites may be less aware of the changes and the challenges of growing population diversity than any other group. In part, there is often a “blindness” among the majority to the situation of other groups, because their own situation is typically taken as the norm. This “blindness” is reinforced by locational patterns and neighborhood choice. Whites are much more likely to live in the Midwest than other groups, the least diverse part of the nation; and they tend to live in the most segregated neighborhoods in the other regions. In contrast, Asian and Pacific Islanders—who do as well as Whites on many measures of well-being—live in much more diverse neighborhoods and are almost surely more aware of issues relating to diversity and difference, even when these issues do not translate into personal economic differentials. In short, the growing populations of Hispanics and Asian and Pacific Islanders, as well as many Blacks, may be better prepared to address the challenges, and to take advantage of the benefits, of an increasingly diverse population than are Whites.

This introduction has provided a set of data-based “snapshots” of diversity and differentials by race and Hispanic origin in some key areas. The rest of this book provides in-depth examinations of these same key areas. The chapters that follow look beneath the averages and the aggregate snapshots and disclose a nuanced sense of how and why racial differentials continue to exist, and how they have been influenced by policy choices.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The opinions expressed in this paper reflect the personal views of the author and not the official position of the Council of Economic Advisers. I thank all my staff at the CEA who worked on putting together the information summarized here.

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