



# Policy Brief

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## National Poverty Center

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## The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial & Ethnic Disparities Persist

Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris, editors

National Poverty Center Series on Poverty and Public Policy, The Russell Sage Foundation,  
<http://www.russellsage.org/publications/books/080117.709458>

### Why is American Poverty Still Colored in the Twenty-First Century?

*The Colors of Poverty* asks why racial differences continue to result in socio-economic disadvantages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Given substantial progress in civil rights and anti-discrimination policies—as well as the increased ethnic diversity of the nation—why is poverty still so colored? Why have racial differences in poverty persisted for so long—and what can we do to confront them?

Ann Chih Lin and David R. Harris contend that poverty results not from a single source but from a cumulative process: any type of disadvantage makes one vulnerable to other

## Findings

- Racial disparities in poverty result from cumulative disadvantage over the life course, as the effects of hardship in one domain spill over into other domains.
- Whites report better overall health than blacks, Latinos, and Asians, even after controlling for poverty, education, and unemployment.
- Residents of a predominately black or Hispanic neighborhood have access to roughly half as many social services as those in predominately white neighborhoods.
- In the U.S., one of every three African American children and one of every four Latino children live in poverty—two times higher than the rate for white children.
- States with more blacks and Hispanics on welfare are more likely to impose lifetime limits, family caps on benefits, and stricter sanctions for noncompliance.
- By age three, white children have a significantly larger vocabulary than black children of the same economic class. The gap for race is as large as the gap for class, and remains the same through age 13.
- The collateral consequences of felony conviction—such as bans on entering many occupations, on voting, jury service, and receiving federal college loans and grants—harm both offenders and their communities.

disadvantages. The book's interdisciplinary group of authors finds that when discrimination, beliefs about achievement, or cultural practices elevate one race over another, even slightly, the associated penalties have far reaching consequences. Similarly, small initial correlations between race and negative outcomes in health, education, or residential quality lead to cascades of disadvantage over time. Race is no longer the primary determinant of American life chances. But its continuing effect upon economic and social policy has an exponential effect on poverty.

Lin and Harris conclude that if we are to strive for a society in which poverty is not colored, we must pay more attention to race. By focusing less on the specific causes of poverty, and more on how racial differences in poverty spread from one domain to another, we can develop better, more comprehensive reforms. Reframing the debate over poverty in terms of cumulative disadvantage is a significant shift in how to study its causes and reduce its impact.

## Discrimination, Attitudes, and Culture

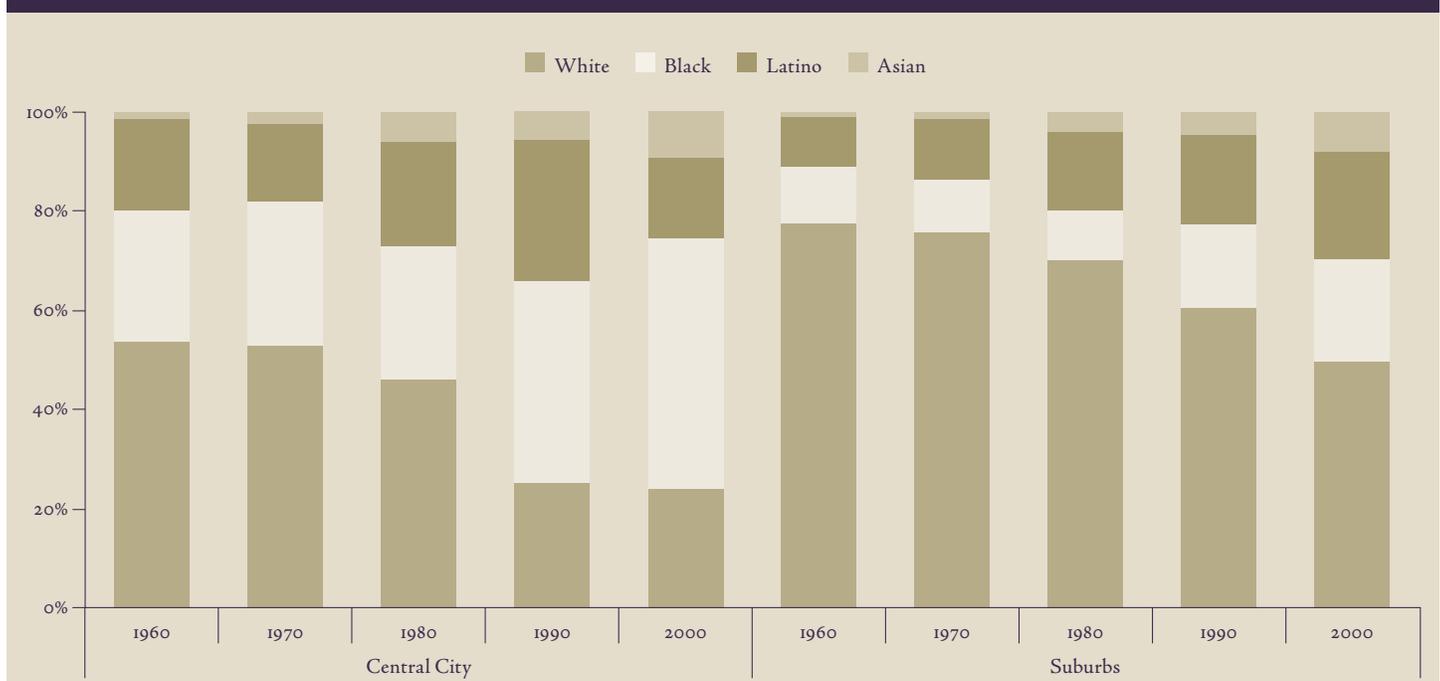
The first section of the volume examines how connections between race, privilege, disadvantage, and achievement are constructed. Devah Pager argues that while certain forms of systemic discrimination have largely receded, others have persisted. For example, geographic steering of black and Hispanic homebuyers remains common and 50% of black respondents in a recent Gallup Poll reported incidents of discrimination within the month prior to the survey. In a two-city audit study, employers were twice as likely to hire a white applicant as an equally qualified black applicant for an entry-level position. They were just as likely to hire a white recently released from prison as a black applicant with no criminal history.

Heather Bullock documents attitudes and beliefs about poverty that contribute to contemporary racial stratification. The American ethos of rugged individualism and meritocracy erode support for

antipoverty programs and reinforce the belief that people are responsible for their own poverty. Americans today are more likely to believe in the possibility of upward mobility than they were twenty years ago—despite increased economic inequality in that same time period. These beliefs intersect with higher levels of poverty among minority groups, affecting how the white nonpoor treat the poor and what minorities, poor or not, believe about themselves.

In debates about poverty, “culture” is often a flashpoint for debates between liberals and conservatives. Michele Lamont and Mario Luis Small argue that this debate overlooks substantial research into cultural frames, narratives, and repertoires that explains how people evolve different strategies for coping with poverty. In addition, research into symbolic boundaries, cultural capital, and institutional changes illuminates how characteristics attributed to race or ethnicity are instead the product of distinctions, competition, and policy

Figure 1. Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Poor in Central Cities and Suburbs, 1960–2000



**Table 1: Disparities in Family Circumstances When Schooling Begins**

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
% Single Parent <sup>a</sup>	15	54	27	10
% Experiencing Poverty <sup>a</sup>	10	42	37	
Average SES (SD) <sup>a</sup>	0.2 (1.0)	-0.5 (1.0)	-0.4 (0.9)	0.5 (1.1)
% Non-English Household <sup>a</sup>	1	1	31	51
% Mother H.S. Dropout <sup>b</sup>	7	18	35	
% Teen Mother <sup>b</sup>	10	22	19	
% Mother Depressed <sup>b</sup>	11	20	13	
% Low Birth Weight <sup>b</sup>	6	15	8	
% Four or More Hardships <sup>b</sup>	4	29	18	
Average Number of Books <sup>a</sup>	93	40	53	56
% Own Home Computer <sup>a</sup>	66	33	42	65

Sources: *a* Lee and Burkam (2002); *b* Duncan and Magnuson (2005)

categories embedded in larger social processes. They contend that these research approaches can help to develop richer explanations of racial disparities in poverty, and thus policies that more accurately target levers for change.

## Education, Social Networks, and Health

In the second section, the authors explore factors that are ostensibly unrelated to race but nonetheless contribute to racial inequality. George Farkas analyzes how disparities in household resources, parenting time, and stressors shape a substantial racial and ethnic achievement gap before children even enter school. Black and white children enter kindergarten with very different levels of preparedness, while Asian and Hispanic achievement levels are lowered by the high proportion of parents who lack English skills. These initial differences are exacerbated by class differences, ability grouping, and teacher attention. By fourth grade, black children score more than 25 points lower, Hispanic children about 15 points lower, and Asian children between 5-10 points lower than white children on reading and math tests. Second language

learners of any race lose roughly 20 more points on reading and 15 more points on math. Farkas points to the need for intensive, ongoing tutoring programs that start with very young children and are continued at least through all elementary grades, and perhaps beyond.

David R. Williams and Selina A. Mohammed analyze data from the California Health Interview Study (CHIS)—the most comprehensive health database with information on race and immigration—to examine links between health, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity, and migration. SES differences are larger than racial differences in health: differences in health between poor and high-income persons are more than three times the overall black-white difference in health. However, race carries its own burden for health beyond those associated with SES. These burdens are different, not only across racial groups, but also across national origin groups that are generally consolidated into the same race.

Social capital theories are commonly cited to explain racial disparities in poverty. Lincoln Quillan and Rozlyn Redd evaluate several of the most common, pointing out that much research overestimates the effect

of social capital while underestimating the impact of other similarities between people in the same social group. They find good evidence for three theories: the effect of friendships on student achievement, the effect of neighborhoods on crime control and social order, and the effect of ethnic businesses, hiring networks, and community monitoring on the economic and educational achievements of immigrants. They argue, however, that the evidence for one of the most cited social capital explanations for poverty—the idea that differences in job search networks perpetuate racial stratification—is at best mixed. Quillan and Redd conclude that even though social capital is an important factor, other processes—such as discrimination—are equally or more important in producing racial differences in poverty.

## Public Policy as a Contributor

In the last section of the volume, the authors show how public policies deepen and in some cases create racial inequality. Housing policies, crime policies, and antipoverty policies concentrate advantage and disadvantage, undercutting their stated goals of improving the well being of all Americans. Michael Stoll shows that the traditional juxtaposition of poor black central cities and wealthy white suburbs has changed. While central cities are still overwhelmingly black, especially among the poor, suburbs are becoming both more racially diverse and more poor. The economic and racial integration of the suburbs, however, has not led to more numerous routes out of poverty. Transportation, zoning, development regulations, and housing assistance tend to perpetuate racial and economic stratification in the suburbs.

Scott W. Allard’s analysis of the availability and provision of social

services reinforces Stoll's conclusions. Individuals in high poverty, highly black neighborhoods are the least likely to have access to food pantries, child care, transportation, job training, substance abuse treatment or other, similar social services. Instead, these services are much more likely to be located in low-poverty census tracts, and in predominantly white areas. Hispanics have more accessibility to social services when they live in mixed-race areas. However, the growing presence of Hispanics in poor rural areas bodes ill for their future access.

Over the last 25 years, the number of Americans under criminal supervision has increased by nearly 400%. Darren Wheelock and Christopher Uggen estimate that 23% of black adult males now have a felony record, preventing them from fully participating in society long after their sentences have been served. Ex-offenders are ineligible for federal college loans and grants, which exacerbates the black/white educational attainment gap. Legal immigrants can have their residency revoked, contributing to an 800% increase in criminal deportations from 1983-2003. In many states, ex-offenders are also barred from a long list of employment opportunities; in Florida, these include barbering, septic tank contracting, and pest control. States also permanently remove the right to vote and serve on juries from ex-felons, which diminishes the political power of entire communities: in 16 Georgia counties, more than half of all African American men are excluded from jury duty.

Joe Soss and Sanford F. Schram conclude that the decentralized and discretionary nature of state welfare programs allows for different treatment of racial groups, even when such policies are touted as "race-neutral." States with greater numbers of blacks and Hispanics on the welfare rolls are more likely to impose lifetime limits,

family caps on benefits for mothers who give birth, and stricter sanctions for not complying with work requirements. As a result, nationwide, a majority of white recipients experience the most generous welfare programs and a majority of black recipients, the most restrictive. Soss and Schram put this finding in a historical context that shows increasing government supervision and intervention in the lives of the poor, particularly those of blacks, Hispanic, and Asian descent.

## Conclusion and Policy Implications

Each chapter makes an important contribution to our understanding of how race and poverty intersect in contemporary society. Together, they show that disadvantages in one area create new disadvantages in others. Conversely, advantages insulate, allowing those with fewer vulnerabilities to buffer themselves from cascading disadvantage. Simultaneous policies in multiple spheres are necessary to prevent cascades from occurring. The enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in employment, housing, and credit need to be accompanied by the provision of tutoring in all grade levels; the expansion of services in locations accessible to the poor should be accompanied by a reduction in the collateral consequences facing prisoners upon release.

The implication of cumulative disadvantage is that racial disparities will be slow to yield to even overall improvements in equality. Meanwhile, the advantaged, who are most likely to see equality's benefits, are protected from realizing that racial disadvantage traps others in poverty. Correcting this state of affairs requires moving beyond a simple black-white paradigm, beyond the search for a single cause of poverty or a single policy solution.

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