

Immediate Release

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Racial Inequality Persists in the Mountain State; Groups propose solutions

African Americans in West Virginia continue to earn less money, have higher rates of poverty, and be less likely to own a home or have health insurance than whites, according to a report released today at the State Capitol. These disparities persist despite substantial gains in education and civil rights made by African Americans over the past century.

“The poverty rate for the state’s African American children is double the rate for white children, and the infant mortality rate is higher than that of many less developed countries,” said Reverend James Patterson, president of the Partnership of African American Churches and co-author of the report. “Such widespread poverty is destructive not only to the children and their families, but to the social and economic progress of the state as a whole.”

The report, “Legacy of Inequality: Racial and Economic Disparities in West Virginia,” includes a sobering analysis of Census and other data conducted by the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. For example, nearly six in ten African American children live in poverty. The median wage for African American workers is 20 percent lower than that of white workers. African American workers are 40 percent more likely than white workers to become unemployed.

“Underlying all of these disparities is the fact that African Americans continue to be underrepresented in higher-paying occupations,” said Center director Ted Boettner. “Educational attainment is fairly equal between African Americans and whites, but whites are still more likely to land the good-paying jobs, whether they be in management or construction.”

While the report does not suggest that racism is the sole cause of these disparities, it does suggest that a deeper understanding of race is needed in order to rectify them. It cites the work of Dr. Camara Jones, physician and epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control, who describes racism as a system, rather than an individual character flaw. Therefore, reducing racism requires more than changing individual behavior. It also involves changing social structures, policies and norms that treat people differently based on the way they look.

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“Fortunately, racial inequality is not a law of nature,” said Rick Wilson, director of the American Friends Service Committee and co-author of the report. “The system we have was created by people and can be changed by people.”

“Despite difficult and sometimes inhuman conditions, African Americans have made vital and lasting contributions to the history and culture of West Virginia,” said Beth Spence of the American Friends Service Committee and co-author of the report. “There are many steps we can take to create a different legacy – one of respect and equality – for future generations of African Americans.”

The report proposes numerous public policies that could be enacted to reduce racial and economic disparities in the state, including:

- Create a State Office of Minority Affairs charged with reviewing information and coordinating agency-level programs across state government to eliminate the racial disparities identified in this report.
- Expand economic opportunity by appropriating state funds to support economic development projects in communities with large African American populations. In addition, continue funding for the Neighborhood Housing and Economic Stabilization Program in low-income and minority neighborhoods to spur economic growth and to provide employment and training opportunities.
- Extend Unemployment Insurance to workers who are presently excluded. West Virginia is eligible for \$33 million under the federal Recovery Act if the state adopts three reforms. The Legislature passed the first reform last year by adopting a broader-based method for calculating eligibility. The state could draw down the remaining funds expanding coverage to part-time workers and workers with compelling family reasons for leaving their jobs.
- Reauthorize Professional Development Schools in ten counties with high minority and low-income populations. A professional development school is an innovative partnership between teacher education programs and public schools designed to improve both the quality of teaching and student learning.

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The West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization that focuses on how policy decisions affect all West Virginians, especially low- and moderate-income families. The report “Legacy of Inequality: Racial and Economic Disparities in West Virginia” is available at www.wvpolicy.org.

The Partnership of African American Churches (PAAC) is non-profit, faith-based community development corporation, based in Charleston. www.paac2.org

The American Friends Service Committee, West Virginia Economic Justice Project, works statewide on issues affecting low-income and working families. www.afsc.org/charleston