

Wonkblog

Report: No progress for African Americans on homeownership, unemployment and incarceration in 50 years

By **Tracy Jan** February 26

Convened to examine the causes of civil unrest in black communities, the presidential commission issued a 1968 report with a stark conclusion: America was moving toward two societies, “one black, one white — separate and unequal.”

Fifty years after the historic Kerner Commission identified “white racism” as the key cause of “pervasive discrimination in employment, education and housing,” there has been no progress in how African Americans fare in comparison to whites when it comes to homeownership, unemployment and incarceration, according to a [report](#) released Monday by the Economic Policy Institute.

In some cases, African Americans are worse off today than they were before the civil rights movement culminated in laws barring housing and voter discrimination, as well as racial segregation.

- 7.5 percent of African Americans were unemployed in 2017, compared with 6.7 percent in 1968 — still roughly twice the white unemployment rate.
- The rate of homeownership, one of the most important ways for working- and middle-class families to build wealth, has remained virtually unchanged for African Americans in the past 50 years. Black homeownership remains just over 40 percent, trailing 30 points behind the rate for whites, who have seen modest gains during that time.
- The share of incarcerated African Americans has nearly tripled between 1968 and 2016 — one of the largest and most depressing developments in the past 50 years, especially for black men, researchers said. African Americans are 6.4 times as likely than whites to be jailed or

4/4/2018 Report: No progress for African Americans on home ownership, unemployment and incarceration in 50 years The Washington Post
imprisoned, compared with 5.4 times as likely in 1968.

“We have not seen progress because we still have not addressed the issue of [racial inequality](#) in this country,” said John Schmitt, an economist and vice president of the Economic Policy Institute, citing the [racial wealth gap](#) and continuing racial discrimination in the labor and housing markets. “One of the key issues is the disadvantages so many African Americans face, right from the very beginning as children.”

The wealth gap between white and black Americans has [more than tripled](#) in the past 50 years, according to Federal Reserve data. The typical black family had zero wealth in 1968. Today the median net worth of white families — \$171,000 — is 10 times that of black families.

The wealth black families have accumulated is negligible when it comes to the amount of money needed to meet basic needs during retirement, pay for children’s college education, put a down payment on a house, or cope with a job loss or medical crisis, Schmitt said.

The lack of economic progress is especially startling, given that black educational attainment has improved significantly in the past five decades, Schmitt said. African Americans are almost as likely as whites to have completed high school. In 1968, 54 percent of blacks graduated from high school, compared with 75 percent of whites. Today, more than 90 percent of African Americans have a high school diploma, 3.3 percentage points shy of the high school completion rate for whites.

The share of young African Americans with a college degree has more than doubled, to 23 percent, since 1968, although blacks are still half as likely as whites to have completed college.

Yet the hourly wage of a typical black worker grew by just 0.6 percent a year since 1968. African Americans make 82.5 cents of every dollar earned by the typical white worker, the report said. And the typical black household earns 61.6 percent of the annual income of white households, with black college graduates continuing to make less than white college graduates.

Despite the poverty rate dropping from more than a third of black households in 1968 to about a fifth of black households, African Americans are 2½ times as likely to be in poverty than whites.

“We would have expected to see much more of a narrowing of the gap, given the big increase in educational attainment among African Americans,” Schmitt said.

A book, “Healing Our Divided Society,” to be released Tuesday at a D.C. forum, also examines how little progress has been made in the past 50 years.


Housing and schools have become resegregated, “locking too many African Americans into slums and their children into inferior schools.” White supremacists have become emboldened. And there is too much excessive use of force — often deadly — by police, especially against African Americans, notes the book, co-edited by Fred Harris, a former U.S. senator and sole surviving member of the Kerner Commission.

“Whereas the Kerner Commission called for ‘massive and sustained’ investment in economic, employment and education initiatives, over the last 50 years America has pursued ‘massive and sustained’ incarceration framed as ‘law and order,’” the book says. “Mass incarceration has become a kind of housing policy for the poor.”

The 1968 Kerner Commission report ended on a note of déjà vu, citing a witness who recalled similar analyses, recommendations and, ultimately, inaction following a government investigation nearly 50 years earlier after the 1919 Chicago riot.

“The destruction and the bitterness of racial disorder, the harsh polemics of black revolt and white repression have been seen and heard before in this country,” the report concluded.

 **242 Comments**

Tracy Jan covers the intersection of race and the economy for The Washington Post. She previously was a national political reporter at the Boston Globe.  Follow @TracyJan

