

Race in the Heartland

Equity, Opportunity, and Public Policy in the Midwest

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A half-century removed from the high-tide of the civil rights movement, progress on racial equity has slowed or stalled on many fronts. Nowhere is this more starkly evident than in the twelve states of the Midwest region, where racial disparities in economic opportunity and economic outcomes are wider than they are in other regions, and policy interventions designed to close those gaps are meager. *Race in the Heartland: Equity, Opportunity, and Public Policy in the Midwest* examines the roots of those racial disparities, documents their extent and impact, and proposes a range of policy solutions.

A Troubled History

We trace the origins of racial inequality in the Midwest to the deep imprint of racial segregation, which concentrated the regions' African American population in relatively few urban counties—and then erecting a forbidding architecture of residential segregation within those urban settings. In turn, the historical arc of economic opportunity saw African Americans flock to new opportunities in the industrializing Midwest in the middle years of the last century, and then disproportionately hit by the deindustrialization that followed.

A Legacy of Inequality

Taken together, these historical patterns of segregation and uneven economic opportunity—alongside continuing patterns of discrimination—yielded a legacy of deep and lasting racial disparity and inequality. *Race in the Heartland* draws on a wide array of data sources to document these disparities—highlighting both the yawning gap between black and white outcomes or opportunities, and the exceptional or outlying position of the Midwestern states on these metrics.

We examine not just conventional economic outcomes (wages, incomes, poverty rates), but other dimensions of opportunity and security including

wealth, health outcomes, homeownership, and incarceration. For each of these, we calculate both the gap and ratio of black to white outcomes, and the relative position of the Midwestern states among their peers from other regions. Almost without exception, we find wide gaps or disparities across the Midwest. And we find Midwestern states crowding the bottom ranks of any state-by-state comparison.

Equity and Policy

In a regional setting in which these racial disparities are relatively stark, policy solutions have been slow to take up the challenge. Indeed, we find that policies that might begin to redress these disparities are relatively weak across the region.

Race in the Heartland maps out a policy agenda which takes those disparities seriously; and which views racial equity as a fundamental goal. Pursuing that goal requires addressing the political and policy roots of the insecurity and inequality that shape the lives of most working families. But it also requires that “universal” policies be accompanied by careful attention to patterns of discrimination within those policies, by close and targeted attention to people and places that those policies—even at their most robust—have left behind.