



# The State of Opportunity in America

## African Americans and Opportunity

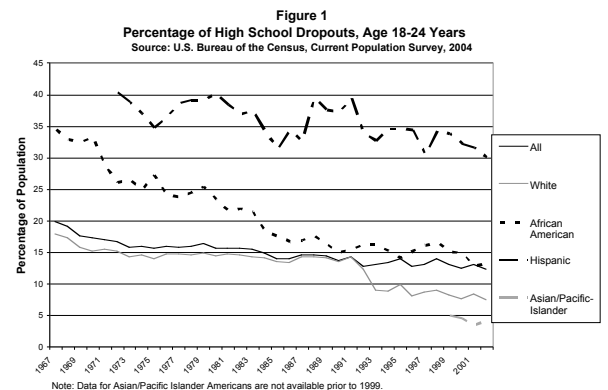
*Despite considerable progress over the last several decades, African Americans continue to face many barriers to opportunity. African-American children remain largely segregated from children of other racial and socioeconomic groups in schools and neighborhoods, damaging their life prospects. Evidence from audit studies demonstrates that discrimination in housing and employment persist. African Americans face significant barriers to accessing high-quality healthcare. They continue to be poorly served by a criminal justice system that treats people of color more harshly and less equitably than whites. Recent increases in the U.S. poverty rate have occurred disproportionately among African Americans. And while rates of criminal victimization have declined nationwide, African Americans remain more likely than whites to be the victim of a violent crime. These are just some of the signs that opportunity for African Americans is in crisis.*

### Mobility

Everyone who works hard should be able to advance and participate fully in the economic, political, and cultural life of the nation—that is, any child in America should be able to fulfill his or her full potential, and economic status at birth (or gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality) should not predetermine ultimate achievements. When our national policies have focused on strengthening opportunities for mobility, we have made great strides in improving our nation’s economic strength and cohesiveness—even as these policies largely excluded women, nonwhites, and others in the years prior to civil rights legislation enacted in the 1960s.

- *Racial and Ethnic Segregation in Schools.* Highly-segregated, predominantly minority schools are often characterized by fewer educational resources and poorer student outcomes. In 2002 and 2003, 73% of African-American children were in schools that enrolled over 50% children of color, and nearly two of every five African-American students attended schools that were over 90% minority.<sup>1</sup>
- *High School Dropout Rates.* African Americans have experienced a 64% decline in dropout rates

since 1967. Significant racial and ethnic gaps in high school dropout rates persist, however. And federal data often mask considerable problems of high dropout rates that are not captured in federal definitions, and therefore underestimate dropout rates. Three-fourths of white students will graduate on time, while **only about half of African-American, Latino, and Native American students earn regular diplomas alongside their classmates.**<sup>2</sup>



### Equality

True opportunity requires that we all have equal access to the benefits, burdens, and responsibilities

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of our society regardless of race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, or other aspects of what we look like or where we come from. Ensuring equal opportunity means not only ending overt and intentional discrimination, but also rooting out subconscious bias and reforming systems that unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. It requires proactive efforts to remake our institutions in ways that ensure fairness and inclusion.

- *Housing Discrimination.* A 2000 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study found that **whites were favored over similarly-qualified African Americans in rental housing 22% of the time.** In housing sales, whites received favorable treatment over African Americans in 17% of tests.<sup>3</sup>
- *Employment Discrimination.* A 2003 audit study of temporary employment agencies in California found that employment agencies preferred *less-qualified* white applicants nearly three times as often as African-American applicants.<sup>4</sup> And an audit study that assessed whether a criminal record would damage job chances found that even white auditors who presented criminal records were more likely to receive callbacks than African Americans *who did not present criminal records* (17% to 14%).<sup>5</sup>
- *Sentencing Inequalities.* Significant disparities in application of the death penalty emerge when the race of the defendant is considered in combination with the race of the victim. Since 1976 African Americans have been murdered at rates seven to eight times higher than whites, resulting in a roughly equivalent number of African-American and white murder victims. But **80% of the more than 840 people put to death since 1976 have been convicted of the murder of whites.**<sup>6</sup>

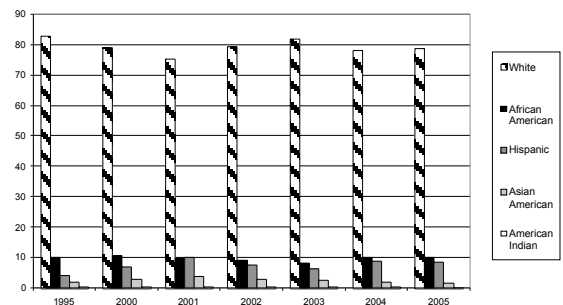
### Voice

Americans embrace democracy as a system that depends on the ability of all of us to participate in the public dialogue. This includes affirmative

opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect us and to be part of the nation's social and cultural life. The United States has made great progress in expanding voice over the last four decades. But significant obstacles to full democratic participation and expression remain for many.

- *Representation in Elective Office.* African Americans now hold more than 9,000 elected offices across the nation.<sup>7</sup> But the number of African Americans in Congress has not increased substantially since 1993, and they remain vastly underrepresented among elected officials relative to their proportion in the population.<sup>8</sup>
- *Representation in the Media.* African Americans have greater representation in the news media today than three decades ago, but this expansion has leveled off since 2000, and is even declining in some industries, such as the newspaper workforce.<sup>9</sup> And African American representation in the broadcast radio news workforce has declined sharply since 2004.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 2  
Percentage of Broadcast TV News Workforce, by Race/Ethnicity,  
Selected Years 1995 - 2005  
Sources: Papper, 2003, 2004, 2005, and RTNDA, 2000



### Redemption

Over the last two decades, the scope of the criminal justice system has been expanded as a means of social control. This expansion has had a dampening effect on opportunity. Policies that limit access to educational resources, provide inadequate means to address prisoners' health problems, and deny the vote and access to public benefits, also hurt opportunity—often well after offenders have paid

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their debts to society. Measures of these problems demonstrate that opportunity for redemption is in crisis and may be more threatened than any other dimension of opportunity.

- *Incarceration Rates.* Based on current trends, about **1 in 3 African-American males born in 2001 will spend time in prison at some point in their lifetimes.**<sup>11</sup>
- *Racial Disparities in Incarceration.* State and federal laws enacted from the 1970s to the 1990s have had a disproportionate racial impact. Between 1990 and 2000 the number of African Americans incarcerated in state prisons for drug offenses increased by over 80% to 145,000, a number that is 2.5 times higher than that for whites.<sup>12</sup>
- *Disenfranchisement.* Nearly 4 million currently or formerly incarcerated Americans were denied the vote in 2000, about 2% of the adult population. An estimated **1 in 7 African-American males is currently disenfranchised.**<sup>13</sup>

### Community

Americans have long adhered to a strong belief in individualism and self-reliance. But this ethic is accompanied by a conviction that we share responsibility for each other and our communities, just as we are responsible for ourselves. We recognize that the strength of our people and our nation depends on the vibrancy and cohesiveness of our diverse communities. But in some measures of community, many Americans remain segregated and divided from the mainstream.

- *Residential Segregation.* A 2002 study by the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, found that while levels of African American segregation declined across many dimensions between 1980

and 2000, residential segregation is still higher for African Americans than for any other group.

- *Concentration of Poverty.* While poor African-American families were 3.8 times more likely than poor white families to live in high-poverty neighborhoods in metropolitan areas in 1960, they were 7.3 times more likely than poor whites to live in high-poverty neighborhoods in 2000.<sup>14</sup>

### Security

Americans believe that we are all entitled to a basic level of education, economic well-being, healthcare, and other protections necessary to human dignity. Without this security, it is impossible to access society's other rights and responsibilities or to enjoy full opportunity. Moreover, international human rights commitments—many of which were initiated by the United States—obligate our nation to ensure basic levels of healthcare, housing, and income security.

In most other measures of security, progress is stagnant or declining. Increasingly, threats to security are found in rising social and economic inequality, the eroding safety net, and unequal access to the nation's vast resources.

- *Poverty.* **Over one-third of African-American children live in poverty today**, an increase of more than 10% since 2000.<sup>15</sup>
- *Access to Healthcare.* Nearly 20% of African Americans lack health insurance, and among those who possess insurance, African Americans are disproportionately dependent upon public sources of insurance.<sup>16</sup>
- *Physical Safety.* African Americans remain more likely to be victimized by violent crime than any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>17</sup>

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## Conclusions and Recommendations

*Without a renewed national commitment and concrete policy changes to reverse these negative trends, the promise of opportunity for all is at great risk for this and future generations. Fulfilling the promise of opportunity for all will be one of the great challenges of the twenty-first century. It will require bold leadership from our government, civic, and business leaders, creative and effective solutions, and the sustained political will of the American people. Fortunately, however, a significant body of pragmatic policies has proven effective in expanding opportunity in concrete and measurable ways. The State of Opportunity report recommends six types of policy approaches:*

- Regularly assess the impact of public policies on opportunity;
- Modernize safety net programs that help people meet their basic needs, starting with equitable and affordable healthcare for all Americans;
- Build Americans' skills to adapt to a globalizing economy, evolving technology, and an increasingly diverse population;
- Renew a commitment to human rights in the United States;
- Prioritize crime prevention and rehabilitation over increased incarceration; and
- Protect voting rights and promote political participation.

<sup>1</sup> G. Orfield and C. Lee, "Why Segregation Matters: Poverty and Educational Inequality," January 2005, [www.civilrightsproject.org](http://www.civilrightsproject.org) (23 August 2005).

<sup>2</sup> D. Losen and J. Wald, "Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis in California," March, 2005, [www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu) (14 October 2005).

<sup>3</sup> M. Turner et al., *Discrimination in Metropolitan Housing Markets: National Results from Phase 1 of HDS 2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> J. Bussey and J. Trasvina, "Racial Preferences: The Treatment of White and African American Job Applicants by Temporary Employment Agencies in California," December 2003, [www.impactfund.org](http://www.impactfund.org) (13 August 2005).

<sup>5</sup> D. Pager, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol.108, no.5(2003): 937-975.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International, *Death by Discrimination: The Continuing Role of Race in Capital Cases* (New York: Amnesty International, April 2003).

<sup>7</sup> D.A. Bosisis, *Black Elected Officials: A Statistical Summary, 2001, 2003*, [www.jointcenter.org/publications1/publication-PDFs/BEO-pdfs/2001-BEO.pdf](http://www.jointcenter.org/publications1/publication-PDFs/BEO-pdfs/2001-BEO.pdf) (23 July 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Membership of the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress: A Profile*, May 2005, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/49078.pdf> (15 August 2005).

<sup>9</sup> B. Dedman and S.K. Doig, "Newsroom Diversity has Passed its Peak at Most Newspapers, 1990-2005 Study shows," June 2005, <http://powerreporting.com/knight> (10 August 2005).

<sup>10</sup> B. Papper, "Running in Place: Minorities and Women in Television See Little Change, While Minorities Fare Worse in Radio," *Communicator*, July/August 2005: 26-32; B. Papper, "Recovering Lost Ground: Minorities Gain Ground and Women Make Management Strides in Radio and TV Newsrooms in 2004," *Communicator*, July/August 2004: 24-28; B. Papper, "Women & Minorities: One Step Forward and Two Steps Back," *Communicator*, July/August 2003: 20-25; RTNDA, 2000 Women and Minorities Survey, 2000, [www.rtna.org](http://www.rtna.org) (1 September 2005).

<sup>11</sup> T.P. Bonczar, "Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001," Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, August 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2003, 31<sup>st</sup> Edition*, 2004, [www.albany.edu/sourcebook](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook) (21 September 2005).

<sup>13</sup> M. Mauer, "Mass Imprisonment and the Disappearing Voters," in, eds. M. Mauer and M. Cheney-Lind, *Invisible Punishment: The Collateral Consequences of Mass Imprisonment* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Poverty and Race Research Action Council analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, with the assistance of Nancy A. Denton and Bridget J. Anderson, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census 2005.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004*, Current Population Reports, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "Criminal Victimization, 2003" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, September, 2004).

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