

Center for Race & Ethnicity

Between Privilege and Poverty: Perspectives on New Jersey Disparities

In this issue:

“Do disparities in housing, health, criminal justice, education, and income have separate origins or common roots?” - Keith Wiloo

- ***New Jersey and the Nation***
- ***Politics of Punishment***
- ***Health Disparities***
- ***Preschool Education***
- ***Localism and Federalism: Problem or the Solution?***

“When we talk about disparities, we are interrogating, if not indicting the American Dream.” – David Troutt

“Why are [health] gaps so high when New Jersey has higher median income than most states?” – Joel Cantor

“Some states have high African-American incarceration rates that drive the disparities. New Jersey... has an Af-Am incarceration rate on par with the nation, but a lower white rate than the national average. The high disparity is the result of this relatively low white incarceration rate.” – Lisa Miller

“Education is one of the greatest reproducers of inequality... but in my own research, I see hopeful signs.” – Sharon Ryan

One of the nation’s wealthiest states with striking disparities in health care, education, income, criminal justice, and housing. A conversation about the complex roots of disparities, recent trends, and remedies in New Jersey and the nation.

Panelists (r-l): **David Troutt**, School of Law; **Sharon Ryan**, Graduate School of Education; **Joel Cantor**, Bloustein School for Planning and Public Policy/Director, Center for State Health Policy; **Lisa Miller**, Political Science; **Keith Wiloo**, History/Institute for Health, Health Care Policy, and Aging Research/Director, Center for Race & Ethnicity



Incarceration rate disparities, by state, 2007*

State	Black-white disparity rate
<i>Highest rates</i>	
Iowa	13.6
Vermont	12.5
New Jersey	12.4
Connecticut	12.0
<i>Lowest rates</i>	
Arkansas	3.9
Mississippi/AL	3.5
Georgia	3.3
Hawaii	1.9

National trends show increasing economic disparities; New Jersey, one of nation’s wealthiest states, also has seen – like other states – disparities grow and pockets of poverty persist. A panel of Rutgers academics pointed to the different roles that local, state, and federal governments play in exacerbating and ameliorating disparities, to the complex connections between health, education, income, and criminal justice disparities, and they set in motion a new research and policy initiative at the Center.

NEW JERSEY AND THE NATION

The Garden State is home to three of the top ten counties with the highest median family income (Hunterdon, Morris, and Somerset) as well as cities with some of the highest percentages of residents living below the poverty line – such as Newark, Camden and Paterson.

The causes of rising inequality are varied across regions. Many cite growing wage

inequality and expansions of investment incomes. Some say that government policies including deregulation, privatization, as well as trade and tax policies have exacerbated economic inequality. Strikingly, New Jersey is more unequal than most states, with the 14th largest gap between the richest and poorest.

While New Jersey does follow many of the national socio-economic trends, the state has emerged – over the last few decades – as both an exception and a model for progressive legislation.

State legislation initiated by court cases (e.g. the *Abbott* and *Mount Laurel* decisions) serves as models across the nation for how law can address inequality and remedy disparities, but also exacerbates the gaps between the rich and poor.

The roundtable discussion brought together educators and experts on crime, housing, education, and health care policy from a variety of disciplines including history,

law, health, education and political science to discuss privilege and poverty in the Garden State. The panelists highlighted common themes across their varied areas of study. They addressed questions such as: How does New Jersey fit within the national spectrum of disparity? Does New Jersey’s wealth temper its disparities?

How does New Jersey’s particular geo-political structure—its local townships and regions—shape the distribution of income and public resources?

POLITICS OF PUNISHMENT

“Race still matters in the justice system – yet the seriousness of the offense and prior convictions are better indicators of incarceration rates” – Lisa Miller, Political Science

* Source: Mauer, Marc and Ryan S. King. "Uneven Justice: State Rates of Incarceration by Race and Ethnicity." The Sentencing Project, July 2007

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Many employ the term mass incarceration to describe these national trends, but incarceration is not evenly distributed across the population. Nationally, in terms of race “blacks are 4 to 5 times more likely to be under correctional supervision.”

The US incarceration rate varies from state to state as does the racial disparities among prisoners. “While many assume that Southern states like Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi have the greatest racial disparities in the nation, the highest racial disparities are actually in Iowa, Vermont, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The lowest are in Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Hawaii.”

There are varying reasons for racial disparities. “Some states have high African-American incarceration rates that drive the disparities. New Jersey... has an Af-Am incarceration rate on par with the nation, but a lower white rate than the national average. The high disparity is the result of this relatively low white incarceration rate.”

Income inequality and concentrated poverty combine to cause high and racially-skewed incarceration rates. In addition, white wealth is also an important part of the story in New Jersey. New Jersey’s high level of white wealth depresses white incarceration rates and thereby increases the racial gap in incarceration.

Roughly one-third of the black population in New Jersey resides in seven cities (Newark, East Orange, Jersey City, Paterson, Trenton, Camden, and Elizabeth). These cities are places of concentrated poverty and high crime rates. Local community groups in poor cities often organize around crime issues. While these local groups share common interest there is little coordination between neighborhoods. Lisa Miller

contends that “federalism causes crime and justice to become balkanized across the state’s many urban cores.” Specifically, federalism makes it difficult for groups to mobilize against crime and incarceration across localities because local groups address local government, not the state that creates criminal policy. While this dynamic allows for local control, it limits options open to these localized community groups. Localized collective action hinders people from coalescing around these issues. Miller believes that trans-local citizen groups could more effectively pressure state and national governments for reforms.

HEALTH DISPARITIES

“Policy wise NJ has done more than many other states to address health disparity, but large gaps remain.” – Joel Cantor, Director, Center for State Health Policy

Health disparities manifest across the state as they do nationally with racially disparities operating along predictable lines. For example, breast cancer deaths are 1.2 times higher among blacks compared to whites even though the disease prevalence among blacks is equal to whites. Blacks are five times more likely and Latinos are two and a half times more likely than whites in New Jersey to go to the emergency room for asthma. Infant mortality is 2.7 times higher among blacks and 1.3 times higher among Latinos than for whites.

Joel Cantor asks “Why are gaps so high when New Jersey has higher median income than most states.” In other words, why can’t such a wealthy state compensate for economic disparities to ensure that everyone receives adequate health care?

New Jersey has several fairly unique problems that contribute to health disparities. Many cite access to health insurance as a primary cause of health

disparities nationwide. New Jersey’s large immigrant population contributes to this problem. Immigrants are a group that is more likely to be without insurance. This problem shows up in the racial statistics. While blacks in New Jersey are 2.4 times less likely to have health insurance than whites, Latinos are 4 times less likely to have health insurance.

New Jersey is also one of the most expensive states for health care. “Both health services and health insurance cost more in NJ than in most other states. As a result, both health insurance and health care remain further out of reach for those with low-incomes.”

In addition to the increasing cost of health care, those who live in low-income communities also have less access to health care providers. “Hospital closings, primarily in poor and minority neighborhoods, combined with cuts to charity care that fund many health care services in poor communities have created less access to health services.” In addition, “high profit health services like radiological and surgical services have moved out of hospitals to small independent businesses – draining part of the revenue stream from struggling hospitals.”

PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Theorists have long argued that “Education is one of the greatest reproducers of inequality,” Sharon Ryan noted. Differential access to pre-school may be one of the important factors at work here. Research shows that a pre-school education has a positive influence on later school performance, college attendance, and earnings.

New Jersey courts have sought to ameliorate this perverse effect of American education. Educational policies resulting from *Abbott v. Burke* (1997, 1998, 2000) decisions required, among other things, full time preschool for all 3 and 4 year olds in low-income school

districts called ‘Abbott’ districts (located in 31 urban areas within New Jersey). This decision led to standards based education, as well as supplemental programs for at-risk students such as ESL, family programs, and food programs.

As increased regulation and support of preschool education has gone into effect in the Abbott districts in New Jersey, increasing numbers of children are accessing high quality preschool education services in communities where access to such services was fragmented and of a low quality. Moreover, children who attended an Abbott preschool program demonstrated substantial gains in language, literacy and mathematics and these gains are sustained through the kindergarten year (Frede, Jung, Barnett, Lamy & Figueras, 2007). Despite these positive developments, the Abbott preschool program is not without its challenges. While teachers are qualified, most leaders or administrators of Abbott private child care programs do not have the necessary pedagogical expertise of those they are responsible for supervising. Moreover, there is the bigger question of whose knowledge and interests underpin the Abbott preschool programs. Developmentally appropriate curricula have been shown to be based on white and middle class assumptions about learning, and may not necessarily resonate with the communities being served in the Abbott districts.

“FROM HUNTERDON TO HUDSON” – HOUSING IN NJ LOCALITIES

“How can law work to disaggregate poverty?” – David Troutt, School of Law, Rutgers-Newark

David Troutt addressed the problem of concentrated poverty in New Jersey cities. Troutt noted that, “many cities are past the point of having the resources to revive

themselves.” Troutt argued for what he called ‘equitable regionalism’ as a solution to inner-city poverty and disparities in New Jersey and more broadly across the country.

Troutt noted that, a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1970s promoted the concept of localism. Localism allowed local residents to define borders, control land use, set school policy and finances, control taxation and lot zoning along with local ordinances such as denying multi-family housing. These Supreme Court decisions were part of the backlash against integration. As Troutt notes, “Localism offered a non-racial way to prevent meaningful integration.”

Today, sustained segregation defines localism in New Jersey. “Segregated effects dynamically reproduced localism in New Jersey.” Segregation has become an organizing principle of American life and a main factor contributing to disparities—especially racial ones. This has been done while adhering to seemingly non-racial legal principles like localism.

Attempts to address segregation in New Jersey’s *Mount Laurel* decision opened the door for integration, but also allowed a series of loopholes to undermine the law. *Southern Burlington County N.A.A.C.P. v. Mount*

Laurel Township (1975) requires every town to have an allotment of affordable housing. However, municipalities can buy their way out of this requirement by paying other communities to allot the affordable housing. “So affordable housing ends up in lower income areas, not in wealthy areas – diminishing the integration purpose of the decision.”

LOCALISM AND FEDERALISM: PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?

A critical question emerged for further investigation: to what extent have the roots of disparities (and the remedies) in housing, health care disparities, criminal justice, education, and income inequality come from local initiatives, from the state, or from national court rulings and legislation?

While panelists were hopeful and maintained that solutions not only exist but could be implemented, they cited the difficult political and economic terrain that we face in New Jersey as well as nationally.

Can individual states address health care disparities? Joel Cantor argued that few states have the resources to provide viable healthcare solutions to its residents without the federal government. New Jersey is potentially one of those states but NJ’s current fiscal situation

makes such an attempt unlikely. Instead, Cantor believes that only some kind of national health care system can be truly effective. Joel Cantor notes that there is sufficient public support for some type of national health care system.

State policies (combined with national court rulings like the Abbott ruling) offer other hopeful remedies. Sharon Ryan cited recent attempts to make pre-school universal in the state of New Jersey. While this state level policy has supporters, such as Governor Corzine, again the current fiscal problems of the state present obstacles to such a policy.

In housing, New Jersey’s culture of local political control remains an impediment. David Troutt argued for regional governance in New Jersey. “In suburban states like New Jersey, we live regional lives, not local lives. We work one place, live another place and play someplace else.”

Furthermore, the ability to move further and further from urban areas is becoming untenable as densely populated states like New Jersey simply run out of room.

Lisa Miller advocated a trans-local politics that could stretch across New Jersey’s many communities. A trans-local politics could enhance the power of local grassroots organizations across the state. Miller also pointed out that many groups are tying these issues together and looking for common solutions.



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- Facilitating research and enriching education on matters of race and ethnicity in contemporary life in America, in New Jersey, and the world
- Promoting collaborations and fostering cross-disciplinary seminars and discussions on topics from immigration and work, to ethnic politics and racial classification, from preservation of cultural identity to its transformation, and including questions of poverty, discrimination, advancement, integration, and privilege
- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

GENERAL INFORMATION about the Center for Race and Ethnicity and its activities: <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu>

Teaching Race and Ethnicity across Disciplines (syllabus exchange) <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingRaceAndEthnicity.html>

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Other Roundtable Discussions <http://raceethnicity.rutgers.edu/TeachingUnimaginableExperiencesSummary.htm>