



The Iowa Policy Project

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Report: Legacy of discrimination plagues Midwest

Policy can reduce inequity in Iowa and the region across range of issues

IOWA CITY, Iowa (Oct. 10, 2019) — Iowa and other Midwestern states must do more through public policy to knock out racial disparities affecting African American residents, including stronger wage and pay-equity laws, better educational opportunities, improving the safety net, and investing in state capacity to fight discrimination.

“Racial disparities are clear and well-documented, and particularly of concern in the Midwest,” said Colin Gordon, author of “Race in the Heartland,” a new report released jointly by Policy Matters Ohio, the Economic Policy Institute, the Iowa Policy Project (IPP) and the Wisconsin-based COWS, shows the persistence of racial disparities in the 12-state Midwest region, which includes Iowa.

“While federal civil rights efforts have languished, states need to do more. But states in the Midwest have cut funding for their civil rights commissions — including a 37 percent cut in Iowa,” Gordon said.

While the black population of Iowa is relatively small, 3.4 percent, more black Americans live in the Midwest than in the Northeast or the West. On equity metrics, Midwestern states often have higher disparities than those regions. Black-white gaps on school suspensions, Bachelor’s degree attainment, incarceration, and segregation are all generally bad in the nation and worse in the Midwest.

“Stark racial disparities — and the patterns of segregation and discrimination which underlie them — create real and lasting barriers for black workers and families in the Midwest,” said Gordon, University of Iowa history professor and senior research consultant for IPP. “A strong policy agenda that views racial equity as a fundamental goal can turn our region around.”

From the report:

“On many ... dimensions, the Midwest is among the starkest settings for racial disparity or inequality. The result is a jarring juxtaposition: While Midwestern metros (Des Moines, Madison, Minneapolis) typically crowd the “best places to live” lists, they are also among the very worst places to live for African-Americans. In one recent analysis, ranking the states on an index of racial inequality, the twelve states of the Midwest census region (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) claimed eight of the bottom ten slots and swept the bottom five.”

The report illustrates disparities by various measures: In education, black residents are below the national average and behind white in-state residents in eighth-grade math scores, out-of-school suspensions, and bachelor's degrees. In unemployment and in employment to population ratio, black residents fare worse than the national average and behind white residents — a negative backdrop for Iowa’s low overall unemployment rate.

“Iowa is among the 10 Midwestern states plus Pennsylvania that had the largest ratio, or gap, between black and white unemployment in 2017,” Gordon noted.

“Wages also are a problem. In every Midwestern state, black median household income is below the national average for those families. Iowa and eight other Midwestern states are among the 14 states with the widest disparity in white to black incomes.”

The report also notes that nationally, the black poverty rate in 2017 was 21.2 percent, almost double the white poverty rate of 10.7 percent.

“In every Midwestern state, the black poverty rate is greater than the national average. When you look at the ratio between white and black poverty, Iowa joins five of its Midwestern neighbors among the seven worst-performing states.”

The report recommends a slate of policies to improve schools, jobs, safety nets, neighborhoods, and financial security:

- Invest in education at all levels and reduce racist practices within schools;
- Raise minimum wages, labor law enforcement, childcare investment and union-friendly practices to improve jobs;
- Ease access to Medicaid, food aid and housing assistance;
- Improve neighborhoods and eliminate exclusionary zoning; and
- Remove lending obstacles and make taxes fairer and more adequate.

The report is available on the websites of all organizations involved with the report. For the Iowa Policy Project, visit www.iowapolicyproject.org.

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The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy research and analysis organization in Iowa City.