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Racial Discrimination in America

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Racial discrimination in American society is not only a felt experience—it can be seen through the data collected by government agencies and researchers. Although the United States has passed important civil rights laws over the past several decades, many racial disparities continue to exist in employment, the legal system, and access to voting rights and access to ballots. These issues have become the subject of ongoing political debate because they raise questions about whether everyone truly receives the equal rights and treatment our society's laws are supposed to provide.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in areas such as employment and public accommodations, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed discriminatory voting practices like literacy tests and helped protect minority citizens' right to vote. While these laws marked major milestones in promoting equality, passing this type of legislation alone has not eliminated unequal outcomes. Many of today's disparities also connect to historical inequalities that have continued across generations. Looking at the data helps determine whether discrimination still affects Americans and how these patterns continue to shape people's lives. When comparing the lives of white Americans with those of many people of color, significant differences appear within key metrics such as the racial wage gap, unequal outcomes in the criminal justice system, and differences in voting rights.

Together, these examples demonstrate that racial inequality remains a significant legal and social issue that continues to affect millions of people in today's society. These disparities also demonstrate why studying racial discrimination is important from both a legal and social perspective. Laws are intended to guarantee equal treatment, yet measurable differences in wages, incarceration, and voting participation raise questions about whether those protections are always effective in practice. By examining reliable government data and legal research, we can identify where inequalities persist and evaluate whether current laws are achieving their intended goals.

One of the most relevant signs of racial discrimination is the wage gap between different racial groups in the United States. According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey (2025)*), for every dollar earned by a typical white worker, Black workers earn about 84 cents on the dollar, while Hispanic workers earn about 76 cents. Although educational attainment among minority workers has improved, wage growth has still lagged behind that of white workers. This

suggests that education alone cannot fully explain earnings differences. The effects of lower wages extend far beyond an individual's paycheck. According to the U.S. Census Bureau(*U.S. Census Bureau, Wealth and Asset Ownership Reports (2024)*), the wealth gap between White and Black households remains substantial, limiting opportunities for homeownership, higher education, retirement savings, and financial stability across generations. Because wealth is often passed down from parents to children, these inequalities can continue long after discrimination occurs. The U.S. Department of Labor (*U.S. Dep't of Labor, The Impact of Equal Pay for Black Women (2024)*) also reported that Black women experienced approximately \$42.7 billion in lost wages compared to what they would have earned if they had received the same pay as white men in similar positions. Hispanic women experienced an estimated \$53.3 billion in lost wages, largely because they are disproportionately represented in lower-paying occupations. These figures represent income that workers could have earned if racial and gender pay disparities did not exist.

Federal law prohibits employment discrimination through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964(*1964..." Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-352, tit. VII, 78 Stat. 241*), which makes it illegal for employers to discriminate against employees or job applicants because of their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The law applies to hiring, firing, promotions, compensation, and other terms of employment. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (*U.S. Equal Emp. Opportunity Comm'n, Race/Color Discrimination*) enforces these protections and investigates allegations of workplace discrimination. Despite these legal protections, wage differences and unequal employment opportunities persist. The wage gap reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the wealth gap identified by the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Department of Labor's findings on lost wages all suggest that legal protections have helped reduce discrimination but have not completely eliminated the barriers that contribute to racial wage disparities. Lower wages can make it harder for families to save money, buy homes, invest for retirement, or pay for higher education. Over time, these financial disadvantages can affect future generations because children often benefit from the opportunities their parents can provide. As a result, wage inequality influences not only current workers but also long-term economic mobility.

Together, the evidence indicates that the wage gap stems from long-standing structural challenges rather than individual choices alone. The wage gap also affects more than financial

stability. Lower earnings may limit access to quality healthcare, safer neighborhoods, and educational opportunities for future generations. Families with fewer financial resources often have fewer opportunities to build wealth through investments or homeownership, making it more difficult to break the cycle of economic inequality. Because these effects accumulate over time, many economists argue that closing the wage gap would benefit not only individual workers but the overall economy.

Racial discrimination is also evident within the criminal justice system. Under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, every American is promised equitable treatment under the law. However, research has consistently found that people of color often experience less favorable outcomes than white defendants. According to The Sentencing Project(*The Sentencing Project*,(2024), African Americans are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and receive longer prison sentences than white Americans, even after accounting for similar offenses in many studies. Research published in Nature found that Black men are approximately six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men, while Latino men are about two and a half times more likely to be incarcerated. Black and Latino defendants are also more likely to remain in jail before trial because they cannot afford bail. Being detained before trial can make it harder to keep a job, support family members, or work closely with an attorney to prepare a defense. These disadvantages can affect a case's outcome before a verdict is even reached.

In response, many states have attempted to reform sentencing laws over the past decade. However, a 2025 analysis by the Council on Criminal Justice (*Council on Criminal Justice*(2025) found that more than 700 sentencing reform laws passed between 2010 and 2020 had little impact on reducing racial disparities in imprisonment. Although these reforms addressed certain sentencing policies, they did not substantially narrow the racial gap in incarceration. In addition, incarceration often has lasting consequences after a sentence has been served. Formerly incarcerated individuals may struggle to find stable employment, secure housing, or continue their education. These challenges can place financial stress on families and communities for many years. When one racial group is imprisoned at much higher rates than another, these long-term effects become even more significant. These obstacles in returning to normalcy lead to a much greater chance of recidivism for formerly incarcerated individuals, and this further feeds into the disparity between racial groups. This evidence suggests that broader

legal and policy changes may be necessary to address the underlying causes of these disparities and ensure that the justice system treats all individuals fairly.

Voting rights are another important example of continued racial inequality. Voting is one of the most fundamental rights in a democracy because it allows citizens to influence the laws and leaders that govern their country. Despite its importance, voter participation still differs significantly across racial groups. According to research highlighted by NPR and based on Pew Research Center data, 43 percent of eligible White voters participated in all three elections from 2018 through 2022, compared with only 27 percent of eligible Black voters, 21 percent of Asian American voters, and 19 percent of Hispanic voters. A major legal turning point occurred in 2013 when the Supreme Court decided *Shelby County v. Holder* (*Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529 (2013)). The ruling effectively removed the requirement that certain states with histories of racial discrimination obtain federal approval before changing their voting laws. Following the decision, several states implemented stricter voter identification requirements and other election law changes. The Brennan Center for Justice reported that racial turnout gaps have widened since the ruling, particularly in states that were previously covered by the Voting Rights Act.

Supporters of stricter voter identification laws argue that these policies help protect election security and increase public confidence in elections. However, critics argue these requirements can create greater barriers for minority voters, who are less likely to have certain forms of government-issued identification. Government Accountability Office research found that 84 percent of registered white voters have a driver's license, compared with only 63 percent of registered Black voters. While election security is an important goal, policymakers must also consider whether voting laws provide equal access to every eligible citizen. Voting is one of the primary ways citizens influence the laws and policies that affect their daily lives. When certain groups face greater obstacles to voting, their communities may have less influence over decisions involving education, criminal justice, healthcare, and the economy. Although election security is a government responsibility, evidence from the Brennan Center and the Government Accountability Office suggests that stricter voting requirements have disproportionately affected minority voters. As a result, these policies can unknowingly increase racial disparities in voter participation and involvement.

Election laws should protect election integrity without creating unnecessary barriers for eligible citizens. Maintaining public confidence in elections depends on both security and

accessibility. When citizens believe they can participate equally in the democratic process, they are more likely to trust election outcomes and remain engaged in civic life. Ensuring voting laws are fair to all eligible voters strengthens democracy and upholds the constitutional principle that every citizen should have an equal voice in government.

Overall, the evidence regarding wage differences, unequal criminal justice outcomes, and voting participation and access points to the same conclusion. The evidence clearly demonstrates that racial discrimination continues to influence employment, criminal justice, and voting rights in the United States. While important progress has been made, the data shows that racial disparities remain widespread and continue to affect millions of people in our society. These patterns are not isolated incidents, but consistencies that appear across multiple areas of society. Reducing these disparities will require stronger enforcement of civil rights laws, thoughtful public policy, and continued efforts to ensure that every individual receives equal treatment under the law. These differences influence economic opportunity, interactions with the legal system, and participation in democracy. Addressing these issues will require continued enforcement of civil rights laws, thoughtful public policy, and a commitment to equal treatment under the law. The statistics clearly demonstrate that racial discrimination remains an important legal and social issue, and future efforts to reduce these disparities will play a significant role in creating a more equitable society. Continued research and careful evaluation of public policy will also be important for determining which legal reforms are most effective. Understanding these issues through reliable evidence allows lawmakers and citizens to make informed decisions that move the country closer to the principle of equal justice for all.

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