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America's Racial Divide, Charted

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America's racial divide is older than the republic itself, a central fault line that has shaped the nation's history. This month it has manifested itself in sometimes violent protests in Ferguson, Mo., after a police killing of an unarmed young black man. The resonance of that event is related to deeper racial fissures between blacks and whites; that divide is the reason that the events in Ferguson amount to something bigger than a local crime story.

What is the state of that larger divide? In what areas has there been meaningful progress toward shared prosperity over the last generation, and in what areas is America as polarized by race as ever — or even more so?

Across a broad range of economic and demographic indicators, the data paint a largely depressing picture. Five decades past the era of legal segregation, a chasm remains between black and white Americans — and in some important respects it's as wide as ever.

The unemployment gap is virtually unchanged over the last 40 years. The income and wealth gaps have actually widened. So has the gap in educational attainment.

There are bright spots, including a rising number of blacks in executive and

managerial jobs (not to mention top political jobs) and converging levels of life expectancy. But by most measures, black and white Americans are still living in radically different societies – and there is no reason to believe that will change anytime soon.

Many other gaps – between men and women, between non-Hispanics and Hispanics – have shrunk substantially over the last few decades. But the black-white racial divide remains as central to American life as it has been for centuries.

Let's look at the numbers:

Through economic booms and busts, the unemployment rate has been persistently higher for African-Americans than for whites across the decades.

The gap is not even narrowing in a meaningful way. Instead, the ratio of the unemployment rate among blacks versus that among whites has been amazingly consistent – between 2 and 2.5 – for the 40 years that official data go back. In 1972, the jobless rate among African-Americans was 2.04 times that among whites. In 2013, the ratio was 2.02.

How much of this is caused by differing educational levels of black workers versus white workers, given that people with advanced education have sharply lower jobless rates than those without? Only some of it is.

Even among people with similar levels of education, the black unemployment rate is higher. There was a 5.7 percent unemployment rate among African-Americans with a bachelor's degree or higher in 2013, compared with 3.5 percent among white Americans with a bachelor's degree or higher. Indeed, joblessness is higher among blacks in every education level tracked by the Labor Department.

Moreover, while the proportion of blacks getting a college degree has risen sharply over the last generation, the proportion of whites doing the same has risen even more.

According to census data analyzed by two Harvard economists, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz, 21 percent of black 30-year-olds had a college degree in 2012, compared with 38 percent of white 30-year-olds. The 17 percentage point gap between those two numbers is considerably wider than the 10 percentage point gap in 1970.

There is better news to be seen in the types of jobs workers of different races are doing. A rising proportion of the nation's white-collar professionals are

African-American. Some 7.4 percent of managers and executives were black in 2013, up from 5.7 percent in 1990, and the ratio of professionals like lawyers and engineers who are black had risen to 9.3 from 6.7 percent.

Still, blacks are underrepresented in these jobs, and overrepresented in low-skilled jobs. That might be one reason why the rise of a black professional class has not been sufficient to reduce the overall income gap between white and black workers. That gap, if anything, is widening. In 1983, the median weekly pay of white workers was 18.4 percent higher than that of black workers. Three decades later, the premium had risen to 21.6 percent.

The differences in levels of wealth are even more striking. For two people with similar incomes, the level of wealth they accumulate can vary widely, depending on whether they received an inheritance or other help from parents; whether they had to take on student debts or other loans, and how aggressively they save and invest, among other factors.

And this gap has widened during the last recession and the slow recovery since then, according to an analysis of Federal Reserve data by the Urban Institute. The researchers found that white families were 4.3 times as wealthy as black and Hispanic families in 2007. By 2010, the multiple had widened to 6.1.

As a result, African-American families have less of a cushion to protect themselves if they encounter a financial setback, such as being laid off or encountering an unexpected health problem.

Poverty, by contrast, offers a glass-half-empty/glass-half-full picture. The good news is that the proportion of blacks living below the poverty line has fallen in a meaningful way over the last generation, to 27.2 percent in 2012 from 32.5 percent in 1980.

But the bad news is that 27.2 percent is an astronomical level of poverty, more than double the 12.7 percent level among whites (which has ticked up a couple of percentage points in the same span).

Lower incomes and wealth coincide with greater health problems. For example, 19.6 percent of blacks were diagnosed as having diabetes from 2007 to 2010, compared with 9.5 percent of whites. A similar pattern appears with a range of serious health problems.

Health disparities between people of different races are thought to arise from a number of factors, including poverty; health-insurance rates; housing stock;

access to grocery stores and parks; and discrimination in how people of different races are treated by medical professionals.

More blacks than whites had no usual source of health care as recently as 2011-2012. It remains to be seen how the health law now being put into place might change that equation.

The law is likely to help large numbers of blacks, but many living in states that have chosen not to expand Medicaid will remain without coverage.

While the disparity in health is stark, there are some signs of improvement. Life expectancy has risen for people of both races over the last six decades. While newly born white children are still expected to live longer, the gap has narrowed considerably over recent decades, raising the prospect that the racial health gap will become less pronounced over time.

In 1950, white newborns had a life expectancy that was 8.3 years longer than that of black newborns. By 2010 that had narrowed to 3.8, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

But there is one area of health that speaks directly to the tension in Ferguson, Mo., and where progress has been slower in coming: homicides.

Homicide rates have come down across the board since the 1970s, so a smaller proportion of people of all races and ages are killed in any given year. But among young black men, death at the hand of someone else remains a threat to a degree it is not among any other subgroup of the population.

About 76 out of every 100,000 black men between ages 25 and 34 were killed in a homicide in 2010, more than nine times the rate among white men in the same age group and 14 times the rate of the U.S. population as a whole.

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