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Report Highlights Disparities for Black Rhode Islanders

Systemic barriers impede Black Rhode Island communities

Providence, RI – A new report from the Economic Progress Institute, “The State of Black Families in Rhode Island 2015” provides details about key economic and social indicators for Black families in the Ocean State and documents the disparities with their White counterparts.

“This report pulls together data that have been highlighted by different sources and community members over the years to provide a full picture of how Black Rhode Islanders are faring in the Ocean State,” said Rachel Flum, Executive Director of the Institute. “The significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, lower wages and educational attainment, and over-representation in the criminal justice system should set off alarm bells for all of us. We hope this report will be a catalyst for action by policy makers, educators, the business community and the public.”

Key points from the report include:

Population Growth

- Rhode Island’s Black population has grown substantially, increasing from 46,908 in 2000, when the Black population accounted for 4.5 percent of Rhode Island’s overall population, to 68,243 in 2015, representing 6.5 percent of the overall population.
- The foreign-born Black population accounts for 29 percent of Rhode Island’s Black population, compared to a national average of 9 percent.

Income Inequality

- The Black median household income consistently trails the White median income; from 2005 to 2015, for every dollar in median income in a White-headed household, the Black median household saw only fifty-seven cents.
- The Black median wage peaked thirty years ago, while the White median wage has made progress over that period. The gap between Black and White median wages has widened over time.

Unemployment Worse for Black Rhode Islanders:

- Black unemployment is consistently approximately double White unemployment.
- Black underemployment peaked at nearly 30 percent during the Great Recession and consistently tracks nearly double the White underemployment rate.

Educational Attainment

- Black Rhode Island students consistently trail their White counterparts in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing in both 4th and 8th grade reading and mathematics. While progress has been made at improving scores over time, very little progress has been made at closing the Black/White gap.
- There is a substantial gap between the share of the Black and White populations with higher education: 19 percent of Blacks have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34 percent of Whites.

Judicial/Corrections Indicators

- Black Rhode Islanders in Ocean State cities face arrest rates that range from 3.4 to 9.1 times non-Black arrest rates; arrests for possession of marijuana are more than double, despite research showing Black and White use of marijuana is comparable.
- Black Rhode Islanders comprise a disproportionately large share of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections population – 30 percent of the DoC population, compared to 5.3 percent of the overall population.

The Economic Progress Institute's earlier report, "The State of Working Rhode Island: Workers of Color" documented how families of color in Rhode Island were faring compared to their White counterparts. After the report's release, both the Institute and members of the Racial Justice Coalition of Rhode Island (NAACP Providence, Direct Action for Rights and Equality, Jobs with Justice, Opportunities Industrialization Center, Progreso Latino, PrYSM, Refugee Dream Center) thought it important to take a deeper look at the key economic and social indicators for Black families.

"This report documents the lived-experience of Rhode Island's Black children, families and adults – lower educational attainment, higher unemployment, and over-representation in the criminal justice system," said Justice Gaines, Coordinator of the Racial Justice Coalition of Rhode Island. "Reversing systemic barriers to success and paving the road to prosperity for Rhode Island's Black population will require a comprehensive and coordinated set of policy responses."

The paper will be released at the 104th NAACP Freedom Fund breakfast and available online at the EPI's website Saturday morning at www.economicprogressri.org/blackrhodeislanders

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About the Institute

The Institute is a non-partisan research and policy organization that works for policies that improve economic security and opportunity for Rhode Islanders. For more information visit www.economicprogressri.org.