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The 17th century would bring enormous changes to the Western Hemisphere, commonly called the New World. European explorers and settlers would claim land for economic, sovereignty, political and religious reasons, but the common bond between nearly all was the use of enslaved Africans as the chief labor force to clear land, build cities and harvest the cash crops that would make men and communities wealthy beyond imagination. The settlement of Rhode Island would embody the greatest human irony where European settlers seeking religious freedom would simultaneously embrace human enslavement.

By the end of the 18th century, Rhode Island would become the center of the African slave trade in British North America. One cannot truly comprehend the intricate ties that bound Rhode Island’s history of economic growth and prosperity with African enslavement. From the three dozen rum distilleries along 18th century Newport, Bristol and Providence waterfronts, to the “Negro Cloth” textile mills that dotted Rhode Island’s many rivers during the 19th century, Rhode Island’s very economic well-being has been historically tied to the enslavement and exploitation of African heritage people.

Today, the state of African heritage people in Rhode Island still contains some complicated historic contradictions. While Rhode Island and society have made great progress in the areas of human rights and equality, far too many African heritage people in Rhode Island are still confined to segregated and substandard neighborhoods and face limited access to employment, education and affordable healthcare opportunities.

This report provides a data-driven basis for an action plan that intends to challenge and change public policies in the State of Rhode Island to redress the adverse socio-economic past and present discrimination that has had a negative impact on Black families. Corrective action is an imperative for all.

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1 The author of the Preamble, Michael Van Leesten, is CEO of the OIC of Rhode Island, a community based workforce, urban policy, and minority business development organization. Van Leesten has been a leader in Rhode Island for decades, with extensive service in the public, non-profit, and private sectors.
Introduction

The Economic Progress Institute’s earlier report, *The State of Working Rhode Island: Workers of Color (SWRI-WOC)*\(^2\) documented how families of color in Rhode Island were faring compared to their White counterparts. This report provides greater detail about key economic and social indicators for Black families in the Ocean State. Making sure all Rhode Islanders have access to good jobs that allow them to provide for themselves and their families is vital for our state’s future.

From the early days of Rhode Island’s colonization and the subsequent reliance on Black slaves for both labor and trade\(^3\), through widespread displacement and asset-stripping through eminent domain via the Federal Housing Act, and the use of redlining to perpetuate racial segregation in the 20th Century, Black Rhode Islanders have been dealt an unfair hand. The historical legacy of centuries of unequal treatment manifests today across many socio-economic indicators.

New immigrants to Rhode Island from Liberia, Nigeria, other African nations and the Caribbean may have different experiences than native born African Americans, yet still be subject to the similar prejudices and barriers that have held back the native born population.

This report shines a bright light on these continued disparities, laying the foundation for a concerted public policy response to redress historical wrongs through proactive public policy solutions.

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Executive Summary

Black Rhode Islanders face significant disparities when compared with their White counterparts, across a broad range of socio-economic indicators. This report summarizes many of these points. Among the most noteworthy finding of this report are the following:

Demographics

- **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 just 9 percent.

- **Two thirds of Rhode Island’s Black immigrant population were born in Africa**, one in five (21 percent) were born in the Caribbean.

- **The Black population is younger than the White population.** Children comprise 29 percent of the Black population, compared to just 18 percent of the White population. By contrast, a smaller share of Black Rhode Islanders are older – just 3 percent are 75 years and older, compared with 8 percent of White Rhode Islanders.

- **Black Rhode Islanders are heavily concentrated geographically.** More than four in five Black Rhode Islanders live in Providence and the surrounding five cities of Pawtucket, Cranston, Central Falls, East Providence, and North Providence. Smaller but noteworthy populations are found in Woonsocket and Newport.

The State of Black Workers

- **The Black share of the Rhode Island labor force has been steadily increasing** for decades; their engagement in the economy, as measured by the employment/population ratio (EPOP), is consistent with the White EPOP.

- **Black unemployment is consistently approximately double White unemployment.**

- **In the aftermath of the Great Recession, one in three Blacks who worked part-time did so because they were unable to find full-time work** due to the weak economy.
• The underemployment rate is a broad measure of labor market slack; by this measure, Black underemployment peaked at nearly 30 percent during the Great Recession; and consistently tracks nearly double the White underemployment rate.

• The median Black wage is just 71 percent of the median White wage; this gap gets larger in the higher-income ranges, and smaller in the lower-income range.

• 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 diverged over time.

**Key Measures of Economic Well-being**

• Black overall poverty and child poverty rates are much higher than the corresponding White rates. Since 2007, the Black poverty rate has been nearly 3 times the White poverty rate, while the Black child poverty rate has been more than 3 times higher than the White child poverty rate.

• Black Rhode Islanders comprise 6.5 percent of the population, but 23.8 percent of the homeless population.

• 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.

• Black households remain furthest behind in recovering from the impact of the Great Recession on household incomes.

**Education**

• 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.

• Rhode Island’s Black higher education attainment is the lowest in New England (as is the White).
Wealth/Family Assets

• The Black homeownership rate is less than half the White homeownership rate in Rhode Island; 30 percent compared to 64 percent.

• Black Rhode Islanders are about three times more likely to lack access to a vehicle as White Rhode Islanders.

Key Health Care Indicators

• There is a substantial gap between the shares of Black and White Rhode Islanders with health insurance.

• Asthma hospitalization rates for Black Rhode Islanders are more than double the rates for White Rhode Islanders at all age levels.

• High levels of lead poisoning are concentrated in the municipalities that contain the largest share of Black Rhode Islanders.

• Efforts to mitigate lead poisoning in Rhode Island have yielded significant results, disproportionately benefiting Black students.

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.
WHO IS COUNTED AS BLACK IN RHODE ISLAND?

One of the first issues to clarify when discussing “Black Rhode Island” is to identify as precisely as possible who is included (and/or excluded) from that group. In Figure 1 we see three possible definitions of the term “Black” in Rhode Island, each deriving from specific populations identified and measured by the US Census Bureau. The most expansive category includes both those of one race who identify as Black or African American, and those who identify as Black but are also of one or more other races. For the purposes of this report, we rarely use this broader category. The middle category looks at all those who identify as Black only, of just one race (including Blacks with Hispanic/Latino ethnicity). This is the category used most often in this report, especially when comparing “Black” and “White” Rhode Islanders.

In Figure 2A, we see 56,294 Rhode Island Non-Hispanic Blacks, representing 5.3 percent of all Rhode Islanders. In Figure 2B, the Latino population is distributed by race, increasing the Black share of the overall population to 6.5 percent.

DETERMINING WHO IS “BLACK” IS COMPLICATED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of Rhode Island residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black alone or in combination with one or more other races</td>
<td>84,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Race: Black or African American</td>
<td>68,243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Black or African American alone</td>
<td>56,294</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Rhode Island residents in each category


The middle category looks at all those who identify as Black only, of just one race (including Blacks with Hispanic/Latino ethnicity). This is the category used most often in this report.

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4 Those identifying as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race. Thus, the yellow bar includes nearly 12,000 Rhode Island Blacks of one race who identify as Hispanic or Latino.
Looking over time, we see that the 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\(^5\), representing 6.5 percent of the overall population.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Five-year data have been used here, representing the five years spanning 2011-2015. We refer to these data as 2015 data for simplicity.

\(^6\) The US Census Bureau strives to accomplish two competing objectives in their categorization of populations by race and ethnicity. They try to accurately reflect shifting (and increasingly complex) patterns in racial composition, while also retaining continuity in how categories are defined to allow accurate comparisons over time. The fact that the category including “two or more races” has been growing reflects this increasing complexity.
WHERE DO BLACK RHODE ISLANDERS LIVE?

Mapping Rhode Island’s Black population we see that the vast majority of Black Rhode Islanders live in and around the city of Providence. Five of the seven municipalities with the greatest Black population form a cluster with Providence at its core.

This concentration of Black Rhode Islanders is further evident in Table 1 and Figure 4. More than four in five Black Rhode Islanders live in Providence and the surrounding five cities of Pawtucket, Cranston, Central Falls, East Providence, and North Providence. Rounding out the top eight towns by total Black population are Woonsocket and Newport.
WHERE DO BLACK RHODE ISLANDERS LIVE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>68,200</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providence</td>
<td>29,100</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawtucket</td>
<td>12,800</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cranston</td>
<td>4,100</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Falls</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woonsocket</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Providence</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Providence</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newport</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

BLACK RHODE ISLANDERS ARE HEAVILY CONCENTRATED IN PROVIDENCE AND SURROUNDING TOWNS

Figure 4

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2011-2015, Table B02001
AGE
As a whole, Rhode Island’s Black population is younger than the White population. Children comprise a much larger share of Black Rhode Islanders than of White Rhode Islanders (29 percent versus 18 percent). The Black population includes a slightly higher share of prime working-age adults (18-55 years of age) than the White share (55 percent versus 50 percent). Among older Rhode Islanders, there is a considerably smaller Black population in both the 55-74 and 75+ age groups. Combined, the White population 55 years and older is twice the share of the White total compared with the Black population (32 percent White versus 16 percent Black).

IMMIGRATION
While a significant majority of Rhode Island’s Black population are native-born Americans, there is also a sizable population who are immigrants. The foreign-born Black population, comprising 10,000 naturalized citizens and 10,000 non-citizen immigrants, accounts for 29 percent of Rhode Island’s Black population, compared to 13 percent of foreign born Rhode Islanders in the overall population. (Figure 6).

Earlier, we noted the substantial increase in Rhode Island’s population since 2000. Looking more closely at the increase in Rhode Island’s Black population since 2000, for every 100 new Black residents of Rhode
Island, 41 were foreign-born, the result of a 90 percent increase in the Black foreign-born population between 2000 and 2015.

The share of Black Rhode Islanders who are foreign-born (29 percent) is more than triple the national average (9 percent). A distinct geographical pattern is evident in Figure 7, with the top ten states for share of foreign-born located in the northernmost states.

Among Rhode Island’s Black foreign-born population, two-thirds (67 percent) were born in Africa, one in five (21 percent) were born in the Caribbean, and the remainder were born in Central America, including Mexico (8 percent), Northern America (3 percent), South America (3 percent), and Europe (1 percent) (Figure 8).

Among all foreign-born Rhode Islanders from Africa, more than four-fifths were born in Western Africa, including 45 percent born in Cape Verde, 17 percent in Liberia, 9 percent in Nigeria, and 4 percent in Ghana.7

Figure 6

Source: US Census Bureau, 2011-2015 5-year estimates, Table S0501, "Select Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-born populations.

**Figure 7**

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2011-2015, Table S0501

**SHARE OF RHODE ISLAND BLACK FOREIGN-BORN MORE THAN TRIPLE NATIONAL AVERAGE**

**Figure 8**


**TWO-THIRDS OF RHODE ISLAND’S BLACK FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION WERE BORN IN AFRICA**

*Central America includes Mexico; **Northern America includes Canada and “other Northern America” but not Mexico (Census data show no foreign-born Black or African American residents from either Asia or Oceania).
The State of Black Workers

SHARE OF LABOR FORCE

Black workers comprise a higher share of Rhode Island’s labor force today than they have at any time since 1979. Over that period there have been small changes (positive and negative) in the Black share, but the overall trend (evident in the dotted linear trend line in Figure 9) has been positive, reflecting similar increases in the Black population in Rhode Island.

EMPLOYMENT POPULATION RATIO (EPOP)

One measure of the engagement of Black workers in the Rhode Island economy is the employment-population ratio (EPOP) which measures the share of the working age population who are working. The EPOP for Black Rhode Islanders tracks the White EPOP fairly consistently, evident in Figure 10. What is clear from this pattern is that Black workers in Rhode Island are as engaged in the economy as are White workers (though the apparent swings in EPOP may indicate a greater vulnerability to shifts in the overall economy).

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8 In Figures 9 and 10 we also show three-year moving averages of Black Share of Labor Force/EPOP. Because smaller sample sizes have a larger margin of error in statistical sampling, considerable data swings (as seen in the gold “Black” one-year data) reflect a combination of real data shifts, and variations due to sampling error. Using moving averages smooths the data, providing a picture that is more likely to reflect real change over time.
UNEMPLOYMENT

The share of Black workers in Rhode Island unable to find a job (as measured by the unemployment rate) consistently exceeds the share of White workers who are unemployed, as seen in Figure 11. This is true both when the economy is strong and when the economy is weak, such as during the Great Recession and during the subsequent weak recovery.
Looking at the relationship between Black and White unemployment rates in Figure 12, we see that it is approximately double the White unemployment rate (ranging between approximately 1.5 to 2.5 times the rate). This is consistent with the national ratio between Black and White unemployment rates, which is consistently in the 2:1 range.

**PART-TIME FOR ECONOMIC REASONS**

While many workers may choose to work part-time, perhaps because it best fits their family’s financial needs, or because of a preferred scheduling pattern, many others working part-time do so “for economic reasons”, meaning they would prefer to work full-time, but aren’t able to find full-time employment and so choose to work part-time to try to make ends meet.

During the years immediately following the official “Great Recession”, when workers continued to bear the brunt of an underperforming economy, about a third of Rhode Island’s Black workers who worked part-time were doing so for economic reasons. By comparison, about one in five White Rhode Islanders working part-time were doing so for economic reasons.
As Rhode Island workers continued to feel the brunt of the Great Recession, one in three black part-time workers did so for economic reasons, preferring full-time work.


Black underemployment rate 1.7 times greater than white underemployment.

UNDEREMPLOYMENT

Another measure of slack in the labor force is the “underemployment” rate, which includes those who are unemployed, those working part-time for economic reasons, and marginally-attached workers (including ‘discouraged workers’). Marginally-attached workers are those individuals who are not counted in the official labor force, but who want, and are available for work, and have looked for a job sometime in the prior 12 months, but were not counted as unemployed because they had not searched for work in the four weeks preceding the survey.

In Figure 14 we see that the underemployment rate for Black Rhode Islanders in 2016 was 14.8 percent, compared to an underemployment rate of 8.6 percent for White Rhode Islanders.

Figure 15 shows the Black and White underemployment rates over time, since 2002. The gap between White and Black is persistent, with the Black rate averaging 1.8 times the White rate.

The gap between White and Black is persistent, with the Black underemployment rate averaging 1.8 times the White rate.

Figure 16 compares Rhode Island’s underemployment rate with the US national rate and with the rates in other states with sufficient Black populations to measure with adequate statistical reliability. Rhode Island’s
14.8 percent is similar to the national rate of 15.3 percent, and falls between the 12.9 percent rate for Massachusetts and Connecticut’s 19.0 percent.

WAGES

Black Wages trail White wages across the wage distribution, though the gap grows considerably as incomes increase. At the 10th percentile wage (‘very low wage’), Black wages are very similar to White wages, earning 95 percent of the 10th percentile wage for White workers. The median Black wage is 71 percent of the median wage for White Rhode Islanders. The Black wage at the 90th percentile is just 60 percent of the White 90th percentile wage (Figure 17).

This wage gap is not only persistent across the wage distribution, it is also persistent over time. Figure 18 shows the median Black wage and the median White wage since 1979. Three noteworthy aspects of this comparison include the following:

- The gap between Black and White median wages has not been narrowing. The Black median wage as a percentage of the White was less in 2016 than in 1979 (71 percent versus 78 percent).
• Strong wage growth during the 1990s resulting from full employment pushed Black median wages to the highest they had been since 1987, but Black overall median wages are lower today than they were at the turn of the century.

• Although it has been three decades since Black Rhode Islanders saw their peak median wage ($16.34 in 1987), White median wages have grown slowly but fairly steadily throughout this period. White Rhode Islanders need look back just two years for the peak median in this period of time.
POVERTY RATES

Black Rhode Islanders have rates of poverty and child poverty that are substantially higher than the overall rates and the rates for White Rhode Islanders (Figure 19). In 2015, the Black poverty rate in Rhode Island was more than double the White poverty rate (24.4 percent compared to 9.4 percent). For child poverty, that differential was more than three times (33.3 percent compared to 9.1 percent).

![Figure 19]

**BLACK POVERTY IN RHODE ISLAND MORE THAN DOUBLE WHITE POVERTY; BLACK CHILD POVERTY MORE THAN TRIPLE WHITE CHILD POVERTY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of the population living below the Federal Poverty Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>POVERTY</strong></td>
<td>Black: 24.4% White: 9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHILD POVERTY</strong></td>
<td>Black: 33.3% White: 9.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This disparity is persistent and wide. In the nine-year period from 2007 to 2015, the Black poverty rate averaged nearly three times the White poverty rate (Figure 20). In 2010, at the depths of the labor market recession (which persisted for years after the official end of the Great Recession), the Black poverty rate was nearly four times the White rate (36.5 percent compared to 9.4 percent).
The pattern is even more stark looking at child poverty. Over the nine-year period in Figure 21, the Black child poverty rate averaged 3.4 times the White child poverty rate.
Compared to other states, Rhode Island’s 24.4 percent Black poverty rate ranks about the same as the national average of 25.4 percent, and slightly higher than the Black poverty rates in neighboring Connecticut (20.5 percent) and Massachusetts (21.6 percent).

**MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME**

Median household income is a standard measure of economic well-being. White Rhode Islanders enjoy a median household income that is nearly double that of Black Rhode Islanders. In 2015, the Black median income was $36,719, compared to the White median income of $64,284 (Figure 23). If the Black median income had been the same as the White median income in 2015, Black families would have realized an additional $678 million in household income.
...for every dollar of income in the median White household, the median Black household realizes just fifty-seven cents.
The gap between Black and White median incomes is both large and consistent over time. Evident in Figure 24, the gap between the median household income for Black and White households in Rhode Island ranges from approximately $24,500 to $32,500. Over the eleven-year period in Figure 24, for every dollar of income in the median White household, the median Black household realizes just fifty-seven cents. At the worst part of the Great Recession, Black median household income was just half that of the White median. Figure 24 also highlights the fact that Black households took a deeper cut in household income than did White households during the recession. The lingering impact of the Great Recession on Black household incomes is even more starkly evident in Figure 25, where we see that Black household incomes remain the furthest behind (-$4,762) where they had been in 2007 before the recession took hold compared to Latino and White households.

![Figure 25](source: Economic Progress Analysis of US Census Bureau American Community Survey 1-yr estimates.)
Compared with the other states (Figure 26), Black median household income in Rhode Island ($36,719) is on par with the national average, and somewhat lower than the Black median income in neighboring Massachusetts ($41,732) and Connecticut ($44,418).

**Figure 26**


**HOMELESSNESS**

Homelessness is one of the most devastating manifestations of economic insecurity, reflecting a lack of adequate income and wealth to provide either rental or owned housing (coupled with a lack of affordable housing stock, and a severe shortage of subsidized housing units such as those available through federal Section 8 housing vouchers). As with other economic indicators, we see a gaping disparity between Black and White Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness. While comprising just 6.5 percent of the overall population, Black Rhode Islanders account for nearly a quarter (23.8 percent) of the share of Rhode Islanders in emergency shelters or transitional housing in 2015.
BLACK RHODE ISLANDERS COMPRISE A DISPROPORTIONATE SHARE OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION


Figure 27
We know that as educational attainment increases, incomes increase, and the likelihood of living in poverty decreases. Black children growing up in Rhode Island experience significant obstacles to achieving their educational potential. Disparities in access to education begin early and persist throughout the educational timeline.

**EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION: HEAD START**

The purpose of Head Start, a federal program operated by the US Department of Health and Human Services, is to “promote the school readiness of young children from low-income families through local programs...[by] support[ing] the mental, social, and emotional development of children from birth to age 5.”

In Figure 28 we see that Black children comprise 10 percent of Rhode Island children ages 0-5, 16 percent of children in poverty ages 0-5, and 12 percent of children enrolled in Head Start.

![Figure 28](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs)

**Figure 28**


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DISPARITIES IN K-12 EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

4th Grade Reading

Rhode Island’s 4th grade reading scores show a considerable gap between Black and White test results, as seen in Figure 29. The 18-point gap between Rhode Island’s Black and White scores, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), is statistically significant.

Over time, both Black and White NAEP scores have improved, while the gap between Black and White has narrowed slightly (Figure 30).

Figure 31 compares Rhode Island’s Black 4th grade scores with those for other states. Rhode Island’s score (215) falls just short of Massachusetts’ nation-leading score (217), but is significantly higher than both the national and Connecticut (205) scores.
**Figure 30**
GAP BETWEEN RHODE ISLAND’S BLACK AND WHITE 4TH GRADE READING SCORES SLOWLY NARROWING; BOTH IMPROVING OVER TIME


**Figure 31**
RHODE ISLAND’S BLACK 4TH GRADE READING SCORES OUTPACE CONNECTICUT AND NATIONWIDE SCORES, SIMILAR TO MASSACHUSETTS’ NATION-LEADING SCORE

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 Reading Assessment. Data for 9 states unavailable, due to insufficient size of Black student population.
4th Grade Math

By 4th grade, the Black-White gap in standardized test results is apparent. Figure 32 shows a 24 point gap between the average Black score (222) and the average White score (246) on NAEP standardized tests. Although some progress has been made lifting both Black and White scores since the early 1990s, Figure 33 shows slight progress closing the persistent gap between Black and White 4th grade math scores. In 1991, the gap stood at 30 points, and had closed to 24 points by 2015.

Figure 34 compares Rhode Island’s Black 4th grade math scores with the scores for other states with populations large enough to meet the NAEP statistical standards. Rhode Island’s 222 score falls in the middle of the pack, a few points higher than Connecticut’s score, two points lower than the national score, and eight points lower than the score in neighboring Massachusetts.
**Figure 33**
4TH GRADE MATH NAEP SCORES IMPROVE FOR BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS IN RHODE ISLAND, LITTLE PROGRESS CLOSING THE GAP, 1992-2015

![Graph showing 4th grade math NAEP scores improve for black and white students in Rhode Island, with little progress closing the gap, 1992-2015.](image)


**Figure 34**
RHODE ISLAND FALLS BETWEEN CT AND MA FOR BLACK SCORES ON 4TH GRADE MATH, 2015

![Graph showing Rhode Island falls between CT and MA for black scores on 4th grade math, 2015.](image)

**8th Grade Reading**

Within Rhode Island, the average Black score of 248 falls 27 points behind the average White score of 275 (Figure 35).

Rhode Island’s 8th grade reading scores show virtually no progress for Black Rhode Island students since 1998. Of even greater concern, the gap between Black and White 8th graders on the NAEP standardized test has grown since 1998 (Figure 36).

Rhode Island’s Black 8th grade reading score trails slightly behind scores for Massachusetts (252) and Connecticut (251), as seen in Figure 37.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\) The differences between Rhode Island, and the United States, Massachusetts, and Connecticut were not statistically significant.
BLACK RHODE ISLAND 8TH GRADERS SHOW VIRTUALLY NO PROGRESS IN READING TEST SCORES, FALL FURTHER BEHIND WHITE COUNTERPARTS SINCE 1998


RHODE ISLAND’S AVERAGE BLACK 8TH GRADE READING SCORE RANKS IN THE “MIDDLE OF THE PACK”

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 Reading Assessment. (Differences between Rhode Island and US, CT, and MA were not statistically significant.)
8th Grade Math
As with reading, Rhode Island’s Black 8th grade math scores compare unfavorably against its White scores. In Rhode Island the difference between Black and White scores is considerable (32 points separating them) and the gap is statistically significant (Figure 38).

While both Black and White test scores have improved over time (Figure 39) there has been no discernible progress in closing the gap between the mathematics scores of Black and White 8th graders.

Rhode Island’s 8th grade mathematics score (258) sits midway between Connecticut’s score (256) and the national average score (260), and ten points behind Massachusetts’ score of 268 (Figure 40).11

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11 The difference between Rhode Island’s Black 8th grade math score and the scores for Massachusetts, Connecticut, and the United States is not statistically significant.
BOTH BLACK AND WHITE 8TH-GRADE MATH SCORES IMPROVE OVER TIME, BUT NO DISCERNABLE PROGRESS CLOSING BLACK/WHITE GAP


RHODE ISLAND’S BLACK 8TH GRADE MATH SCORE SIMILAR TO NATIONAL AVERAGE AND CONNECTICUT, LOWER THAN MASSACHUSETTS (But not statistically different)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2015 Mathematics Assessment. (Differences between Rhode Island and US, CT, and MA were not statistically significant.)
Data for 11 states unavailable due to sample size and reporting standards.
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Low Educational Attainment

A larger share of Black Rhode Islanders than White (21 percent compared to 10 percent) have low educational attainment (as defined by less than a high school diploma). About the same share of Black and White Rhode Islanders have a high school graduation diploma or equivalent (HSE), and a slightly higher share of Black Rhode Islanders have “some college” or an associates degree (33 percent compared to 29 percent, (Figure 41)).

![Diagram showing educational attainment](source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-yr data, 2011-2015, SEX BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT FOR THE POPULATION 25 YEARS AND OVER, , Tables C15002H, C15002B.)
Higher Education

Attainment of higher education is recognized to improve many life outcomes, including economic well-being. Rhode Island trails the national average and our neighboring states for attainment of a bachelor’s degree or higher, with only one in five (19.1 percent) Blacks over 25 holding a Bachelor's degree or higher (Figure 42).

Figure 42

Source: American Community Survey, 5-yr data, 2011-2015. Table C15002B
At least as troubling as racial disparities in wages and income is the persistence of gaping inequality in wealth. Research on wealth disparities shows that even when we have had some success at closing gaps in income inequality, wealth inequality continues to be pervasive. Inequality holds families back, making it more difficult for them to pursue paths to prosperity such as paying for college, or buying a decent car to get to work.

A joint report by Demos and Brandeis University, *The Asset Value of Whiteness* shows that the median White household in the United States has $13 in net wealth for every dollar of net wealth in Black households. This ongoing, intergenerational disparity in wealth by race is rooted in historic injustices, and has been reinforced by policy choices, most of which have been slowly dismantled, but which continue to scar the communities in which those policies existed for generations.12

Although we lack adequate data sources to note such specific variances in wealth by race in Rhode Island, we do have some measures that serve as proxies that suggest that the wealth gap by race in Rhode Island is very real, and also persistent over time.13

**HOMEOWNERSHIP**

Historically, one of the main vehicles for building family assets has been homeownership (notwithstanding the fact that the housing bust associated with the Great Recession stripped a larger share of family assets from Black families than from White families). Figure 43 shows nationally, a 69 percent White homeownership rate and a 41 percent Black homeownership rate (the Census Bureau definition of homeownership includes mobile homes). The difference is considerably more stark for homeowners in Rhode Island, where the White homeownership rate (64 percent) is more than double the Black homeownership rate (64 percent versus 30 percent).

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12 In the absence of federal data sources allowing us to track wealth disparities by race and ethnicity, state resources should be directed to ensuring we have rigorous data available to inform discussion around this critical issue of inequality.
**Figure 43**

*Only 30 percent of Rhode Island Black householders own their homes, less than half the White share.*


**Figure 44**

*Fewer than one in three Black Rhode Island householders own their home, fifth lowest rate among available states.*


*Data for Black homeownership unavailable for twelve states due to limited sample sizes.
ACCESS TO MOTOR VEHICLE

Another proxy measure for family wealth is access to a motor vehicle. Figure 45 shows that Black Rhode Islanders are about three-times as likely as Whites to lack access to a motor vehicle (14.1 percent versus 5.4 percent). Lacking access to a vehicle can be an impediment to attaining higher education, and can limit employment options. Thus, even though owning a car can be very costly, being able to afford a car opens important doors to future economic success.

Figure 45

BLACK RHODE ISLANDERS NEARLY THREE TIMES AS LIKELY AS WHITE RHODE ISLANDERS TO LACK ACCESS TO A MOTOR VEHICLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Share of Rhode Islanders lacking access to a motor vehicle</th>
<th>WHITE</th>
<th>BLACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literature on the social determinants of health emphasizes the interconnections between a broad range of socio-economic indicators. The social determinants of health are “the structural determinants and conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age... They include factors like socioeconomic status, education, the physical environment, employment, and social support networks, as well as access to health care.”

Knowing that Black Rhode Islanders have been left behind on a broad range of socio-economic indicators, we should expect they also trail in health indicators.

**HEALTH INSURANCE**

Five-year Census Bureau data shows 82.9 percent of Black Rhode Islanders covered by health insurance, more than 10 percentage points less than the White share covered by health insurance (93.5 percent (Figure 46)). (Single-year data for 2015 show higher rates of insurance coverage for each demographic, but are less statistically reliable).

![Bar Chart](image)

**Figure 46**

Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2011-2015. Table S2701

**ASTHMA**

In Figure 47 we see that the hospitalization rates for Black Rhode Islanders is considerably higher than for White Rhode Islanders, ranging from 2.4 times higher for birth to four-year olds, to 3.1 times higher for those age 5-64 years old. These rates are significantly higher for two main reasons. The first is that lower income families and racial and ethnic minorities are exposed to more pollutants that trigger asthma attacks. The other is that because Black Rhode Islanders often lack health insurance, they are far less likely to be receiving preventative medical care for asthma symptoms, and may postpone seeking medical attention until they are in a crisis situation.

![Asthma Hospitalization Rates for Black Rhode Islanders More Than Double Rates for White Rhode Islanders at All Ages](http://www.health.state.ri.us/data/asthma/)

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15 United States Environmental Protection Agency.
LEAD POISONING

Exposure to lead is known to contribute to a range of negative health and behavior outcomes, especially among children. There is also a considerable body of literature noting that “environmental inequalities documenting [the] sources of potential environmental risk are concentrated among racial and ethnic minorities and the poor.”

Table 2 shows the 2015 top ten Rhode Island municipalities for cases of reported cases of lead poisoning, based on the blood concentration of lead in those cases. In other words, it answers the question “Where, in Rhode Island, is the incidence of lead poisoning greatest?”. Highlighted in bold in Table 2 are the eight municipalities with the largest share of Rhode Island’s Black population, collectively accounting for 88 percent of Rhode Island’s Black population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Urban Group</th>
<th>Cases with &gt;5 mcg/dL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Shoreham</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providence</td>
<td>Core City</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newport</td>
<td>Core City</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawtucket</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Falls</td>
<td>Core City</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Compton</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westerly</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Providence</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Kingstown</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woonsocket</td>
<td>Core City</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burrillville</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Providence</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Warwick</td>
<td>Core City</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scituate</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narragansett</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cranston</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: Rhode Island Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program and LESS Database. Gold shaded municipalities are those with the vast majority of Rhode Island’s Black population, accounting for 88 percent of the total.

A groundbreaking Brown University study looks closely at the impact of lead poisoning on academic test scores among children, after noting that factors such as family income, school segregation, family structure, parenting practices, and teaching quality fall short in explaining the persistent gap in Black and White test scores. Aizer et al’s paper relies on a Rhode Island specific dataset that tracks child blood levels measured from birth to age six, linked to educational outcomes experienced in grades three through eight. Their findings confirm that Black children in Rhode Island have higher average blood lead levels than White Rhode Island children – 4.8 vs 3.1 for children born in Rhode Island between 1997 and 2004.

Further, their research finds that since 1997, when Rhode Island started rigorously instituting measures to reduce exposure to lead in homes, lead levels declined across the state, but “significantly more so for African American children”. Their research highlights three important trends: the persistent gap between Black and White children in terms of their lead blood levels; the significant reduction in lead blood levels resulting from enhanced mitigation efforts; and the steeper decline in lead blood levels experienced by Black Rhode Island children than by White Rhode Island children.

Lead poisoning is also known to play a serious role contributing to crime and other negative outcomes.18


EDUCATIONAL DISCIPLINE: SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AND THE “SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE”

The “school to prison pipeline” is a national epidemic that results when students – disproportionately Black and Latino students – face high rates of school discipline such as suspension or expulsion. Disciplinary measures that remove students from the educational environment, denying them access to the education needed to lay the foundation for economic success and stability, take a high toll not only on those students, but on their communities, and society as a whole.

A PBS special report on the school to prison pipeline, titled “Education Under Arrest” summarizes how the school to prison pipeline works.

“Statistics reflect that these [school disciplinary] policies disproportionately target students of color and those with a history of abuse, neglect, poverty or learning disabilities. Students who are forced out of school for disruptive behavior are usually sent back to the origin of their angst and unhappiness – their home environments or their neighborhoods…Those who are forced out for smaller offenses become hardened, confused, embittered. Those who are unnecessarily forced out of school become stigmatized and fall behind in their studies; many eventually decide to drop out of school altogether, and many others commit crimes in their communities.”

The disciplinary patterns evident in Rhode Island schools are consistent with the national pattern described above. Comparing the Black and White school suspension rates for the 2014-2015 school year (Figure 48), we see that the Black rate is both consistently and considerably higher than the White rate, at the elementary, middle school and high school levels. Notably, the ratio between Black and White is most stark at the elementary school level, though suspension rates for both Black and White are relatively low (2 suspensions per 100 White students versus 9 per 100 Black students). Black suspension rates are highest overall at the middle school level, with 60 suspensions for every 100 Black students, while the Black suspension rate in Rhode Island high schools was 44 per 100 students).

The statewide averages for each school level mask the stark data associated with many individual schools. Nathanael Greene Middle School, in Providence, for example saw 121 suspensions for every 100 Black students in 2014-15, more than 3 times the White suspension rate of 36 per 100 students. The Black suspension rate at Aldrich Junior High in Warwick was 158 per hundred students, nearly 4 times the White rate of 41 suspensions per 100 students. At Mt. Hope High School in the Bristol Warren Regional School District, the Black suspension rate was 350 suspensions per 100 students, nearly five times the White rate of 73 suspensions per 100 students.

The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that improving the male graduation rate by just 5% would save $18.5 billion in crime costs (including $38 million here in Rhode Island), and generate an additional $1.2 billion in earnings ($4.2 million in Rhode Island).\(^{20}\) Comparing the average cost of educating a student in Rhode Island ($16,239)\(^{21}\) with the annual cost of incarcerating individuals in Rhode Island ($42,281),\(^{22}\) stopping the flow in Rhode Island’s school to prison pipeline makes sense at multiple levels.


DISPARITIES IN ARREST RATES

As seen in Figure 49, Black Rhode Islanders in the Ocean State cities face arrest rates that range from 3.4 times to 9.1 times non-Black arrest rates. The Black arrest rate in five cities – Newport, Middletown, South Kingstown, and Warwick – exceed 300 per 1000 residents. These disparities, while noteworthy, are largely consistent with national patterns. A 2014 USA Today study noted “Blacks are far more likely to be arrested than any other racial group in the USA. In some places, dramatically so.”23

National data show ample evidence of what a 2013 ACLU study calls “racially based arrests”.24

![Figure 49](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/11/18/ferguson-black-arrest-rates/19043207/)

The ACLU study notes that in Rhode Island, where arrests for possession of marijuana resulted in 59 percent of all drug related arrests in 2010, Blacks are arrested at 2.6 times the rate of Whites for marijuana possession (compared to 3.9 times the White rate in Massachusetts,

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3.3 times the White rate in Connecticut, and 3.7 times the White rate nationally. Figure 50). These arrest disparities occur despite evidence that the rate of use of marijuana is essentially the same for Blacks and Whites in America.

**HUGE DISPARITIES IN ARREST RATES FOR POSSESSION OF MARIJUANA COMPARING BLACK AND WHITE RESIDENTS OF MA, CT, RI, AND US**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Black Arrest Rate/100,000 Residents</th>
<th>White Arrest Rate/100,000 Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>681</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>716</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**DISPARITIES IN COMMITMENTS, SENTENCING, AND BEYOND INCARCERATION**

Disparities in arrest rates not surprisingly translate into disparities in the incidence of Black Rhode Islanders in Rhode Island’s correctional system. While the majority of offenders in the correctional system are White Rhode Islanders, Blacks comprise a much larger share of the population in the system than they do in the overall population (Figure 51), the result of a series of punitive systems that begin as early as elementary school, and follow many people of color throughout their lives.

The barriers that ex-offenders face in re-entering society and the economy have been understood and well documented for years.25 Among the barriers noted by Holzer et al are the following:

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• Employers are more averse to hiring ex-offenders than any other disadvantaged group;
• Willingness to hire ex-offenders varies both by the ex-offender’s offense, and by whether they have had meaningful work experience since being released from prison;
• Inclination to do criminal background checks has risen considerably.26

For Black ex-offenders, the interaction of the barriers associated with being Black (well-documented throughout this report) and the barriers associated with being an ex-offender creates a formidable barrier to economic success.

Holzer et al note that “race and ex-offender status seem to interact in powerful ways in reducing the job market opportunities of Black men with criminal records, with Black offenders receiving less than one-seventh the number of offers received by White non-offenders with comparable skills and experience.”27

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26 Holzer et al, Ibid, p 11.
The lower educational attainment of Black students, the economic challenges for Black families and the disproportionate representation of Black adults in the criminal justice system show a community with life’s deck dramatically stacked against them. Reversing these systemic barriers to success and paving the road to prosperity for Rhode Island’s Black population requires a comprehensive and coordinated set of policy and program responses at both the state and local levels. While such responses fall beyond the scope of this paper, we hope this report, which compiles data known to many both either by their lived-experience or by other reports, will be a catalyst for action.
Thank you to our donors and philanthropic partners who made this report possible including:

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Rhode Island Foundation
The United Way of Rhode Island
Stoneman Family Foundation
Annie E. Casey Foundation
Carter Family Charitable Trust

Thank you also to:

The Racial Justice Coalition of Rhode Island
whose members provided guidance and feedback on the report.

To learn more about the Coalition go to:
Facebook/RiRacialJustice

We are also deeply appreciative of the data analysis and support provided to us through our involvement in national networks coordinated by the Economic Policy Institute (www.epi.org) and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (www.cbpp.org).