

How Equal/Unequal Can You Get? Martin Luther King on Inequality

By

Richard W. Franke, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Montclair State University
Resident, Ecovillage at Ithaca; Board Member, Sustainable Tompkins

franker@mail.montclair.edu

<http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~franker/>

Overview of this Workshop: Dr. Martin Luther King was one of our most perceptive and thoughtful observers of inequality in the U.S. In his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (1968) King described the effects of three centuries of racial inequality on the lives of ordinary people. This book was part of an Ithaca-area community read in 2010–2011. **King wrote in 1968 that African Americans have “...of the good things in life...approximately one-half those of whites; of the bad...twice those of whites.”** What “things” was King talking about? How much has changed since he wrote those words? What’s left on the agenda for overcoming racial inequality?

1. **How Many Ways Can We Be Unequal? Are some types of inequality morally justifiable or even beneficial to society?**
2. **How Many Ways Can We Be Unequal Racially? Let’s see what Martin Luther King thought in his book *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?***
3. **How Many of King’s Ways Are Still True? How much have they changed?**

If you are a black male today...(slightly different for females)...you are...

Basic Health and Life Conditions

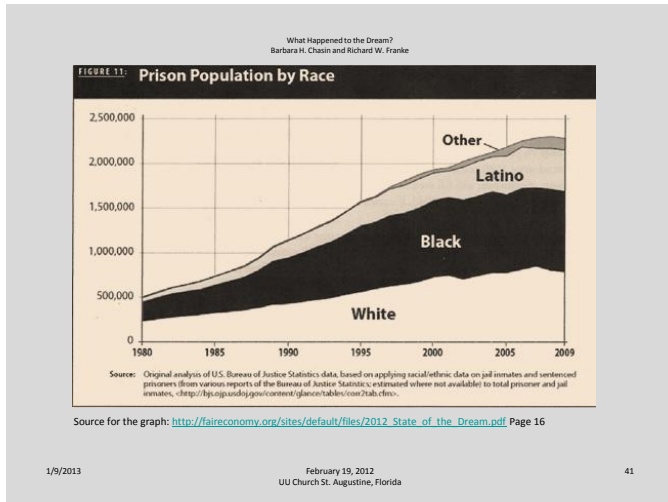
- ✓ Likely to die 5 years sooner than a white male born at the same time¹ [Was 6 years in 1967, that is, difference declined by one year over the past 45 years]
- ✓ Twice as likely not to have health insurance²
- ✓ More likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes and hypertension
- ✓ Less likely to get timely, aggressive medical treatment even for serious conditions

Education, Jobs, Money, Housing

- ✓ 2/3 as likely to graduate (52%) as a white student (78%)³ although the rate got a little better recently - Ithaca 2009 had rates of 65% vs 82%⁴ -- see page 21 of the source - not clear why there are no more recent reports on the equity scorecard site? Some other info here on the endnote.⁵
- ✓ Twice as likely to be unemployed (14.4% vs. 7.4%)⁶ [ratio same as 1967]
- ✓ Going to make 19% less money of which more than half the difference (11%) is directly due to racial discrimination⁷
- ✓ 2/3 as likely to own a house [46% vs. 71%]⁸
- ✓ Have a total wealth of about \$1 for every \$20 whites have⁹ [difference is greater than in recent past - the inequality is growing]

Vulnerability to Violence and to the Criminal Justice System

- ✓ King wrote in 1968 (page 120) that "90% of the young people of the ghetto never come in conflict with the law."
- ✓ But more recently 68% of African-American men born since the mid 1970s have been imprisoned and thus have a record - with all the disadvantages this entails. King could not have imagined what was about to come down in African-American communities as the "war on drugs."¹⁰



Source for the graph:
http://faireconomy.org/sites/default/files/2012_State_of_the_Dream.pdf
Page 18

- What are some of the disadvantages of being an ex-felon?
Varies somewhat by state but -
 - Can't hold public office
 - Can't sit on juries
 - Ineligible for some educational grants
 - Ineligible for public housing
- ✓ Equally likely to use drugs but 10 times more likely to be sent to prison for it¹¹
- ✓ Likely to receive a longer prison sentence than a white person who

Average Jail Sentence in 2002, by Race

Offense	Whites	Blacks
Murder	213	240
Robbery	78	92
Burglary	37	44
Fraud	25	30
Drug Possession	20	23
Drug Trafficking	38	45

All statistics are for males only. Length of sentences are in months.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice
<<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/welcome.html>>

committed a similar offense - but somewhat lessened by the new crack cocaine laws?¹²

✓ 6 times more likely to be murdered - but black rate is going down faster than the white rate?¹³

Source for the chart above: http://faireconomy.org/files/sod_2009_charts/SoD_09_Charts31.jpg

Political Power and Representation in the Government

- ✚ 1965 Voting Rights Act Made it Easier for African Americans to Vote in southern states

- King (1968, pages 35 and 85) criticized the federal government for lax enforcement, noting (page 35) that "...fewer than 60 registrars were appointed and not a single federal law officer capable of making arrests was sent into the South."
- Then, the massive imprisonment of the war on drugs and the rules in many states preventing ex-felons from voting have left about 1.4 million black men - 13% of them - ineligible to vote.¹⁴
- ✚ Big increase in African Americans in local, state and national government
 - King wrote (page 16): "A decade ago, [ie 1958] not a single Negro entered the legislative chambers of the South except as a porter or chauffeur. Today [1968] eleven Negroes are members of the Georgia House."
 - In 2010 there were 39 black members of the national Congress and in the year 2000 there were almost 9,000 at various levels across the country.¹⁵ But are African American elected officials experiencing a decline in their political impact?¹⁶

Experiences of Everyday Life

- ✚ 1964 Civil Rights Act Desegregated Public Facilities in America, especially important in the South
- ✚ More African Americans on TV and in the media generally
- ✚ More tolerant attitudes among whites regarding interracial dating and marriage according to various opinion surveys
 - King wrote (page 8): "...88% of them [white Americans] would object if their teenage child dated a Negro. Almost 80% would mind it if a close friend or relative married a Negro, and 50% would not want a Negro as a neighbor."
 - A 2006 Pew Research study found that 71% of whites born after 1976 are OK with interracial dating. The same study found that 17% of whites now have an interracial marriage in their immediate or close family. However, white-black intermarriages are only a portion of these interracial marriages and the most common are white-Asian.¹⁷
- ✚ Martin Luther King's birthday became a national holiday in 1986. In what way could we say this lessens racial inequality? Or not?

- ✚ According to Wikipedia, as of 2009, there were at least 730 MLK streets in the U.S. including Ithaca, NY.¹⁸ But how much tension has arisen over these names and how well accepted are they? What about MLK Street/State Street in Ithaca? Why does the street have two names? In what way could we say this lessens racial inequality? Or not?
- ✚ Daily life indignities: "Unpacking the knapsack."
 - <http://www.nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf>
- ✚ Living with white privilege: Being white in Ithaca by Roberta Wallitt

What It's Like To Be White in Ithaca

Written by Dr. Roberta Wallitt; Thursday, February 19, 2009

Many of us who have been examining the unearned privilege that comes with being White have read a classic article by Peggy McIntosh called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1988). As I heard community conversations about racism, I was moved to adapt her article to Ithaca. Here are some of the ways my unearned privilege affects me in my daily life:

1. I have the privilege to go through my day never thinking about being White.
2. I can feel good about working on liberal causes because I don't have to worry about survival.
3. I don't have to worry about my children being targeted by police or shop owners because of their race.
4. I can see reflections of my race in the public officials with whom I meet, in the meetings I attend, in the stores in which I shop and in the street names on which I drive.
5. I can wait for an extended time to be served at restaurants or stores without wondering if the lengthy wait is due to my race.
6. I can send my children to school knowing their curriculum will represent my race and most of their teachers will teach in ways that are culturally comfortable for my children.
7. I can speak out in public without fear that my words will be dismissed because of my race or that someone might take offense when I state a simple fact.
8. I can ignore the concerns of people who don't look like me, because I can believe they don't impact my life.
9. I can limit my interactions to people who are White like me.
10. If I have a complaint about my children's experiences in school or the operations of local government, I can be fairly sure that the officials I must deal with are White like me.

Dr. Roberta Wallitt, a retired teacher, is on the Board of Directors of the Village at Ithaca, and is also a member of ACTION (Activists Committed To Interrupting Oppression Now).

Read more about her ideas on this subject at the original source site:

http://www.villageatithaca.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=177&Itemid=58

Treatment of Your History and Culture

- ✚ More courses and sections of courses on Africa and African American history in colleges
- ✚ More info on slavery and on African American history taught in high schools?
- ✚ Do Americans know much or anything about the contributions of Africans and African Americans in medicine, science, technology, literature, painting, poetry or other fields?

¹ <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jun/05/science/la-sci-life-expectancy-gap-20120606>

² <http://www.ahrq.gov/research/disparit.htm>

³ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/09/19/05boys.h32.html>

⁴ <http://www.villageatithaca.org/media/ERC3-4.pdf>

⁵ http://www.publicschoolreview.com/school_ov/school_id/55602

⁶ <http://money.cnn.com/2012/07/06/news/economy/black-unemployment-rate/index.htm>

⁷ Coleman, Major G. (2003). "Job Skill and Black Male Wage Discrimination". *Social Science Quarterly* 84 (4): 892–906. doi:10.1046/j.0038-4941.2003.08404007.x

⁸ <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/housing/census/historic/ownershipbyrace.html>

⁹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2012/12/10/how-home-ownership-keeps-blacks-poorer-than-whites/>; and <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/07/26/wealth-gaps-rise-to-record-highs-between-whites-blacks-hispanics/>

¹⁰ Weston, Bruce , and Becky Pettit, Incarceration and social inequality, *Daedalus*. Summer 2010. 139:3, pg. 11.

¹¹ <http://www.thehouseilivein.org/get-involved/drug-war-today/>

¹² http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/crime-scene/post/new-crack-cocaine-law-could-impact-hundreds-of-old-cases-in-dc-region/2011/05/31/AGquJkFH_blog.html

¹³ <http://www.epi.org/blog/racial-inequality-black-homicide-rate/>

¹⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/reports98/vote/usvot98o.htm>; see also

<http://www.aclu.org/blog/voting-rights/democracy-restoration-act-creating-broader-and-more-just-base-voter-participation>

¹⁵ <http://kingpolitics.blogspot.com/2010/06/black-elected-officials-in-chart-form.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.jointcenter.org/research/resegregation-in-southern-politics>

¹⁷ <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2006/03/14/guess-whos-coming-to-dinner/>

¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_streets_named_after_Martin_Luther_King,_Jr.#cite_note-wsj-2

Get this six page document online at:

<http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~franker/RacismFilesIthaca/MLKingInfusionDayIthaca11Jan2013.pdf>

Get the two page Handout at:

<http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~franker/RacismFilesIthaca/Handout11Jan2013.pdf>

Get the document "Messages from Martin" at:

<http://msuweb.montclair.edu/~franker/RacismFilesIthaca/MessagesfromMartinIthaca11Jan2013.pdf>