Race, Ethnicity, and the American Labor Market: What's at Work?

ASA SERIES ON HOW RACE AND ETHNICITY MATTER

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SERIES BACKGROUND

This on-line publication by the American Sociological Association (ASA) is one in a five-part series on the institutional aspects of race, racism, and race relations, a project intended to help commemorate the ASA centennial (1905-2005) and designed for a general readership. As a professional membership association, the ASA seeks to promote the contributions and uses of sociology to the public. These synthetic summaries provide an overview of the research evidence on how race remains an important social factor in understanding disparities in the well being of Americans in many important areas of life (including employment, health, income and wealth, housing and neighborhoods, and criminal justice) although demonstrable changes have occurred in American society over the last century.

Published under the auspices of ASA's Sydney S. Spivack Program in Applied Social Research and Social Policy, these syntheses are based upon a vast literature of published research by sociologists and other scholars. This body of research was reviewed and assessed at a working conference of 45 social scientists that attempted to create an integrated map of social science knowledge in these areas. The effort was organized by Felice J. Levine, former ASA Executive Officer, Roberta Spalter-Roth, Director of the ASA Research and Development Department, and Patricia E. White, Sociology Program Officer at the National Science Foundation (when on detail to ASA), and supported by generous grants from the Ford Foundation and the W.G. Kellogg Foundation.

In conjunction with the Clinton administration's Presidential *Initiative on Race: One America*, the ASA was encouraged by the White House Office of Science Technology Policy to undertake this ambitious examination of relevant arenas of research, explicate what the social sciences know, dispel myths and misconceptions about race, and identify gaps in our knowledge. The purpose of the President's overall initiative, begun in late 1997, was to "help educate the nation about the facts surrounding the issue of race" and included many activities such as university, community, and national dialogues; government initiatives and conferences; and topical reports.

The ASA's original materials have been updated, synthesized, and developed for this Centennial Series under the direction of Roberta Spalter-Roth. The first of the series is on race and the labor market and is co-authored by **Roberta Spalter-Roth** and **Terri Ann Lowenthal**, Legislative and Policy Consultant.

The labor market is a set of arrangements through which workers learn about jobs and employers learn about workers. In principle, the labor market is supposed to be "race blind" in the long run (3). But key indicators and an examination of factors that influence workplace decisions suggest that race and ethnicity play significant roles in determining job placement and career opportunities. Whether a person is looking for a job, seeking a promotion, or considering a new line of work, race and ethnicity constrain individual choices and affect chances of success. Sociologists have explored the roles that race and ethnicity play and how race and ethnicity interact with other factors such as type of job or industry, social networks, and social policies in shaping labor market outcomes. In this research synthesis, we first examine indicators of different outcomes and then examine what explains these differences. We highlight key findings on how education and skills, workplace processes, and government policies contribute to or ameliorate work force disparities between race and ethnic groups.

Key Workforce Indicators

Several key economic indicators suggest that not everyone who wants to work can find a satisfactory job (Table 1).White men have the highest labor force participation and employment rates, and the lowest unemployment rates, of all measured demographic groups; data for Asian men differ only slightly.[1] A somewhat smaller share of African American men is in the workforce, nearly one-half of whom do not have jobs. The proportion of Hispanic men in the labor force is closer to that of white men than African American men, although a smaller share (compared to white men) is employed.

Slightly less than three-fifths of white women are both in the labor force and employed; their unemployment rate is the lowest of all measured groups. A higher proportion of African American women are in the labor force, but the gap is greater between their participation and employment rates, and they are more than twice as likely as white women to be unemployed. The share of Hispanic women in the labor force is lower than, and their employment rate is substantially below, that of white and African American women, although their unemployment rate is lower than that of African American women.

TABLE 1. Labor Force Participation, Employment, and Unemployment Rates, by Race and Sex, 2000.

RACE OR ETHNICITY[1]	EMPLOYMENT STATUS FOR POPULATION AGED 16 AND OVER (percentage)		
	IN LABOR FORCE	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED
White	**64.6**	**61.1**	**3.0**
Male	72.2	68.0	3.3
Female	57.5	54.7	2.6
Black, African American	**60.2**	**52.5**	**6.9**
Male	60.9	52.5	7.3
Female	59.6	52.8	6.5
Asian	**63.3**	**59.7**	**3.2**
Male	71.0	66.8	3.5
Female	56.4	53.3	3.0
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander	**66.2**	**57.7**	**7.0**
Male	71.5	61.5	7.4
Female	60.9	53.8	6.6
American Indian, Alaska Native	**61.1**	**53.0**	**7.5**
Male	65.6	56.1	8.4
Female	56.8	50.0	6.6
Two or more races	**64.1**	**57.9**	**5.5**
Male	70.2	63.2	5.8
Female	58.2	52.7	5.2
Hispanic[2]	**61.4**	**55.2**	**5.7**
Male	69.4	62.8	5.7
Female	53.0	47.2	5.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. "Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics." Census 2000, Summary File 4, DP-3.

1. Data reflect only those who selected a single race category (e.g., white). In the 2000 U.S. Census, 2.1 percent of the population selected two or more races.
2. Hispanics may be of any race.

These economic statistics indicate that, in a robust economy, the supply of white and Asian workers may not meet employer demand, but the supply of African Americans and Hispanics who want to work outstrips the demand for these workers. For example, one analysis shows that the ratio of job applicants to job hires is significantly higher for African Americans than for whites in Detroit (26). The result is lower unemployment for whites and Asians and higher unemployment for African Americans and Hispanics. The roughly two-to-one ratio in unemployment rates between African Americans and whites (for both men and women) has been constant throughout economic expansions and recessions, despite a shrinking gap in educational differences between the two groups. Unemployment gaps between whites and Hispanics have generally been smaller, although the differential between whites and Hispanics nearly rivals the disparity between whites and African Americans. Hispanics and African Americans also are more likely than whites to be unemployed for longer periods of time. Research has shown that African American men, especially those with limited education, suffer higher rates of long-term joblessness than white men with similar education (50). Occupational data are another indicator of racial and ethnic labor market disparities (Table 2). One-third of white men and nearly one-half of Asian men are employed in managerial, professional, and related occupations, compared with one-fifth of African American men and one-seventh of Hispanic men. Conversely, more than one-quarter of both African American and Hispanic men hold jobs in production, transportation, and material moving occupations, compared with less than one-fifth of white men and less than one-seventh of Asian men. A disproportionately high percentage of African American and Hispanic women, compared with white and Asian women, are employed in service occupations such as food preparation, cleaning, and personal care (see also 71; 46; 17). These occupations are often in work environments characterized by poor pay, few benefits, and little career mobility (63).

According to sociological research, occupational segregation helps explain persistent wage gaps between whites and both African Americans and Hispanics, especially for women (11; 66). The wage gap has narrowed somewhat as African Americans moved into a wider range of occupations in the 1960s and 1970s, boosted by affirmative action, equal employment opportunity laws, and higher education levels, but the relative earnings of African Americans stagnated in the 1980s (34). Research demonstrates that wages do not rise for any occupation characterized by the presence of African American women (37). Along with occupational segregation, work arrangements also affect earnings. For example, African American and Hispanic men and women are concentrated in nonstandard work positions, such as temporary and on-call work, that yield lower pay and benefits (43; 44).

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Queues: The Ranking and Sorting of Jobs

Sociological research documents a wide range of processes through which employers sort and rank workers, and workers jockey for positions in the labor market. For employers, the result is a "job queue," a ranking of workers from perceived best to perceived worst (72). Many labor market economists emphasize the importance of education and skills (referred to as human capital) in explaining

[1] The *labor force participation rate* represents the percentage of the adult population that is employed or actively seeking work. The employment rate is the percentage of the adult population that is employed, while the unemployment rate is the percentage of the adult population that is not working but is actively seeking work.

TABLE 2: Selected Occupational Data by Race, Ethnicity and Sex, 2000.

RACE OR ETHNICITY[1]	SELECTED OCCUPATIONS FOR EMPLOYED CIVILIAN POPULATION AGED 16 AND OVER (percentage)				
	MANAGEMENT, PROFESSIONAL, AND RELATED	SERVICE	SALES OR OFFICE	CONSTRUCTION, EXTRACTION, OR MAINTENANCE	PRODUCTION, TRANSPORTATION, OR MATERIALS MOVING
White	**35.6**	**13.4**	**27.0**	**9.8**	**13.6**
Male	33.6	10.6	18.0	17.5	19.3
Female	38.0	16.5	37.5	0.7	6.9
Black, African American	**25.2**	**22.0**	**27.3**	**6.5**	**18.6**
Male	20.0	19.4	18.3	13.3	28.3
Female	29.7	24.2	34.8	0.8	10.4
Asian	**44.6**	**14.1**	**24.0**	**3.6**	**13.4**
Male	47.1	12.4	19.0	6.4	14.8
Female	41.7	16.1	29.6	0.5	11.9
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander	**23.3**	**20.8**	**28.8**	**9.6**	**16.5**
Male	20.7	19.8	18.0	17.2	23.1
Female	26.4	21.9	41.4	0.9	8.9
American Indian, Alaska Native	**24.3**	**20.6**	**24.0**	**12.9**	**16.8**
Male	19.9	17.1	13.7	23.7	23.5
Female	29.1	24.5	35.1	1.3	9.5
Two or more races	**26.7**	**19.8**	**27.1**	**9.8**	**15.7**
Male	24.1	16.5	19.0	17.5	21.6
Female	29.6	23.6	36.7	0.9	8.8
Hispanic[2]	**18.1**	**21.8**	**23.1**	**13.1**	**21.2**
Male	14.6	19.0	14.8	21.9	26.1
Female	22.9	25.6	34.8	0.9	14.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. "Profile of Selected Economic Characteristics." Census 2000, Summary File 4, QT-P28.

1. Data reflect only those who selected a single race category (e.g., white). In the 2000 U.S. Census, 2.1 percent of the population selected two or more races.
2. Hispanics may be of any race.

labor market inequalities. Sociological research finds that education and skills play a role but do not fully explain the placement of either group in the queue or the historical disparities between whites and racial minorities with respect to earnings, labor force participation, training and promotion opportunities, and choice of occupation (14; 50; 86). In today's service-based economy, employers often emphasize a preference for "soft skills,"[2] creating potential for bias in workplace decisions (48; 57; 86).

Workers also engage in a ranking process, viewing the desirability of jobs according to pay scales,

[2] Soft skills include an array of employee characteristics that are subjectively evaluated by employers. They include how individuals look and dress and their manner of speaking; whether they are perceived to be team players; perceived motivation, cheerfulness, and interpersonal skills; and perceived ability to represent the organization. The studies cited here suggest that employers perceive African-American men (whether or not they actually interview them) as having limited soft skills but rather are perceived as intimidating, hostile and defensive.

fringe benefits, opportunities for advancement, convenient hours, harassment-free environments, and other factors (72; 85; 81). Jobs are less attractive as pay and benefits diminish, but even previously spurned jobs can become desirable when employment opportunities are scarce (85). Creation of "ethnic niches" in certain occupations or industries also affects both the desirability and availability of jobs. These niches benefit job seekers from members of racial or ethnic groups by providing training and shelter from discrimination but potentially depress wages and constrain career mobility within that niche (36; 75; 85; 86; 91). In New York City, for example, ethnic niches have helped funnel workers into specialized services such as fire fighting, police, laundries and dry cleaning, taxi companies, gardening, and small restaurants (85), creating barriers to employment in those sectors for workers from other ethnic groups. African Americans have had limited success in establishing economic niches in the private sector, although more recently they have created more successful networks to boost their employment chances in many (though not all) public-sector occupations (30; 85).

The ranking and sorting process is affected by constant economic change and restructuring, with the effect being a movement of current and new workers up or down the job queue. Theoretically, if there were no racial and ethnic discrimination, there would be one queue of workers, with placement in the job queue dependent on skills, education, and experience (16). However, employer preferences also vary by gender and race; preferences for whites, and sometimes Asians, alter job queues based on educational level and skills. The reality, some scholars say, is several queues with whites and African Americans often employed in different industries, occupations, and types of jobs to the overall advantage of whites (78). Black and Hispanic women face greater obstacles to employment than their white counterparts, as they strive to overcome a lack of available and affordable childcare, more family illness, and few job networks (39).

Reasons for Disparities: Pre-and Post-Civil Rights Act

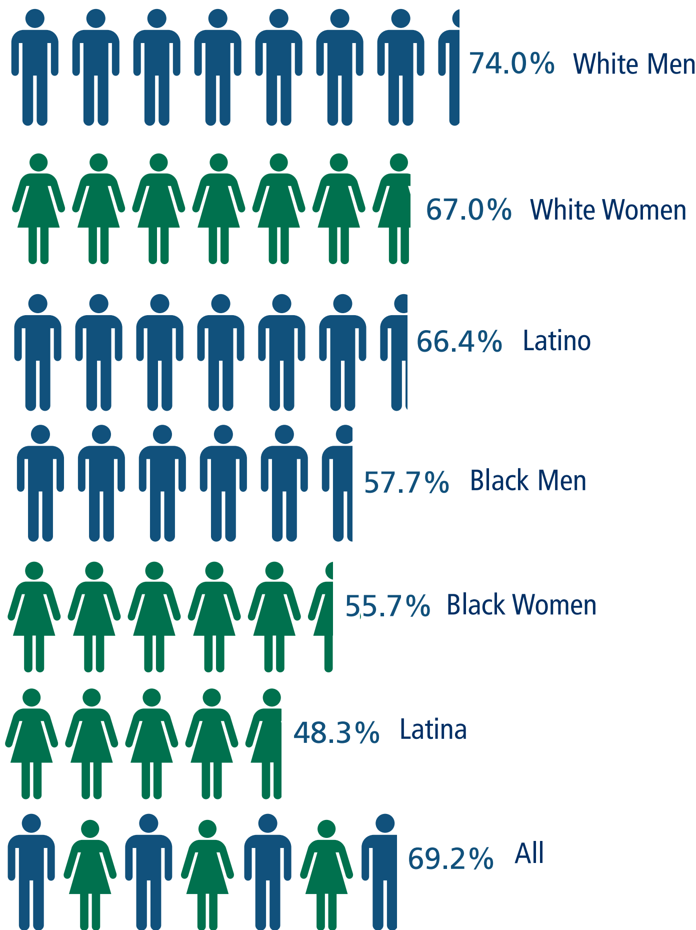
Before the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, widespread institutional discrimination denied people of color access to many employment opportunities and enforced their position at the bottom of the job queue. Occupational segregation between whites and African Americans–the result of both legal segregation and discriminatory practices that included intimidation and violence (38)–declined most dramatically in the years immediately following passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and then the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act. While the Equal Pay Act of 1963 mitigated wage disparities between whites and people of color, it did not eliminate them because historical hiring patterns, educational inequalities, and workplace discrimination continued to affect outcomes (37; 50; 70). In addition, lax federal enforcement of the new civil rights laws slowed dismantling of segregated workplaces in the 1980s, despite marked gains in educational achievement for African Americans (6; 73).

In the post–Civil Rights Act era, economic restructuring had a significant effect on the placement of a group in the job queue. The sharp decline in manufacturing in the 1970s and 1980s had racially differential consequences for blue-collar workers, precipitating a persistent wage gap between more- and less-educated men (88; 89). Many relatively well-paying, unionized manufacturing jobs in the steel, auto, and durable goods industries were eliminated, reducing job opportunities and relatively high wages for less-educated men (43). White men without post-secondary education suffered the greatest wage losses (because their wages were higher to begin with). But African American men were particularly hard hit by job losses; their unemployment rate hit 20 percent during the recession in 1983, again

lowering their placement in the job queue. Hispanic men fared somewhat better in the wake of the industrial downturn, keeping a larger share of the remaining manufacturing jobs (89). For example, as service-oriented industries replaced manufacturing jobs in Chicago, employment increased for Hispanic men with limited education or skills, but decreased for African-American men, primarily as a result of employer preferences (80).

FIGURE 1:

Employment Outcomes of Displaced Workers by Race and Ethnicity.



Percent Re-Employed (as of February 1996)

Source: Roberta Spalter-Roth and Cynthia Deitch, 1999 "'I Don't Feel Out-of-Work Sized': Gender, Ethnicity, and the Unique Costs of Displacement." *Work and Occupations* 26(4):446-82, Table 2.

Corporate downsizing and restructuring continued even during the 1990s economic boom. Displacement and job losses among managerial and professional employees, as well as blue-collar workers, were unevenly distributed by race, ethnicity, and gender (32; 49; 70; 77). Figure 1 shows that white men are the most likely group to be reemployed a year after displacement.

The industrial slowdown also triggered a period of relocation among companies seeking more flexible, cheaper workforces, and cheaper land. There was widespread workforce dislocation, especially for African Americans and Hispanics in cities in the Midwest and Northeast. In fact, some researchers suggest that fundamental economic restructuring in the latter decades of the twentieth century created a spatial mismatch between workers and jobs, particularly for African Americans (26; 54; 88). Spatial mismatch matters not only because of the accessibility of jobs, but also because of the accessibility of social networks that yield job opportunities (14).

Other researchers, however, question whether spatial mismatch alone explains the high unemployment rate for African American men. For example, other groups control of job niches such as police, fire fighting, sanitation, and construction are among the key forces that contribute to joblessness among African American men (85). Others suggest that African American men are the special targets of discrimination starting in the public education system (40). There is some debate as to whether immigrant employment occurs "on the backs of blacks" (51), because African Americans and Hispanic immigrants tend to compete in similar occupations and labor markets (2). Some researchers suggest that immigration does not benefit African American men

with low skill levels and has a downward effect on African American wages, in part because immigrants are likely to have similar skill levels but are willing to accept lower wages (2; 9). Other researchers say that immigration does not result in massive job losses for African American men, because new jobs are created as a by-product of immigration (51).

In the 1980s and 1990s, wages for African Americans and other low-income men stagnated as the United States experienced its largest surge in immigration since the early 1900s (35). Native-born workers in areas with large immigrant populations are most likely to feel the effects of competition, especially for low-skilled jobs, from this new group of workers and may migrate away from these metropolitan areas and states, further segmenting the labor market (28; 29). These findings challenge the perception that immigrants, by and large, fill the worst jobs that native-born Americans do not want. Studies suggest, rather, that there is intensified competition for jobs among workers, especially less educated workers. Spatial mismatch can weight this competition in favor of those who can find housing outside of central cities (26).

The Role of Education and Skills in the Job Market

The transition from a manufacturing to an information-based economy brought a shift in labor market demand toward college-educated workers (12) and an increased preference for employees with cognitive skills (42). The education gap between African Americans and whites has narrowed substantially since the mid-twentieth century, but African Americans are still less likely than whites to earn a high school diploma. Hispanics are now more likely to complete high school than they were ten years ago, but they have not closed a persistent gap in these rates compared with whites. Disparities remain in the percentage of each group completing some college and earning a bachelor's degree or higher, especially among younger people (ages 25–29). Asian Americans are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, or Hispanics to hold a bachelor's degree or higher (83).

Some economic researchers suggest that African Americans enter the job market with weaker skills and that standardized achievement tests are a more accurate gauge of skills and potential productivity than years of schooling completed (61; 42). Other research suggests that factors other than test scores, such as discrimination, poor schools, racial segregation, and social isolation explain such skill differentials (53; 90). Studies based on 1980 and 1990 census data found that race and ethnicity accounted for more of the earnings gaps between whites and minorities than differences in education and work experience (19).

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Some sociological researchers suggest that the growing service sector has produced a greater employer focus on so-called "soft skills": ease of interaction with colleagues and customers; enthusiasm and positive work attitude; willingness to learn new tasks — skill sets that are hard to measure using objective or quantifiable standards such as years of schooling (47; 58; 59; 60). This new emphasis can result in race- and ethnicity-based discrimination in hiring and promotion decisions. Sociological studies conducted in several major cities suggest that employers often evaluate soft skills based on racial stereotypes and other subjective screening criteria that are vulnerable to personal and social biases, especially against African American men (26; 47; 59; 60). African American men are at a particular disadvantage during interviews, some researchers report, because their body language and communication skills

often do not meet employer expectations regarding politeness, indications of motivation, or enthusiasm (47).

Workplace Practices

While employers do consider measurable skills when ranking workers in the job queue, workers with equivalent skills do not necessarily have equal opportunities to be hired and promoted. Stereotyping, discrimination, cronyism, and informal hiring networks all affect employment outcomes and contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in the labor market. Discrimination in hiring is particularly hard to measure; however, studies based on self-report and on objective audit techniques have helped sociologists evaluate how bias results in workplace disparities.

Personal and social biases often color employer expectations of on-the-job performance. For example, employers might exaggerate average differences between the skills of whites and African Americans because of their own tendencies to stereotype by race (18). Studies show that African American men from inner city neighborhoods are especially vulnerable to such biases and the effects that negative media reports about African American communities have on employers (26; 41; 48; 58; 59).

Audit studies[3] have found that African American men with identical qualifications as white men are denied job opportunities in a significant portion of test cases (27) and that Hispanics with better credentials than whites are significantly less likely to move beyond their initial inquiries when applying both by telephone and (to a lesser extent) by mail. Audit studies also have shown that hiring discrimination occurs more often in central cities, and for jobs in sales and service industries, than for positions requiring a college education (5).

Beyond discrimination by employers, less overt processes and widely accepted workplace practices, including "cronyism" and "business as usual," also contribute to unequal access to employment and advancement opportunities for minority job seekers (70). Access to desirable jobs can be constrained by limited professional networks, racially segregated social circles, and new groups of job seekers possessing less information about job openings, especially when employers rely on informal workplace and social networks to recruit new workers (65; 21; 70; 62).

Methods of job recruitment have a significant effect on who applies for and who gets a job. Word of mouth recruiting — where employers ask for recommendations from their current workers or from other employers, or from members of their social networks — is the most prevalent form of filling jobs (70) and tends to reinforce the racial, ethnic, and gender composition of the workforce. Formal job advertisements in newspapers often fail to attract minority job seekers because the publications are primarily circulated in predominantly white suburbs (89).

Research has shown that race and ethnicity can also influence chances for promotion because most high-level managers are white men who feel most comfortable with those like themselves (56). Indirect barriers to promotion for minorities include limited opportunities for mentoring relationships and fewer or less effective training opportunities, as well as employer and supervisor bias in evaluation procedures. The 1995 Glass Ceiling Commission report (31) cited one study in which

3 According to Benedick et al. (1992), discrimination in hiring is particularly difficult to detect and measure. Job applicants who are told that vacancies have been filled generally cannot check whether this is true. Statistical outcomes are often faulted for not demonstrating a motivation to discriminate. Employment testing or employment auditing is an alternative technique for measuring discrimination. Two job candidates (one White, one a member of a racial minority), who have been provided with similar résumés, both answer published job vacancies. If the White applicant is treated more favorably than her/his paired partner, the differential treatment is considered a direct measure of discrimination.

supervisors rated African American managers in a high-prestige firm significantly lower in potential for promotion and overall corporate "fit" than white managers who had matching personal and work profiles. One study noted that African American corporate executives have a sense of always being watched, like "strangers in a hostile territory" (1).

Job seekers and workers employ various strategies to secure and retain stable jobs, gain promotions, and improve their standing in the job queue. Tactics include improving education and skills, using personal contacts and networks, creating ethnic niches, and collective bargaining. Some of these approaches aggravate existing racial and ethnic inequalities in the workplace. For example, young, white job seekers benefit the most from family history and social connections, which give them access to employment networks and more prestigious jobs (21; 63; 65). Research shows that whites more often identify employment opportunities through referrals from relatives, friends, and employment agencies, avenues more likely to produce higher-paying positions, while African Americans tend to pursue jobs by directly visiting prospective employers and submitting applications, a practice associated more often with lower-paying positions (26; 38).

Public Policy and Affirmative Action

Some federal policies have maintained or increased racial and ethnic disparities in the workplace, while others have helped to equalize opportunities. The post-World War II "GI bill" gave white men a competitive advantage over African American men in the workforce (76). Significant reform of welfare programs in 1996 may have raised barriers to meaningful employment for workers at the bottom of the job queue, who are disproportionately people of color, according to a growing body of sociological research (7; 74; 76; 34; 68; 13; 33). Affirmative action policies represented a government effort to reduce the effects of embedded discrimination in the workplace by opening doors of opportunity to groups previously disadvantaged by biased recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices. When adequately enforced, research indicates, affirmative action is an effective tool for equalizing opportunities in the labor market (70). Without these policies, social networks and connections would prevail, diminishing hiring and advancement chances for racial minorities and for whites at the lower end of the job queue (70).

Conclusion

The labor market is neither race neutral nor color blind, despite laws that prohibit deliberate discrimination. Workers are concentrated by race and ethnicity among industries and occupations, work arrangements and positions, and pay levels. Statistical data and sociological research suggest that not everyone who is qualified has an equal opportunity to work in a wide range of fields and positions.

Differences in education, experience, and skills explain some, but not all, labor market disparities. In fact, employer biases (individual, organizational, and social), informal decision-making processes, and systemic inequalities make race and ethnicity significant factors in determining workplace opportunities. The fundamental restructuring of the U.S. economy in the late twentieth century left the labor market even more vulnerable to discrimination that affects outcomes for workers all along the job queue.

Informal recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices will continue to have discriminatory consequences, absent conscious policies, such as affirmative action, and behavioral change that promote workplace equality. In addition, programs to reduce welfare dependence and move recipients into the workforce must also ensure more low-skilled jobs and opportunities for advancement through training, in order to address the relative lack of education and skills among young Hispanic and African American women.•

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