WHAT WILL YOU LEARN?

- What Are the Issues in Education?
- What Does the Economic Picture Look Like?
- How Is Family Life?
- Why the Housing Gap?
- What Are the Concerns about the Criminal Justice System?
- Why the Health Care Dilemma?
- Will Political Momentum Continue?
African Americans have made significant progress in many areas, but they have not kept pace with White Americans in many sectors. African Americans have advanced in formal schooling to a remarkable degree, although in most areas residential patterns have left many public schools predominantly Black or White. Higher education also reflects the legacy of a nation that has operated two schooling systems: one for Blacks and another for Whites. Gains in earning power have barely kept pace with inflation, and the gap between Whites and Blacks has remained largely unchanged. African American families are susceptible to the problems associated with a low-income group that also faces discrimination and prejudice. Housing in many areas remains segregated, despite growing numbers of Blacks in suburban areas. African Americans are more likely to be victims of crimes and to be arrested for violent crimes. The subordination of Blacks is also apparent in healthcare delivery. African Americans have made substantial gains in elective office but still are underrepresented compared with their numbers in the general population.
John and Glenn are alike in almost every way: about the same age, Big Ten college graduates, similar jobs, and active sports enthusiasts. But they find that they have very dissimilar experiences in such everyday activities as walking into a shopping mall to buy shoes or looking over the latest CDs. John typically receives instant attention when he walks even near the shoe department, but the same salesperson fails to acknowledge Glenn even though he has been waiting five minutes. A little later John casually picks up some CDs in a record store. At the very same time, Glenn is engaged in exactly the same behavior in the same store, but he is closely shadowed by a store employee, who observes Glenn’s every move.

John is White and Glenn is Black, which makes all the difference even in this everyday shopping behavior. They were part of an experiment conducted in St. Louis by the television newsmagazine *Primetime Live* to assess the impact of race on the day-to-day lives of average African Americans and Whites. Over a period of three weeks, the program closely monitored the two researchers, who had been trained to present themselves in an identical manner in a variety of situations.

In a televised report on this experiment, *Primetime Live* host Diane Sawyer acknowledged that, at times, the two men were treated equally. However, Sawyer added that not once or twice but “every single day,” there were instances of differential treatment. At an employment agency, Glenn was lectured on laziness and told that he would be monitored “real close.” John, by contrast, was encouraged to pursue job leads, and staff members made it clear that he could expect to find a suitable position (ABC News 1992).

Race is socially constructed, but that does not mean that being Black does not have consequences and being White carries privileges. Despite the publicity given to obvious discrimination that has persisted well into the present, a superficial sense of complacency about the position of African Americans in the United States exists now in the twenty-first century.

As you read this chapter, try to keep in perspective the profile of African Americans in the United States today. This chapter assesses education, the economy, family life, housing, criminal justice, healthcare, and politics among the nation’s African Americans. Progress has occurred, and some of the advances are nothing short of remarkable. The deprivation of the African American people relative to Whites remains, however, even if absolute deprivation has been softened. A significant gap remains between African Americans and the dominant group, and to this gap a price is assigned: the price of being African American in the United States.

**Education**

The African American population in the United States has placed special importance on acquiring education, beginning with its emphasis in the home of the slave family and continuing through the creation of separate schools for Black children because the public schools were closed to them by custom or law. Today, long after the old civil rights coalition has disbanded, education remains a controversial issue. Because racial and ethnic groups realize that formal schooling is the key to social mobility, they want to maximize this opportunity for upward mobility and, therefore, want better schooling. White Americans also appreciate the value of formal schooling and do not want to do anything that they perceive will jeopardize their own position.

Several measures document the inadequate education received by African Americans, starting with the quantity of formal education. The gap in educational attainment between Blacks as a group and Whites as a group has always been present. Despite programs directed at the poor, such as Head Start, White children are still more likely to have formal prekindergarten education than are African American children. Later, Black children generally drop out of school sooner and, therefore, are less likely to receive high
school diplomas, let alone college degrees. The gap in receiving college degrees has been reduced in recent years, as shown in Figure 8.1. Despite this progress, however, the gap remains substantial, with the proportion of Blacks holding a college degree in 2010 about what it was for Whites in the early 1980s.

Proposals to improve educational opportunities often argue for more adequate funding. Yet there are disagreements over what changes would lead to the best outcome. For example, there is significant debate among educators and African Americans in general over the content of curriculum that is best for minority students. Some schools have developed academic programs that take an Afrocentric perspective and immerse students in African American history and culture. Yet a few of these programs have been targeted as ignoring fundamentals. On other occasions, the Afrocentric curriculum has even been viewed as racist against Whites. The debates over a few controversial programs attract a lot of attention, clouding the widespread need to reassess the curriculum for racial and ethnic minorities.

Middle- and upper-class children occasionally face these barriers to a high-quality education, but they are more likely than the poor to have a home environment that is favorable to learning. Even African American schoolchildren who stay in school are not guaranteed equal opportunities in life. Many high schools do not prepare students who are interested in college for advanced schooling. The problem is that schools are failing to meet the needs of students, not that students are failing in school. Therefore, the problems with schooling were properly noted as a part of the past discrimination component of total discrimination illustrated in Figure 3.1 on page 62.

**School Segregation**

It has been more than 50 years since the U.S. Supreme Court issued its unanimous ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* that separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. What has been the legacy of that decision? Initially, the courts, with the support of the federal government, ordered Southern school districts to end racial separation. But as attention turned to larger school districts, especially in the North, the challenge was to have integrated schools even though the neighborhoods were segregated. In addition, some city school districts were predominantly African American and Hispanic, surrounded by suburban school districts that were predominantly White. This type of school segregation, which results from residential patterns, is called **de facto segregation**.

Initially, courts sought to overcome de facto segregation just as they had de jure school segregation in the *Brown* case. Typically, students were bused within a school district to achieve racial balance, but in a few cases Black students were bused to predominantly White suburban schools and White children were bused into the city. In 1974, however, the Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* that it was improper to order Detroit and the suburbs to have a joint metropolitan busing solution. These and other Supreme Court decisions have effectively ended initiatives to overcome residential segregation, once again creating racial isolation in the schools. Indeed, even in Topeka, one-third of the schools are segregated (Orfield et al. 1996).
School segregation has been so enduring that the term *apartheid schools* has been coined to refer to schools that are all Black. An analysis released in 2003 by the Civil Rights Project of Harvard University documented that one in six of the nation’s Black students attends an *apartheid school*, and this proportion rose to one out of four in the Northeast and Midwest. If there has been any trend, it is that the typical African American student was less likely to have White classmates in 2010 than in 1970 (Frankenberg et al. 2003; Tefera et al. 2010).

Although studies have shown positive effects of integration, a diverse student population does not guarantee an integrated, equal schooling environment. For example, *tracking* in schools, especially middle and high schools, intensifies segregation at the classroom level. Tracking is the practice of placing students in specific curriculum groups on the basis of test scores and other criteria. It also has the effect of decreasing White–Black classroom interaction as African American children are disproportionately assigned to general classes, and more White children are placed in college-preparatory classes. For example, in 2009 at an elementary school in suburban Montgomery County, Maryland, the school’s faculty, which is nearly 75 percent White, identified the percent of the student body, which is about 64 percent White, likely to be considered “gifted and talented”: Forty-nine percent of White students and 67 percent of Asian students were so identified, compared to less than 8 percent of Latino students and less than 4 percent of African American children. Studies indicate that African American students are more likely than White students to be classified as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed. Although there are successes in public education, integration clearly is not one of them (Ellison 2008; K. Thompson 2010).

### Acting White, Acting Black, or Neither

A common view advanced by some educators is that the reason African Americans, especially males, do not succeed in school is that they do not want to be caught “*acting White.*” That is, they avoid at all costs taking school seriously and do not accept the authority of teachers and administrators. Whatever the accuracy of such a generalization, acting White clearly shifts the responsibility of low school attainment from the school to the individual and, therefore, can be seen as yet another example of blaming the victim. Acting White is also associated with speaking proper English or cultural preferences like listening to rock music rather than hip-hop (Ferguson 2007; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fryer 2006; Ogbu 2004; Ogbu with Davis 2003).

To what extent do Blacks not want to act White in the context of high achievers? Many scholars have noted that individuals’ efforts to avoid looking like they want an education has a long history and is hardly exclusive to any one race. Students of all colors may hold back for fear of being accused of “too hardworking.”

Back in the 1950s, one heard disparaging references to “teacher’s pet” and “brown nosing.” Does popularity come to high school debaters and National Honor Society students or to cheerleaders and athletes? Academic-oriented classmates are often viewed as social misfits, nerds, and geeks and are seen as socially inept even if their skill building will later make them more economically independent and often more socially desirable. For minority children, including African Americans, to take school seriously means they must overcome their White classmates’ same desire to be cool and not a nerd. In addition, Black youth must also come to embrace a curriculum and respect teachers who are much less likely to look or sound like them (Chang and Demyan 2007; Ferguson 2007; Tyson et al. 2005).
The acting-White thesis overemphasizes personal responsibility rather than structural features such as quality of schools, curriculum, and teachers. Therefore, it locates the source of Black miseducation—and by implication, the remedy—in the African American household. As scholar Michael Dyson (2005) observes, “When you think the problems are personal, you think the solutions are the same.” If we could only get African American parents to encourage their children to work a little harder and act better (i.e., White), everything would be fine. As Dyson notes, “It’s hard to argue against any of these things in the abstract; in principle such suggestions sound just fine.”

Of course, not all Whites act White. To equate acting White with high academic achievement has little empirical or cultural support. Although more Whites between ages 18 and 19 are in school, the differences are nearly 10 percent—67 percent of Whites compared to 58 percent of Blacks. Studies comparing attitudes and performance show that Black students have the same attitudes—good and bad—about achievement as their White counterparts. Too often we tend to view White slackers who give a hard time to the advanced placement kids as “normal,” but when low-performing African Americans do the same thing, it becomes a systemic pathology undermining everything good about schools. The primary stumbling block is not acting White or acting Black but being presented with similar educational opportunities (Bureau of the Census 2010a:Table 220; Downey 2008; Tough 2004; Tyson et al. 2005).

Higher Education

Higher education for Blacks reflects the same pattern: the overall picture of African American higher education is not promising. Although strides were made in the period after the civil rights movement, a plateau was reached in the mid-1970s. African Americans are more likely than Whites to be part-time students and to need financial aid, which began to be severely cut in the 1980s. They are also finding the social climate on predominantly White campuses less than positive. As a result, the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are once again playing a significant role in educating African Americans. For a century, they were the only real source of college degrees for Blacks. Then, in the 1970s, predominantly White colleges began to recruit African Americans. As of 2010, however, the 105 HBCUs still accounted for about one-fifth of all Black college graduates (National Center for Educational Statistics 2011:Tables 250, 297).

As shown in Figure 8.1, although African Americans are more likely today to be college graduates, the upward trend in the 1970s and 1980s has moderated. Several factors account for this reversal in progress:

1. Reductions in financial aid and more reliance on loans than on grants-in-aid, coupled with rising costs, have tended to discourage students who would be the first members of their families to attend college.
2. Pushing for higher standards in educational achievement without providing remedial courses has locked out many minority students.
3. Employment opportunities, though slight for African Americans without some college, have continued to lure young people who must contribute to their family’s income and who otherwise might have gone to college.
4. Negative publicity about affirmative action may have discouraged some African Americans from even considering college.
5. Attention to what appears to be a growing number of racial incidents on predominantly White college campuses has also been a discouraging factor.

Colleges and universities seem uneasy about these problems; publicly, the schools appear committed to addressing them.

There is little question that special challenges face the African American student at a college with an overwhelmingly White student body, faculty, advisors, coaches, and administrators. The campus culture may be neutral at best, and it is often hostile to members
of racial minorities. The high attrition rate of African American students on predominantly White college campuses confirms the need for a positive environment.

The disparity in schooling becomes even more pronounced at the highest levels, and the gap is not closing. Only 6.1 percent of all doctorates awarded in 2008 were to native-born African Americans, reflecting a modest increase from 3.9 percent in 1981 (Bureau of the Census 2010a:Table 296).

In summary, the picture of education for Black Americans is uneven—marked progress in absolute terms (much better educated than a generation ago), but relative to Whites the gap in educational attainment remains at all levels. Sixty years ago, the major issue appeared to be school desegregation, but the goal was to improve the quality of education received by Black schoolchildren. Today, the concerns of African American parents and most educators are similar—quality education. W. E. B. Du Bois advanced the same point in 1935—that what a Black student needs “is neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education” (p. 335).

The Economic Picture

The general economic picture for African Americans has been gradual improvement over the last 50 years, but this improvement is modest compared with that of Whites, whose standard of living has also increased. Therefore, in terms of absolute deprivation, African Americans are much better off today but have experienced much less significant improvement with respect to their relative deprivation to Whites on almost all economic indicators. We consider income and wealth, employment, and African American–owned businesses.

Income and Wealth

There are two useful measures of the overall economic situation of an individual or household: income and wealth. Income refers to salaries, wages, and other money received; wealth is a more inclusive term that encompasses all of a person’s material assets, including land and other types of property.

There is a significant gap between the incomes of Black and White households in the United States. As we saw in Figure 7.4 on page 190, Black income has been increasing steadily, but so has that of Whites. In 2009, the median income of Black households was $32,584, compared with $54,461 for White non-Hispanic households. Another way to consider the gap is that Black income today resembles that of Whites more than 10 years ago. This lag has been present since World War II. In Figure 8.2, we look at the overall distribution of Black and White household income. Even a casual glance at the figure will show very different income profiles for Blacks and Whites today.

The underside of the income picture is people trapped in poverty. In 2009, 25.8 percent of Black people lived below the poverty level, compared with 9.4 percent of White non-Hispanics. Low incomes are counterbalanced to some extent by Medicare, Medicaid, public assistance, and food stamps. However, that an African American family is three times more likely to be poor shows that social inequality is staggering (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010, 15; G. Wilson 2007).

Wealth is more difficult to measure because it takes more effort to determine accurately how much people own and owe, as opposed to how much they earn in a given year. Yet wealth is very important in that it protects individuals against financial hardship and may offer a way to pass money or property to future generations, giving them a good start.
On the other hand, the lack of wealth or even the presence of debt can place young people at a severe disadvantage as they seek to become independent.

The wealth picture in the United States shows even greater disparity between Whites and Blacks than does income. African American households have less to fall back upon, which, given their greater likelihood to need reserves, makes the contemporary picture even more bleak. Across all asset categories, Blacks typically have less, but this is particularly true in the ability to own a home, most people’s biggest asset.

The inability of many Blacks to own a home and develop this asset results not only from lower incomes but also from discriminatory lending practices, which we consider later in this chapter. Of course, there are poor Whites and very rich Blacks, but the group differences that the researchers documented are unmistakable. The recent housing crisis and the crackdown on mortgage lending has only made the situation even worse (Shapiro et al. 2010).

As shown in Figure 8.3, White assets typically are 13 times greater than the typical Black household. Besides being much less likely to own homes, Blacks are less likely to have savings accounts, mutual funds, own a business, or own a car (Kent 2010; Wright 2009).

**Employment**

This precarious situation for African Americans—the lack of dependable assets—is particularly relevant as we consider their employment picture. Higher unemployment rates for Blacks have persisted since the 1940s, when statistics were first documented. Even in the best economic times, the Black unemployment rate is still significantly higher than it is for Whites. In 2011, as the United States slowly emerged from the recession, the Black unemployment rate stood at 15.5 percent compared to 7.9 percent for Whites. Considerable evidence exists that Blacks are first fired as the business cycle weakens (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011a; Couch and Fairlie 2010).

The employment picture is especially grim for African American workers aged 16 to 24. During the height of the recent recession, Black males aged 16–24, unemployment hit 35 percent—equivalent to the national unemployment rate during the darkest period of the Great Depression. Many live in the central cities and fall victim to the unrecorded, irregular—perhaps illegal—economy outlined in Chapter 3. Many factors have been cited by social scientists to explain why official unemployment rates for young African Americans is so high:

- Many African Americans live in the depressed economy of the central cities.
- Immigrants and illegal aliens present increased competition.

**FIGURE 8.2**

Income Gap: Black versus White

Note: Income data for 2009 were reported in 2010, and these data are for White non-Hispanics.

Source: DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010:Table HINC-01.

**FIGURE 8.3**

Wealth Gap: Black versus White

Note: The wealth data for 2004 were reported in 2010.

Source: Bureau of Census data reported in Kent 2010.
White middle-class women have entered the labor force.

Illegal activities at which youths find they can make more money have become more prevalent.

None of these factors is likely to change soon, so depression-like levels of unemployment probably will persist (Haynes 2009).

The picture grows even more somber when we realize that we are considering only official unemployment. The federal government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics counts as unemployed only people who are actively seeking employment. Therefore, to be counted as unemployed, a person must not hold a full-time job, must be registered with a government employment agency, and must be engaged in submitting job applications and seeking interviews.

Quite simply, the official unemployment rate leaves out millions of Americans, Black and White, who are effectively unemployed. It does not count people so discouraged that they have temporarily given up looking for employment. The problem of unemployment is further compounded by underemployment, or working at a job for which one...

One of the most notable accomplishments of liberalism over the past 20 years is something that didn’t happen: the demise of affirmative action. Contrary to all predictions, affirmative action has survived. This is a triumph not only for race relations but also for the liberal vision of an inclusive society with full opportunity for all.

Conservatives charged that affirmative action amounts to “reverse racism”; discriminates against “innocent whites”; stigmatizes its putative beneficiaries; erodes the incentives that prompt individuals to put forth their best efforts; lowers standards; produces inefficiencies; goes to those racial minorities who need it least; and generates racial resentments. This indictment and the backlash it rationalized resonated not only with Republicans but also with Democrats, some of whom shared the conservatives’ philosophical objections to the policy, while others worried that supporting it meant electoral suicide.

Writing in The Audacity of Hope, he did not expressly condemn affirmative action, but he did consign it to a category of exhausted programs that “dissect[s] Americans into ‘us’ and ‘them’” and that “can’t serve as the basis for the kinds of sustained, broad-based political coalitions needed to transform America.” As president, Obama has repeatedly eschewed race targeting (with respect most notably to employment policy) in favor of “universal” reforms that allegedly lift all boats.

Over the years, affirmative action has been truncated by judicial rulings and banned by voters in some states. In one guise or another, however, special efforts to assist marginalized racial minorities remain a major force in many schools and firms,
is overqualified, involuntarily working part time instead of full time, or being employed only intermittently.

Although a few African Americans have crashed through the glass ceiling and made it into the top echelons of business or government, more have entered a wider variety of jobs. As shown in Table 8.1, African Americans, who constitute 12.4 percent of the population, are underrepresented in high-status, high-paying occupations. The taboo against putting Blacks in jobs in which they would supervise Whites has weakened, and the percentage of African Americans in professional and managerial occupations rose from 4 percent in 1949 to 11 percent in 2009, a remarkable improvement. However, most of this advancement came before 1980. Little advancement has occurred since then.

Not surprisingly, many scholars of labor force patterns still make a case for affirmative action even if few, if any, political leaders are likely to publicly endorse the policy. Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy makes the case for there still being an aggressive program of affirmative action.

Foundations, and governments. Affirmative action survived principally because many rightly believe what President Bill Clinton declared on July 19, 1995, in what is (thus far) the only presidential address wholly devoted to the subject: “Affirmative action has been good for America.” Clinton argued that ongoing injuries of past racial wrongs require redress; that affirmative action can usefully serve to prevent new invidious discrimination that is difficult, if not impossible, to reach through litigation; that the adverse consequences of affirmative action on whites are often grossly exaggerated and can easily be minimized; and that better learning and decision making arise in environments that are racially diverse.

The amorphous and malleable idea of “diversity” provided much needed buoyancy to affirmative action, especially in the 2003 University of Michigan affirmative-action cases when 65 major companies, including American Express, Coca Cola, and Microsoft, asserted that maintaining racial diversity in institutions of higher education is vital to their efforts to hire and maintain a diverse workforce. A group of former high-ranking officers and civilian leaders of the military concurred, declaring that “a highly qualified, racially diverse officer corps...is essential to the military’s ability to fulfill its principal mission to provide national security.” Even Theodore Olson, the Bush administration’s solicitor general, took pains to defer to “diversity” in a brief on the case.

Liberals have been key supporters of the modern struggle for racial equality. Affirmative action is both a major strategy and central accomplishment of that struggle. Its status is paradoxical. The election of the first African American president represents a coming of age of the “affirmative-action babies,” but the right has so successfully villified the policy that Obama is embarrassed by it. He has yet to say forthrightly what Bill Clinton aptly declared: Affirmative action is good for America.

This observation is not necessarily a criticism of Obama. The president should be pragmatic. If quietude about affirmative action serves its purposes or is essential to him retaining office, then by all means he should remain quiet. Fortunately, though, Obama’s acts and omissions, justifiable or not, will not prove decisive. The true measure of affirmative action’s staying power is that its absence now is virtually inconceivable.

Source: Kennedy 2010:31–33.
Family Life

In its role as a social institution providing for the socialization of children, the family is crucial to its members’ life satisfaction. The family also reflects the influence, positive or negative, of income, housing, education, and other social factors. For African Americans, the family reflects both amazing stability and the legacy of racism and low income across many generations.

Challenges to Family Stability

Although it is the conventional view that a female heads the typical African American family, most children are still in two-parent households. More than one-third of African American children had both a father and a mother present in 2010 (see Figure 8.4). Ninety-one percent of Black children live with at least one biological parent compared to 95 percent of White non-Hispanic children. Although single-parent African American

![Figure 8.4](https://example.com/figure8.4.png)
families are common, they are not universal. In comparison, such single-parent arrange-
ments were also present in for about one in five White children.

It is as inaccurate to assume that a single-parent family is necessarily deprived as it is to
assume that a two-parent family is always secure and happy. Nevertheless, life in a single-
parent family can be extremely stressful for all single parents and their children and
not just for those who are members of subordinate groups. Because the absent parent is
more often the father, the lack of a male presence almost always means the lack of a male
income. This monetary impact on a single-parent household cannot be overstated.

For many single African American women living in poverty, having a child is an added
burden. However, the tradition of extended family among African Americans eases this
burden somewhat. The absence of a husband does not mean that no one shares in child-
care: out-of-wedlock children born to Black teenage mothers live with their grandparents
and form three-generation households.

No one explanation accounts for the rise in single-parent households. Sociologists
attribute the rapid expansion in the number of such households primarily to shifts in the
economy that have kept Black men, especially in urban areas, out of work. The phenom-
emon certainly is not limited to African Americans. Increasingly, both unmarried White
and Black women bear children. More and more parents, both White and Black, divorce,
so even children born into a two-parent family might end up living with only one parent.

**Strengths of African American Families**

In the midst of ever-increasing single parenting, another picture of African American
family life becomes visible: success despite discrimination and economic hardship. Robert
Hill (1999), of the National Urban League and Morgan State University, listed the follow-
ing five strengths of African American families that allow them to function effectively in
a hostile (racist) society.

1. **Strong kinship bonds:** Blacks are more likely than Whites to care for children and
   the elderly in an extended family network.

2. **A strong work orientation:** poor Blacks are more likely to be working, and poor Black
   families often include more than one wage earner.

3. **Adaptability of family roles:** in two-parent families, the egalitarian pattern of deci-
   sion making is the most common. The self-reliance of Black women who are the
   primary wage earners best illustrates this adaptability.

4. **Strong achievement orientation:** working-class Blacks indicate a greater desire for
   their children to attend college than do working-class Whites. Even a majority of
   low-income African Americans want to attend college.

5. **A strong religious orientation:** since the time of slavery, Black churches have been the
   impetus behind many significant grassroots organizations.

Social workers and sociologists have confirmed through social research the strengths
that Hill noted first in 1972. In the African American community, these are the sources of
family strength (Hudgins 1992).

Increasingly, social scientists are learning to look at both the weaknesses and the
strengths of African American family life. Expressions of alarm about instability date back
to 1965, when the Department of Labor issued the report *The Negro Family: The Case for
National Action*. The document, commonly known as the Moynihan Report, after its prin-
cipal author, sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, outlined a “tangle of pathology” with the
Black family at its core. More recently, two studies—the Stable Black Families Project and
the National Survey of Black Americans—sought to learn how Black families encounter
problems and resolve them successfully with internal resources such as those that Hill out-
lined in his highly regarded work (Department of Labor 1965; Massey and Sampson 2009).

The most consistently documented strength of African American families is the pres-
ence of an extended family household. The most common feature is having grandparents
residing in the home. Extended living arrangements are much more common among
Black households than among White ones. These arrangements are recognized as having the important economic benefit of pooling limited economic resources. Because of the generally lower earnings of African American heads of household, income from second, third, and even fourth wage earners is needed to achieve a desired standard of living or, in all too many cases, simply to meet daily needs (Haxton and Harknett 2009).

The African American Middle Class

Many characterizations of African American family life have been attacked because they overemphasize the poorest segment of the African American community. An opposite error is the exaggeration of the success African Americans have achieved. Social scientists face the challenge of avoiding a selective, one-sided picture of Black society. The problem is similar to viewing a partially filled glass of water. Does one describe it as half empty and emphasize the need for assistance? Or does one describe the glass as half full to give attention to what has been accomplished? The most complete description would acknowledge both perspectives.

A clearly defined African American middle class has emerged. In 2009, about 28 percent of African Americans earned more than the median income for White non-Hispanics. At least about one-quarter of Blacks, then, are middle class or higher. Many observers have debated the character of this middle class. E. Franklin Frazier (1957), a Black sociologist, wrote an often-critical study of the African American middle class in which he identified its overriding goal as achieving petty social values and becoming acceptable to White society (DeNavas-Walt et al. 2010:Table PINC-03).

Directing attention to the Black middle class also requires that we consider the relative importance of race and social class. The degree to which affluent Blacks identify themselves in class terms or racial terms is an important ideological question. W. E. B. Du Bois (1952) argued that when racism decreases, class issues become more important. As Du Bois saw it, exploitation would remain, and many of the same people would continue to be subordinate. Black elites might become economically successful, either as entrepreneurs (Black capitalists) or professionals (Black white-collar workers), but they would continue to identify with and serve the dominant group’s interest.

Social scientists have long recognized the importance of class. Class is a term used by sociologist Max Weber to refer to people who share similar levels of wealth and income. The significance of class in people’s lives is apparent to all. In the United States today, roughly half of the lower-class population suffers from chronic health conditions that limit their activity, compared with only one in 11 among the affluent. The poor are more likely to become victims of crime, and they are only about half as likely as the affluent to send their children...
to colleges or vocational schools. When considering class difference, remarkable similarities exist in childrearing practices between Black and White households (Lareau 2002).

The complexity of the relative influence of race and class was apparent in the controversy surrounding the publication of sociologist William J. Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race* (1980). Pointing to the increasing affluence of African Americans, Wilson concluded that “class has become more important than race in determining black life chances in the modern world” (p. 150). The policy implications of his conclusion are that programs must be developed to confront class subordination rather than ethnic and racial discrimination. Wilson did not deny the legacy of discrimination reflected in the disproportionate number of African Americans who are poor, less educated, and living in inadequate and overcrowded housing. However, he pointed to “compelling evidence” that young Blacks were competing successfully with young Whites.

Early critics of Wilson comment that focusing attention on this small, educated elite ignores vast numbers of African Americans relegated to the lower class (Pinkney 1984; Willie 1978, 1979). Wilson himself was not guilty of such an oversimplification and indeed expressed concern over the plight of lower-class, inner-city African Americans as they seemingly fall even further behind, like those who become a part of the irregular economy discussed in Chapter 3. He pointed out that the poor are socially isolated and have shrinking economic opportunities (1988, 1996). However, it is easy to conclude superficially that because educated Blacks are entering the middle class, race has ceased to be of concern.

### Housing

Housing plays a major role in determining the quality of a person’s life. For African Americans, as for Whites, housing is the result of personal preferences and income. However, African Americans differ from Whites in that their housing has been restricted through discrimination in a manner that it has not for Whites. We devote significant attention to housing because, for most people, housing is critical to their quality of life and often represents their largest single asset.

Although Black housing has improved—as indicated by statistics on home ownership, new construction, density of living units, and quality as measured by plumbing facilities—African Americans remain behind Whites on all these standards. The quality of Black housing is inferior to that of Whites at all income levels, yet Blacks pay out a larger proportion of their income for shelter.

### Residential Segregation

Typically in the United States, as noted, White children attend predominantly White schools, Black children attend predominantly Black schools, and Hispanic children attend predominantly Hispanic schools. This school segregation is not only the result of the failure to accept busing but also the effect of residential segregation. In their studies on segregation, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) concluded that racial separation “continues to exist because white America has not had the political will or desire to dismantle it” (p. 8). In Chapter 1, we noted the pervasiveness of residential segregation as reflected in Census 2000 (refer back to Figure 1.5). This racial isolation in neighborhoods has not improved since the beginnings of the civil rights movement in the 1950s (Massey 2008).

What factors create residential segregation in the United States? Among the primary factors are the following:

- Because of private prejudice and discrimination, people refuse to sell or rent to people of the “wrong” race, ethnicity, or religion.
- The prejudicial policies of real estate companies steer people to the “correct” neighborhoods.
Government policies enforce antibias legislation ineffectively.

Public housing policies today, as well as past construction patterns, reinforce housing for the poor in inner-city neighborhoods.

Policies of banks and other lenders create barriers based on race to financing home purchasing.

This last issue of racial-basis financing deserves further explanation. In the 1990s, new attention was given to the persistence of redlining, the practice of discrimination against people trying to buy homes in minority and racially changing neighborhoods. As we noticed in Listen to Our Voices in Chapter 3, Patricia Williams eloquently spoke about her being a victim of discrimination in housing lending practices.

It is important to recall the implications of this discrimination in home financing for the African American community. Earlier in the chapter, we noted the great disparity between Black and White family wealth and the implications this had for both the present and future generations. The key factor in this inequality was the failure of African Americans to accumulate wealth through home buying.

A dual housing market is part of today’s reality, although attacks continue against the remaining legal barriers to fair housing. In theory, zoning laws are enacted to ensure that specific standards of housing construction will be satisfied. These regulations can also separate industrial and commercial enterprises from residential areas. However, some zoning laws in suburbs have seemed to curb the development of low- and moderate-income housing that would attract African Americans who want to move out of the central cities.

For years, the construction of low-income public housing in the ghetto has furthered racial segregation. The courts have not ruled consistently in this matter in recent years so, as with affirmative action, public officials lack clear guidance. Even if court decisions continue to dismantle exclusionary housing practices, the rapid growth of integrated neighborhoods is unlikely. In the future, African American housing probably will continue to improve and remain primarily in all-Black neighborhoods. This gap is greater than can be explained by differences in social class.

**Criminal Justice**

A complex, sensitive topic affecting African Americans is their role in criminal justice. It was reported in 2010 that Blacks constitute 4.7 percent of all lawyers, 14.1 percent of police officers, 14.9 percent of detectives, and 28.6 percent of security guards but 39 percent of jail inmates.

Data collected annually in the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report show that Blacks account for 28 percent of arrests, even though they represent only about 12 percent of the nation’s population. Conflict theorists point out that the higher arrest rate is not surprising for a group that is disproportionately poor and, therefore, much less able to afford private attorneys, who might be able to prevent formal arrests from taking place. Even more significantly, the Uniform Crime Report focuses on index crimes (mainly property crimes), which are the type of crimes most often committed by low-income people.

These numbers are staggering but, as dramatic as they are, it is not unusual to hear exaggerations presented as facts, such as “more Black men are in prison than in college.” The reality is sobering enough. About one in 16 White males can expect to go to a state or federal prison during his lifetime, yet for Black males this lifetime probability is one out of three (Bureau of the Census 2010a:Tables 320, 346, 615; Gaines 2005).

Most (actually 70 percent) of all the violent crimes against Whites are perpetrated by Whites, according to the FBI. In contrast to popular misconceptions about crime, African Americans and the poor are especially likely to be the victims of serious crimes. This fact is documented in victimization surveys, which are systematic interviews of ordinary people carried out annually to reveal how much crime occurs. These Department of Justice
statistics show that African Americans are 35 percent more likely to be victims of violent crimes than are Whites (Catalano 2006).

Central to the concern that minorities often express about the criminal justice system is **differential justice**—that is, Whites are dealt with more leniently than are Blacks, whether at the time of investigation, arrest, indictment, conviction, sentencing, incarceration, or parole. Studies demonstrate that police often deal with African American youths more harshly than with White youngsters. Law is a public social institution and in many ways reproduces the inequality experienced in life (Rosich 2007; Sandefur 2008).

There is also a reluctant acceptance that the government cannot be counted on to address inner-city problems. In crimes involving African Americans, scholars of the legal system have observed **victim discounting**, or the tendency to view crime as less socially significant if the victim is viewed as less worthy. For example, the numerous killings of Black youth going to and from school attract much less attention than a shooting spree that takes five lives in a suburban school. When a schoolchild walks into a cafeteria or schoolyard with automatic weapons and kills a dozen children and teachers, it becomes a case of national alarm, as with Columbine. When children kill each other in drive-by shootings, it is viewed as a local concern, reflecting the need to clean up a dysfunctional neighborhood. Many African Americans note that the main difference between these two situations is not the death toll but who is being killed: middle-class Whites in the schoolyard shootings and Black ghetto youth in the drive-bys.

**Healthcare**

The price of being an African American took on new importance with the release of a shocking study in a prestigious medical journal revealing that two-thirds of boys in Harlem, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New York City, can expect to die young or in mid-adulthood—that is, before they reach age 65. In fact, they have less chance of surviving even to age 45 than their White counterparts nationwide have of reaching age 65. The medical researchers noted that it is not the stereotyped images of AIDS and violence that explain the staggering difference. Black men are much more likely to fall victim to unrelenting stress, heart disease, and cancer (Fing et al. 1996).

The morbidity and mortality rates for African Americans as a group, and not just Harlem men, are equally distressing. Compared with Whites, Blacks have higher death rates from diseases of the heart, pneumonia, diabetes, and cancer. There are significant differences

---

**differential justice**
whites being dealt with more leniently than Blacks, whether at the time of arrest, indictment, conviction, sentencing, or parole

**victim discounting**
tendency to view crime as less socially significant if the victim is viewed as less worthy
among segments of the population with Whites living longer than Blacks. So, for example, among those born in 1994, at one extreme a White female could anticipate to live to 79.6 years while a Black male could expect a lifespan of 64.9 years—that is, equivalent to what White females could reasonably expect who were born in 1935 (Arias 2010:Table 12; Bureau of the Census 2010a:Table 102).

Drawing on the conflict perspective, sociologist Howard Waitzkin (1986) suggests that racial tensions contribute to the medical problems of African Americans. In his view, the stress resulting from racial prejudice and discrimination helps to explain the higher rates of hypertension found among African Americans (and Hispanics) than among Whites. Death resulting from hypertension is twice as common in Blacks as in Whites; it is believed to be a critical factor in Blacks’ high mortality rates from heart disease, kidney disease, and strokes.

Although medical experts disagree, some argue that the stress resulting from racism and suppressed hostility exacerbates hypertension among African Americans (Cooper et al. 1999; A. Green et al. 2007).

A very troubling history of how the medical establishment has treated African Americans in the United States continues to have implications for healthcare delivery today, as we consider in this chapter’s Research Focus, “Medical Apartheid.”

Related to the healthcare dilemma is the problem of environmental justice, which was introduced in Chapter 3 and again in Chapter 6 with reference to Native Americans. Problems associated with toxic pollution and hazardous garbage dumps are more likely to be faced by low-income Black communities than by their affluent counterparts. This disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards can be viewed as part of the complex cycle of discrimination faced by African Americans and other subordinate groups in the United States.

Just how significant is the impact of poorer health on the lives of the nation’s less-educated people, less-affluent classes, and subordinate groups? Drawing on a variety of research studies, population specialist Evelyn Kitagawa (1972) estimated the “excess mortality rate” to be 20 percent. In other words, 20 percent more people were dying than otherwise might have because of poor health linked to race and class. Using Kitagawa’s model, we can calculate that if every African American in the United States were White and had at least one year of college education, some 58,000 fewer Blacks would have died in 2012 and in each succeeding year (author’s estimate based on Bureau of the Census 2010a: Table 107).

Politics

Despite Barack Obama entering the White House as president in 2009, African Americans have not received an equal share of the political pie. After Reconstruction, it was not until 1928 that a Black was again elected to Congress. With Obama’s election to the presidency, there is once again no African American elected to the U.S. Senate. Recent years have brought some improvement. Now, more than 80 years and several civil rights acts later, there are 42 African American congressional representatives (Figure 8.5 on p. 214).
Obama’s electoral victory was impressive, and while not a landslide victory, his winning margin enjoyed widespread support. Expectedly, 95 percent of Black voters backed Obama, but he also had 66 percent of all voters under 30 and 69 percent of first-time voters were prepared to vote for the first African American president (Connelly 2008).

Yet there are major problems in the continued success of African American politicians. Locally elected Black officials find it difficult to make the jump to statewide office. Voters, particularly non-Black voters, have difficulty seeing Black politicians as anything other than representatives of the Black community and express concern that the views of Whites and other non-Blacks will not be represented by an African American.
The political gains by African Americans, as well as Hispanics, had been placed in jeopardy by legal actions that questioned race-based districts. Boundaries for elective office, ranging from city council positions to the U.S. House of Representatives, have been drawn in such a way so as to concentrate enough members of a racial or ethnic group to create a “safe majority” to make it likely a member of that group will get elected.

The creation of these minority districts redrawn in this manner raised cries of gerrymandering. A practice dating from 1810, gerrymandering is the bizarre outlining of districts to create politically advantageous outcomes. Although creating race-based districts may seem discriminatory, boundaries have routinely been drawn based on a commonality of interests, such as rural versus urban interests, or even to maximize the likelihood of electing a representative from a certain political party. For more than a decade, the legality of these actions has been debated; finally, in 2003, the Supreme Court ruled 5–4 that a state might consider overall minority influence in the political process. In Figure 8.6, we look at the admittedly bizarre shape of one congressional district (Bendavid 2004).

The changing racial and ethnic landscape can be expected to have an impact on future strategies to elect African Americans to office, especially in urban areas. However, now that the number of Hispanics exceeds the number of Blacks nationwide, observers wonder how this might play out in the political world. A growing number of major cities, including Los Angeles and Chicago, are witnessing dramatic growth in the Hispanic population. Latinos often settle near Black neighborhoods or even displace Blacks who move out into suburbs, making it more difficult to develop safe African American districts. For example, South Central Los Angeles, the site of rioting in 1992 described in the previous chapter, is now largely a Latino neighborhood. The full impact has not been felt yet because the Latino population tends to be younger, with many not yet reaching voting age. Even more significant, many Latino adults have not yet obtained their citizenship. As the Hispanic population becomes eligible to vote, the impact is going to be particularly felt by African Americans, who have just begun to enjoy success in local elections.

---

**FIGURE 8.5**

Black Elected Members of the House of Representatives, 1960–2012

*Note:* Excludes nonvoting representatives from the District of Columbia and U.S. Territories. Although the rate of increase has leveled off, the number of Black Americans to the House of Representatives has steadily increased over four decades. African Americans in the Senate has alternated between one or zero during the same period.


---

**FIGURE 8.6**

Developing a Minority District: North Carolina’s Twelfth

In areas with a history of keeping African Americans from voting, courts have approved oddly drawn districts to increase the likelihood of a Black being elected to office. The 12th congressional district in North Carolina zigzags along Interstate 85 from Charlotte to Winston-Salem to create a district that is 45 percent Black and has consistently elected a Black candidate to the U.S. House of Representatives.
Conclusion

Black and White Americans have dealt with the continued disparity between the two groups by endorsing several ideologies, as shown in the figure above. Assimilation was the driving force behind the civil rights movement, which sought to integrate Whites and Blacks into one society. People who rejected contact with the other group endorsed separatism. As Chapter 2 showed, both Whites and Blacks generally lent little support to separatism. In the late 1960s, the government and various Black organizations began to recognize cultural pluralism as a goal, at least paying lip service to the desire of many African Americans to exercise cultural and economic autonomy. Perhaps on no other issue is this desire for control more evident than in the schools.

Twice in this nation’s history, African Americans have received significant attention from the federal government and, to some degree, from the larger White society. The first period extended from the Civil War to the end of Reconstruction. The second period was during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In both periods, the government acknowledged that race was a major issue, and society made commitments to eliminate inequality. As noted in Chapter 7, Reconstruction was followed by decades of neglect, and on several measures the position of Blacks deteriorated in the United States. Although the 1980s and 1990s were not without their successes, race is clearly not a major issue on today’s national agenda. Even inner-city violence only diverts much of the nation’s attention for a few fleeting moments, whereas attacks on school integration and affirmative action persist.

The gains that have been made are substantial, but will the momentum continue? Improvement has occurred in a generation inspired and spurred on to bring about change. If the resolve to continue toward that goal lessens in the United States, then the picture may become bleaker, and the rate of positive change may decline further.

SPECTRUM OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPULSION</th>
<th>SEGREGATION</th>
<th>ASSIMILATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INCREASINGLY UNACCEPTABLE</td>
<td>MORE TOLERABLE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXTERMINATION or genocide</td>
<td>SECESSION or partitioning</td>
<td>FUSION or amalgamation or melting pot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim discounting</td>
<td>Ghettoes</td>
<td>Acting White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical experimentation</td>
<td>All-Black suburbs</td>
<td>Black electoral districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redlining</td>
<td>Zoning laws</td>
<td>Tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apartheid schools</td>
<td>De jure school segregation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What Do You Think?

Summary

1. African Americans have made gains in all levels of formal schooling but still fall behind the gains made by others. Debate continues over the appropriateness of the notion that Black youths avoid appearances of acting White.

2. Income and wealth disparities persist between Black and White Americans, with African Americans facing the challenge of accumulating assets.

3. Typically, Black Americans are underrepresented in high-wage, high-status occupations and overrepresented in low-wage, low-status occupations.

4. Family life among Black Americans has many identifiable strengths. A particular challenge faces the growing proportion of households that are moving into the middle class.

5. While de jure segregation has faded, residential segregation persists.

6. Blacks are more likely to be victims of crime as well as more likely to be arrested and imprisoned. Critics question whether minorities are subjected to differential justice.


8. Black Americans have made great strides in being elected to office but remain underrepresented nationally despite some districts being gerrymandered to their advantage.

Key Terms

acting White / 200 taking school seriously and accepting the authority of teachers and administrators.

apartheid schools / 200 all-Black schools.

class / 208 as defined by Max Weber, people who share similar levels of wealth.

de facto segregation / 199 segregation that is the result of residential patterns.

differential justice / 211 whites being dealt with more leniently than Blacks, whether at the time of arrest, indictment, conviction, sentencing, or parole.

gerrymandering / 214 redrawing districts bizarrely to create politically advantageous outcomes.

income / 202 salaries, wages, and other money received.

redlining / 210 the pattern of discrimination against people trying to buy homes in minority and racially changing neighborhoods.

tracking / 200 the practice of placing students in specific curriculum groups on the basis of test scores and other criteria.

underemployment / 204 working at a job for which the worker is overqualified, involuntary working part time instead of full time, or being intermittently employed.

victim discounting / 211 tendency to view crime as less socially significant if the victim is viewed as less worthy.

victimization surveys / 210 annual attempts to measure crime rates by interviewing ordinary citizens who may or may not have been crime victims.

wealth / 202 an inclusive term encompassing all of a person’s material assets, including land and other types of property.

zoning laws / 210 legal provisions stipulating land use and the architectural design of housing, often used to keep racial minorities and low-income people out of suburban areas.
Review Questions

1. To what degree have the civil rights movement initiatives in education been realized, or do they remain unmet?

2. What challenges face the African American middle class?

3. What are the biggest assets and problems facing African American families?

4. What are the similarities in the experiences of African Americans in the criminal justice and healthcare systems?

5. How is race-based gerrymandering related to affirmative action?

Critical Thinking

1. Without the comparison to John, Glenn might have taken the shoe salesperson to be merely incompetent at his job rather than purposefully avoiding selling to African Americans. Drawing on the case of John and Glenn, what are other types of situations in which people may be victims of discrimination but be unaware of it?

2. What has been the ethnic and racial composition of the neighborhoods you have lived in and the schools you have attended? Consider how the composition of one may have influenced the other. What steps would have been necessary to ensure more diversity?

3. How are the problems in crime, housing, and health interrelated?

MySocLab®

Watch. Explore. Read. MySocLab is designed just for you. Each chapter features a pre-test and post-test to help you learn and review key concepts and terms. Experience Racial and Ethnic Relations in action with dynamic visual activities, videos, and readings to enhance your learning experience.

Here are a few activities you will find for this chapter:

- **Watch on mysoclab.com** Video clips feature sociologists in action, exploring important concepts in the study of Ethnicity. Watch:
  - Education and Financial Success

- **Explore on mysoclab.com** Social Explorer is an interactive application that allows you to explore Census data through interactivemaps. Explore the Social Explorer Report:
  - Social Explorer Activity: Income Inequality by Race

- **Read on mysoclab.com** MySocLibrary includes primary source readings from various noted sociologists from around the world. Read:
  - African American Families: A Legacy of Vulnerability and Resilience