

**Sociology 125**  
**Contemporary American Society**  
**Lectures 15 & 16**  
**October 30 & November 1, 2006**

# **Race in America**

# **I. Introductory Remarks**

# 1. What is “Race” and “Racism”?

## **Race:**

Race is a classification system of human beings on the basis of culturally-defined biologically-transmitted group characteristics. Typically, but not invariably, these are connected to visible attributes (skin color, physical characteristics, etc.).

## **Racism:**

Racism is a set of beliefs and social practices in which people are treated differently and accorded advantages and disadvantages on the basis of culturally-defined racial classifications. Typically racism involves linking evaluative judgments to these classifications – superior/inferior, worthy/unworthy, dangerous/not dangerous, honest/dishonest.

## 2. Racism in America hurts not only minorities, but whites as well

1. Racism reduces social solidarity and weakens social movements: “Divide & Conquer”
2. Racism weakens support for Universal Programs:
  - In 1930s domestic workers and agricultural labor excluded from social security
  - Reduces support for programs like universal health care
3. Racism fuels a politics of *fear* rather than a politics of *hope*
4. Wages of white workers are *lower* in places where black/white wage differentials are *higher*.

### **3. Racism is a form of *Oppression*: it imposes real harms on people and communities**

- In the original US Constitution, Indians, blacks and other nonwhites were counted as less than full persons.
- Slaves were denied virtually all legal protections.
- full citizenship for blacks was not enforced until 35 years ago.
- Native Americans have been massively displaced from their original lands, subjected to murderous repression and marginalization.
- All of this is not just “ancient history”; it is an on-going reality today

## **II. Historical Trajectory of Forms of Racial Domination**

### 1. Genocide:

*A systematic policy to exterminate a particular category of persons, because of their race, religion, ethnicity or some other characteristic.*

**In US history the treatment of Native Americans was often genocidal.**

### 2. Slavery:

*A system of social relations in which one person is the private property of another and can be bought and sold on a market.*

US slavery was an *extreme* form of this:

- **Children could be taken from parents and sold**
- **Slaves could be tortured and killed with almost no restraint**
- **Rape of slaves was never a crime**

### 3. Second Class Citizenship

*A system of giving different categories of people different citizenship rights on the basis of some attribute.*

**In the U.S., “Jim Crow Laws” in the South after the Civil War officially gave blacks and whites different rights.**

### 4. Semi-free labor

*A system for including non-citizens in a labor market without giving them the rights and protections of citizenship.*

**In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was true for Chinese labor (“Coolie” labor). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this is the case for “illegal aliens”.**

### 5. Discrimination

*A form of racism in which persons are accorded full citizenship rights, but in various ways they face systematic private discrimination in various contexts.*

**This may be officially illegal, but widely tolerated in practice.**

# **III. Current Situation of Race in America**

## **1. Historic Achievement:**

**Dismantling of the machinery of legal racial segregation and oppression and erosion of cultural supports for racism.**

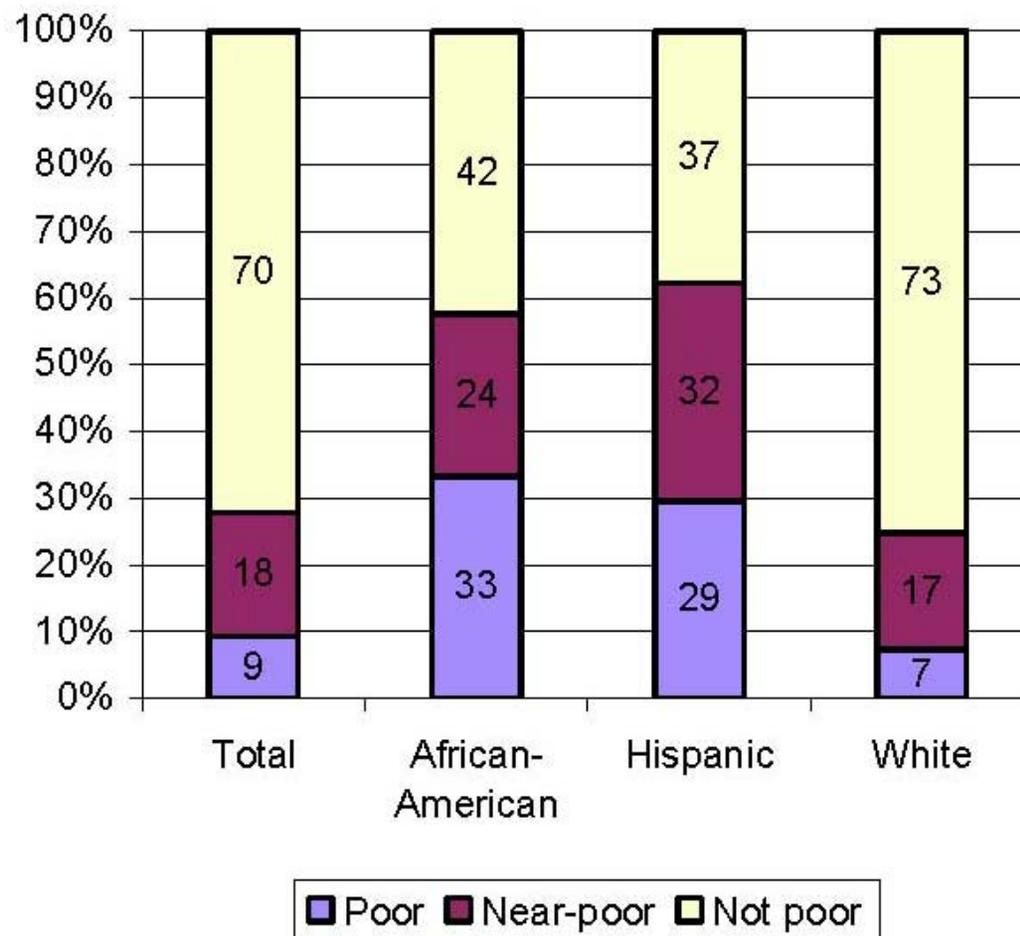
**Progress is real:**

- **African-Americans in ads and on TV**
- **Acceptability of inter-racial marriage**
- **Emergence of a vibrant black middle class**
- **Positive images are common**
- **Political visibility: Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Barak Obama**

## **2. Continuing realities of significant economic disadvantage for racial minorities**

- **Household Poverty**
- **Poverty wages**
- **Unemployment**
- **Lack of wealth**

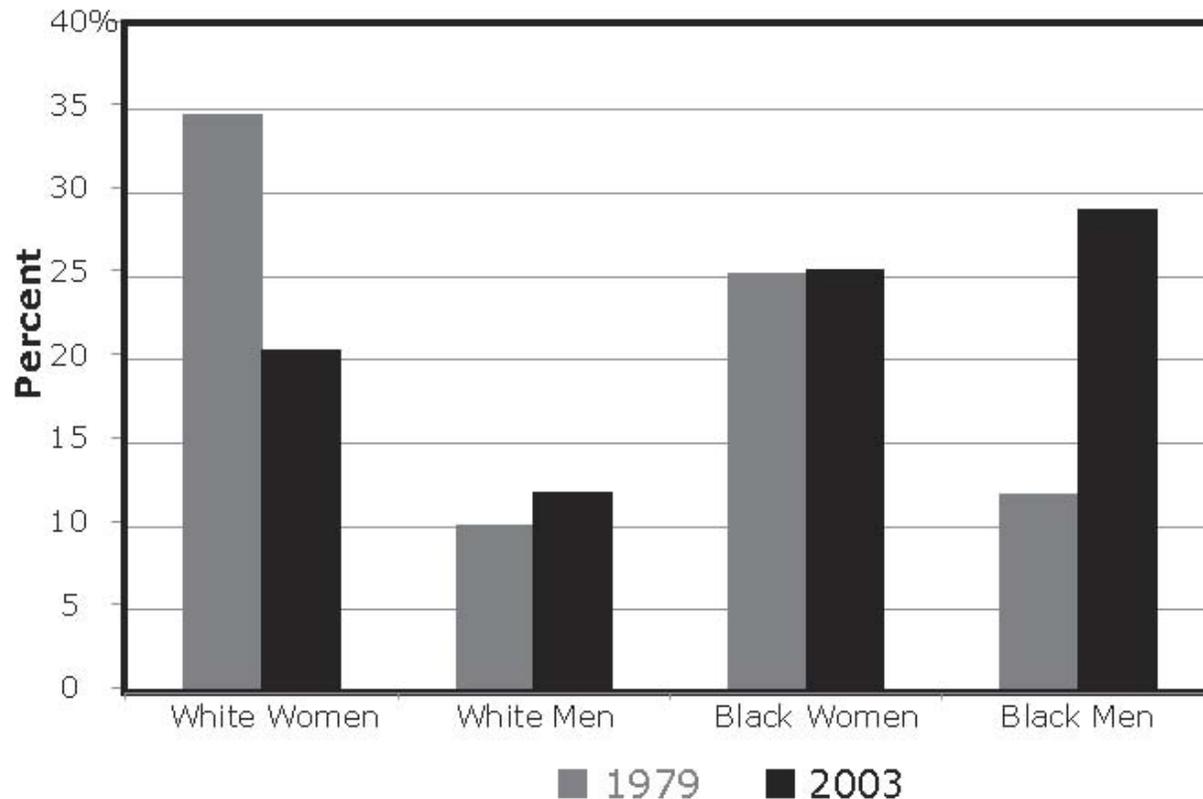
### Poverty Status by Race and Ethnicity, Wisconsin 2004



Source: 2004 Family Health Survey, Wisconsin  
Department of Health and Family Services.

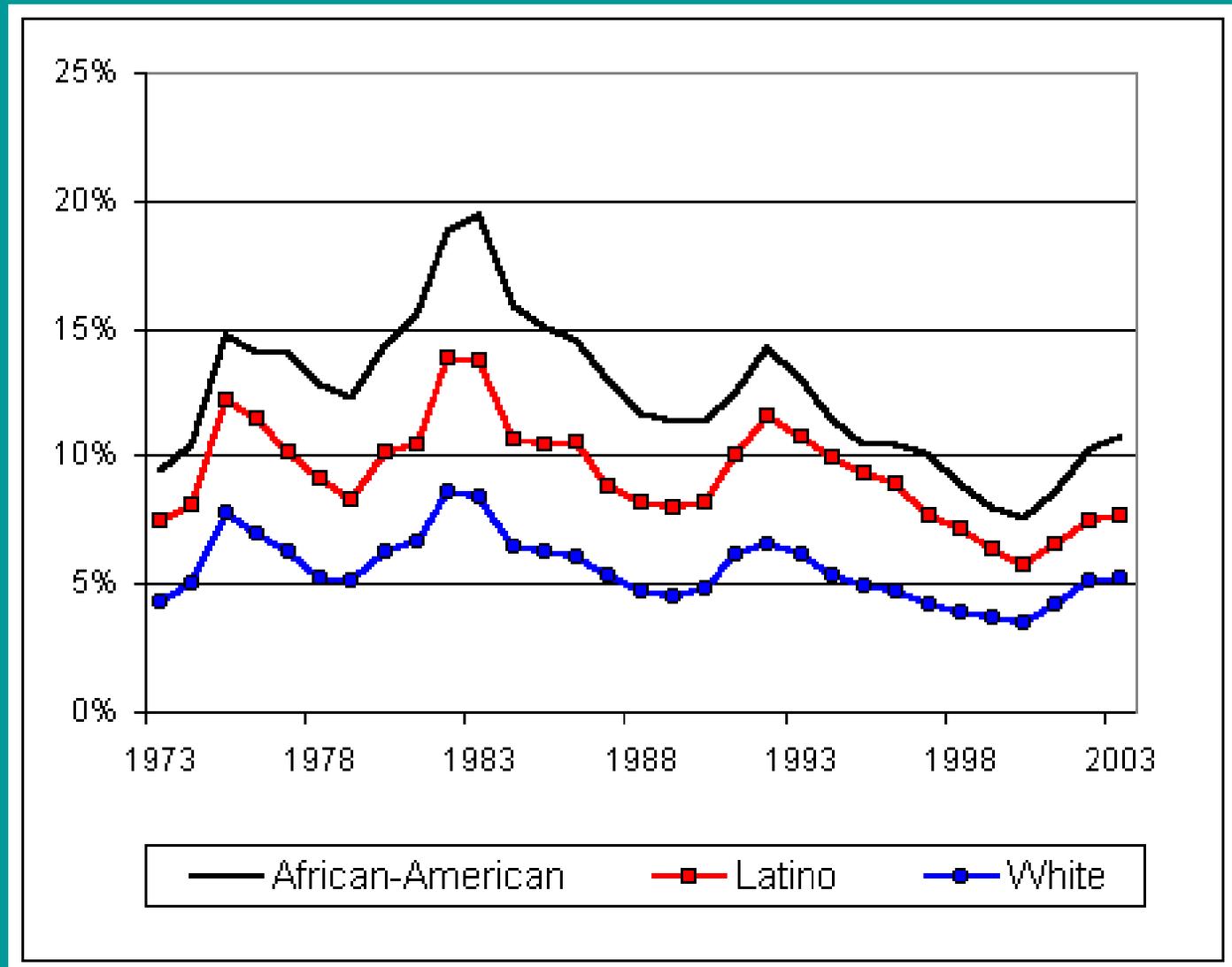
## Share of Wisconsin Workers Earning Poverty Wages, 1979–2003

(wages less than \$8.97 per hour in 2003)



**Source:** Authors' Analysis, CPS.

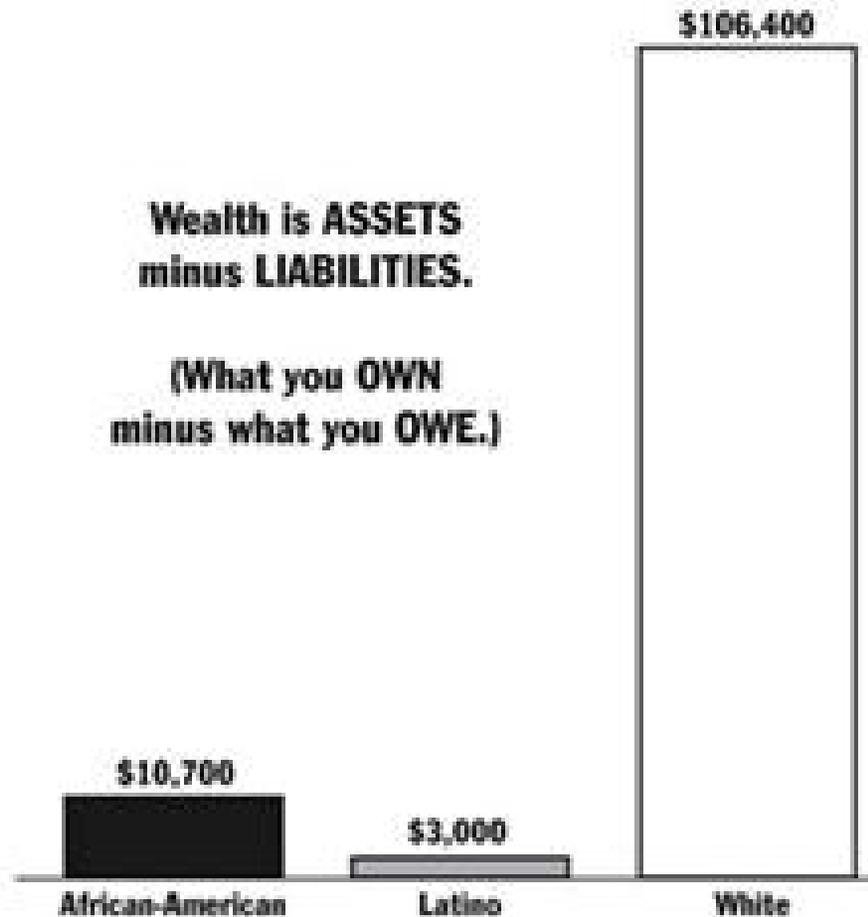
# Unemployment rates by race, 1973-2003



## Median Household Wealth by Race and Ethnicity, 2001

**Wealth is ASSETS  
minus LIABILITIES.**

**(What you OWN  
minus what you OWE.)**

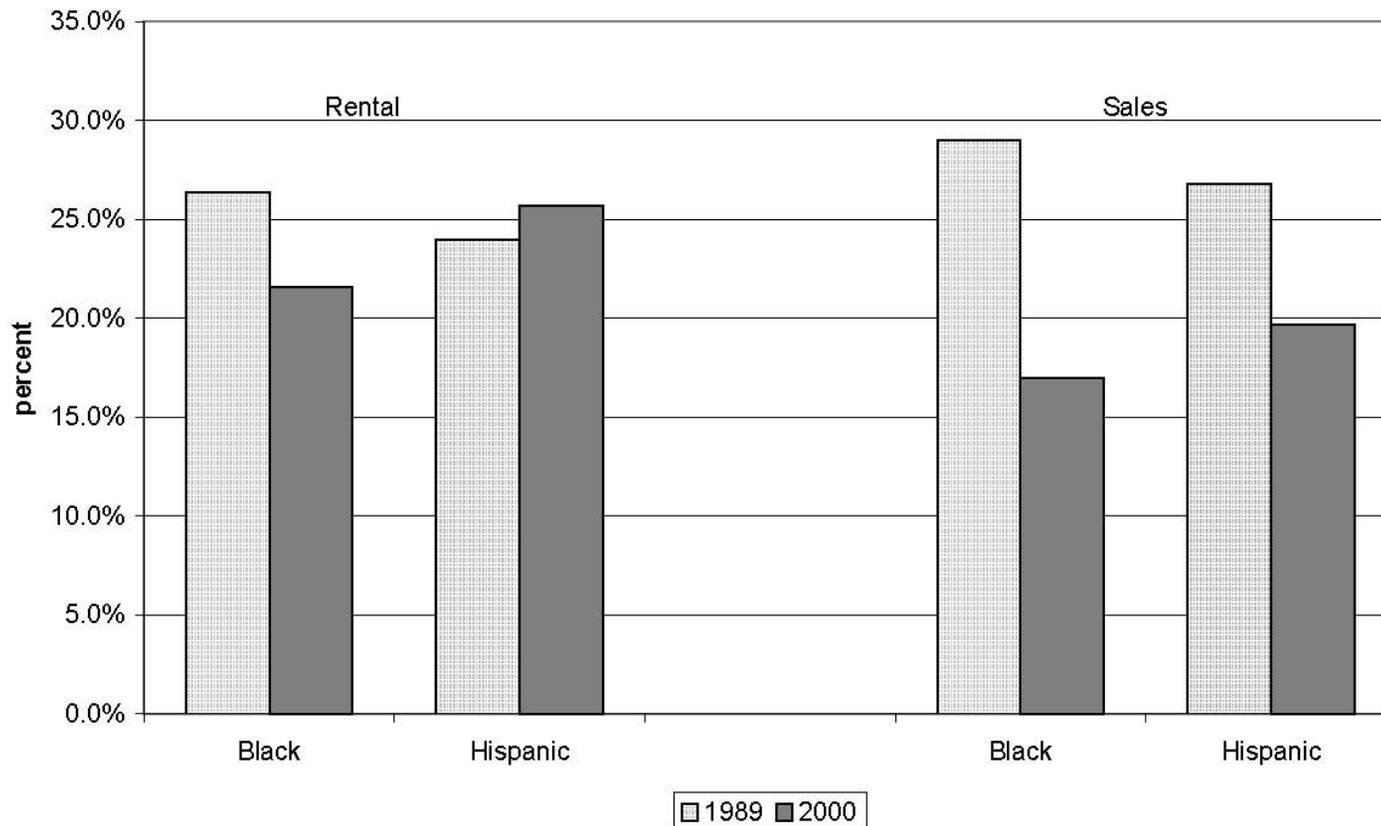


### 3. Continuing realities of active discrimination

- **Petty harassment: taxis, surveillance in stores, etc.**
- **Housing**
- **Criminal justice system: prison sentencing**
- **Lending**
- **Employment: the problem of “statistical discrimination”**
- **Education: Central city schools**

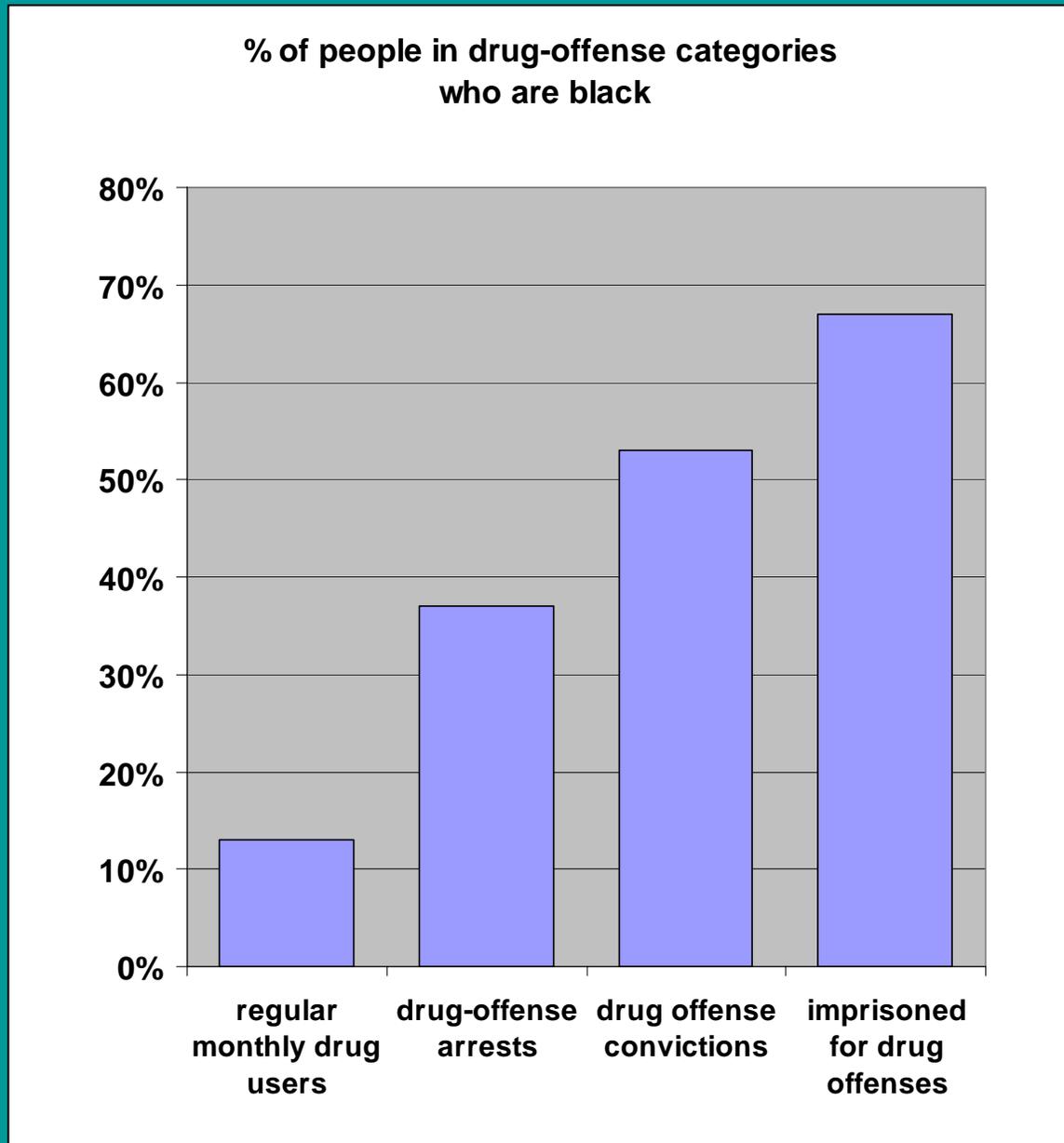
### III. Current Situation: Housing

**Exhibit ES-1: Consistent Adverse Treatment Against Blacks and Hispanics, 1989 and 2000**



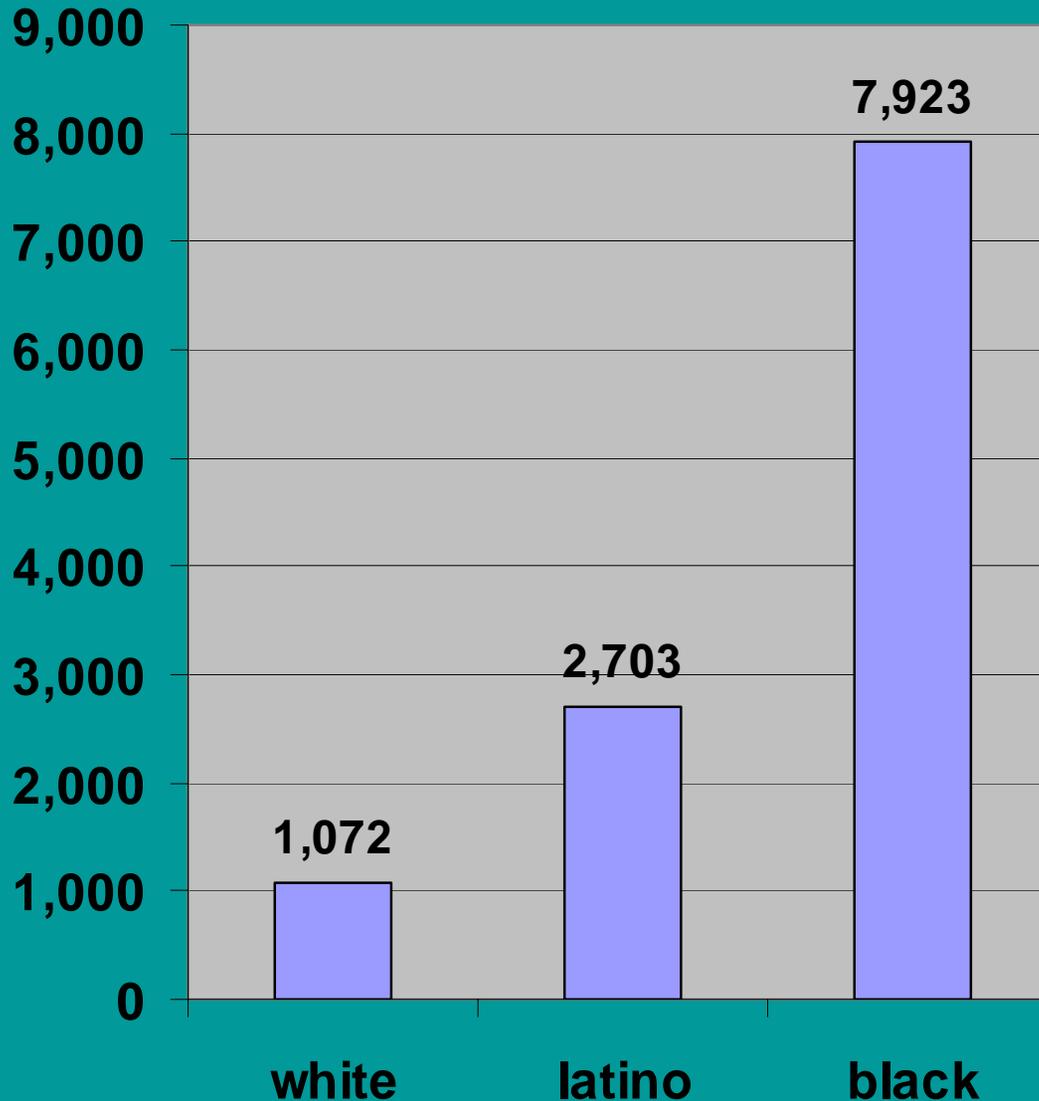
**Data are from a “housing audit” study in which black and white couples acted as “testers” seeking rentals and home purchases.**

### III. Current Situation: criminal justice

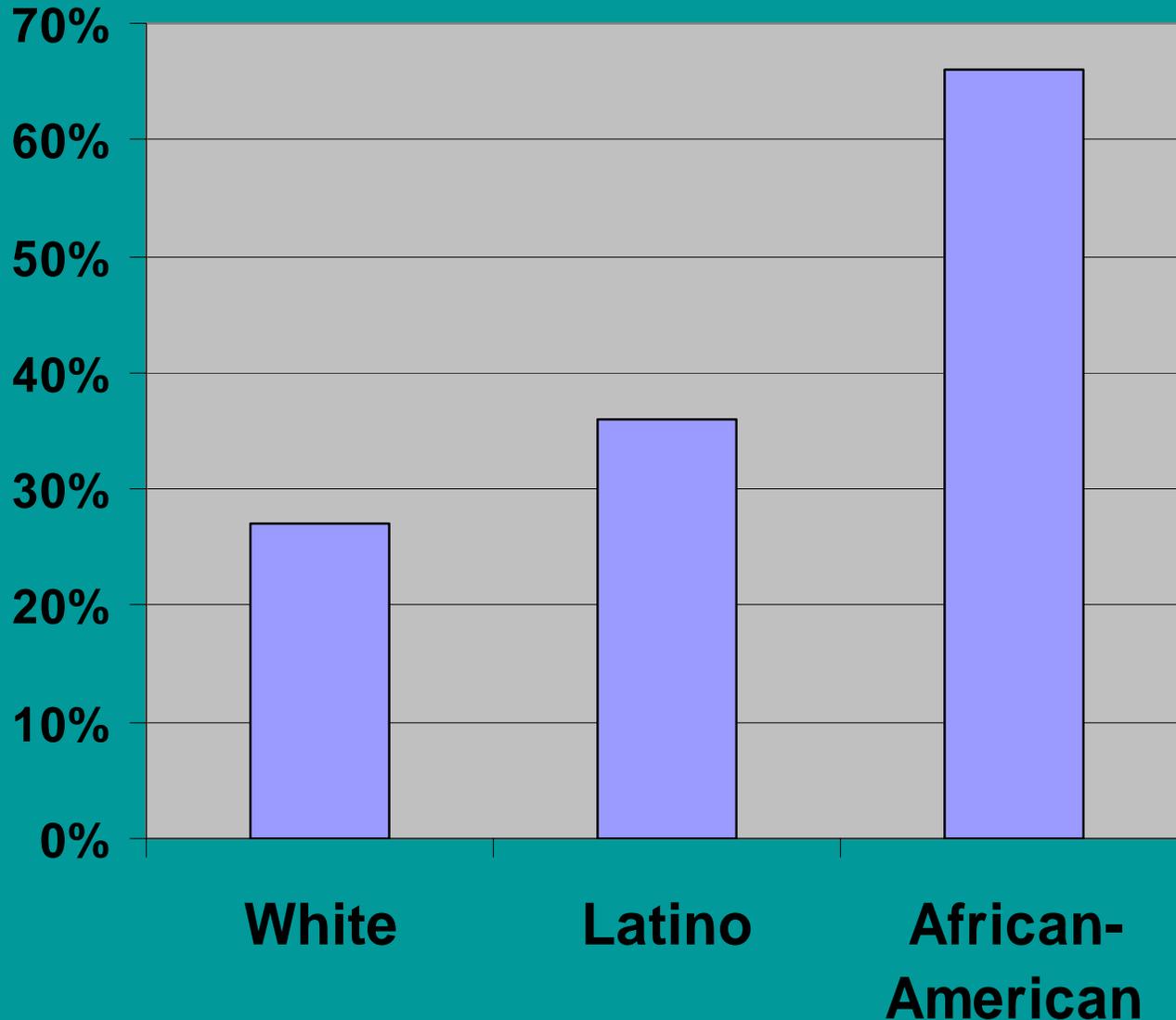


### III. Current Situation: criminal justice

## Incarceration rates by Race, per 100,000 adult residents, 2002



# Denial Rate for Small Business Loans, 1993



## “Statistical discrimination”:

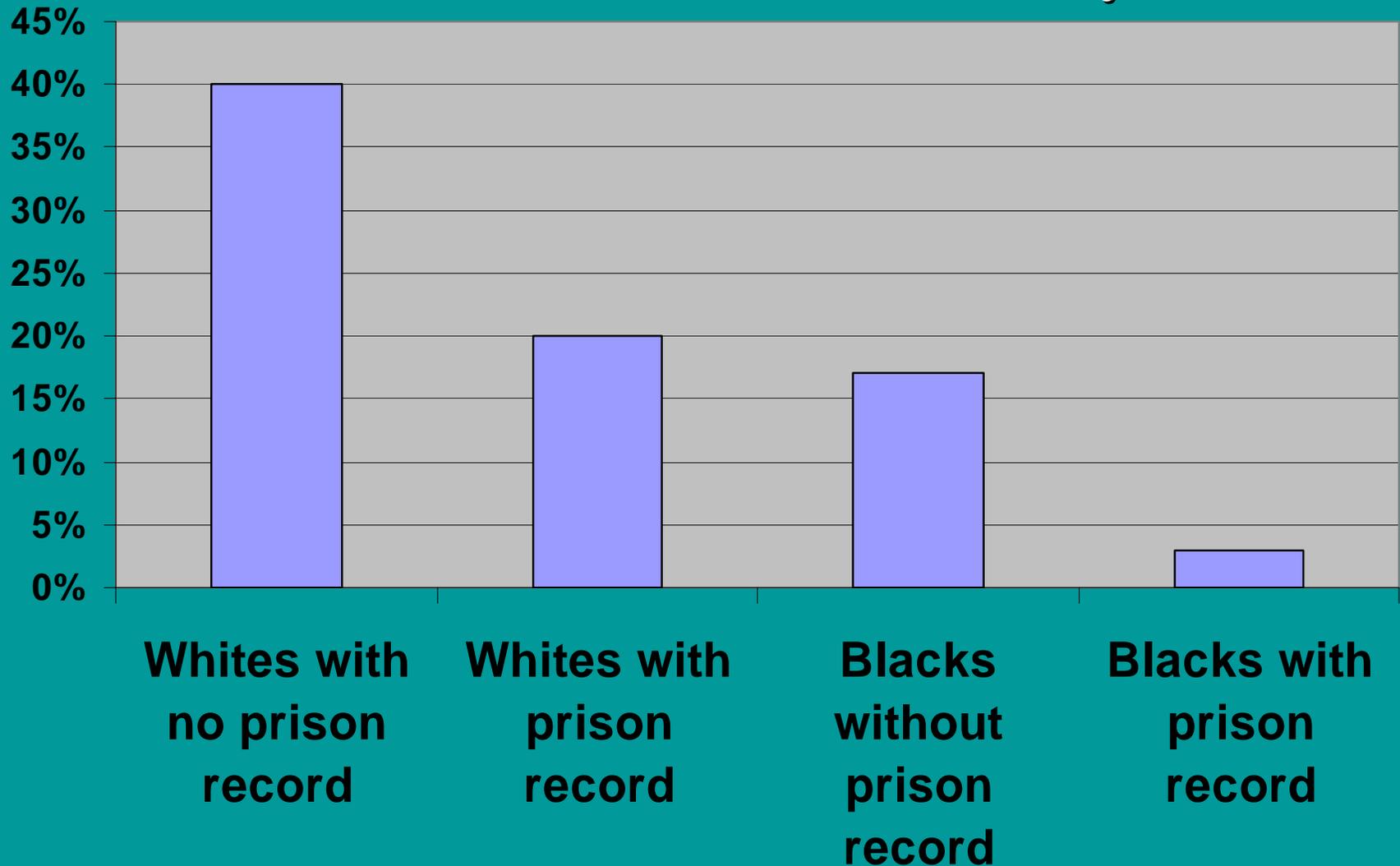
*A situation in which an employer makes a hiring decision about an individual on the basis of beliefs about the average characteristics of a social category rather than the characteristics of the specific individual. Why? Because it is less costly to do so, not because of an dislike of people in that category.*

### Example:

**Employers believe that on average a young black man will be a less reliable employee than a young white man with the same formal qualifications, and since it is difficult to get reliable information about individual reliability, the employer will rely on presumed group traits to make the choice.**

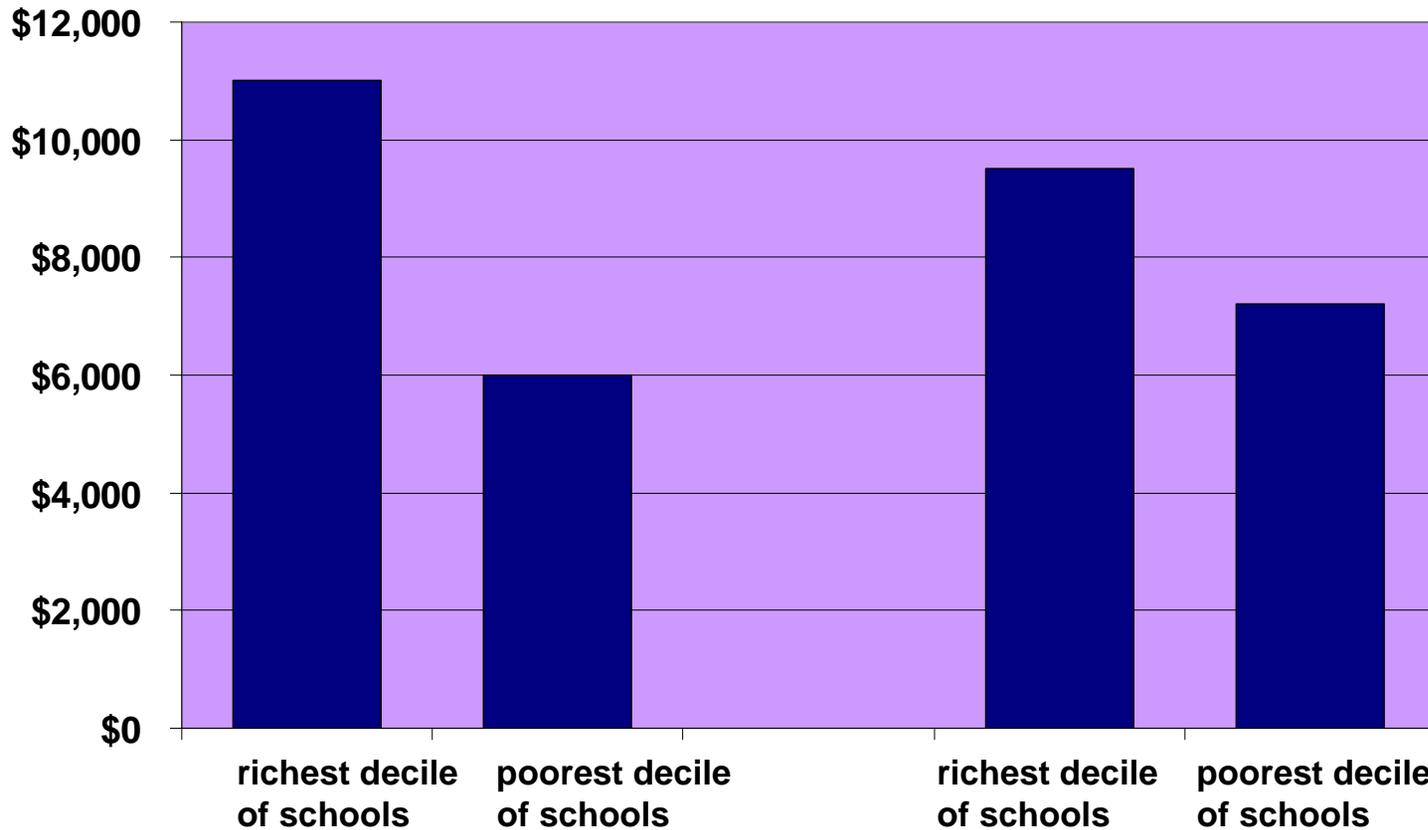
### III. Current Situation: employment

## Rates of “call backs” in Employment discrimination audit study



### III. Current Situation: education

Per student school spending in richest and poorest school districts, Wisconsin



1990s, before funding equalization began in 2001

2005 after funding equalization

Note, 1990s figures are approximate

## 4. Affirmative Action

### Definition:

*Any policy that takes into account membership in some historically discriminated group (eg. race or gender) to increase the likelihood of a person from that group getting a job or being admitted to a university.*

### Alternative procedures:

- (1) Specific quotas or looser “targets”
- (2) Tie-breaker rules
- (3) Intensive recruitment campaigns
- (4) “points” added to recruitment scores

## **4. Affirmative Action**

**What are the possible justifications for affirmative action policies?**

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**What are the possible justifications for affirmative action policies?**

- (1) Redressing *past* injustices to a group**
- (2) Counteracting or neutralizing *current* discrimination**
- (3) Serving the needs of particular communities (eg. Minority doctors and lawyers for disadvantaged communities)**
- (4) Promoting valuable forms of diversity**

## **5. Reinforcement of racism by class inequality**

**Four crucial facts to remember:**

- a. Most African-Americans are not poor**
- b. In actual numbers there are more poor white Americans than poor black Americans**
- c. But: African Americans (and Latinos) are greatly overrepresented among the poor, especially among the very poor. This gets a lot of media attention.**

**This intersection of race and poverty and the accompanying link between race and crime fuels continuing racial stereotypes and racism.**

## **6. Dilemmas of Politics for racial equality**

**Two basic choices in electoral politics:**

- (1) Try to elect black candidates: this is facilitated by concentrating black voters in specific electoral districts so that they will have a majority of voters.**
- (2) Try to elect politicians who support racial justice whether they are black or white: this is facilitated by having black voters spread out across more districts so that they can influence more elections.**

**Dilemma: if you adopt strategy (1) fewer elected representatives will support racial justice policies; if you adopt strategy (2) fewer black politicians will get elected.**