Twenty Years of Evidence Shows Continuing Racial Disparities in Academic Achievement

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INTRODUCTION

Non-Hispanic white children typically outperform non-Hispanic black children in school. Likewise, non-Hispanic white students typically outperform Hispanic students, and high-income students outperform low-income students in school. In addition, these "academic achievement gaps" tend to worsen as children progress through school, indicating minimal to no progress toward more equal educational outcomes across racial, ethnic, or income lines. These persistent gaps also demonstrate that educational policies to improve the academic performance of minority or low-income students has had little impact over time.

Most research to date has focused on each form of the gap separately: by race (black vs. white), by ethnicity (Hispanic vs. white), or by income (poor vs. non-poor). Although students of color are more likely to live in families with lower incomes that their white peers, these investigations nevertheless often ignore the impact of the intersections between race, ethnicity, and income on achievement gaps.

This brief reports on research that investigates variations in academic performance within racial and ethnic groups according to students' family income. For instance, this brief asks whether all groups of students in poverty, regardless of their race or ethnicity, perform similarly poorly across time or if some groups of poor students (namely, whites) have better academic outcomes compared to their black and Hispanic peers. Likewise, the academic performance of non-poor students is compared across race and ethnicity over time. Measuring performance across time also allows the authors to determine if achievement gaps are widening or narrowing.

Using data from children living in households with women who were included in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979, the authors report on the math and reading achievement of children ages 5 to 6, 9 to 10, and 13 to 14 over a 20-year period (1986 to 2005). Children were divided into 6 groups: black, Hispanic, and white children who live in families with incomes 100% or less of the federal poverty limit (poor students) and black, Hispanic, and white children in families with incomes above the poverty line (non-poor students).

KEY FINDINGS

> **Non-poor white children consistently outperformed non-poor black and non-poor Hispanic students from kindergarten through high school in both reading and math from 1986 to 2005.**

  > This academic achievement gap between non-poor white and non-poor black students has widened.

  > In contrast, the academic achievement gap for non-poor white and non-poor Hispanic students has narrowed.

  > In addition, non-poor black students had lower achievement than poor white students at nearly every time point.

> **Likewise, poor white children consistently outperformed their poor black and Hispanic peers from kindergarten through high school in reading and math over the 20-year period.**

  > The gap in achievement between poor white and their poor black peers has grown over time and appears to widen after kindergarten.

  > The gap in achievement between poor white and their poor Hispanic peers has also persisted over time and grown wider for middle school-aged children.

> **Poverty has a more detrimental effect on the academic achievement of children of color compared to their white peers.**

  > Given that even white students from poor families outperform their poor black and Hispanic peers, these findings suggest that the greater incomes, on average, of non-poor white families compared to non-poor black and Hispanic families do not fully explain race/ethnic academic achievement gaps.

RACIAL DISPARITIES IN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT PERSIST OVER TIME
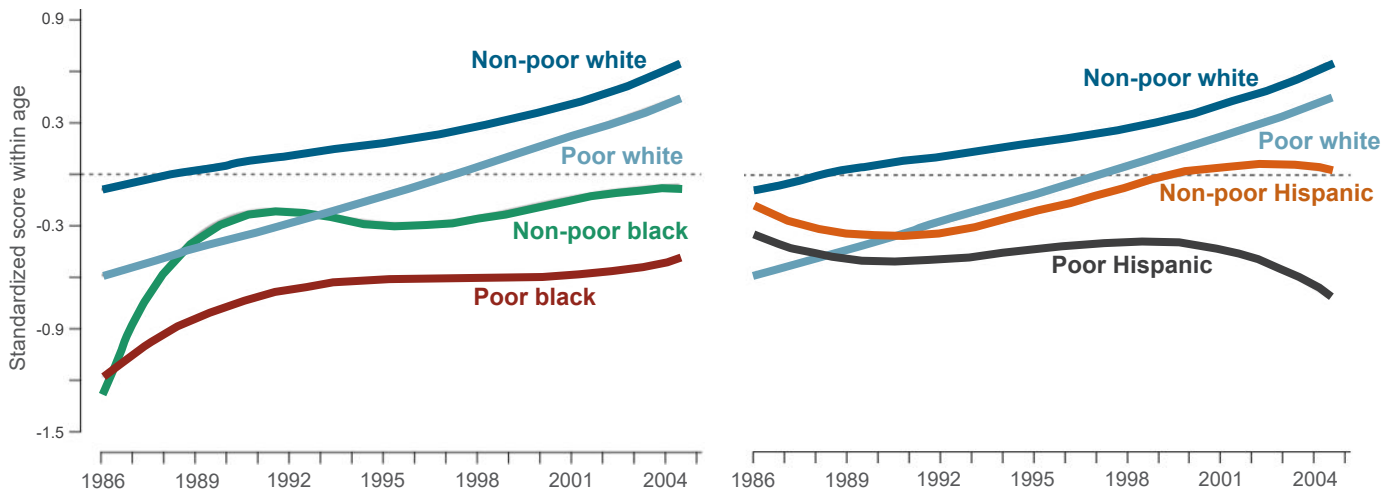
This figure illustrates that from 1986 to 2005, non-poor white students consistently outperformed non-poor black and Hispanic students; poor white students also consistently outperformed their poor black and Hispanic peers over that period. This demonstrates that poverty has a more detrimental effect on the academic achievement of children of color compared to their white peers. The above examples use data for math achievement for 13- to 14-year-olds; these findings also hold true for math achievement across the other age groups (5- to 6-year-olds and 9- to 10-year-olds) and for reading achievement across all three age groups.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policies designed to improve the academic performance of black and Hispanic students compared to their white peers must include financial assistance that offsets the burdens of economic hardship, such as housing and food subsidies and transportation assistance. There also must be greater investment in quality instruction, high-quality teachers, curriculum, and adequate school resources in areas in which high proportions of minority and/or poor students live. Finally, given that the authors found that across nearly every time point, non-poor black students had lower achievement than poor whites, policies should focus on equity. That is, rather than evenly distributing educational investments, those investments need to be concentrated where incomes are low, minority student concentration is high, and educational materials and experiences are limited.

REFERENCE

Paschall, K.W., Gershoff, E.T. & Kuhfeld, M. (2018). A two decade examination of historical race/ethnicity disparities in academic achievement by poverty status. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. Published online ahead of print.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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