

Yes, You Can Measure White Privilege



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Whenever anyone slips the words “white privilege” into a conversation, it immediately builds an impenetrable wall. For some white people, the words elicit an uneasy feeling because, for them, the term is accusatory without being specific. It is a nebulous concept that seemingly reduces the complex mishmash of history, racism and social phenomena to a nonspecific groupthink phrase.

But white privilege is real.

Instead of using it as a touchy-feely phrase that gives white people the heebie-jeebies because it conjures up images of Caucasians sitting on plantation porches drinking mint juleps while they watch the Negroes toil in the Southern sun, we

should use it as a proper noun, with a clear definition. White privilege *does not* mean that any white person who achieved anything didn't work hard for it. It is an irrefutable, concrete phenomenon that manifests itself in real, measurable values, and we should use it as such.

Imagine the entire history of the United States as a 500-year-old relay race, where whites began running as soon as the gun sounded, but blacks had to stay in the starting blocks until they were allowed to run. If the finish line is the same for everyone, then the time and distance advantage between the two runners is white privilege. Not only can we see it, but we can actually measure it. If we begin viewing it as an economic term—the same way we use “trickle-down economics”—then it might be debatable, but it becomes a *real, definable thing* that we can acknowledge, explain and work toward eliminating. Race might be a social construct, but white privilege is an economic theory that we should define as such:

White privilege: *n.* The quantitative advantage of whiteness

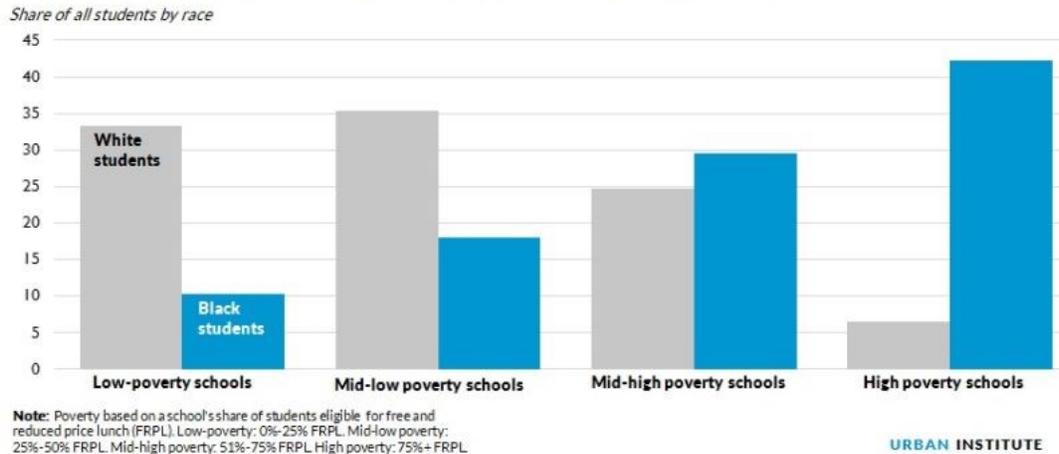
Here are four examples that explain white privilege in economic terms.

Education

If education is the key to success, then there is no debate that whites have the advantage in America. [In 2012, the U. S. Department of Education reported](#) that about 33 percent of all white students attend a low-poverty school, while only 6 percent attend [high-poverty schools](#). In comparison, [only 10 percent of black students attend a low-poverty school, while more than 40 percent of black students attend high-poverty schools](#).

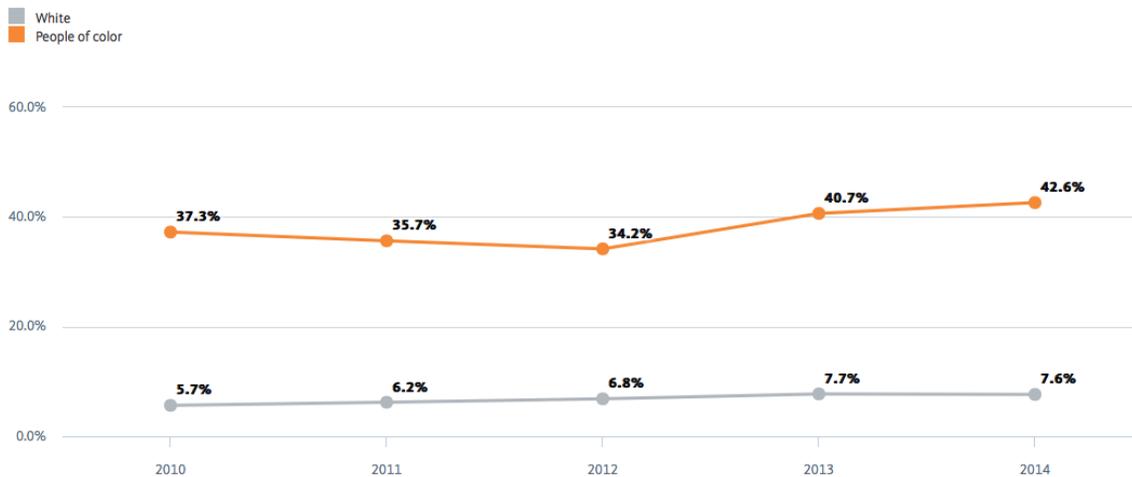
This means that black students are more than six times more likely than white students to attend a high-poverty school, while white students are more than three times more likely than black students to attend a low-poverty school.

Black public school students are far likelier to attend high-poverty schools



Urban Institute/Urban.org

Percent of students in high-poverty schools: United States, All public schools, 2010-2014



National Center for Education Statistics
National Equality Atlas

The logical response to this is for whites to explain the disparity away with statistics of black unemployment and the minority wage gap, but that might not be true. In 2015, a research scientist named [David Mosenkis examined 500](#)

[school districts in Pennsylvania](#) and found that—regardless of the level of income—the more black students, the less money a school received. While this may not be true for every single school, people who study education funding say that they can predict a school’s level of funding by the percentage of minority students it has. Even though this is a complex issue that reveals how redlining and segregation decreased the property tax base in areas where blacks live—therefore decreasing funding—it underscores a simple fact:

White children get better educations, and that is a calculable advantage.

Employment

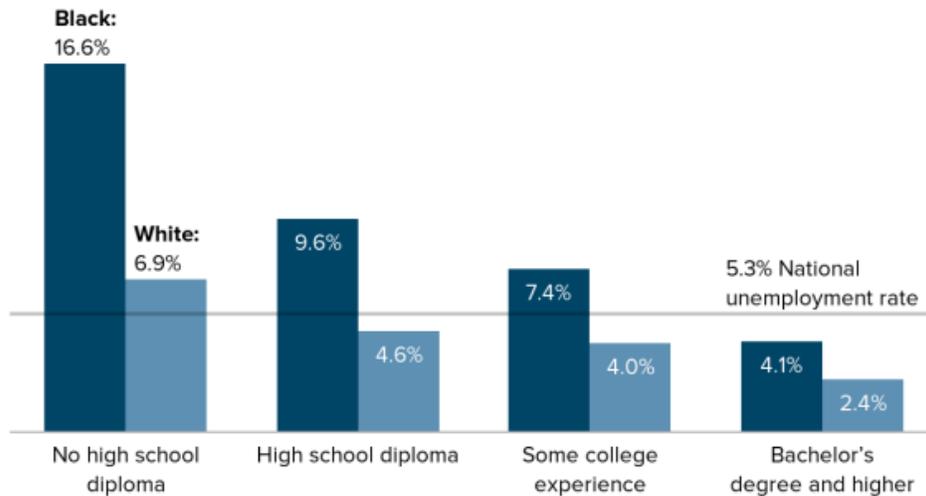
Even when black students manage to overcome the hurdles of unequal education, they still don’t get equal treatment when it comes to jobs. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of Friday, April 7, the unemployment rate for African Americans was nearly double that of whites ([8.1 percent for blacks, 4.3 percent for whites](#)).

There are some who will say blacks should study harder, but this phenomenon can’t be explained by simple educational disparities. A 2015 study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research shows that [whites with the exact same résumés as their black counterparts are hired at double the rate](#). In fact, a white man with a criminal history is more likely to be hired than an African American with no criminal past.

A similarly named, but different, organization—[the Economic Policy Institute—examined 2015 data](#) and discovered that at every level of education, whites were twice as likely to have jobs as blacks.

Black unemployment is significantly higher than white unemployment regardless of educational attainment

Unemployment rate by race and education level



Source: Author's calculations based on monthly Current Population Survey data. The 12-month averages include data for December 2014 through November 2015 and is calculated for people age 25 or older.

Economic Policy Institute

EPI.org

If it is statistically easier for whites to get a better education, and better jobs, then being born white must be an advantage in and of itself.

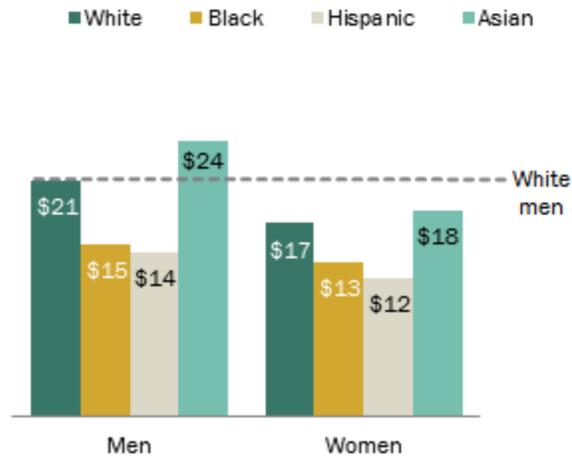
Income

But let's say a black man somehow gets a great education and finds a job; surely that means the playing field is level, right?

Not so fast.

White men had higher hourly earnings than all except Asian men in 2015

Median hourly earnings of men and women from each race/ethnicity



Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest dollar. Based on civilian, non-institutionalized, full- or part-time workers with positive earnings. Self-employed workers are excluded. Hispanics are of any race. Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Asians include Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders. Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of 2015 Current Population Survey data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Researchers at [EPI found that black men](#) with 11-20 years of work experience earned 23.5 percent less than their white counterparts, and black women with 11-20 years of experience were paid 12.6 percent less than white women with the same experience. This disparity is not getting smaller. The wage gap between black and white workers was 18.1 percent in 1979, and steadily increased to 26.7 percent in 2015. When [Pew Research controlled for education](#) and just looked at income data, white men still surpassed every other group.

These income inequalities persist to create the disparities in wealth between races, manifesting in generational disadvantages. A black person with the same education and experience as a similar Caucasian, over the span of their lives, will earn significantly less.

Spending

It is a little-known fact that the average black person pays more for almost every item he or she purchases. While there is no discount Groupon that comes with white skin, there might as well be. [A John Hopkins study](#) (pdf) showed that supermarkets were less prevalent in poor black neighborhoods than in white

neighborhoods with the same average income, leading to increased food costs. News organization ProPublica recently found that [car-insurance companies charge people who live in black neighborhoods higher rates](#) than people in predominantly white areas with the same risk.

When it comes to credit, it is even worse. [According to the National Bureau of Economic Research](#), The Atlantic reports, “[even after controlling for general risk considerations](#), such as credit score, loan-to-value ratio, subordinate liens, and debt-to-income ratios, Hispanic Americans are 78 percent more likely to be given a high-cost mortgage, and black Americans are 105 percent more likely.” Even banks as large as [Wells Fargo have lost cases for up-charging minorities](#).

[According to the Wall Street Journal](#), large auto lenders have paid more than \$200 million since 2013 to settle lawsuits for charging minorities higher rates, but in November, both Democrats and Republicans [voted to reduce regulations on the financial institutions that offer auto loans](#). The National Consumer Law Center filed a [2007 lawsuit that exposed how](#) “finance companies and banks put in place policies that allowed car dealers to mark up the interest rates on auto loans to minorities based on subjective criteria unrelated to their credit risk.”

Instead of hurling the term “white privilege” around as an imprecise catch-all to describe everything from police brutality to Pepsi commercials, perhaps its use as a definable phrase will make people less resistant. Maybe if they saw the numbers, they could acknowledge its existence. It is neither an insult nor an accusation; it is simply a measurable gap with real-world implications. It is the fiscal and economic disparity of black vs. white.

In America's four-and-a-half-centuries-old relay race, the phrase "white privilege" does not mean that Caucasians can't run fast; it is just a matter-of-fact acknowledgment that they got a head start.

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