



# Toward a More Perfect Union: Understanding Systemic Racism and Resulting Inequity in Latino Communities

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests across the country have fueled an unprecedented national conversation on racial justice. However, this national discourse often ignores how historical and institutional dynamics produce cumulative and persistent disparities for Latino\* communities in this country. This exclusion reflects a long history and set of experiences regarding Latinos in the United States that is often hidden and difficult to quantify. History and research show that one thing is clear: past policymakers' actions—sometimes intentional and other times not—to exclude, suppress, and “otherize” people of color have shaped the Latino experience in this country, as they have shaped the experiences of other communities of color. Even though the United States has abolished the most egregious, formal examples of systemic racism, their legacy, as well as more subtle forms of exclusion, persist.

*Toward a More Perfect Union: Understanding Systemic Racism and Resulting Inequity in Latino Communities* offers a “primer” for understanding the ways that systemic racism has impacted Latino communities. In particular, this paper outlines the role that systemic racism plays in perpetuating injustices and inequity in the areas of employment, income and poverty, education, homeownership, wealth, health coverage, and criminal justice. On the whole, systemic racism is a key factor explaining the unequal social, political, and economic opportunities for the nation's 60 million Latinos. On each of these measures—from housing to education to criminal justice to immigration and others—Latino socioeconomic outcomes are significantly lower than those of their White counterparts. Together, these disparities continue to reinforce the separate and unequal status of Latinos in the United States by fueling a cycle of inequity where power (in terms of wealth or representation in government)—remains out of reach for many Hispanics.

\* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent. According to the technical definitions used by the Census, Latinos may be of any race. This document uses the sociological construct of “race” whereby, at least historically, most Latinos were treated as a distinct racial group, regardless of ethnicity. UnidosUS also occasionally refers to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

## Criminal Justice

Institutionalized police violence has affected Latino communities for decades. Later twentieth-century penal laws and uneven enforcement have disproportionately affected the Latino community, and Latinos are 1.7 times (170%) more likely to be killed by a police officer than their White counterparts.\* This estimate is likely an undercount due to the lack of ethnicity data collected by most criminal justice databases. In addition, Latino immigrants have the stigma of “criminality” ascribed to them by an ever-evolving assortment of laws and immigration-enforcement mechanisms.

## Education

In the United States, right from the start, people of color have had limited access to education. As recently as the 1960s, most Black, Latino, and Native American elementary and secondary school students were relegated to largely segregated schools funded at much lower levels than those serving White children, and many students of color were entirely excluded from some higher education institutions. This unequal system is the result of the confluence of intentional laws, policies, and cultural practices, including Jim Crow legislation in the South, state laws and practices ensuring segregation of Latinos in the Southwest, the rise of residential segregation in the northern states, and the limited role of the federal government in funding and overseeing public education. Even after legal segregation was abolished, Latinos were subject to additional isolation via restrictions based on language. Today, Latino children remain more likely to be in schools with fewer resources and lower funding levels, and they are now the most segregated school children in the country.

## Employment

Historically, employment programs and labor protection laws—such as the Social Security Act of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA), which introduced unemployment insurance and other protections (including a 40-hour workweek, a federal minimum wage, and overtime requirements)—have disproportionately excluded Black and Latino workers from these benefits through an exemption on many domestic, agricultural, and service occupations. These and many other subsequent policy decisions relegated many Latino workers to lower-status occupations without protections and perpetuated the exploitation of workers of color. The effects persist today. Although Latinos currently have the highest labor force participation rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States, they are concentrated in low-wage jobs and are the least likely to have access to benefits, including paid leave.

## Health

High uninsurance rates in the Latino community are driven, in large part, by the structural racism embedded in the employment-based insurance system, as employers in many of the lower-tier occupations in which Hispanics are concentrated rarely offer health insurance as a fringe benefit. Among Hispanics, 41% receive health insurance

---

\* References to specific facts and figures or other background information can be found in the full version of this paper.

through their jobs, compared to 66% of Whites. State and federal policies restricting coverage eligibility for publicly funded health benefits have a disproportionate impact on Latino coverage rates. While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was intended to help provide coverage to more individuals, as the overall number of uninsured people in the United States fell, the Latino uninsured rate remained one of the highest in the country, and many gains made by the ACA for Latinos have been lost in recent years. Language barriers too often effectively bar Latinos from appropriate care. The compounded effects of social determinants such as housing, working conditions, and schooling lead to Latinos being more likely than Whites to report being in “fair” or “poor” health, with a greater incidence of chronic health conditions.

## Housing

Practices such as redlining and residential segregation are two pernicious hallmarks of racism and discrimination in our nation’s housing system. Outright discrimination and a series of other practices, such as “steering” Latinos away from predominantly White neighborhoods, have resulted in difficulty accessing mortgages or homes close to good jobs and schools, as well as difficulty in finding affordable, quality rental housing. Although the worst discriminatory housing practices have been banned, their lasting effects have perpetuated segregated neighborhoods, along with their accompanying socioeconomic, educational, and health-related harms. Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. policymakers and institutions designed and implemented laws, programs, and policies to increase wealth building through property ownership and making rental housing affordable, but those efforts largely benefitted White households instead. In 2019, Hispanics are significantly less likely, at 48%, to be homeowners than Whites, who own homes at a rate of 70%.

## Immigration

Hispanic immigrants faced few restrictions on immigration until the 1960s and 1970s, when immigration patterns shifted from predominately European to “browner” populations, including Latin Americans. New forms of structural racism emerged in laws and policies that seemed designed to systematically and adversely affect Latinos in numerous ways, including limits on ways to adjust to legal status, unprecedented levels of enforcement, and new restrictions on access to public benefits. Undocumented workers and their families face particular challenges, and research consistently shows that providing lawful immigration status would increase wages, tax revenues, and economic output.

## Voting

Despite significant increases in legal protections through the Voting Rights Act (VRA), discriminatory policies and barriers continue to exist for people of color. Latinos represent 13.2% of all eligible voters in the United States but continue to face exclusion or discrimination through restrictive voter I.D. laws, roll purging, unnotified polling place closures, and early voting reduction, all of which weaken Latinos’ ability to fully exercise their right to vote. The disenfranchisement of Puerto Rican residents, American citizens numbering more than 3 million, is a constant reminder of our voting system’s racialized origins. The exclusion of certain groups from the democratic process results in a lack of political power to elect candidates with shared values who can enact public policy priorities important to diverse groups.

## The Wealth Gap

Wealth\* is an essential indicator of long-term financial security and a measure of social status. Accumulated wealth allows people to weather adverse life events, achieve homeownership, start businesses, invest, prepare for retirement, and transfer opportunities onto future generations. While most White people in the United States benefit from laws, policies, and practices that ensure they can access these opportunities, Latinos and other people of color are excluded, sometimes intentionally. In 2019, Latino families held \$36,100 in wealth compared to \$188,200 held by White families. Disparities in employment, education, and housing—all of which carry legacies of structural racism—continue to reinforce this racial wealth gap.

## Conclusion

The weight of evidence demonstrates that a significant portion of the socioeconomic disparities between Hispanics and other Americans is attributable to and/or has roots in systemic racism:

- Hispanics almost invariably have been adversely affected by racism embedded in institutional structures and policy systems most salient to economic opportunity and upward mobility, and policy interventions to dismantle systemic racism must fully include the Hispanic community.
- UnidosUS believes that wherever possible, racism deeply embedded in our society's core structures and institutions must be acknowledged, confronted, and dismantled.
- UnidosUS further believes that intentionally inclusive policy can both reduce racial disparities while also benefitting everyone, a strategy some scholars call "targeted universalism."

An essential element of the growing national discourse on race is the intentional and full inclusion of the history, perspectives, and interests of Latinos. Journalists, educators, and advocates can and should pursue concrete objectives:

- **Public discourse should be more inclusive of how systemic racism has adversely affected the Latino community** throughout its 180-plus year history under American jurisdiction.
- **Educational institutions should more accurately reflect the Hispanic experience in the United States**, including coverage of how systemic racism has affected Latinos.
- **Latino advocates themselves should become better informed about systemic racism**, and more intentional about informing key audiences of the clear linkages between contemporary challenges faced by the Hispanic community and their roots in systemic racism.

---

\* According to the U.S. Federal Reserve Board, "wealth" is defined as the difference between a family's gross assets and their liabilities and that measure is used in this document. See [The Fed - Disparities in Wealth by Race and Ethnicity in the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances \(federalreserve.gov\)](https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumersandcommunitydevelopment/2019-survey-of-consumer-finances-disparities-in-wealth-by-race-and-ethnicity) for more information on their definition.

## About Us

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an Affiliate Network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our community stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit [unidosus.org](https://unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).