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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics  
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Issue Brief

Issue Brief: Affirmative Action and Socioeconomic Status/Class

**Key Words:** Affirmative Action, Underrepresented Group, Class, low-socioeconomic status, residential segregation, zoning, red-lining, restrictive covenants

**Description:** This brief shall describe the relationship between affirmative action and socioeconomic status. More specifically, this brief will focus on legislation that led to African-American residential segregation pre-1961, and the effects of this residential segregation on the present African-American community and affirmative action policy. Furthermore, this brief will attempt to examine whether or not low socioeconomic status and race are correlated with affirmative action policy. This brief will conclude that affirmative action simultaneously addresses both race and low socioeconomic status.

**Key Points:**

- Affirmative Action seeks to remedy past harm, enhance diversity, increase minority power, provide role models and enhance minority wealth and services
- Social class and race are not in opposition nor are they mutually exclusive, especially in the case of African-Americans in the United States.
- Affirmative Action has been particularly successful in the realms of employment, education and economics
- Due to the residential segregation faced by African-Americans, low socioeconomic status and race have become conflated labels, and transitively, any policy that seeks to address either addresses the other

**Brief:**

The history of the United States has been marred with discrimination stretching back to the country's initial discovery in 1492. In an effort to mitigate these efforts, President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 in 1961, which declared that employers must take affirmative action to employ individuals without regard to their race or national origin. This Executive Order also established the Presidential Committee on

Equal Employment Opportunity, a committee designed to investigate grievances pertaining to race and ethnicity within the work place. Today, affirmative action can be understood as the policy of considering race, ethnicity, origin, gender, national origin or sexual orientation in a manner that benefits either a historically or presently underrepresented group. The goals of these policies are simple: remedy past harm, enhance diversity, increase minority power, provide role models and enhance minority wealth and services.

This policy has had an effect on many underrepresented groups in both the realm of education and employment—with noticeable benefits for women and African-Americans. For example, the rate of high school graduating women after the enactment of affirmative action policy<sup>1</sup> to today has risen 25% (U.S. Census, 2010). For African-Americans, this rate has risen 53.5% (U.S. Census, 2010). Within the same time frame the rate of college graduating women has also risen 21.7%, while the rate of college graduating African-Americans has risen 13.5%. Even more impressive are the effects of affirmative action on the employment rates for these two groups: the number of employed women has nearly doubled, while the number of employed African-Americans has increased by 75% (U.S. Census, 2010).

But the most striking category of progress due to affirmative action has been the economic progress for African-Americans. Upon first glance at such Census statistics as income per capita, unemployment rates, healthcare coverage, living conditions, one can clearly see a very grim picture of African-American socioeconomic life. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, African-Americans have the lowest median income of any other racial

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<sup>1</sup> Just to be clear, this period ranges from 1961-1965.

category at a staggeringly low \$32,068. Furthermore, African-Americans have the highest percentage of its members below the poverty line of any racial category at 27.6% despite making up only 12% of the total US population<sup>2</sup>.

As the United State's economy worsens, the connection between African-Americans, their low socioeconomic status, and the policies that have contributed to the conflation of these terms two factors must be examined. In the 1940s, federal legislation permitted local businesses to segregate and isolate the Black community by using such tactics as zoning, or the division of neighborhoods often by race, restrictive covenants, or legally imposing different real-estate restrictions on selected demographics, and red-lining, or the denial and/or increase in the cost of services to racially-selected neighborhoods. In doing so, the federal government in conjunction with these businesses created stigmas of African-Americans and African-American neighborhoods that heightened the white feeling of contempt and distrust of blacks. These policies also had a long-term, presently felt effect on the socioeconomics of African-American people and communities—most neighborhoods that are majority African-American are also the poorest.

To support the argument that race-based residential segregation and discrimination have caused the labels African-American and low socioeconomic status to merge, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, authors of the book *American Apartheid*, juxtapose the experience of poor African-Americans and poor whites living in Philadelphia in the 1980s. Massey and Denton start off this case study by establishing the similarities in neighborhood conditions between the two groups: “both groups live in

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census, 2010: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf>

areas where about 40% of the births are to unwed mothers, where median home values are under \$30,000, and where nearly 40% of high school students score under the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile on a standardized achievement test” (151). As income rose in both groups, 70% of white families were able to move into a neighborhood where only 10% of births are to single mothers and housing values are above \$30,000. In addition, school performance was markedly better for white families moving out of previously dire housing circumstances: only 17% of students in the local high school scored below the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile. Income increases and lack of residential barriers to entry allowed for poor whites to escape their negative residential conditions and achieve upward mobility. In contrast, blacks remained stuck in disadvantage at all income levels and mired with the same problems they were dealing with before the income increases. This lends weight to the following fact: that policies pre and post affirmative action have caused the labels “low-socioeconomic status” and “African-American” to be one in the same.

However, despite the findings of Denton and Massey, since Executive Order 10925 and the introduction of affirmative action as a proactive policy aimed at equality for underrepresented groups, African-American socioeconomic status has risen and is on the rise<sup>3</sup>. This can be explained by one thing: although members of low socioeconomic status are not typically considered an underrepresented group by affirmative action standards, there is a direct relationship between race, socioeconomic status, and any legislation or program that seeks to address either of the two in a beneficial way.

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<sup>3</sup> This excludes the skewed statistics brought along by the 2008 Recession

**Relevant images:**

Black: less than 5 years of elementary school

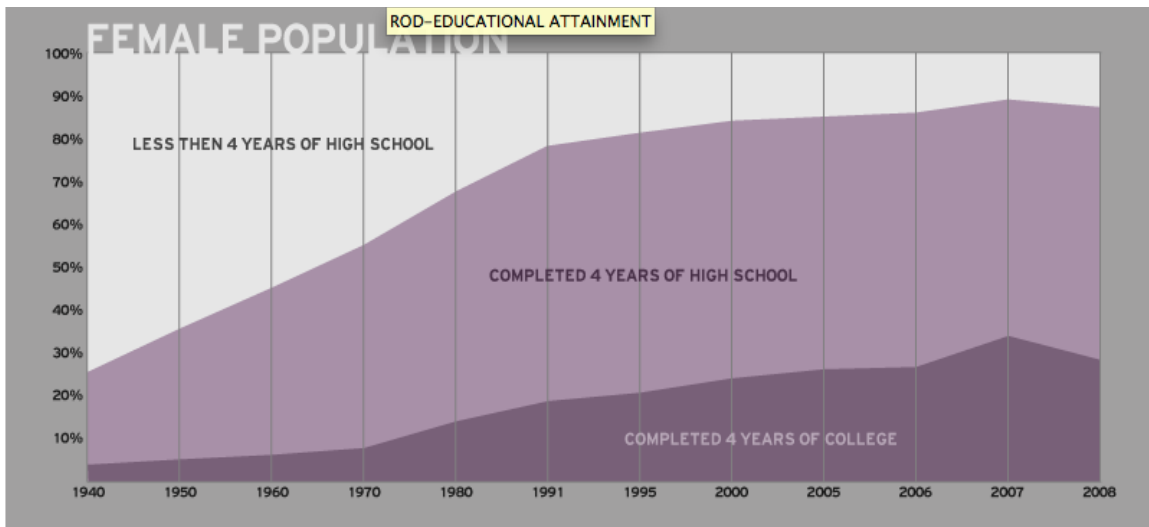
Black: High-school completion or higher

Black: 4 or more years of college

Years

23.5	21.7	3.5	April 1960
14.7	36.1	6.1	March 1970
9.1	51.4	7.9	March 1980
6.1	59.9	11.1	March 1985
5.1	66.2	11.3	March 1990
3.9	67.7	11.9	March 1992
3.7	70.5	12.2	March 1993
2.7	73.0	12.9	March 1994
2.5	73.8	13.3	March 1995
2.2	74.6	13.8	March 1996
2.0	75.3	13.3	March 1997
1.7	76.4	14.8	March 1998
1.8	77.4	15.5	March 1999
1.6	78.9	16.6	March 2000
1.3	79.5	16.1	March 2001
1.6	79.2	17.2	March 2002
1.3	81.1	17.7	March 2004
1.5	81.5	17.7	March 2005
1.5	81.2	18.6	March 2006
1.2	82.8	18.7	March 2007
—	84.1	19.3	March 2009

Taken from the US Census website



Data compiled from the US Census website, courtesy of [www.lsb.scu.edu](http://www.lsb.scu.edu)

ADMISSIONS



DAUGHTER  
of ALUM

SON of  
BIG DONOR

SOCCER  
PLAYER

RAISED in  
DISTANT STATE

MINORITY

DIDN'T  
GET IN

S. HENKINSON

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