NNG Members and Interested Social Justice Funders:

We are very excited to provide you with this report, *Pursuing Racial Equity Through Civic Engagement & Mass Media*.

Early this year, representatives from NNG, Wilder Research, and the Northwest Area Foundation entered into a partnership to develop a pre-conference issue paper that would give conference attendees a way to preview the issues that would be presented in *The Power of Generations: Pursuing Social Justice through Sacred Relationships*. We also hoped that the paper would serve as a way to inform discussions that would continue during the conference and post-conference as well.

After a national search, Wilder Research and NNG hired the first Social Justice Fellow to work for a full year on this initiative. For the past several months, Sheila Romero has been working with session designers, presenters, NNG staff and conference planners to develop a paper that offers some additional context to our conference, and that has the integrity to serve as a stand-alone piece for readers who simply want to explore issues of social justice. Sheila and the Wilder Research team have completed a stimulating piece that is backed by an annotated bibliography which we will post on our web site: www.nng.org.

We want to thank all of you who have helped give form to this piece. We know it required time and thought, and we appreciate the commitment you have made to NNG.

We want to thank Sheila for embracing this concept and for her dedication and hard work. We also want to thank Paul Mattessich, Sandi Pierce, and others at Wilder Research for supervising this project, and giving guidance to Sheila that will be valuable to her as she begins her career. Finally, we want to thank Ellery July and his colleagues at the Northwest Area Foundation for seeing the value of this effort and providing the funding support for this pilot year.

We commend this paper to you. We hope you enjoy the reading and that you find it a valuable resource in your work.

*Ari Matusiak*
Co-Chair  
NNG Board

*Ron McKinley*
Executive Director  
NNG
# Pursuing Racial Equity Through Civic Engagement & Mass Media

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## Acknowledgements

Social Justice Fellow, Sheila Romero, wishes to thank the National Network of Grantmakers (NNG), Wilder Research, and the Northwest Area Foundation for the opportunity to contribute to the efforts of social justice change. This paper would not have been possible if it weren’t for the following contributors: Ginger Hope, Paul Mattessich, Sandi Pierce, and others at Wilder Research.
Introduction

This paper discusses social justice and ways to attain it. It provides background for the 2005 National Network of Grantmakers conference “The Power of Generations: Pursuing Social Justice through Sacred Relationships.” More specifically, the paper:

- Offers context for the issues of this conference.
- Provides examples, from around the United States, of efforts to achieve social justice and racial equity through the engagement of community and the use of media.

The paper, along with the whole movement to promote social justice, is a “work in progress.” It reviews what we know as of now. As we strive to achieve social justice, new understandings will emerge, new information will come to light, and consensus may form on the most effective efforts. Together with the annotated bibliography prepared for the National Network of Grantmakers, this paper presents readers with a tool to raise awareness, inform others, stimulate discussion, and enlist new recruits in the promotion of social justice and racial equity.

The National Network of Grantmakers (NNG) is in the process of adopting a racial equity lens as a core means to attain social justice. Therefore, this paper uses racial equity as a lens through which to identify disparities, examine published research, and identify promising efforts.

NNG has particular interest in the engagement of communities and the use of mass media to achieve racial equity. The diagram below suggests how civic engagement might do this by building capacity, fostering connections, and promoting leadership.

Civic engagement, along with media visibility, can influence public opinion. Public opinion, along with voting power, community capacity, social connections, leadership, and a strengthened social structure, in turn influence racial equity. Of course, other factors influence social justice, such as gender equity and socioeconomic equity. However for the purpose of this paper and of the conference, we focus on racial equity as a means to attain social justice.

![Diagram of a Pathway to Social Justice through Racial Equity]

**ONE MODEL OF A PATHWAY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH RACIAL EQUITY**

- Civic engagement
- Voting power, capacity, connections, leadership
- Racial equity
- Social justice
- Other factors
**What does ‘social justice’ mean?**

Some definitions of social justice characterize it as a value, or something that should be done because it is right. For example, the Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ), based in Washington, DC, defines social justice as the virtue that guides the organization of institutions. CESJ suggests that “social institutions, when justly organized, provide us with access to what is good for the person, both individually and in our associations with others. Social justice also imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development.”

When applied as a value or moral obligation, this notion of social justice guides decisions and imposes ethical responsibility on individuals and institutions to act fairly.

Other definitions characterize social justice in practical terms: that the common good will also be good for the individual. One example of this appears in *The Charter of the Global Greens* (2001), which defines social justice as the “equitable distribution of social and natural resources, both locally and globally, to meet basic human needs unconditionally, and to ensure that all citizens have full opportunities for personal and social development... regardless of gender, race, age, religion, class, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, disability, wealth or health.” As a practical definition, social justice occurs when a society has both an equitable distribution of resources and full opportunities for development.

This paper accepts both types of definitions—social justice as a value and social justice as a practical benefit. The essential notion relies on people working together to ensure fair and equitable treatment of all individuals as an avenue to a healthy society.

The world contains many types of social injustice. Farmworkers become exposed to dangerous chemicals. Poor people lack access to health care. Minorities suffer racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious oppression that denies their civil liberties and/or restricts their access to employment, shelter, food, and other necessities. Those in power develop roadblocks to keep those out of power from organizing, voting, and asserting their voices. To help turn the tide, NNG brings its members and other conference participants together with the commitment to promote social justice as active agents of economic, political, and social change.

There is power in networking and coming together. How appropriate that this conference takes place near the site where the World Trade Organization protests occurred six years ago in Seattle, and on the sacred and native grounds of Semiahmoo. As NNG celebrates 25 years of philanthropic work in the social justice arena, you are invited to read and use each section of this paper:

- **Racial equity**—what it means, along with the dimensions of inequity in the forms of income, education, and health disparities.
- **Civic engagement**—in particular, political and civic participation as ways to address racial inequities.
- **The mass media**—its negative potential in influencing public opinion as well its value in eliminating injustice.
- **Conclusions**—summary thoughts, along with questions for further discussion and suggestions for action.
Racial equity

Racial equity is of critical importance for achieving social justice. People of color clearly do not share the social and economic assets of society in a way that corresponds to their numbers in the population and to their contributions in the workforce and other spheres.

Glenn Loury, an economist, asserts: “The question of social justice in our society cannot be meaningfully formulated without entering into the ambiguous and morally complicated morass of race.”

Race, at least in our time and place, is inseparable from social justice.

This section considers the concept of ‘racial equity.’ It then looks at disparities in education, income, and health/environment, providing a perspective on some of the experiences of African Americans, Latinos, American Indian/Alaska Natives, immigrants and refugees, and farmworkers.

What is racial equity?

Some scholars define ‘equity’ as all individuals “having equal access to economic, social, and educational opportunities.” Citing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenants and other widely adhered-to international human rights treaties and declarations, the People’s Movement for Human Rights Education makes this more explicit and posits equity as an entitlement to adequate standards of living, fair wages, safe and healthy working conditions, basic social services, medical care, and free primary education without regard to race, culture, gender, sexual orientation or religion.

In theory, a free market economy, with equal opportunity and equal access, should ideally result in the fair distribution of goods. “Fair,” of course, does not mean “equal.” Even if everyone did have equal access to education, jobs, housing, and the like, some would probably achieve more than others, by working harder or by producing results with greater economic value.

Whether the free market could, in fact, produce this ideal result is a moot point, however, because in practice equal opportunity does not exist. For centuries, persons of color in the United States have been excluded from opportunities to develop themselves. In some cases this exclusion was overt, through personal acts of prejudice or through formal laws or initiatives that discriminated or oppressed. In other cases, exclusion occurred through less visible patterns of social and economic organization that channeled education and employment opportunities to Whites. (Exclusion may occur solely on the basis of race; it may also be based on ethnicity, skin color, accent, language, legal status, or even family name.)

Sociologist Máire A. Dugan makes a valuable distinction between ‘inequity’ and ‘inequality’ by stating that while inequality refers simply to the uneven distribution of goods, inequity goes beyond this—not only is the distribution uneven, but it is unfair and unjust. She identifies inequity as the result of two powerful forces: individual prejudice and political imbalance on the social level.

Tracy E. Ore further sheds light on the role of social institutions in creating barriers to racial equity. In her book, *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality*, Ore defines social
institutions as “a series of rules and relationships that regulate the social activities in which citizens participate to meet their basic needs.” Social institutions maintain a system of oppression and privilege, thus limiting the fair distribution of resources. Ore identifies family, education, economy, government, and media as five major social institutions that influence and sustain inequity.

The 1960s Civil Rights movement in the United States challenged systematic racial inequity and inequalities. People of color fought for—and won—the same political, social, and economic rights that Whites have. Despite these gains, however, great disparities persist. We will review some of the key facts on disparities with respect to education, income, and health.

**Educational inequity**

Education constitutes a critical avenue of access to better paying jobs and other opportunities. In turn, better-paying jobs allow people to contribute to their communities as taxpayers and consumers. A better-paying job also means a better chance at getting health coverage and improving health standards for families.

The New York Times noted that nationally, about two-thirds of all students, but only half of all African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians who enter the ninth grade, graduate with high school diplomas four years later. Citing Tom Vander Ark of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Times asserted that education is “the most important long-term issue for the civic health of the republic.” People who achieve higher levels of education were described as more likely to participate in the economy and society. Statistics were reported confirming that high school dropouts earn much less than those who have a diploma; poverty rates for families headed by high school dropouts are more than twice the rates for families headed by high school graduates; and dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to vote, and more likely to be imprisoned than those who finish high school.

The table below offers a comparison that highlights two indigenous American groups: American Indians/Alaska Natives and Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders (who are usually lumped in U.S. Census reports with Asian groups having much higher educational attainment). These disparities in education, as we will see, correlate with racial disparities in poverty, median income, and even voting rates and incarceration.

<table>
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<th>Educational Attainment of the U.S. Population Age 25 and Older, by Race</th>
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<td>All U.S. adults</td>
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These data indicate that Latinos have the lowest high school graduation rates, so fewer of them are eligible to attend college. American Indians/Alaska Natives are the next lowest in high school and college graduation rates, followed by African Americans and Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders.

The National Report Card on Education and Equal Opportunity reported that affluent and White school districts also have better-qualified and more-experienced teachers. Research shows that high-poverty schools are twice as likely to hire under-qualified teachers:  

Researchers at the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics report point out the relationship between teacher quality and good schools:

...school quality is enhanced when teachers have high academic skills, teach in the field in which they are trained, have more than a few years of experience, and participate in high-quality instruction and professional development programs. Students learn more from teachers with strong academic skills and classroom teaching experience than they do from teachers with weak academic skills and less experience. Teachers are less effective in terms of student outcomes when they teach courses they were not trained to teach.  

Data from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that racial disparities in special education programs mirror racial disparities in education generally. African American children, for example, are over-represented in special education. Research suggests that, while poverty and environmental influences may partly account for this over-representation, the more important factor is that students of color are more frequently identified as needing special education services, based on racial bias, stereotypes, and other race-linked factors. This would naturally contribute to the overall lifetime educational disparities among racial groups.  

**Economic inequity**

**Median household income**

Median household income represents the “50 percent mark” – half of all households have greater than the median income, and half of all households have less. Median income measurements offer a basic, if crude, picture of which demographic groups struggle the most to make ends meet. The average 2002-2004 median household income for Asians was highest at $56,664, followed by Whites ($49,101), foreign-born residents and citizens of all races ($39,421), Latinos ($34,299), American Indians/Alaska Natives ($33,132), and African Americans ($30,355).  

**Poverty**

Expert observers identify a variety of causes of poverty, including unfavorable economic conditions, mental illness, substance abuse, poor education, historic and ongoing racism, and an unstable home life where abuse or negligence occur. Social exclusion relates to poverty as both a cause and a consequence. On the one hand, social exclusion restricts the opportunities of some people to obtain jobs and produce an adequate income. On the other hand, persons living below poverty often find themselves marginalized, or excluded, from community decision-making, from networks of power and influence, and from opportunities to advance themselves. The following graph shows the high rates of poverty among African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians/Alaska Natives in the U.S.
White, 26 percent are Latino, 2 percent are Asian American, 1 percent are American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 percent are of another or unknown race/ethnicity.\(^{17}\)

Michael Anft in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* reported in 2003 that the U.S. population at that time included 31 million foreign-born people, with an estimated 8 million of them not legally authorized to live and work in the U.S.\(^{18}\) In general, these undocumented workers are vulnerable to pressures to accept low pay and poor work conditions that require them to risk safety and health. Having no legal status, they are often reluctant to protest for fear of being deported.

These same undocumented workers are often blamed for draining the social and welfare systems. However, research by Steven Camarota, director of the Center for Immigration Studies, found that though immigrant households at first glance show persistently high rates of welfare use, that use is almost entirely explained by their heavy reliance on Medicaid rather than on TANF. Immigrant families’ use of TANF has fallen significantly, from a little under 6 percent in 1996 to slightly over 2 percent in 2001. Their reliance on food stamps has also decreased, from 10 percent of immigrant households in 1996 to 6 percent in 2001. Two important findings of the study are that almost 80 percent of immigrant households using any form of welfare in 2001 had at least one person working, and that a major reason for their heavy reliance on welfare programs is that many have little education.\(^{19}\)

In a 2001 report, *Opportunities Under TANF for Serving Refugee and Immigrant Families*, the National Conference of State Legislatures indicates that even authorized immigrant and refugee families face significant hurdles under TANF due to language and cultural barriers, both in working with TANF itself and in becoming employed within the welfare time limits.\(^{20}\)
Environmental inequity

Case study: Farmworkers

There are an estimated 2 to 4 million agricultural workers and dependents in the U.S. The National Agricultural Workers Survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1997 and 1998 found that 81 percent of farmworkers were foreign born, with 77 percent born in Mexico and an additional 2 percent born in other Latin American countries. Many farmworkers work long hours, receive very little pay, and are exposed to numerous hazards on the job, such as pesticides and hard labor. Erik Nicholson, regional director of the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) in the Pacific Northwest, described the following challenges:

“Racism is a huge obstacle. From Anglo consumers not seeing common cause with farmworkers, who largely are people of color, to environmental organizations looking past farmworkers and focusing exclusively on the non-human environment, to the establishment of a regulatory framework which establishes farmworkers as second-class citizens.” (E-mail correspondence, August 22, 2005.)

Holly Baker, of the Farmworker Association of Florida, concurs: “A number of factors further threaten workers’ health and safety such as: language barriers, fear of employer retaliation, lack of access to hand-washing and toilet facilities, low wages, inadequate access to health care, substandard farmworker housing, and unsafe transportation. Other problems that impact farmworker health include: the inadequacy of employer-provided pesticide training; misinformation about workers’ rights under the law; the lack of pesticide monitoring, enforcement, and reporting of workplace violations and incidents of pesticide-related exposure; health care providers’ lack of education about pesticide-related illness; unequal access to quality health care for farmworker communities; and the need to document farmworker health problems.” (E-mail correspondence, September 9, 2005.)

Irwin Weintraub defines ‘environmental racism’ as “the intentional siting of hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries in communities inhabited mainly by African American, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, migrant farm workers, and the working poor.” Weintraub notes that “minorities are particularly vulnerable because they are perceived as weak and passive citizens who will not fight back against the poisoning of their neighborhoods in fear that it may jeopardize jobs and economic survival.” Farmworkers, comprised mostly of Latinos, are disproportionately exposed to environmental toxins like pesticides. Further barriers to farmworker health include language barriers and fear of employer backlash.

In ongoing testing of farmworkers for overexposure to pesticides, the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries found in May 2004 that 82 of 345 farmworkers participating in baseline and follow-up blood tests showed signs of possible overexposure to pesticides, and in follow-up tests 20 showed overexposure serious enough to require immediate removal of workers from their jobs. Studies have shown that pesticides contribute to a variety of serious ailments, including cancer, respiratory diseases, cardiac arrest, and birth defects. Farmworkers who handle pesticides or live near the use of pesticides, such as in nearby agricultural camps or housing units, are the ones most affected.

Currently there are no federal laws in place to protect farmworkers from chronic exposure to pesticides. Activists propose that the government protects agricultural corporations in a profitable multi-million dollar industry that treats its workers like a commodity. Journalist Rebecca Clarren reports that fewer than five states collect accurate, detailed
information about pesticide use. A decision by Washington’s Supreme Court required the mandatory blood testing of agricultural workers and led to the establishment of a medical monitoring program applied to all workers beginning in February 2004. This was due in large part to the organized efforts of farmworker unions and organizations, which will be mentioned in the next chapters on civic engagement and use of mass media.

**Health inequity**

Lack of health insurance is closely related to income and poverty. Families that do not have the financial means to do so, cannot provide their families with health insurance. Federally funded health coverage (e.g., for welfare participants) places severe limitations on who gets coverage and the types of health services offered. State and federal governments use median household income as a poverty indicator to determine who is qualified for TANF. Families not affluent enough to provide their own medical coverage, but not poor enough to qualify, fall in limbo for health coverage.

International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (International Union, UAW) recognizes this problem and observes:

- **Infant mortality:** African American, American Indian, and Puerto Rican infants have higher death rates than White infants. In 2000, the African American-to-White ratio in infant mortality was 2.5 (up from 2.4 in 1998). This widening disparity between African American and White infants is a trend that has persisted over the last two decades.

- **Cancer:** African American women are more than twice as likely to die of cervical cancer compared to White women and are more likely to die of breast cancer than women of any other racial or ethnic group.

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To receive energy assistance families cannot earn more than 150 percent of the poverty line, or 60 percent of the state median income. When the poverty line is set too low, families who need help are denied government assistance.

Referring to the table below concerning persons of working age, approximately 37 percent of Latinos, 27 percent of American Indians/Alaska Natives, and 22 percent of African Americans have no health coverage (private insurance, HMOs, Medicaid or Medicare), compared to 13 percent of Asians/Pacific Islanders and 13 percent of Whites.

| PERCENTAGE OF U.S. ADULTS AGES 18-64 WITHOUT HEALTH COVERAGE, BY RACE AND ETHNICITY |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| White                           | 13%              |
| African American                | 22%              |
| Asian                           | 13%              |
| American Indian/Alaska Native   | 27%              |
| Latino                          | 37%              |


Other data from the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate wide disparities in health status when comparing groups of color with Whites:

- **Infant mortality:** African American, American Indian, and Puerto Rican infants have higher death rates than White infants. In 2000, the African American-to-White ratio in infant mortality was 2.5 (up from 2.4 in 1998). This widening disparity between African American and White infants is a trend that has persisted over the last two decades.

- **Cancer:** African American women are more than twice as likely to die of cervical cancer compared to White women and are more likely to die of breast cancer than women of any other racial or ethnic group.
Cardiovascular disease: Heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death for all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. In 2000, rates of death from diseases of the heart were 29 percent higher among African American adults than among White adults, and death rates from stroke were 40 percent higher.

Diabetes: In 2000, American Indians/Alaska Natives were 2.6 times more likely to have diagnosed diabetes compared with Whites. African Americans were 2.0 times more likely, and Latinos were 1.9 times more likely.

HIV/AIDS: Although African Americans and Latinos represented only 26 percent of the U.S. population in 2001, they accounted for 66 percent of adult AIDS cases and 82 percent of pediatric AIDS cases reported in the first half of that year.

Immunization: In 2001, Latinos and African Americans aged 65 and older were less likely than Whites to report having received influenza and pneumococcal vaccines.

Large racial disparities are evident in 1991-2002 cases of hepatitis, syphilis, and tuberculosis. Of particular concern to communities of color is the fact that the above national statistics mask even greater inequities that may exist in particular regions. The following regional statistics from 2001 illustrate some of those differences.31

- In Oregon, the diabetes death rate for African Americans (86.3 per 100,000) was much higher than the national rate (49.9 per 100,000) and over triple the diabetes death rate for Whites in Oregon (27.1 per 100,000).

- Nationally, the diabetes death rate for American Indians is 45.3 per 100,000. However, in South Dakota, American Indians had the highest death rate from diabetes of any racial group in any state across the nation: 96.3 deaths per 100,000 persons.

- African American women had the highest death rate for breast cancer among women in the nation (35.2 per 100,000). In Arizona, the death rate among African American women was 54.9 deaths per 100,000 compared to White women whose death rate was 24.2 per 100,000.

The Centers for Disease Control report additional racial disparities related to mental health, such as higher rates of depression, suicide, and substance abuse among American Indians and Alaska Natives. Minorities are also underrepresented when it comes to mental health research and access to services.

Racial inequity: Concluding comments

This brief review of racial disparities in the United States with respect to education, income, and health/environment demonstrates clearly that people of color fare, on the whole, worse than Whites in obtaining a share of resources that many of us would consider basic human needs.

If all people, regardless of race, had equal access to education, employment, and acceptable housing, then we could characterize these disparities as mere inequalities – some people simply did better than others. However, no serious observer of U.S. history can deny the patterns of discrimination and oppression that have deprived entire groups of equal access and have produced these severe disparities. The disparities not only point out the lack of racial equality; they show the lack of racial equity.
Civic engagement: Voting and working together on community issues

What works to promote racial equity? This paper identifies two tools that have potential: civic engagement, discussed here, and mass media coverage, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

First, it is important to consider what civic engagement means, and to understand the obstacles to participation that some individuals and communities face. Then we will discuss ways to overcome these obstacles. Some promising models from NNG members and other organizations demonstrate how different communities and organizations use civic relationships to pursue social justice.

Michael Delli Carpini, former director of The Pew Charitable Trusts, defines civic engagement as a set of “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” Committed individuals come together as a community to work towards common solutions to important issues, through, for example, volunteering, getting involved in organizations, and participating in the political process through voting and other means. By building relationships with other community members, people can overcome homelessness, crime, and other community-related problems together. A well-known example of civic engagement is the Neighborhood Watch program, where community members get to know each other, “watch out” for suspicious activity in their neighborhoods, and work with local police to report and prevent crime.

Others identify civic engagement as an empowerment tool, where citizens “recognize their authority, learn the skills to create change, and organize a base with others to share a common vision.” In other words, civic engagement can be used to mobilize people of color to reduce poverty, educational disparities and other racial inequities by increasing their organizations’ capacity levels and developing leadership skills among community members.

Civic engagement + infrastructure = healthy civic life

In a strategy paper developed as part of The Pew Charitable Trusts’ Youth Engagement Initiative, Michael Delli Carpini defines civic engagement as “a set of individual characteristics that collectively make up the requisites for good citizenship...[which] fall into three categories: attitudes, resources and behaviors.”

Related to attitudes, Delli Carpini says “engaged citizens (1) are interested in public affairs and politics, (2) feel a sense of trust in and connectedness to both government and their fellow citizens, and (3) believe that their participation can make a difference in helping to solve public problems that matter to them.” Related to resources, Delli Carpini lists those he believes necessary for civic engagement: “time, money, basic skills such as reading and writing, and (for more complex forms of participation) organizational and leadership skills.”

According to Delli Carpini, the key to civic engagement, particularly for disengaged youth, is “the belief that becoming involved in public life in any way that involves politics, government or organized collective action is likely to be effective or satisfying.”
Four types of civic engagement

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) suggests four ways of approaching civic engagement:35

1. Civic: Community problem-solving, regular volunteering for a non-electoral organization, active membership in a group or association, participation in fund-raising for a charitable cause.

2. Electoral: Regular voting, persuading others (petitioning or advocating), campaign contributions, volunteering for a political cause or candidate.

3. Political: Contacting officials (lobbying), contacting the press/media, protesting, boycotting, canvassing.

4. Attentiveness: Following government and public affairs, talking about current events, news, and politics with friends, family, and colleagues, keeping up with news via TV/radio/Internet.

The electoral and civic forms of civic engagement will be discussed in this section. Since political voice and attentiveness are related to media, they will be covered in the next section.

Voting and other political avenues to overcome racial inequity

Voting gives people influence over the distribution of resources. The popular phrase “every vote counts” indicates the importance of expressing political voice. The degree to which a community votes has an impact on how able a community is to access resources. The more people participate, the greater the likelihood they will have access to these resources. Mobilization of voters is therefore very important to secure policy-makers’ attention for people of color who experience inequities in education, poverty, and health care. This section will discuss barriers to voting experienced by the following populations: disenfranchised people of color, especially African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians/Alaska Natives; and youth of color. (See table below for specific information on U.S. racial and ethnic groups’ voter registration and actual voter turnout. This source did not include an American Indian/Alaska Native category due to a limited sample size for the population.)

Referring to the table below, during the 2004 election, about three-quarters of the White population registered to vote and 66 percent actually voted.

| PERCENTAGE OF U.S. POPULATION (ALL AGES) WHO VOTED OR REGISTERED TO VOTE, BY RACE AND ETHNICITY |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                                                 | White                          | African American                | Asian                          | Latino                          |
|                                                 | Total population | Citizen population | Total population | Citizen population | Total population | Citizen population | Total population | Citizen population |
| Registered                                      |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |
| 2004                                            | 74%                            | 75%                            | 64%                            | 69%                            | 35%                            | 52%                            | 34%                            | 58%                            |
| 2002                                            | 68%                            | 69%                            | 59%                            | 62%                            | 31%                            | 49%                            | 33%                            | 53%                            |
| 2000                                            | 70%                            | 72%                            | 64%                            | 68%                            | 31%                            | 52%                            | 35%                            | 57%                            |
| Voted                                           |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |                                |
| 2004                                            | 66%                            | 67%                            | 56%                            | 60%                            | 30%                            | 44%                            | 28%                            | 47%                            |
| 2002                                            | 48%                            | 49%                            | 40%                            | 42%                            | 19%                            | 31%                            | 19%                            | 30%                            |
| 2000                                            | 60%                            | 62%                            | 54%                            | 57%                            | 25%                            | 43%                            | 28%                            | 45%                            |

Source: 2005. U.S. Census Bureau.36
Among the total Latino population, 34 percent registered to vote, and 28 percent voted. Counting only Latinos who are citizens, the numbers are still low at 58 percent registered, and 47 percent who actually voted. Among the total Asian population, 35 percent registered and 30 percent actually voted; counting only citizens, 52 percent registered and 44 percent actually voted. African American percentages for both registered and actual voters are also lower than those of Whites in 2000, 2002 and 2004.

According to the Immigration Policy Center, there are 10.7 million naturalized citizens in the United States. Though only about half of this group (5.4 million) voted in the 2000 election, an impressive 87 percent of those who registered also voted. This is similar to U.S.-born voters (86 percent of all native registered voters). The number of new citizens is growing annually and shows untapped potential. The center’s research also indicates that foreign-born naturalized citizens can swing elections in key battleground states such as Arizona, Florida, Ohio, and Washington. In states with large immigrant populations like California, Florida, New York, and Illinois, new voters can sway an election by as little as 9 percent (IL) or as much as 27 percent (CA).37

Voter representation affects resource distribution to communities in areas such as education, health, basic infrastructure, and security (police and fire departments). Voter mobilization among underrepresented groups such as people of color and legal immigrants is important because they work and pay taxes in this country, yet have little representation in national politics or resource allocation. “Getting out the vote” is an important strategy for ensuring racial equity.

One example of an organization promoting naturalization as an avenue to greater representation is the Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (PILA), formerly known as the Northern California Citizenship Project (NCCP). Originally launched in 1997 as a short-term response to the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, which affected 150,000 Northern California low-income legal permanent residents, it grew from helping residents attain citizenship to promoting civic engagement. The organization does this via four tools including: civic participation guides and strategies; training and technical assistance for various community organizations; New Citizens Vote! educational curriculum; and grant-making to smaller organizations through its small grant initiatives program.38

The nonprofit organization MassVOTE (Massachusetts Voter Outreach, Training, and Education), a nonpartisan Massachusetts-based organization, works to “increase voter participation and promote election reform in urban areas across the state,” especially “among communities with historically lower rates of voting and representation.”39 MassVOTE has been able to promote higher voter turnout in predominantly Latino and African American neighborhoods like Grove Hall, Chinatown, and Uphams Corner.40

**Barriers to voting:**
**Disenfranchisement**

Disenfranchisement blocks certain members of society from participating in the voting system. In most states, people in prison do not have the legal right to vote. When certain communities are disproportionately represented in prisons, this in turn affects the community members left behind
who, being reduced in number, hold less political power. The diagram below provides an idea of how overrepresentation of people of color in the criminal justice system disproportionately affects communities of color.

African Americans and Latinos in particular are greatly over-represented in the U.S. prison system. Human Rights Watch reported that out of a total population of more than 1.9 million incarcerated adults in 2002, about 1.2 million (63%) were of African American or Latino descent—although these two groups constituted only 25 percent of the U.S. population. At midyear 2004 there were 4,919 Black male prison and jail inmates per 100,000 Black males in the United States, compared to 1,717 Latino male inmates per 100,000 Latino males and 717 white male inmates per 100,000 white males.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that between 1995 and 2001, the number of people in custody for drug offenses increased from 212,800 to 246,100, an increase of 116 percent. Drug offenses accounted for 23 percent of the total growth of African American inmates, and 18 percent of the total growth among Whites.

One could argue that the overrepresentation of African Americans incarcerated for drug offenses may be related to greater illicit drug use by African Americans. However, a national SAMHSA survey in 2003 found very little difference in the use of illicit drugs when comparing Whites age 12 and older to African Americans age 12 and older, with about seven percent of each group reporting illicit drug use in the previous month.

Reginald Shuford of the American Civil Liberties Union asserts that racial profiling plays a role in this:

One component of racial profiling today is a strong, well-funded effort to eradicate drugs. Starting in the 1980s, the “War on Drugs” also became associated with racial profiling. Those conducting the War on Drugs began to believe that it required a focus on African Americans and Hispanics—as being more likely than any other ‘demographic’ to be carrying drugs. This erroneous assumption has been examined in detail—and shown to be wrong. African Americans do not transport or use drugs more than anyone else—they use them much the same as other people. But when things get rough (i.e., as evidenced by the commencement of the War on Drugs), the people that bear the brunt of this are those who are disenfranchised, those who are less able to defend themselves. And in the U.S. that is Blacks and Hispanics.
In a 2002 study whose findings strongly suggest a pattern of racial profiling, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics interviewed 80,000 drivers across the nation. The study found that Whites and people of color were stopped by police at roughly the same rates, but people of color were about three times as likely to have their vehicles searched by police after being pulled over. According to the study, police were more likely to carry out either a physical search or a search of the vehicle of an African American driver (10.2%) or Latino (11.4%) than a White driver (3.5%).

A 1998 study of sentences for drug felonies, the most recent available, found that among persons convicted of drug felonies in state courts, Whites were less likely than African Americans to be sent to prison, as can be seen in the table below.

The Sentencing Project reports that as of 2005, 48 states (Maine and Vermont being the exceptions) and the District of Columbia deny the right to vote for those incarcerated for a felony offense and 36 states prohibit people convicted of felonies from voting while on parole. Thirty-one states continue to deny the right to vote until the probation period has ended. Three states deny the right to vote for all people convicted of felonies, for life.

According to Dēmos, a political think-tank based in New York, an estimated 1.6 million formerly incarcerated persons who have served complete sentences are unable to vote. An additional 3.05 million people are unable to participate because they are currently in prison, on parole, or on probation. This makes for a total of 4.65 million citizens who are unable to vote (see figure below.)

### White/Black Comparison of Sentences for Drug Offenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Possession</th>
<th>Trafficing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prison</td>
<td>Jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A disproportionate number of people in this group are people of color. The Sentencing Project, a Washington D.C.-based organization that studies criminal justice policies, reports that:

- 1.4 million, or 13 percent, of African American men are disenfranchised; a rate seven times the national average.

- Given current rates of incarceration, 30 percent of the next generation of African American men across the nation can expect to lose the right to vote at some point in their lifetime. In states that permanently disenfranchise ex-offenders, up to 40 percent of African American men may permanently lose the right to vote.

Communities with large populations of African Americans are disproportionately affected in their ability to protect their interests through political engagement. For example, in Atlanta, Georgia, where African Americans made up 61 percent of the total population in the 2000 Census, 30 percent of African American males who had not registered to vote in 2002 could not due so because of a felony conviction. Almost half (49%) of the Black/White male disparity in voter registration as of 2002 was due to the disenfranchisement of African American men, and one-third of Black male disenfranchisement in the entire state of Georgia was a result of a felony conviction for a drug offense.

Similarly, in a 2003 study of Latinos in Arizona, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) estimated that while Latinos make up 21 percent of the state’s total voting age population and 15 percent of U.S. citizens of voting age, they make up 28 percent of the state’s population disenfranchised because of felony convictions.

One effort to overcome the barriers posed by disenfranchisement was launched cooperatively by three organizations (the Legal Action Center, the Brennan Center and Community Service Society, and the New York Board of Elections), known as “Unlock the Block.” Their initial project removed all voter registration barriers for people with past felony convictions by identifying impermissible voter registration practices by local boards of elections and campaigning to end those practices. A second project is working to challenge existing disenfranchisement laws that prevent 131,000 individuals convicted of a felony from voting in the state of New York.

Grassroots activism by The Sentencing Project and other groups has led to legislative changes in five states (Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New Mexico, and Texas) between 1997 and 2003. Those changes have allowed almost 500,000 people in those states to regain the right to vote as potential registered voters. In New York City, the Unlock the Block Campaign is working to challenge disenfranchisement laws, which prevent 131,000 individuals convicted of a felony in the state of New York from voting. The campaign involves ensuring that city and state agencies are in active compliance with the law, registering eligible individuals, and mobilizing communities to vote.

Increasing the vote in communities of color that are underrepresented has the potential to impact decision-making and the distribution of community resources, since every active voter can help make a difference. Marc Mauer, the assistant director of the Sentencing Project, reports that during the 2000 presidential election, when George W. Bush’s win was decided by 537 ballots in the state of Florida, some 600,000 disenfranchised people who had already served their sentences were not eligible to vote by state law.
**Disengagement of youth and young adults**

CIRCLE (the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) identifies civic disengagement, particularly regarding voting, as a major problem among young adults of color ages 18-24. The table below demonstrates how young Latinos are the least likely to vote, with Asians as the second-least likely. Young American Indians seem to have voted at slightly higher percentages; however, it is still between 6 and 13 percentage points lower than their African American or White peers.

VOTING AMONG YOUTH, AGES 18-24, IN 2000 AND 2004 ELECTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2004. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

**Strategies for community capacity-building**

The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) uses the following approaches in supporting capacity-building with underserved communities: 61

- Function as enablers, facilitators, resources and co-creators with the community, not as “experts” imposing “other” cultural perspectives or approaches.

- Identify, document, synthesize, and transfer knowledge about lessons learned and return it to the community, because it belongs to them; and incorporate the lessons learned into the institutional practices of those providing support or technical assistance so that they, too, can continue to grow.

- Engage in a process of diagnosis that consists of creating a planning team made up of individuals who represent the various perspectives within an organization or community.

- Review the history and cultural elements of the community prior to beginning a project.

- Engage the planning team in dialogue to define the best approach for overall organizational effect.

To carry out these activities, NCDI sends appropriate personnel into the communities (staff and consultants) as teams that are technically and culturally appropriate to the specific community, in terms of background and experience. Each team does the following:

- Scans the environment and selects culturally- and community-based tools.

- Includes a strategy for leaving capacity in the organization or community that outlives their work with them, and offers follow-up to increase the chances of sustained institutional capacity.

- Adapts service delivery methods to meet the unique needs of diverse groups and ensures that all voices are included in the process.

- Ensures that those impacted by decisions are in steering positions.
Ensures that the language and process (strategic plan, program evaluation, etc.) are not oppressive.

Ensures that support services (child care, food, translation, transportation, etc.) are provided so that everyone can participate.

Delivers services and products in multiple media (written, oral, electronic, paper, etc.) so that everyone in the community has access to them.

**Capacity-building for civic engagement**

NNG recognizes capacity-building as an important avenue to achieve higher levels of civic engagement. Capacity builds on the existing civic infrastructure that engages citizens in decision-making at both the community and organizational levels.

Some experts define capacity-building as “the combined influence of an organization’s abilities to govern and manage itself, to develop assets and resources, to forge the right community linkages, and to deliver valued services.”

Susan Doherty and Steven Mayer of the Effective Communities Project identify two types of capacity-building: organizational and community. These authors list leadership development, finance and fundraising management, and development of programs and evaluation as essential to building an organization’s effectiveness and sustainability.

While organizational capacity-building is related to community-based nonprofits that serve disadvantaged individuals and communities, community capacity-building functions to develop tighter community cohesion and a general ability to respond to a community’s problems and opportunities.

The Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), a four-year project of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, is another example of organizational capacity-building. PRE centers on providing educational resources to grantmakers working to combat institutional and structural racism in communities. PRE also engages in community capacity-building by working at the local level with community leaders and local funders to coordinate effective racial equity and race relations programs.

The Effective Communities Project is another example of community capacity-building through its work with neighborhood-based groups. Mayer identifies a number of ways that voluntary community groups and nonprofit organizations form “political bedrock” that can draw in resources from schools, churches and other religious institutions, government, small and large businesses, and community foundations. These include:

- Supporting political movements behind better housing, schools, recreation, health, safety, and other issues. Also creating processes for facilitating governance and justice, such as elections, juries, political parties, police and advocacy groups.

- Recognizing and building on the fact that considerable money changes hands in neighborhoods. Most businesses and services, and the formal institutions that exist in neighborhoods, like schools, parks, churches and other religious institutions, draw their support from a larger territory.
Organizing around common issues, themes, or interests. Individuals create the atmosphere for educating each other and the larger community, raise money in support of projects they want to promote, and develop the political and organizational skills needed to accomplish their goals.

Capacity-building for communities of color, both through organizations and communities, is increasingly important as a tool to promote civic engagement. Community capacity-building can be very effective with employment issues or labor laws. For example, the Central Texas Immigrant Worker Rights Center (El Centro de Apoyo para Trabajadores Inmigrantes), focuses on immigrant and migrant workers. Some ways that the center builds community capacity include education and advocacy, where weekly workshops are organized to educate workers about their universal rights; and leadership development and training courses to promote worker rights.

Another example of community capacity-building is organized around addressing racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In a series of communications (April 18, July 25, and August 18, 2005), Will Harrell, executive of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Texas described the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) of which his organization is a partner. TCJC engages its diverse communities in a multi-racial, multi-generational, bipartisan coalition setting. TCJC is composed of the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, Break the Chains and a variety of other groups. Civic engagement is made possible by employing what the coalition calls a “formless army” strategy, which encourages each group to lay its differences aside and instead organize to attain achievement of one goal: reform of the criminal justice system. Harrell suggests that there is a two-fold benefit of such a strategy:

1. A coalition maintains autonomy and neutrality so the opposition can’t see one group operating behind the coalition and focus its attack on that one group. For example, if one of the groups happens to be a politically conservative organization, it doesn’t draw fire from politically liberal organizations to attack the credibility of the coalition (or vice-versa).

2. The model serves as an empowering strategy that involves each group and their strengths. For example, one group might be better at mobilizing than the other groups, whose strengths may be in lobbying, public relations, fundraising, etc.

Sovereignty, civic engagement, and economic development

Sovereignty, in simplest terms, is self-rule—the right of a tribe to manage its own affairs. Sovereignty is considered a racial equity issue, since eliminating American Indians’ right to self-govern was a primary goal of hundreds of years of U.S. federal policies. These policies included genocide, criminalization of culture and language, attempts to force assimilation through the removal of Indian children from their families, and confinement of Native people on reservations. Not only did these efforts create mass trauma over generations, but they also forced dependency on the U.S. government for basic needs. Most tribal communities experienced a complete loss of autonomy and resulting inability to be self-sufficient.
Centuries of genocide, attempted subjugation, and racial and cultural oppression continue to play out today in significant social, economic, health, and educational disparities for all indigenous peoples, including First Nations (Canada) and American Indian (United States) peoples. North America’s indigenous peoples experience higher national rates of suicide, homicide, accidental death, domestic violence, child abuse, and alcoholism. The long-term effects of North American colonization can be understood by looking at the diagram below.

In a paper developed for the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Eric Henson and Jonathan B. Taylor report that American Indian nations have taken positive steps to address racial inequities and improve their capacity by strengthening tribal governments and economies. One example of this is through gaming enterprises.70

The Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Indians in Minnesota has used gaming proceeds to build roads, install water and sewage systems, and fund language preservation. In another example, the Mississippi Choctaw have virtually eliminated unemployment and created an economic boom in their jurisdiction; they have used gaming profits to make significant improvements in public safety and health care delivery.71

Not only have tribes established their political voice in these exercises of sovereignty, but they have also given their community members new hope, increased pride, and new opportunities for engagement in nation-building activities.

Many tribes are promoting indigenous culture as a way to engage the community in solving problems like gang violence, crime, and drug use. Henson and Taylor observe:
Tribes are tapping deep cultural connections to find solutions. Whether it is the union of Ho-Chunk elders and youth in mentoring programs, the restorative systems of justice for Navajo juveniles, or the training of Ojibwe teens to make music videos in their Native tongue, tribes are finding that traditional intergenerational bonds form a strong foundation for addressing today’s issues. Those bonds of family, community, shared history and shared challenges stretch back through centuries. They undergird what it is to be “Indian” in America at the new millennium. They are the foundation on which Indian peoples now strive to define their own futures for themselves.  

Yet another way to engage indigenous communities effectively is via education about sovereignty. The Canada-based nonprofit Environmental Aboriginal Guardianship through Law and Education (EAGLE) has set a powerful precedent by providing education and legal advice to First Nations in defending their land and sovereign rights.  

Farmworkers and civic engagement

The promotion of citizenship and civic engagement ensures that communities of color, like farmworkers who are predominantly Latino, benefit from much needed resources like clean water, protection from environmental hazards, and education and health provision for their children.

The United Farm Workers of America (UFW) have set a precedent in the movement for farmworker justice since the 1960s. Today, the UFW has garnered support in the Northwest and achieved some legislative gains, including the recent passage of mandatory blood testing for pesticide exposure, ordered by the Supreme Court in the state of Washington.

Other farmworker groups are building support networks and increasing their capacity levels. One of them is the Farmworker Association of Florida, which does this through various avenues such as:

- Farmworker health research, which involves community/academic partnerships.
- Economic development initiatives for organizational sustainability and to build capacity of farmworkers.
- Farmworker and immigrant rights advocacy, citizenship classes, civic participation, and legalization assistance.
- Trainings on legislative process, pesticide safety, and leadership development.
- Workplace organizing focused on workers’ rights, wages and benefits, housing, transportation, and working conditions.
- Health outreach, which involves AIDS awareness and prevention, pregnancy and postpartum care, women’s health education, and vocational rehabilitation.
- Community education on migrant/bilingual students’ rights, and building parent leadership in schools.
- Disaster assistance, including preparedness, needs assessment, and recovery.

Another example of farmworker capacity building and leadership development is CAPACES in the Pacific Northwest. “CAPACES” is Spanish for “we are capable” and involves nine major sister organizations led by the Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste–PCUN) based in Oregon. The coalition
builds capacity, engagement, and solidarity through education within their communities. The group developed 100 hours of leadership and fundraising training through 42 classes and gatherings, and created a curriculum of bilingual lesson plans, course notes, and supplemental materials. (E-mail correspondence with Larry Kleinman, June 17, 2005.)

**Civic engagement: Concluding comments**

American Indians, Latinos, and African Americans are the U.S. populations that have been most disadvantaged by disenfranchisement and youth disengagement. Voter representation, civic engagement, and capacity-building provide important avenues to racial equity by helping communities to mobilize, develop leadership, and gain access to resources. The following diagram illustrates this section’s main points about capacity-building as a way to effectively promote civic engagement.

In addition to disenfranchisement, low voter turnout exists among people of color, especially in the American Indian, Latino and African American communities. Barriers to voting include legal status, which affects immigrant populations and unauthorized workers in particular.

Voter mobilization represents the method of civic engagement that may have the most impact in overcoming racial inequity because voting power means historically disadvantaged and poor communities can gain access to public resources. In order to overcome disparities in voting patterns, disempowered communities have to be mobilized.

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**HOW CAPACITY-BUILDING CAN MOBILIZE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND IMPROVE CIVIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR**

- **Institutional support for community cohesion, mobilization, and leadership**
- **Communities of color identify and prioritize issues of importance and leaders step forward**
- **Communities of color are better able to protect themselves against discrimination and unequal treatment**
- **Racial disparities are reduced and gains are made socially and economically**
- **Communities of color experience greater access to opportunities and resources**
- **Communities of color are better able to ensure representation and the development of political and economic opportunity**
The influence of media coverage: A double-edged sword

As the previous section implies, mass media are closely connected with civic engagement when citizens express political voice and attentiveness as tools to make a difference in their communities. Citizens express their political voice by putting pressure on their political representatives, contacting the press, protesting, and boycotting consumer products. Attentiveness grows when citizens keep up with current events through different forms of media such as television, radio, print, and the Internet, and when citizens discuss political viewpoints amongst themselves.

The “digital divide”

During the last 100 years, a multitude of media have become available, including but not limited to television, radio, newspaper, magazines, e-mail, and the Internet.

There is some evidence that race matters in who has access to computers and the Internet, though the debate is still not resolved. In 1998, researchers Donna L. Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak found that African Americans and Whites differed significantly in access to personal computers and Web use. Their findings showed that household income, but not educational attainment, influences home computer ownership. Educational attainment affected overall computer access (such as at work) as well as Web use. Younger African Americans were more likely to use the Internet and to work in computer-related jobs, but when looking at students who had no access to home computers, White students were much more able to find some alternative means of accessing the Internet.

In a follow-up study in 1999, these researchers found that the gap between Whites and African Americans in access to a home computer was persistent and seemed to be increasing, but that the gap in Web usage was diminishing rapidly. Their conclusion was that a primary cause of the still existing digital divide was unequal access to a home computer.

Recent research has identified important benefits resulting from information technology (IT), Internet communication, computer network usage, and new communication technology networks in particular:

- Those who utilize IT possess more accurate information than those who do not.
- There are economic benefits to Internet access, such as the ability to search for employment, file taxes, conduct financial transactions, and learn about financial opportunities.
- There are interpersonal benefits including the ability to communicate more with others, increasing levels of communication and maintaining ongoing relationships with families, friends, and new contacts made through use of IT.
- Political benefits include higher levels of participation in civic matters, the ability to engage in discussion and leadership roles that challenge differences in status, learning about or keeping informed on political issues, and even altering existing political organization by engaging social groups not previously engaged.
Pursuing Racial Equity Through Civic Engagement & Mass Media

There are negative consequences for those who are excluded from newly emerging forms of online communication in addition to not enjoying the benefits listed above, such as being left out of new communication networks related to societal systems that are increasingly reliant on IT. One example is state and local governments’ growing practice of publishing reports and resource information online rather than in print.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation reports that public access computers are now available in more than 95 percent of the nation’s public libraries, making an important difference in increasing disadvantaged groups’ access to IT.

**Ethnic media**

Ethnic media can be an effective way of reaching out to disadvantaged communities, for example, as a potential avenue for mobilizing the vote. Based on a 2005 national public opinion survey of 1,895 Asian American, Hispanic, African American, Arab American and American Indian adults, New California Media (NCM) estimates that 29 million ethnic adults are primary consumers of ethnic media, and these media reach a total of 51 million adults overall (one-quarter of the U.S. population). NCM reports that 80 percent of the ethnic populations they studied is reached by ethnic media on a regular basis, though the type of preferred media differs across groups.

- 87 percent of all Hispanic adults access Spanish-language television, radio, or newspapers on a regular basis. One-fifth of Spanish adults say they prefer Spanish-language newspapers to their English-language counterparts. Only 24 percent have Internet access.

- A substantial majority of African American adults listen to ethnic radio stations on a regular basis, in particular those who are age 40 and older and those with annual incomes above $40,000. Almost half have Internet access.

- Half or more of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean adults read ethnic newspapers on a regular basis. Sixty-seven percent have Internet access.

- Three-quarters of Arab Americans are reached by Arabic media, with television the preferred medium. Three-quarters of Arab American adults have access to the Internet.

- One-fifth of American Indians are primary consumers of ethnic and tribal newspapers. Nearly half have access to the Internet.

The Pew Internet and Family Life Project reports that in 2005, 70 percent of Whites use the Internet. The national survey by New California Media found a much lower proportion of Internet users among racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S., but among those who do use it, some visit ethnic-specific web sites, as is shown in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERNET USE AMONG FIVE U.S. ETHNIC GROUPS</th>
<th>Use the Internet</th>
<th>Visit ethnic web sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab Americans</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Americans</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indians</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanics</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Racial stereotypes in the media

In the past, the media have contributed to negative stereotypes of virtually every ethnic and cultural minority group. Unfortunately, much of this stereotyping continues today. Most often it is subtle, yet present nonetheless. For example, the news media’s ubiquitous coverage of crime, drug abuse, and gang violence among African American young men has fostered a distorted public perception of African Americans as a whole. Always on the lookout for sensational coverage, the news media too often ignore the historical racism and chronic poverty that have contributed to the anti-social behaviors of some African American youth today.

A prime example of this is the riots that took place following the 1992 Rodney King trial in Los Angeles. Racial tension was the catalyst for this tragic event, not the cause. What happened was described by one author as “the consequence of economic decline, cultural decay, and political apathy.”

While the news media portrayed the riot as a “Black event,” only 36 percent of those arrested were African American. Most media outlets failed to cover this reality.

The riots in Los Angeles are not the only example of selective news coverage of African American issues. Richard Lapchick of Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sport in Society asserts:

Nonetheless, surveys show that the majority of Whites still believe that most African Americans are less intelligent, are more likely to use drugs, be violent and are more inclined to be violent against women…Sport, as it is currently being interpreted now provides Whites with a chance to talk about athletes in a way that reinforces those stereotypes about African Americans. With African Americans dominating the sports we watch most often (77 percent of the players in the NBA, 65 percent in the NFL…57 percent in NCAA division basketball and 47 percent in NCAA Division I football are African American), whites tend to “think black” when they think about major sports.

Even in the entertainment media, where communicating a factual reality is typically not the intent, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes is equally strong. Media scholar Tara Yosso asserts that “mainstream Hollywood films often portray whites as successful in school and in life, whereas Chicanas/os and African Americans are more generally characterized as failures in education and society.”

In a report developed as part of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, Henson and Taylor advise that historically, the public has been largely ignorant or misinformed when it comes to the diversity of American Indians due in large part to media portrayal of them as a singular group and negative caricatures of them in sports, TV and newspapers. They add that the public has also been misinformed or are unaware about the special relationship American Indian nations share with the federal government, due to their history as the original inhabitants of the Americas. These misunderstandings often result in negative attitudes, even inciting political and economic actions against American Indian peoples who have been given special rights such as gaming and protection of sacred land in recognition of American Indian sovereignty.

Henson and Taylor remind us that “the media not only inform but they persuade.” Media can
eradicate misconceptions about American Indians by educating the public through the mainstream mass media and through the voices of American Indians themselves. One prime example of this is the Gwich’in community’s low-powered FM radio station in Arctic Village, which has stimulated civic engagement by teaching tribal culture, strengthening community identity, and announcing information of particular interest to the community.90

Examples of positive work with mass media

The following examples demonstrate approaches to using mass media to inform, raise awareness, and mobilize.

The Akonadi Foundation, based in Oakland, CA, supports various nonprofits working toward social change and racial justice, such as The SPIN Project (Independent Media Institute); Ebb Pod Productions, which has produced an historical documentary on the North’s role in the slave trade; and If Americans Knew, which is working to eliminate disinformation and negative stereotyping about Palestinians and Arab Americans.91

The Media Justice Fund (Funding Exchange), a grant-making foundation based in New York, supports grassroots organizations that incorporate media advocacy as a core component of their social justice work. Toolkits are provided to groups that inform communities of color and to gender justice organizations.92

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an international Quaker-based organization utilizes the media in its Immigrant Rights Program through a method they call “participatory documentation.” Through this type of media, human rights victims are encouraged to document, report, and advocate around their communities and workplaces. AFSC also encourages immigrants to portray themselves in a positive light by highlighting their positive contributions to society. Some examples include interviewing immigrants and refugees involved in community activism, recording how cities and communities have been restored either through volunteerism or tax payments, looking at positive examples of small business ownership, and developing mentoring programs.93

The Farmworker Association in Florida gained media exposure in early 2005 for three babies with severe birth defects born to farmworker families in Immokalee, FL. Media emphasis on the suspected connection between pesticide exposure and the birth defects has mobilized support of farmworkers by health workers, environmentalists, lawyers, faith-based communities, politicians, and others.

MoveOn.org has been cited by, among others, Sarah Palmer, an academic writer for ServiceLeader.org. Palmer noted MoveOn.org’s effective use of Internet media to mobilize voters, particularly young adults:

MoveOn.org is one internet site that has gotten a great deal of media attention for its ability to organize America’s youth quickly and efficiently, especially around the 2003 war with Iraq and the upcoming 2004 presidential elections. It aims to engage “ordinary” Americans in the political sphere and has had a great deal of success. Currently, 1.4 million Americans, many of whom “haven’t been political before” are members and receive regular updates and requests to sign petitions about issues on the legislative agenda.94
Mass media: Concluding comments

As the previous examples have shown, the media have been and will continue to be a powerful force in shaping attitudes toward race and race relations in our society. As advances in technology create an expanding universe of media types and outlets, both vigilance against negative media representations and judicious use of media to advance racial and other social justice initiatives will be of critical importance.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a variety of analyses and perspectives on racial equity issues, as well as their relationship to the social justice process. This paper has explored how disparities in education prevent people of color from progressing toward equity in income, health care, and political representation. Similarly, it has shown how low voting patterns among certain racial groups—which are due in part to barriers like racial profiling, disenfranchisement and limited access to quality education—have exacerbated issues of chronic poverty and poor health. Research shows that voting increases power and representation, which thus increase resources for those communities that vote in large numbers.

Indigenous peoples everywhere are affected by a legacy of colonialism that has left them impoverished and lacking in resources to fully establish and exercise their own governments. Yet, they are tapping into their cultures to find answers, such as the Haida Nation’s use of Aboriginal lawyers (EAGLE) who understand and support their efforts to defend their territories and resources in Canada.

Through this paper we have also explored how civic engagement can strengthen indigenous, minority, and immigrant groups struggling to overcome inequities. One critical form of civic engagement is voter mobilization. Others include engaging people through nonprofit organizations, as well as community organizing, lobbying, advocating, building alliances, networking, building community cohesion, capacity-building, and leadership development.

Finally, media clearly can be a powerful tool for educating the public about issues such as voting, disenfranchisement and racial profiling. However, it can too often work to promote negative stereotypes of various ethnic and cultural groups. As the number of media types and outlets continue to expand, it will be of utmost importance to not only continue careful scrutiny of them, but to use them judiciously to further racial equity goals.

With much to digest and consider, it is important to spend a few moments asking ourselves where we go from here. How can this information best be utilized and shared among others committed to social justice? What actions can each of us take in the near term to begin the process of countering the societal failings outlined in this paper, and promote the successes? How will we know if we are making a difference? It is in these moments of reflection that solutions are found and passions ignited. This is the recipe for effective social justice change.
Sources


Pursuing Racial Equity Through Civic Engagement & Mass Media


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