



Sustainability

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Land & Wealth Inequity in the U.S.



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Wealth, land, and opportunity disparities have led to some of the [worst cases](https://www.insider.com/environmental-racism-examples-united-states-2020-8#cancer-alley-louisiana-1) (<https://www.insider.com/environmental-racism-examples-united-states-2020-8#cancer-alley-louisiana-1>) of environmental racism and injustice in this country. Many of the disparities witnessed and experienced today are direct results of oppressive systems like slavery, the forced displacement and assimilation of Indigenous peoples, and racist immigration restrictions. Privileged groups, like white people, often believe they earned all

of the success they have today solely based on their hard work. However, we must recognize the history and policies that have contributed to the massive success gap in society today.

Inequity vs. Inequality

“Inequity” and “inequality” are often interchanged in daily discourse. However, the distinctions between the two are important to understand. The term “inequality” refers to uneven distributions of resources while [“inequity”](http://www.globalhealthurope.org/index.php/resources/glossary/values/179-inequity-and-inequality-in-health) (<http://www.globalhealthurope.org/index.php/resources/glossary/values/179-inequity-and-inequality-in-health>) recognizes the systemic influences of issues like corrupted politics and discriminatory policies that create unjust and completely avoidable social conditions between different groups. The wealth and land ownership gaps in the United States today are inequitable because they stem from unjust choices people in power made that prioritized certain groups of people over others.

A History of Inequity in the U.S.

Some scholars estimate that over [60 million](https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-31/european-colonization-americas-killed-10-percent-world-population-and-caused) (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-31/european-colonization-americas-killed-10-percent-world-population-and-caused>) Indigenous peoples lived in what we now call the Americas before colonization. These peoples had their own nations, cultures, and traditions. Although Indigenous nations fought against the invasions from European countries, many of them were decimated by [genocide](https://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/native-american-timeline) (<https://www.history.com/topics/native-american-history/native-american-timeline>).

In the late 1600s, the Thirteen British Colonies in North America used [indentured servants](https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race) (<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race>) to work on the new tobacco plantations. Many of these servants were European, but some were from Africa as well. This form of forced labor allowed the possibility for servants to earn their freedom. These servants were eventually replaced with enslaved people from Africa and also enslaved Indigenous peoples. The indentured servants trained the enslaved people and were rewarded from the elite class with rights and sometimes even land.

The nearly 200 years of slavery in the United States expanded white wealth by an estimated [\\$1 trillion](https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm) (https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm). People in both the North and the South experienced this newfound wealth. While slavery largely remained in the South due to the agricultural economy, white people in the [North](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajn9g5Gsv98&src_vid=RNftCCwAol0&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_73346) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajn9g5Gsv98&src_vid=RNftCCwAol0&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_73346) owned businesses that insured slaves for plantations. Northern businesses also industrialized to produce products from the cotton in the South and profited from the shipments and enslaved labor. Banks in the North also helped plantation owners with loans. White people across the country supported and benefited from the enslavement of other people.

New policies also affected people of different races and ethnicities differently. The 1790 Naturalization Act only allowed “free white persons” to enter the United States. This limited immigration and citizenship from European countries only. Alien Land Laws were passed in places like California. These laws blocked Asian American immigrants from becoming naturalized so that they could not own land or vote. Additionally, the

U.S. Army forcibly stole land from Indigenous peoples with the 1830 Indian Removal Act and the 1862 Homestead Act. These stolen lands were given to white settlers for free.

After the Civil War, General Sherman's Civil War plan promised to give freed enslaved people "[40 acres and a mule](https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm)," (https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm) which never happened. Reparations were never made for the enslavement of Black people. Instead, former slave owners got compensated by the government for each of the enslaved people they used to own. Freed Black people continued to face discrimination with the Jim Crow laws, many of which continued until the 1960s. These laws further divided wealth and opportunity inequity in the United States by segregating communities and giving the white portion the best schools, hospitals, and facilities.

Redlining and the Social Security Act of 1935 also targeted people of color. The practice of redlining separated communities by "safe" neighborhoods from "risky" ones and gave the safe neighborhoods, which were predominantly white, home loans. The Social Security Act of 1935 guaranteed retirement benefits to professions except for agriculture and domestic work. These positions were largely held by people of color. Both of these practices further divided access and attainability of homeownership and supported previous methods of oppression by creating a system in which many people of color had to work for little profit for most of their lives.

Wealth Inequity Today

Today, it's estimated that the average white family in the United States has [eight times the net worth](https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm) (https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-02.htm) of the average Black family, due to our history of racial preferential treatment. This economic divide continues to grow. [Reports](https://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index) (<https://scalar.usc.edu/works/growing-apart-a-political-history-of-american-inequality/index>) have revealed that "the richest 1 percent claims over a third of the nation's wealth" while "the top 5 percent claim over 60 percent" of wealth in the United States. Even during World War II when the U.S. was plunged into a new war-based economy, the income gap between the poor and the rich was smaller than it is now.

The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality in countries. A Gini coefficient of 0 equates to complete equality while a measure of 1 signifies complete inequality. The program compares the population to their proportion of income to determine the measure. Using the most recent data from 2017, the U.S. has a Gini coefficient of 0.390, which is one of the highest scores in the world. For comparison, the Slovak Republic has one of the lowest scores at 0.236. Alongside income inequality, the U.S. also has one of the [highest measures](https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm) (<https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>) of poverty gaps in the world. While the Gini coefficient is not a perfect indicator of wealth inequality, it provides a base measure to compare and contrast economic disparities between countries. These wealth disparities today intersect with gender and racial discrimination, especially targeting women of color who, on average, earn [only 63%](https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/black-women-and-the-pay-gap/) (<https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/black-women-and-the-pay-gap/>) of what white men get paid. [Researchers](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp145_2015.pdf) (https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp145_2015.pdf) have also found that "rich countries with higher inequality consume more resources and generate more waste per person."

Poverty gap Total, Ratio, 2019 or latest available

Source: Income distribution



Sustainability Consequences

These economic disparities create consequences for not just our economic sustainability, but also our social and environmental sustainability. [Research](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp145_2015.pdf) (https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp145_2015.pdf) has shown that income inequality has led to wealthier people dumping waste in low-income neighborhoods. As a result, residents in those communities suffer from related health issues and the total pollution level is worse than it would have been in a more equitable society. Bigger income disparities are also linked to greater biodiversity loss and threatened species.

Becoming a more-equitable country will help the United States lower its impact on the environment. Japan is one of the most equitable countries in the world, while the U.S. is one of the least. In the U.S., the inequality ratio between the top ten percent of the wealthiest people in the population and the bottom ten percent is 15.9. In Japan, that ratio is only 4.5. Additionally, the ecological footprint on average in Japan is nearly half of the impact in the U.S.

Acknowledge Discomfort

Guilt, shame, and a strong desire to bury these uneasy feelings can be common reactions for people who have accumulated generational wealth while others have been denied the opportunity. However, wrapping yourself up with these feelings of discomfort prevents you from doing something to make the system more equitable. Once you are aware of an issue and your place within it, it is your responsibility to act! Another common misconception that stalls people from igniting change is the idea of loss. Many may worry about losing some of their wealth, opportunities, or privileges if they try to make systems more equitable for all. However, this is

a false dichotomy. Your own advantages are unlikely to change with the advancement of opportunities for other people. In fact, your situation might even improve with the advancement of opportunities for others to prosper. In the timeless words of former Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, “We all do better when we all do better.”

Generate Action

Everyone holds some form of power, whether that’s as a voter, a consumer, an activist, or just a person who wants change. You can help make your community more equitable by learning more about the history of wealth and land ownership inequity. Discover which Indigenous First Nations were the original stewards of the [land you live on \(https://native-land.ca/\)](https://native-land.ca/) today. Learn about your family’s historical wealth accumulation and acknowledge what kind of advantage that has given you over other groups, if any (search land patents on the [U.S. Department of the Interior webpage \(https://glorecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx?searchTabIndex=0&searchByTypeIndex=0\)](https://glorecords.blm.gov/search/default.aspx?searchTabIndex=0&searchByTypeIndex=0)). Help keep wealth in your community by buying from local, independent shops and farms. Finally, continue holding corporations and politicians accountable for their actions and policies that contribute to inequality in your community and your country.

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