

Attacking the African American-White Achievement Gap on College Admissions Tests

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The African American-white achievement gap exists even among the youngest children; African American students arrive at kindergarten considerably behind their white peers in measurable cognitive skills. Although the gap has narrowed somewhat over the past several decades, the average African American still scores below 75 percent of white students on standardized tests. Alarming racial gaps are consistently found on the SAT, which plays an important role in the quality of access to higher education and, in turn, to social and economic mobility. Between 1976 and 1988 substantial progress was made in closing the gap, and the advantage for whites was reduced by 25 percent. In subsequent years, however, the gap has remained steady or even increased slightly. In 1999 the African American-white SAT gap was between 0.75 and 1 full standard deviation (SD). A seemingly endless array of theories has been advanced to explain the consistently lower academic performance of African American students: linguistic and social incongruities between home and school culture; historic immigrant status; differing levels and types of parental involvement; contrasting forms of cultural and social capital; the generally lower socio-economic status (SES) of African American children; divergent study habits and motivational levels; racist and classist school practices; African American adolescents' fear of "acting white"; the quantity and quality of academic material to which minority students are exposed; and lower teacher expectations of African American students. Although these theories come in and out of favor, one that has remained relatively constant is the lower quality of schools attended by African American students. This paper investigates the African American-white achievement gap on the SAT at both the student and school level. Even though the achievement gap has been a long-term concern to educational policymakers and researchers, research that applies the appropriate methodology to investigate the influence of both student and school characteristics upon the gap is sparse.