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Report: Racial divide persists in West Virginia

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— Authors of a new study highlighting racial inequalities across West Virginia are urging state lawmakers to take action.

Despite substantial gains in education and civil rights over the years, blacks continue to earn less money, have higher rates of poverty and are less likely to own a home or have health insurance than whites across the state, according to the study released Tuesday.

The study undertaken by the Partnership of African American Churches, the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy and the American Friends Service Committee is based on U.S. Census data from 2006 through 2008.

While acknowledging the difficulty of bringing minority issues to the forefront in a state where just slightly more than 3 percent of the state's population is black, the Rev. James Patterson, president of the Partnership of African American Churches, said the disparities are detrimental to all West Virginians.

"It isn't just an issue that people of color have," Patterson said. "It's an issue that impacts and actually costs the whole of West Virginia society.

"We need to call everyone into action and do something about it."

Among the findings included in the "Legacy of Inequality: Racial and Economic Disparities in West Virginia" study:

- Per capita income for blacks is \$14,945, which is about \$6,400 less than what whites across the state earn.
- 28.5 percent of blacks live in poverty compared to 16.6 percent of whites.
- 8.8 percent of blacks are unemployed compared to 6.3 percent of whites.
- 57.5 percent of black children under the age of 5 live in poverty, which is more than double the 28.1 percent of poor, white children.
- 48.7 percent of blacks own their own home compared to 75.6 percent of whites.
- 23 percent of blacks don't have health insurance compared to 17.7 percent of whites.

To correct those disparities, the groups urged lawmakers to create a state Office of Minority Affairs that would provide a centralized forum for issues affecting minorities, make policy recommendations and award grants and loans for minority affairs programs. They also urged state leaders to fund economic development and housing programs in black communities and enact a tax credit for low-income workers.

"Fortunately, racial inequality is not a law of nature," said Rick Wilson, director of the American Friends Service Committee, which focuses on issues affecting low-income and working families. "The system we have was created by people and can be changed by people."

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