



9/2004

NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

For Immediate Release

(Editors: This is an op-ed piece from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research in Raleigh. The Center is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to informing the public and making state government more effective and accountable. In the June 2004 edition of its North Carolina Insight magazine, the Center published research on race, ethnicity, and related public policy outcomes in North Carolina. This editorial is based on the Center's research. The commentary can be downloaded from the Center's website at www.nccppr.org.)

Disparities in Public Policy Outcomes Show Need for Governor's Summit on Racial and Ethnic Disparities

By Mike McLaughlin

North Carolina is no stranger to discussions about race relations. But recent research from the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research shows the need to change the focus of the discussion from the abstract to the concrete. What should North Carolina do about real numbers that show wide disparities in public policy outcomes by race and ethnicity across a broad-range of indicators – in education, economic well-being, housing, voter participation, Internet access, health, and criminal justice?

The Center for Public Policy Research believes this conversation should take place at the highest level of government. That's why we recommend after more than a year of study that the next Governor of North Carolina – whether it's the Democratic incumbent Gov. Mike Easley or the Republican challenger Patrick Ballentine – convene a Governor's Summit on Racial and Ethnic Disparities in North Carolina. Such a gathering would allow the governor to chart a clear course for progress toward a North Carolina where all are progressing toward higher ground and no race or ethnicity is left behind.

The evidence for a gap in public policy outcomes by race and ethnicity is clear and compelling. Consider these facts:

In **education**, whites and Asians continue to score higher than other racial and ethnic groups on such indicators as performing at or above grade level on end-of-grade tests, enrolling in advanced placement classes and classes for gifted students, graduating from high school, scoring on Scholastic Achievement Tests required for college admission, and graduating from college. Meanwhile, African Americans are over-represented in special education classes where selection criteria are more subjective, such as classes for behaviorally or emotionally disabled or mentally disabled. They also are over-represented among students suspended or expelled from school.

The gap in education outcomes feeds into a wide gap in **economic well-being**. White per capita income – that is annual income per person – averages \$23,237. This is more than Asians at \$19,815, more than African Americans at \$13,548, more than Native Americans at \$13,441, and more

than Hispanics at \$11,097. This puts Hispanics at only 48 percent of whites' per capita income. Poverty rates show the disparity even more starkly. Only 8.1 percent of whites live in poverty in North Carolina – defined as \$12,490 in annual income for a family of two – compared to 21 percent of Native Americans, 23 percent of African Americans, and 25 percent of Hispanics. The bottom line: an African-American family is almost three times more likely to live in poverty than a white family, and an Hispanic family is *more* than three times as likely to live in poverty.

Health outcomes represent yet another area where disparities emerge for minorities. African Americans and Native Americans have death rates higher than the white majority for almost every major cause of death, including heart disease, stroke, AIDS, and diabetes-related causes. Infant mortality also is elevated for African Americans and Native Americans. And, in terms of prevention, all minority groups are less likely to have health insurance than whites and are less likely to have seen a doctor in the past year.

The disparities extend to **voter registration and voting** as well. While 72 percent of voting-age whites are registered to vote, only 63 percent of African Americans and only 12 percent of Hispanics are registered to vote. An analysis by *The Charlotte Observer* of 82 counties in the 2000 election found that 58.9 percent of voting-age whites cast a ballot, but only 47.7 percent of African Americans and 8.4 percent of Hispanics actually voted.

Perhaps the most striking disparity in public policy outcomes occurs in **criminal justice**. Minorities make up 67 percent of the state's prison population but only 29 percent of the state's overall population. And, among the findings in a study by two University of North Carolina law professors was that persons convicted of murder were almost twice as likely to get the death penalty if the victim were white than if the victim were minority.

The Center's research also found disparities across racial and ethnic groups in such areas as whether a home has a complete kitchen or indoor plumbing, whether a family could afford its monthly rent, and in Internet access and computer use.

State government has the power to address almost all of these areas of disparity, and the Center is not the only group to have pointed out the need to address them. A Governor's Summit on Racial and Ethnic Disparities would provide a great opportunity to examine potential solutions to racial and ethnic disparities and put the power of the state's highest office behind eliminating these persistent differences in public policy outcomes. The Center urges the candidates for Governor to commit to calling such a summit and urges citizens to ask each candidate how they plan to act on these challenges.

Copies of the issue of *North Carolina Insight* containing the Center's research on race, ethnicity, and related public policy outcomes are available for \$20, which includes tax, postage, and handling. To order, write the Center at P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, call (919) 832-2839, fax (919) 832-2847, or order by email from tbromley@nccppr.org. For more information, contact Mike McLaughlin, editor, *North Carolina Insight*, at the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research, (919) 832-2839.