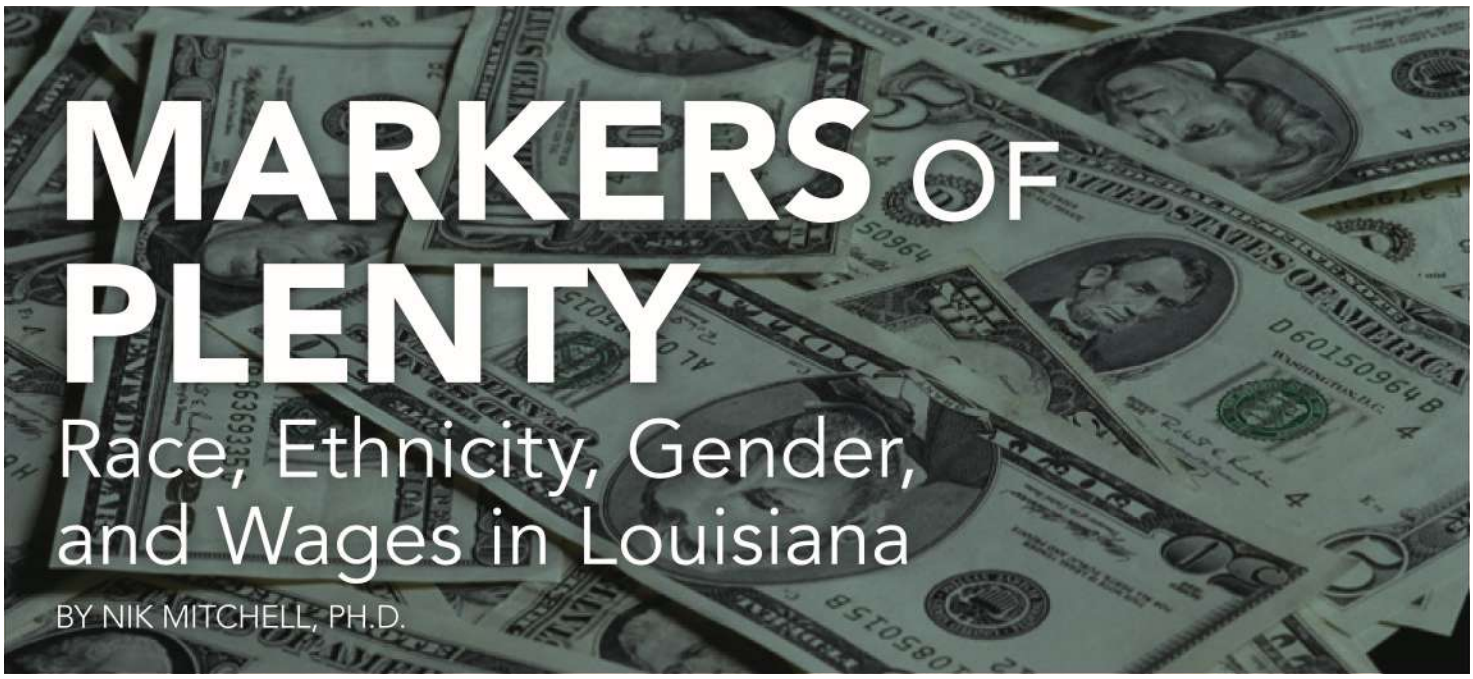


MARKERS OF PLENTY

Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Wages in Louisiana

BY NIK MITCHELL, PH.D.

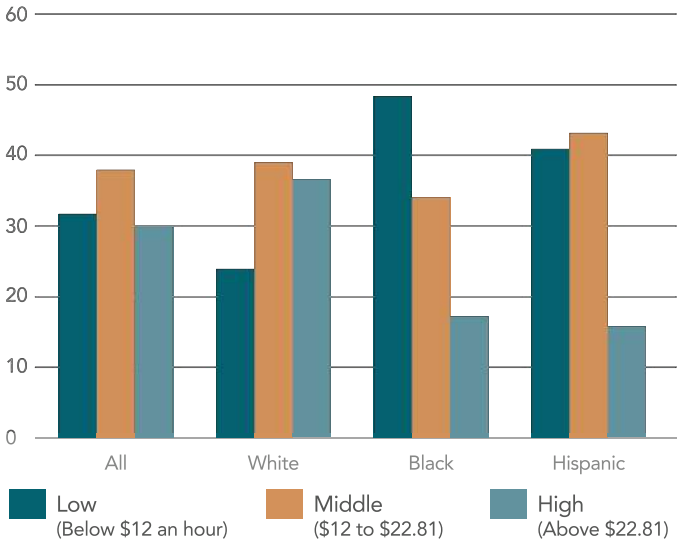
In his landmark work *Black Reconstruction,* W.E.B. Dubois wrote about the American class structure following the Civil War, "The proletariat is usually envisaged as united, but their real interests were represented in America by four sets of people: the freed Negro, the Southern poor white, and the Northern skilled and unskilled laborer."[1] Using DuBois's lens, this article seeks to complicate the social conversation about income inequality by examining Louisiana's wage data intersectionally. The six intersecting racial and gender groups— white males, black males, Hispanic males, white females, black females, and Hispanic females— are categorized as belonging to one of three wage brackets: low, middle, or high.

For this report, low wages earners are defined as those whose hourly wages fall below $12 whereas middle wage earners' hourly wages fall between $12 and $22.81 and high wage earners' hourly wages are above $22.81. For an individual working 40 hours per week, excluding the impact of local and federal taxes, a low wage earner makes less than $24,960 a year, a middle wage earner makes between $24,960 and $47,444.80 a year, and a high wage earner makes over $47,444.80 a year.

Examined as a whole, 31.9% of wage earners in Louisiana qualify as low wage earners, 38.1% qualify as middle wage earners, and 30% qualify as high wage earners. When examined racially, the wage gap becomes evident, as shown in *Figure 1*[2].

48.6% of black workers and 41% of Hispanic workers qualify as low wage earners compared to 24% of white workers; black and Hispanic workers' representation among low wage workers is 16.8% and 9.2% higher than the state average,

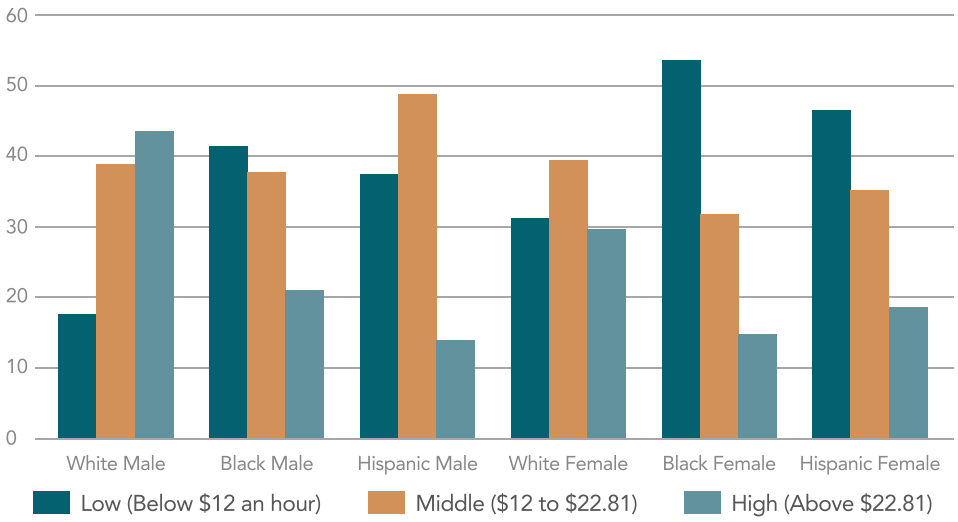
Figure 1: Louisiana Wage Percentiles by Race



respectively, while white workers' representation falls 7.9% below the state average. Black and Hispanic workers' representation among high wage earners is 12.8% and 14.4% lower than the state average of 30%, respectively, while white workers' representation is 6.7% higher than the state average.

When the data are disaggregated by race and gender, as in *Figure 2*[3], they confirm the existence of intersectional wage gaps in Louisiana. Black males, Hispanic males, black females, and Hispanic females are over represented among low wage earners by 9.5%, 5.6%, 21.7%, and 14.4% above the state average, respectively, while white males are under represented by 14.6%. Black women have the highest share of low wage earners at 53.6% of all wage

Figure 2: Louisiana Wage Percentiles by Race and Gender



earners; this means that over half of working black women in Louisiana make less than $24,960 a year. Among female groups, white women have the lowest share of low wage earners at 31.1% along with the highest shares of middle wage earners at 39.5% and high wage earners at 29.5%.

Some point to increased education attainment as being key to closing the racial wage gap, but the data show that the racial-gender wage gap continues when education attainment levels are taken into account. The Equal Justice Initiative asserts that, "Just completing a bachelor's degree or more will not reduce the black-white wage gap."[4] *Table 1* shows the median wage for those with bachelors' degrees or higher by race and gender intersection:

Table 1: Louisiana hourly wage averages for Black and White wage earners holding a bachelor's degree or higher by gender[5]

Wage Earners	Hourly Wage Averages
All	$25.00
White	$26.00
Black	$22.00
White Male	$30.00
Black Male	$22.73
White Female	$23.65
Black Female	$21.10

The data show that in Louisiana, the racial disparity in wages evident in *Figures 1 and 2* continues with people who have bachelor's degrees or higher, although the gaps close in size.

Examined as a whole, the wage data indicate that a structural economic inequality between communities of color and white communities exists in Louisiana which is so pronounced that the class structures are inherently different. There is no single class structure in Louisiana but rather there are "raced classes" within the broader class structure (e.g. black middle income earners versus white middle income earners, etc.). Wage gaps exist and serve as both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the persistence of systemic economic racism and sexism in the United States and, specifically, in Louisiana. The same results can be found in other states as well.

Based on the over representation of men and women of color among low wage earners compared to the state average, systemic racism and sexism are important social and economic factors in Louisiana. Reports released by the Equal Justice Initiative, the Pew Research Center, and the Jesuit Social Research Institute all confirm that there is a racial wage gap in the United States.[6] Additionally, the Institute for Women's Policy Research asserts that if all current trends remained constant, the wage gap between men and women would not close until 2059 and 2115 for the United States and Louisiana, respectively.[7] Nationally, Pew reports that "Looking at gender, race and ethnicity combined, all groups, with the exception of Asian men, lag behind white men in terms of median hourly earnings."[8] These gaps are more than just aggregate data; they reflect the quality of life of millions of people.

ENDNOTES

1 Du Bois, W. E. B. (Ed.). (2007). *Black reconstruction in America: Toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America, 1860-1880*. Oxford.

2 United States Department of Labor. (2017). Current Population Survey Basic Monthly 2016. Retrieved from https://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/ftp/cps_ftp.html#cpsbasic.

3 United States Department of Labor. (2017). Current Population Survey Basic Monthly 2016. Retrieved from https://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/ftp/cps_ftp.html#cpsbasic.

4 Wilson, V., & Rodgers III, W. M. (2016). Black-white wage gaps expand with rising wage inequality. *Economic Policy Institute*, 20. http://www.epi.org/publication/black-white-wage-gaps-expand-with-rising-wage-inequality/#epi-toc-9

5 United States Department of Labor. (2017). Current Population Survey Basic Monthly 2016. Retrieved from https://thedataweb.rm.census.gov/ftp/cps_ftp.html#cpsbasic.

6 Patten, E. (2016). *Racial, gender wage gaps persist in US despite some progress.* Retrieved from Pew Research Center Website: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/01/racial-gender-wage-gaps-persist-in-u-s-despite-some-progress/; Wilson, V., & Rodgers III, W. M. (2016). *Black-white wage gaps expand with rising wage inequality.* Retrieved from Economic Policy Institute Website: http://www.epi.org/publication/black-white-wage-gaps-expand-with-rising-wage-inequality/#epi-toc-9; Jesuit Social Research Institute. (2016). *Just South Index 2016* retrieved from http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/news/inaugural-justsouth-index-2016

7 Anderson, J., Milli, J., Kruvelis, M. (2017). *Projected Year the Wage Gap Will Close by State*. Retrieved from Institute for Women's Policy Research Website: https://iwpr.org/publications/projected-year-wage-gap-will-close-state/

8 Patten, E. (2016). Op. Cit.