

## Wicked apparatus enables Minnesota poverty

Written by Clarence Hightower  
Monday, 03 March 2014 15:57

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It seems that each year a national report from one agency or another notes Minnesota fares particularly well as compared to other states when it comes to the general well-being of its citizens.

In fact, Minnesota historically ranks near the top of all 50 states in any number of "quality of life" measures such as per capita income, homeownership rates, percentage of health-insured citizens, number of college graduates and educational test scores spanning from comprehensive assessments in primary and secondary schools all the way to college entrance exams. However, while the state as a whole fares well in these areas, Minnesota's populations of color compare neither favorably to their white counterparts here, nor populations of color in other states.

It is no secret that racial disparities plague every major city; and for that matter every state in America. However, what I find particularly troubling and even downright peculiar is the situation here in Minnesota. How is it possible for Minnesota in general, to perform so well in these critical areas, whereas Minnesota's communities of color rate so low? After all, Minnesota is generally regarded as a progressive state along with being a national leader in business, health, education and social service industries. The chasm of inequality in Minnesota is so disproportionately skewed as compared to the racial disparity in other states that I cannot begin to wrap my mind around the irony. How did we get here and what does this say about us?

Most affected by the racial disparities in Minnesota are African-Americans – particularly our most vulnerable population, Black children. Indeed it was while reading a report a few years back about Minnesota children in poverty that this paradox and its absurdity really hit home for me. In this 2008 report the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota stated that, "As a group, the economic circumstances of Black children in Minnesota are among the worst in the county. Among the 33 states with enough Black children to produce reliable survey estimates, only three states – Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mississippi – had a higher child poverty rate among Black children than Minnesota."

The enduring tragedy is that the poverty rate has steadily increased during the past five years, not just among children but throughout all age brackets. Recent data from Minnesota Compass

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illustrates that nearly 40 percent of Black Minnesotans and over 30 percent of Native-Americans live below the poverty line. This data also demonstrates that in Minnesota approximately one in four Hispanics and one in five Asians are poor as compared to approximately one in 12 white Minnesotans. Not surprisingly these vast disparities spill over into a myriad of other poverty-related indicators such as employment, education, health and rates of incarceration. Consider for example that in 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reported that Minnesota had the largest employment gap between Blacks and whites of all 50 states. Not to be outdone, the Twin Cities recently shared that same distinction when compared to the largest metropolitan areas in America.

The education achievement gap between Black and white students in Minnesota has consistently been among the largest in the nation. Furthermore, Minnesota's African-American community remains exceedingly more likely to suffer from a host of health related problems such as lack of health insurance, infant mortality, teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, physical abuse and mental health issues. With regard to the criminal justice system, former Hennepin County Justice Lucy Weiland noted in one publication that more than 90 percent of those locked up in the Hennepin County Detention Center are juveniles of color. Weiland went on to state, "Minnesota has tolerated a cycle of racial disparity for many years, and as a result in has some of the worst gaps in employment, education and juvenile detention in the nation."

Every one of these measures – be it unemployment, educational disparity, poor health, inadequate housing or excessive contact with the criminal justice system – cycle back to the singular evil of poverty. I believe that each of these societal ills is both the result of poverty, and part of the wicked apparatus that enables poverty to persist. Another instrument that allows poverty to flourish is our continuing tolerance of it. Minnesota seems more tolerant of poverty than other states to the point where it maintains some of the most significant racial disparities in the nation is rather dubious.

Still, there is hope as a recent are periodical pointed out. The article stated Minnesota students of color have made significant gains in graduating from high school on-time, particularly Black and Hispanic students. Nevertheless, the article still demonstrates Minnesota high school students of color "still lagged behind white peers." I believe that racial disparities and generational poverty that afflict Minnesota can and must be reversed. However, we have to significantly increase our efforts and we have to do so immediately before we lose generations of young people – those very people that are our future.