

## Research Brief

### **THE STATE OF BLACKS IN NEW MEXICO: BLACK EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES IN NEW MEXICO AS REFLECTED BY THE “DATA HUB”**

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## **Background**

New Mexico and Albuquerque policy leaders are currently considering several reforms to our education system in an effort to improve our education outcomes that continue to lag behind neighboring states and national averages. This is therefore an ideal time to examine the educational outcomes among New Mexico's Black population. As we have highlighted in this series of briefs focused specifically on this New Mexico community, disparities facing Blacks in New Mexico are often overlooked as our Black population represents only 3.1% of the state's overall population when calculated as both single or mixed race, only 2.3% when measured as a single-race indicator (not combined with another race such as Black and White/Black and Hispanic). This can lead to a limited focus on the African American population, a community that faces many disparities in important outcomes, including education.

The primary goal of this brief is to highlight data available in the Data Hub, housed at the NM Office of African American Affairs website, to examine how the Black population in New Mexico fares according to several educational outcomes. This is part of our larger effort to inform policy to address challenges this community faces in the education system and other policy domains. This brief intends to be comprehensive, exploring outcomes from pre-school to high school enrollment, math and reading proficiency, disciplinary outcomes and ultimately, high school graduation rates. Education has significant effects on life chances and is the driving factor of several important outcomes, including income and health. This discussion follows the release of two prior briefs that focused on the economic and health well-being of Black's in the land of enchantment.

We supplement data available in the Data Hub with findings from our [most recent survey](#) housed at UNM's Center for Health Policy, and other research conducted by researchers at the RWJF Center for Health Policy focused on education in New Mexico.

## **Overview of Student Demographic Profile**

Although African Americans comprise about 3% of the state's population, Blacks in New Mexico are much younger than non-Hispanic Whites. In fact, the median age of the African American community is 34 compared to 49 for non-Hispanic whites in New Mexico. This means that half of the Black population in New Mexico are under the age of 34. This significant difference in age is very similar to the national age difference between Blacks and non-Hispanic whites (42 for Whites/33 for Blacks).<sup>1</sup>

Given this significant difference in age, it is not surprising to see Blacks represented much more prominently when we move from overall population estimates to school-aged population or across specific stages of the education process. For example, the Black ratio of elementary school population in New Mexico ranges from .07% to 13.8% across counties in elementary schools, .06% to 9.6% in middle schools, and .05% to 10.7% in high schools. Thus, despite being a relatively small population in the state, policy decisions regarding education must include a

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on demographic patterns please see <http://www.oaaa.state.nm.us/population-dashboard.aspx>

focus on Blacks given their high representation across New Mexico’s K-12 education system. We conclude our brief with some specific recommendations grounded in the data we analyzed for the brief, as well as programs we researched from across the country aimed at addressing racial education inequalities.

### **The State of Black New Mexico Education**

In the following sections, we discuss four education outcomes among African Americans that may need targeted interventions in New Mexico. We begin with arguably the most important stage of the education pipeline, enrollment patterns in pre-k and nursery schools across the state by race. The RWJF Center has done [extensive research](#) in this area and held a [national symposium](#) emphasizing the importance of early childhood education to the future well-being of children. Our review of the wide and growing research concludes that access to early childhood programs has huge implications for future career opportunities as well as being linked to a number of positive health outcomes including lower obesity rates. However, our work has found that there are clear racial and ethnic inequalities in access to these programs nationally and in New Mexico. We dig deeper into this issue utilizing the Data Hub and original data collected and tabulated by the RWJF Center and find that there are important racial differences in New Mexico.

The Data Hub reveals that in 2015 there were 3,165 Black children under age 5 in New Mexico and only an estimated 1,084 Black students were enrolled in New Mexico Pre-K/nursery schools Statewide in 2015. This means approximately 2,081 eligible Black children were not enrolled in some form of early childhood programming, which is consistent with overall enrollment data in New Mexico that suggests nearly 60% of the state’s 3 and 4 year olds are not enrolled in Head Start or other pre-K programs.<sup>2</sup> Given that there were 1,085 children on the wait list for childcare assistance in 2016,<sup>3</sup> it is clear that more resources must be invested to increase the number of children who have access to these vital programs.

#### Early Childhood Education

Early childhood literature has found that there can be high returns associated with investment in early childhood education, and the state has debated various approaches to ensuring a wider segment of the state’s children have access to these programs. Regardless of which approach is taken, the evidence is clear that making this investment is necessary to address racial disparities in education outcomes. We therefore urge that the state invest in early childhood programming by increasing funding for Pre-K-12 education, as well as early education enrollment outreach that aims to reach children and their families before children reach pre-K enrollment age.

In addition to major reforms to New Mexico’s education system, there are some short-term interventions that could be implemented to address early childhood development. For example, research suggests that simply reading to children in their youngest years can have a marked impact on their success in the classroom later in their childhoods. In 2012, New Mexican Hispanic families were 15.8 percent less likely to read to their children ages 0-5 compared to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nmvoices.org/archives/5661#CNAP>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cwla.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NEW-MEXICO.pdf>

white families, and Black families in New Mexico were 20.6 percent less likely to read to their children compared to white families (Sanchez-Youngman & Ybarra, 2015). This racial gap is likely driven by underlying inequalities in poverty rates, income levels, and knowledge of the benefits associated with reading to young children. We therefore suggest consideration of programming that could be put in place to increase the number of Black families who read to their young children.

### Math and Reading Proficiency

The next educational outcome we discuss is math and reading proficiency, a widely-used indicator for how well students are faring and how prepared they are to move forward in the education system. According to reports from New Mexico's Public Education Department (NMPED), statewide math and reading proficiency scores from the Standards Based Assessment (SBA) test illustrate mixed results. In general, from 2010-2014 math scores steadily increased for 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students of all races. However, for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, math scores decreased between these four years for all race groups except for Asian students. Specifically, for Black students in New Mexico, SBA math scores dropped from 45.2 in 2010 to 41.3 in 2014.

Reading scores illustrate the most notable racial disparities in New Mexico. For instance, from 2010-2014 reading scores for Black students declined from 53.8 to 48.1% for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students while it increased from 74.5 to 76.3 for Asian students and decreased from 73.2% to 67.4% for non-Hispanic Whites in New Mexico. Fortunately, there have been some bright spots in the data as well. For example, among 11<sup>th</sup> graders, reading scores increased for Black students from 46.9% to 50.7%. However, despite improvement among Blacks, the 2014 reading proficiency rate among Whites was 68.9%.

### Discipline in the School System

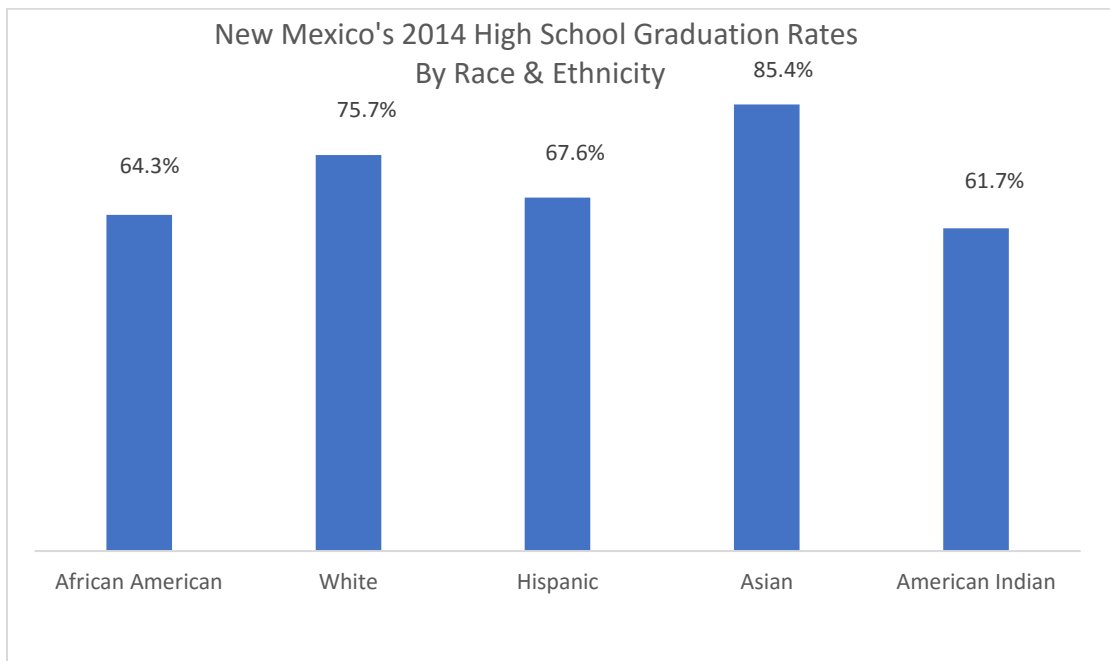
In terms of disciplinary outcomes, we find that although the state-wide numbers do not suggest Blacks are disproportionately targeted for disciplinary action, there are notable disparities for Black students in some areas of the state. Our data suggests that in a number of areas in New Mexico (i.e., Alamogordo, Clovis) retained a higher number of Black students than expected based on enrollment. This varied across areas depending on the disciplinary outcome which includes expulsion, in-school-suspension and out-of-school suspension.

Any disparity in this area should be subject to further analysis, as criminology/criminal justice research suggests that punitive disciplinary approaches can have negative effects throughout a child's life course and has been associated with higher levels of imprisonment, especially for Black students. Missed instructional time due to in school suspension or expulsion negatively effects educational outcomes. Thus, we recommend that schools in New Mexico consider other disciplinary efforts that do not take the student out of the classroom. There has been a movement toward restorative justice across the country, a model we suggest further investigating for application in New Mexico.

### High School Graduation Rates

The final outcome we explore are high school graduation rates, arguably the most highly utilized indicator of performance at the K-12 level. We again see some reason for optimism in the data, as Blacks have seen the most positive increases in high school graduation rates for all racial

groups between 2010 and 2014, with Black graduation rates increasing from 62.1% to 64.3% in New Mexico for that period. However, expanding efforts to increase graduation rates for all minorities should continue to be a priority in New Mexico as the data illustrates that there are stark racial inequalities in high school graduation. As reflected in the figure below, in 2014, American Indians (61.7%) had the lowest graduation rate across all groups, followed by Black students (64.3%) and Hispanic (67.6%) students. Meanwhile, Asian Americans had the highest graduation rates (85.4%) in the state followed by Whites (75.7%). To put this inequality in context, New Mexico ranks 47<sup>th</sup> among all states in the percentage of students who do not graduate high school on time, with a higher percentage among Blacks (35%) than the national average of 18%.<sup>4</sup>



### Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

The primary goal of this brief is to shed some light on New Mexico’s racial disparities in education and highlight specific challenges facing the African American student population in particular. We highlight notable differences in Black educational outcomes compared to non-Hispanic Whites in pre-school to high school enrollment, math/reading proficiency and graduation rates. We also discuss school based discipline by race, and make comparisons between racial/ethnic groups whenever possible, as well as how these patterns compare to national rates where the data allows. In our conclusion, we attempt to identify some policy recommendations to help address the disparities we discuss in this brief. We believe that the following could improve the inequities that affect education outcomes for New Mexico’s Black community.

As we have stressed throughout this series of briefs, we must consider the effect that poverty has on New Mexico’s children’s life course. As our previous brief on economic well-being states,

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NMVC-DataBook2016-Web.pdf>

our state experiences higher rates of children and families living below the poverty line than the national average. In 2015, 29% of Black children lived in families who were below the poverty line, compared to 14% for non-Hispanic Whites.<sup>5</sup> This means that Black families in New Mexico are twice as likely to live in poverty than Whites! This is critically important to address, as research has shown that children living in poverty are much less likely to finish high school and perform more poorly across essentially all education outcomes we reviewed for this brief. In short, if the underlying poverty rates in New Mexico are not addressed we will continue to see inequalities in education outcomes, even if other recommendations we make here are implemented.

One of the most effective interventions to address poverty is the expansion of early childhood programs to young children. We find that a large number of African American children who are under age 5 are not enrolled in Head Start or other pre-k programs. We strongly recommend that New Mexico consider making access to these programs universal. We do not take a position on where the funding for this should come from, either increased taxes, re-prioritization of state's existing education budget, or allowing voters to determine if they would like to use the state's permanent fund. However, we strongly suggest policy-makers move beyond the politics of which funding stream to utilize and start the process of expanding access to early childhood programs and outreach to boost early childhood education enrollment among Black children.

We also noted in our brief that Black children are less likely than New Mexican children of other races to be read to regularly as infants. This significant inequality is a very important one to address, as increasing the amount of time reading to young children improves reading proficiency rates and performance on standardized tests later in a child's life. We suggest stakeholders work together to increase the number of Black parents who are aware of the positive outcomes associated with reading to their children while they are young, and come up with strategies to assist those families as needed to prioritize reading.

Policy leaders and advocates should utilize the rich data that is available through the Data Hub tool to explore how the Black community is faring across multiple outcomes. We hope that our use of that data source to identify racial inequalities in the education system motivates others to do so as well.

### **About the Authors**

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nccp.org/profiles/NM\\_profile\\_7.html](http://www.nccp.org/profiles/NM_profile_7.html)