

# Institutional Racism in Practice

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## Occupational Segregation in America

Occupational segregation in the American labor market reflects and drives inequalities in American society.

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A nurse, right, attends to a 9-day-old child as the child's mother looks on inside the pediatric ward of a medical treatment facility in Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, December 2021. (Getty/Barbara Davidson-Pool)

Occupational segregation occurs when one demographic group is overrepresented or underrepresented in a certain job category. As an enduring feature of the American labor market, it diminishes wages and working conditions for all workers in a job where marginalized groups are overrepresented; contributes to overall wage gaps based on immutable and often intersecting demographic characteristics; and limits economic growth. The causes of occupational segregation include societal biases about particular demographics of workers that are embedded in public and private systems, in policy choices, and in operations across education, training, and work.

This issue brief analyzes existing research on occupational segregation on the topics of race, ethnicity, and gender and presents two approaches that demonstrate its impact: occupational composition and demographic concentration.

**1 The occupational composition approach**, presented via an interactive visualization ([jump to interactive](#)), shows how certain demographic groups are overrepresented or underrepresented in different occupations. For example, Black women constitute 6 percent of employed workers but make up 32 percent of home health aides, where they earn on average \$23,803 per year.<sup>1</sup>

**2 The demographic concentration approach** ([jump to tables](#)) shows how employment for demographic groups is concentrated across a set of occupations. For example, 19 percent of Black women work in just five occupations with an average salary of \$30,789.<sup>2</sup>

These two approaches offer a more complete picture of both how individual jobs are segregated and how clustering within those jobs limits occupational choice and affects groups' economic security. Policy solutions that address occupational segregation should seek to both improve wages and working conditions in low-quality employment and create greater, equitable access to high-quality jobs.

### **Occupational segregation at the intersection of race, gender, disability, and more**

While occupational segregation has been more extensively studied on topics of gender, race, and ethnicity, it can also occur when any group is over- or underrepresented in an occupation. Just as segregation may be most harmful at the intersection of race and gender—for women of color—there is more potential for negative impacts when layering in additional historically marginalized demographics such as disability, immigration status, or LGBTQI+ status. Future CAP work on this subject will leverage the framework established in this brief and center the experiences of other marginalized workers, including workers with disabilities of various backgrounds.

## **Systematized historical exclusion**

Occupational segregation is the direct result of societal biases and policy choices. At the turn of the 20th century, 20 percent of women—and only 5 percent of married women—worked outside the home, with Black women almost twice as likely to participate in the labor force as white women.<sup>3</sup> By 1970, increases in high school education and graduation rates, rising demand for clerical labor, and changing social norms led to an increase in these rates, with 50 percent of single women and 40 percent of married women participating in the labor force. However, before 1963,<sup>4</sup> employers could still legally pay women less than men, and before 1978,<sup>5</sup> employers could legally terminate women on the grounds of pregnancy or marriage—meaning that for many women, their careers were often short-lived, intermittent, or viewed as secondary to that of their husbands. In 1969, about 25 percent of all working women were employed in just five occupations: secretary, household worker, bookkeeper, elementary school teacher, and waitress.<sup>6</sup>



# Occupational segregation is the direct result of societal biases and policy choices.

Today, women's labor force participation stands at 58 percent<sup>7</sup> but differs across race and ethnicity: Black women's labor force participation continues to be higher than that of white women,<sup>8</sup> partly a consequence of societal perceptions—rooted in slavery—that Black women must work.<sup>9</sup> And while progress for women is incontrovertible, an intersectional analysis of changes in occupational segregation between 1983 and 2002 found that white women made more progress in entering different occupations than Black and Hispanic women.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly consequential as norms of breadwinning have shifted, and the prevalence of mothers as the primary or sole household provider has increased over time, particularly for women of color.<sup>11</sup> Simply put, jobs that pay higher wages disproportionately employ white men, (Figure 1) while lower paid jobs disproportionately employ women, particularly women of color. (Figure 2)

**Figure 1**



# White men dominate the highest-paying occupations in the United States

Composition of the top 10 highest-paying occupations by sex, race, and ethnicity

	White men or Latino men	White women Hispanic or Latina women	Black men	Black women	Hispanic
Physicians	56%		30%		4.9%
Dentists	65%			23%	
Chief executives and legislators	68%			23%	
Lawyers, judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers	57%		32%		
Architectural and engineering managers	81%			8%	6%
Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents	62%		23%		6%
Aircraft pilots and flight engineers	86%				6% 6%
Personal financial advisers	62%		24%		
Computer and information systems managers	61%		24%		6%
Financial and investment analysts	52%		31%		6%

Hover over or click to see values.

Note: The top 10 highest-paying occupations are identified by their average wages, for those who have earned a wage. The authors have only included occupations with at least 50,000 employed workers aged 20 or older. The percentages do not

Figure 2



# Men of color and women dominate the lowest-paying occupations in the United States

Composition of the top 10 lowest-paying occupations by sex, race, and ethnicity

	White men or Latino men	White women Hispanic or Latina women	Black men	Black women	Hispanic
Hosts and hostesses, restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop	11%	55%		10%	18%
Dishwashers	40%		13%	14%	23%
Fast food and counter workers	23%	44%		10%	7%
Food preparation workers	22%	37%		6%	7%
Dining room and cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers	27%	28%	6%	7%	21%
Residential advisers	24%	38%		10%	17%
Child care workers	61%			13%	21%
Cashiers	16%	46%		14%	6%
Crossing guards and flaggers	29%	35%		8%	12%
Other entertainment attendants and related workers	42%		30%	6%	6%

Hover over or click to see values.

Note: The top 10 lowest paying occupations are identified by their average wages,

Race-based occupational segregation has its roots in slavery. At the time of emancipation in 1865, approximately two-thirds of enslaved people had been forced to work on farms while others worked in domestic settings.<sup>12</sup> After slavery was abolished, legislation and lack of access to other employment opportunities often left Black workers no choice but to continue working in agricultural or domestic roles; in South Carolina, for example, Black residents could only work as a farmer or a servant unless they received a license from a judge.<sup>13</sup> The New Deal, which established the floor for job protections in the United States, intentionally omitted farmworkers and domestic and agricultural workers from protections such as minimum wage, Social Security, and overtime.<sup>14</sup> These provisions excluded a significant number of Black, Mexican American, Native American, and Asian American workers from basic workplace standards and set a precedent for occupational segregation into low-quality jobs

today.<sup>15</sup> In 1890, 52 percent of Black women were domestic workers; by 1940, this number rose to 70 percent. Today, while the individual household is no longer the most common employer, domestic and care occupations, such as home health aides, personal care aides, and child care workers, still make up a disproportionate percentage of Black women's employment, and Black women account for 1 in 5 people employed in these jobs.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Black men disproportionately work in various driving and cleaning roles. (see interactive visualization)

## Discrimination, harassment, and stereotypes

Systems and policy choices reflect stereotypes, bias, and perceptions of gender, racial, ethnic, and disability status, and they significantly influence and limit an individual's occupational choice. Florence Nightingale, credited with the professionalization of nursing in the late 19th century, created a new role for women in the workplace at a time when the concept was truly novel, proclaiming that nursing duties "could only satisfactorily be done by a woman."<sup>17</sup> Today, characteristics seen as inherently "female" are associated with traditionally female-dominated occupations.<sup>18</sup> For example, women are stereotyped as caring and domestic, and thus likely to be successful in teaching, nursing, or caregiving roles, or as physically weak and unauthoritative, and thus unsuccessful in construction and trades or management positions. Over time, these perceptions are strengthened and perpetuated by norms embedded in systems such as education and workplace recruitment.

Direct discrimination on the basis of immutable characteristics is both a cause and an effect of occupational segregation. Landmark legislation enacted over the 20th century has moved the needle but cannot alone change behavior. The Equal Pay Act of 1963<sup>19</sup> prohibited employers from paying different wages on the basis of sex, while the Civil Rights Act of 1964<sup>20</sup> prohibited workplace segregation and discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Later, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 prohibited discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions. In 1990, Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act banned discrimination on the basis of disability.<sup>21</sup> Affirmative action and anti-discrimination enforcement initially led to an increase in workplace integration and narrowed wage gaps.<sup>22</sup> However, due to a variety of intersecting factors, including declines in enforcement capacity and in political will and exclusions of certain industries from workplace protections, progress in this arena has plateaued.<sup>23</sup>



Today, women are most likely to report sexual harassment to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in industries that are the most male dominated.

Today, women are most likely to report sexual harassment to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in industries that are the most male dominated, such as construction, utilities, mining, and transportation and warehousing.<sup>24</sup> This lessens the likelihood of integration, as women may opt out of joining or leave male-dominated jobs because of their experiences or concerns over harassment. Integration is most difficult for groups who face intersecting biases, such as women of color. For example, in corporate contexts, women of color—particularly Black women—are least likely to report having proactive or defensive support from managers, thus undermining



promotability and leading to significant underrepresentation in C-suite roles.<sup>25</sup>

## Impacts of education on occupational segregation

Occupational segregation in the labor market is closely tied to the design of K-12 and postsecondary educational systems. Girls perform on par or better than boys in fourth to eighth grade math and science exams and equally enroll in advanced math and science courses as they move into high school, but a gap emerges and widens as they progress through high school and higher education.<sup>26</sup> This gap is particularly large for Black and Latino girls, who are underrepresented in science and math professions. Vocational education can also more directly track, or segregate, students into certain occupations. Policymakers initially conceived vocational training as a solution to a shortage of labor in newly industrialized settings and an approach to teaching a sudden influx of new students, often from poor, immigrant, rural, or other minority backgrounds.<sup>27</sup> However, it often directed lower-income students into occupational training programs, while traditional liberal arts education was reserved for wealthier, largely white students. Today, despite significant investments in improving the quality of vocational education and increased calls to ensure all students have access to career training in high schools, racial disparities remain: Black and Latino students are less likely to enroll in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes with higher earning potential and more likely to enroll in hospitality and human services programs.<sup>28</sup>



There are 17 Hispanic women and nine Black women for every 100 white men earning a bachelor's degree in engineering.

These differences also persist among students who pursue postsecondary education. Hispanic and Black students are significantly underrepresented in four-year STEM majors such as physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering. The gap widens for women of color. For example, there are 17 Hispanic women and nine Black women for every 100 white men earning a bachelor's degree in engineering.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the strong correlation between degree attainment and higher income masks the underlying reality that the cost of attendance, unpaid internships,<sup>30</sup> and time constraints on the ability to work for pay while in school can make the eventual payoff of degrees untenable for some students,<sup>31</sup> particularly students of color, whose families have on average less wealth than white families.<sup>32</sup> This leads to the overrepresentation of certain demographic groups in jobs that do not require longer educational pathways. And occupational segregation persists regardless of educational attainment: Even among those who have attained higher education, workers of color and women occupy different, often lower-paid roles compared with white men. (see interactive visualization)

## Impacts of occupational segregation on wages and the economy

Social and institutional factors lead to pervasive occupational segregation in the labor market, and the occupations that women and people of color tend to be segregated into often offer the lowest compensation (Figure 2), provide less access to benefits, and limit workers' economic security.<sup>33</sup> Two theses support these findings.<sup>34</sup> The crowding hypothesis suggests that the concentration of one demographic, such as Black men or

women, into a small number of occupations creates an oversupply of their labor within these occupations and reduces this group’s wages.<sup>35</sup> The devaluation theory suggests that work performed by certain groups, such as women, is devalued because they themselves are devalued in society, and market decisions about the economic value of a type of work are made after that job has been established to have a particular demographic composition.<sup>36</sup> This is partly why equal pay advocates globally have moved away from frameworks of “equal pay for equal work” to “equal pay for work of equal value.”<sup>37</sup>

OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION CONTRIBUTES TO EXISTING GENDER AND RACIAL WAGE GAPS

<b>73 cents</b> Women’s wage per every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns	<b>58 cents</b> Black women’s wage per every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns	<b>49 cents</b> Latina women’s wage per every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns	<b>75 cents</b> Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women’s wage per every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns
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Segregation in jobs significantly contributes to persistent gender and racial wage gaps. Working women overall earn 73 cents for every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns, while women of color experience larger pay gaps, with Black women earning 58 cents and Latina women earning 49 cents for every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns.<sup>38</sup> While overall, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women earn around 75 cents<sup>39</sup> for every dollar a white, non-Hispanic man earns, further disaggregated data show that specific communities within these groups, such as Burmese women, experience some of the largest racial and gender wage gaps.<sup>40</sup> Black and Hispanic men also consistently earn less than white men.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, wage suppression in sectors experiencing occupational segregation is not limited only to the overrepresented group in question. In predominantly female roles, occupational earnings are lower across the board for all workers in those roles, across different genders, races, and ethnicities.<sup>42</sup> Highly gender-segregated labor markets depress wages for all women in that market but particularly the earnings of Black women. Devaluation is especially evident as roles become more integrated: In some cases, as women make up a larger share of an occupation over time, the pay in that occupation decreases.<sup>43</sup>

Low wages limit the capacity of individuals to weather financial shocks, spend, save, and accumulate wealth and retire with dignity. This is particularly important in households where marginalized workers are the family’s breadwinner—common for mothers of color.<sup>44</sup> Occupational segregation negatively affects not only workers but also employers and the economy more broadly. Low wages are associated with high turnover within an occupation, a burden for employers who then must use resources for hiring and training, lowering productivity.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as occupational segregation limits an individual’s choice to work where their skills are best matched, it can further lower productivity.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, balanced, gender-integrated teams and management are more productive and profitable than segregated ones—and at a macro level, economies with labor markets with higher levels of gender segregation have experienced lower levels of economic growth since 1980.<sup>47</sup>

Occupational segregation today: By the numbers

The two datasets below—on occupational composition and demographic concentration—demonstrate how occupational segregation presents in the labor market today.



## 1. Occupational composition

This interactive visualization explores what groups are over- or underrepresented in a specific job. Below are a few sample conclusions from this dataset:

- Asian American or Pacific Islander women across all levels of education constitute 3 percent of total employment and are most overrepresented as manicurists, at 51 percent of workers in this occupation, earning \$21,228 per year.
- Black men with at least a bachelor’s degree make up 1 percent of total employment and are most overrepresented as probation officers, at 8 percent of workers in this occupation, earning \$56,013 per year.
- White men with at least a bachelor’s degree constitute 14 percent of total employment and are most overrepresented as aircraft pilots and flight engineers, at 65 percent of workers in this occupation, earning \$161,888 per year.



## 2. Demographic concentration

Tables 1 and 2 present the top five jobs that selected demographic groups work in

overall, thus demonstrating how occupation contributes to a group’s overall economic security. For example, 18 percent of Hispanic or Latina women work in five occupations that pay an average wage of \$23,196, while 14 percent of white men work in five occupations that pay an average wage of \$59,670.

Table 1



## Most men of color are concentrated in low-paid occupations

Top five most common occupations for men in the United States, by race and ethnicity

	White men	Black men	Hispanic or Latino men
1	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	Construction laborers
2	Other managers	Laborers and movers	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers
3	First-line supervisors of retail sales workers	Janitors and building cleaners	Landscaping and groundskeeping workers
4	Construction laborers	Cooks	Janitors and building cleaners
5	Retail salespersons	Security guards and gambling surveillance officers	Cooks
Average wage	\$59,670	\$29,488	\$30,424
Percentage of group's total employment	14.00%	18.94%	19.59%

Table 2

## Most women are concentrated in low-paid occupations

Top five most common occupations for women in the United States, by race and ethnicity

	White women	Black women	Hispanic or Latina women
1	Elementary and middle school teachers	Nursing assistants	Maids and housekeeping cleaners
2	Registered nurses	Customer service representatives	Cashiers
3	Secretaries and administrative assistants	Cashiers	Janitors and building cleaners
4	Customer service representatives	Registered nurses	Secretaries and administrative assistants
5	Cashiers	Personal care aides	Customer service representatives
<b>Average wage</b>	<b>\$38,304</b>	<b>\$30,789</b>	<b>\$23,196</b>
<b>Percentage of group's total employment</b>	<b>17.36%</b>	<b>18.72%</b>	<b>18.26%</b>

Note: "Percentage of group's total employment" is the percentage of the employed

## A framework for policy solutions to end occupational segregation

Government at all levels must address occupational segregation by both raising the floor and making the ceiling more accessible. First, policy solutions must improve the

quality of all jobs, particularly those where marginalized workers are overrepresented. This ensures that jobs are not devalued due to the composition of the sector's workers. Policymakers can increase the quality of low-wage work in a variety of ways, including raising the minimum wage;<sup>48</sup> ending the tipped minimum wage and subminimum wage;<sup>49</sup> enhancing collective bargaining access and protections; and ensuring all workers have access to paid medical and family leave.<sup>50</sup> Second, policymakers and government at all levels must diversify high-quality jobs to allow underrepresented workers to succeed in those roles. This can be done through ensuring equitable access to secondary and postsecondary education,<sup>51</sup> workforce development,<sup>52</sup> and apprenticeship programs;<sup>53</sup> strengthening anti-harassment<sup>54</sup> and anti-discrimination measures and enforcement; passing paycheck fairness laws; and setting incentives, goals, and requirements for employers to hire equitably.

## Conclusion

Occupational segregation affects the personal and economic dignity of millions of Americans, particularly women and workers of color, and it depresses wages and limits economic growth. The product of intentional policy decisions, lawmakers and government at all levels can mitigate its impacts through policies that acknowledge this labor market condition and actively work to address it.

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