



MISSISSIPPI IS AMERICA:

**How Racism and Sexism Sustain a Two-Tiered Labor Market
in the US and Constrict the Economic Power of Workers in
Mississippi and Beyond**

**By: Anne Price, Jhumpa Bhattacharya
Edited by: Kendra Bozarth**

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of the US economy and the ever-present financial instability of American workers. Prior to this health and economic crisis, headline economic measures including historically low unemployment rates¹ masked the reality for millions of working people who held jobs but suffered from persistently low wages and inadequate access to fundamental benefits, such as sick time or paid family leave.

Viewing Mississippi as a vital case study, this report explores the perpetual economic hardship faced by low-wage workers across the state and within selected regions.² Because the Mississippi economy mirrors the national economy in key ways, including the fact that many of its industries depend on a low-wage workforce, this report demonstrates how Mississippi reflects—and drives—broader trends in the US.

This report utilizes labor market data and an occupational crowding analysis to illustrate who is largely *excluded from* the most-desirable, best-paying occupations and *crowded into* occupations with the lowest wages and least stability. We show that race and gender determine the types of jobs that Mississippians have access to in the labor market.

- The fastest-growing occupations in Mississippi pay relatively low wages, with a median wage of \$11.37 an hour. This trend largely mirrors national estimates in which six of the 10 fastest-growing jobs are expected to pay less than \$15 an hour or \$27,000 a year.
- While a majority of workers in Mississippi are paid low wages, employers pay Black women the lowest wages and prevent them from accessing higher-quality, higher-paying jobs.
- There is a clear racialized and gendered hierarchy when it comes to occupations and earnings in Mississippi. Employers pay Black people an average of \$22,000 a year in occupations in which they are overrepresented, almost one-half of the rate that white people are paid in the occupations in which they dominate.
- White workers, and specifically white men, are the only group that is consistently found in the highest-paying jobs.
- Though limited in number, white workers dominate jobs that offer much higher pay and better employer-sponsored benefits, such as nurses, lawyers, and managerial positions.

The problems of low wages and the resulting economic insecurity are by no means confined to the South. But as this report illustrates, the economic changes underway in the region significantly impact and reflect broader trends in the United States. They also entrench the consequences of America's racist and segregated past.

Our nation has moved toward two tiers of jobs: one tier that provides higher pay, greater stability, and employer benefits; and a second tier defined by part-time, temporary, and contract work and also largely characterized by low pay, instability, and little to no access to advancement opportunities and employer benefits.

This two-tiered labor market is highly racialized and gendered.

- Women and men predominantly work in different occupations.³
- Women are paid less per hour than men and work fewer hours outside of the home.
- Black working people are often paid less than white workers and are found in occupations that are less stable and have fewer benefits.⁴
- Across the nation, 38 percent of Black workers receive low-wages.⁵

Mississippi is no exception to these national trends.

RACISM AND SEXISM REMAIN BECAUSE THE NARRATIVE OF RACIAL DIFFERENCE REMAINS

White supremacy and the patriarchy depend on myths of social hierarchy, including the **narrative of racial difference**.⁶ Built on the notion of Black inferiority, the narrative of racial difference was used to justify a slave economy. Mississippi's economy was built on the labor of enslaved Black people and was foundational, along with other southern states, in establishing the first global economic engine before the Civil War through the violent use of forced, unpaid labor that was rooted in racism. An economy and society committed to upholding white supremacy, cotton slavery was a modern-day business that was constantly shifting to maximize profits at the expense of Black people. Slaveowners experimented with labor control, establishing quotas and using forms of torture and violence to increase production.⁷

Technology⁸ has since changed the mode of surveillance making it more achievable and economical. But today's intrusive workplace surveillance practices, from drug testing to productivity tracking devices, stem from slavery and are merely modernized forms of controlling working people and all aspects of their employment.⁹ Whole Foods, for example, uses metrics such as a "diversity index"¹⁰ to undermine unionization efforts by measuring—and exploiting—racial differences and sabotaging worker solidarity. Overall, research shows that Black working people are subject to more scrutiny or held to a higher standard than white workers.¹¹

Today, Mississippi's economy shares many of the same characteristics that operated before the Civil War, namely that its policymakers and business leaders continue to structure the rules of the economy in ways that maintain a majority low-paid labor force with few to no employer-provided benefits and worker protections.

Ultimately, the narrative of racial difference still permeates our economic, political, and social structures today and defines how Americans view Black people and labor. A narrative of racial difference fundamentally associates Black people with "not working"—and therefore with the conceptual implications that they have a diminished morality and a diminished claim to personhood. In the end, the false narrative that Black people are "lazy" and live off of the hard work of white Americans shapes current job opportunities and economic outcomes for Black workers.

Notably, Mississippi and other Southern states have been coined the birthplace of America's "low-road approach to capitalism." According to University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist Joel Rogers, in a "[l]ow-road capitalist society, low wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality, of goods; so-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions; inequality reigns and poverty spreads."¹² In the Jim Crow South, segregation was used as a way to divide and exploit workers among racial lines, a strategy that worked to dismantle class solidarity and keep wages impossibly low. Jim Crow laws were intended to disrupt the market forces of competition in order to protect a racial and economic hierarchy that exploited Black workers and protected white supremacy.¹³

Today, the reach of this low-road approach can be witnessed firsthand in the wage stagnation experienced by a majority of American workers. For most workers, wages have barely budged since the 1970s.¹⁴ The overall gradual reduction of real wages was pioneered in Southern states, whose businesses have always paid less than other

regions in the country. In today's low-wage economy, Southern workers remain at the bottom, taking home wages well below the national median. In fact, Mississippi has the lowest median wage of any state in the nation.¹⁵

Indeed, the South has served as a policy laboratory for reducing worker power. Policies that successfully served corporate and private interests in the South have been exported to other states in the union, contributing to an overall decline in worker power. For example, right-to-work laws, which bar unions from requiring those who benefit from their negotiations to join the union, originated in the South before spreading throughout the rest of the country.¹⁶ These laws are intended to reduce union membership and starve unions of the money they need to operate. Today, every state in the South has adopted right-to-work laws.

Additionally, trends in Mississippi also shape the state of the broader labor market for countless workers across the country. The South has become a testing ground, both for 1) strategies of workplace reinvention that often preserve concentrated corporate power—through the expansion of contingent work and new forms of production outsourcing—and for 2) worker power activism—through efforts to increase access to economic opportunities, improve health and safety on the job, ensure that labor rights are protected, and redress labor market inequities that plague the US job market.

Policies and practices that serve corporate power profoundly jeopardize the livelihoods of Black people, the majority of whom live in the South. The uptake of many southern economic policies in northern states has brought northern wages down closer to southern levels.¹⁷ After decades of effort, Mississippi can be described as the prototype for what is happening in the rest of the nation.

Mississippi Is America

In many ways, the worst of the economic fragility and stark racial inequality that dominate the American economy are compounded in Mississippi. Mississippi has one of the smallest economies in the US and has been one of the slowest to recover from the 2008 recession. Similar to other southern states, Mississippi is defined by low-wage occupations and a large share of slow-growing or declining industries¹⁸ While Mississippi's economy has struggled to produce enough high-paying jobs to provide economic stability for all working people, race and gender play an outsized role in determining who has access to economic stability within the state. We can no longer ignore this reality or view Mississippi as an outlier of the US economy or the larger American story. **What is happening in Mississippi impacts and reflects America;** and until all Mississippians have financial power at work, our nation will continue to suffer.

LOW-WAGE JOBS DOMINATE THE MISSISSIPPI ECONOMY

Only 25 industries account for more than 50 percent of all jobs in Mississippi, with five of those industries making up 20 percent of all jobs. The four largest industries in the state are health and social services, manufacturing, food service, and retail—all industries that pay median annual wages below \$30,000. This means that for most workers in Mississippi, work options are limited to low-paying jobs in just a handful of industries. Notably, the government is the largest single employer in Mississippi, followed by the food service sector.

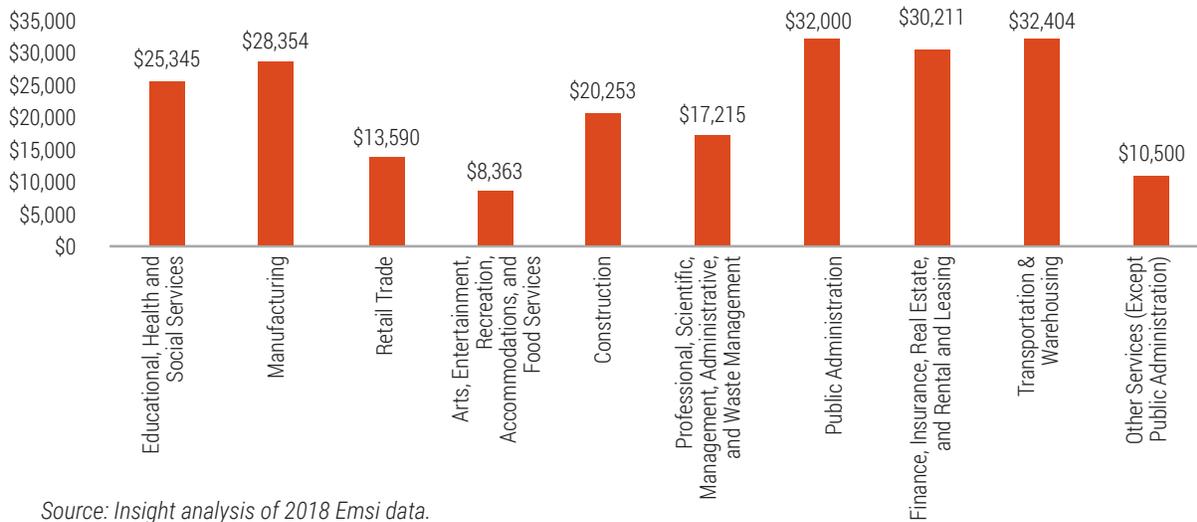
Mississippi policymakers continually recruit industries and employers that provide very few positions that pay middle-income wages. For example, Mississippi legislators provided the automaker Nissan with an excess of \$1.3

“Our country, our entire economic system, has always been built on the backs of people of color and women; and we cannot look out of that without dismantling pieces of it. And we can't do that, because the people who want to dismantle it are always at the bottom, because that's the way it's set up.”

—Shanice, Black Woman, Biloxi

billion in state and local economic development incentives, including the largest withholding tax subsidy ever awarded; but between 2001 to 2013, autoworkers in Mississippi saw their earnings fall by 13.6 percent.¹⁹ One reason that wages are low in Mississippi is because factories, branch plants, and other facilities relocated to the state in search of low wages, fewer labor protections, lack of unionization, and the extensive use of workers employed by temporary staffing agencies. Currently, 29 states and DC have minimum wages above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, but Mississippi is one of five states that have not adopted a state minimum wage.²⁰

Figure 1: Median Annual Wage for the Largest Mississippi Industries, 2018

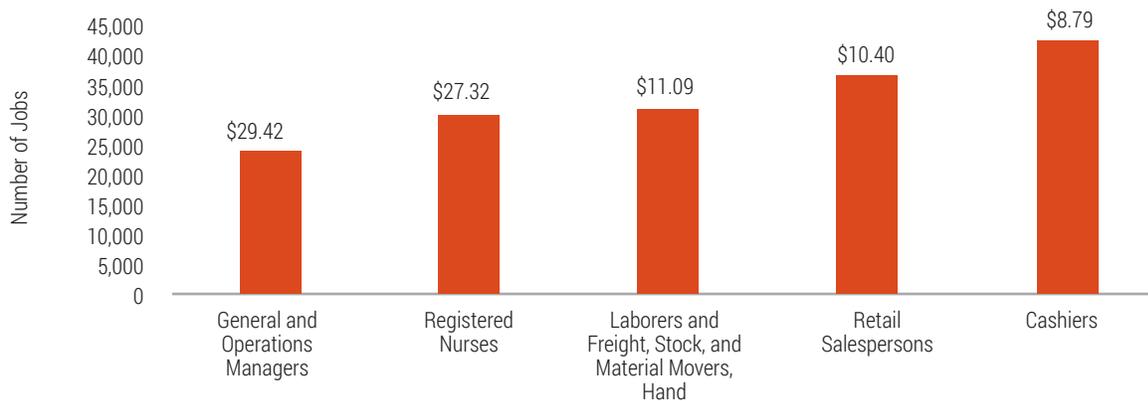


Source: Insight analysis of 2018 Emsi data.

As a result, the median wage among the 50 most-common occupations in Mississippi is just \$12.09 an hour. Working full time at that wage would have put a single custodial parent with two children slightly above the federal poverty level in 2018, but one-half of all workers in the state are paid less than \$12. The five most common occupations in the state are cashier, retail salespersons, laborers, nurses, and general managers (Figure 2). At \$8.79 an hour, cashiers are the lowest paid and have the highest number of workers. Among the most-common occupations in the state, only nurses and general managers are paid a living wage.

While nurses and general managers are among the most-common jobs in the state, a majority of Mississippians work in places like factories or in positions such as security guards or janitors—occupations that pay very little and provide few employer benefits. While limited in number, white workers dominate occupations such as nurses, lawyers, and managerial positions. These occupations have much higher pay and better benefits, setting up a two tiered economy where many Mississippians of color, including women of color, have limited opportunities while the few live in comfort.

Figure 2: Five Most-Common Mississippi Occupations and Median Hourly Wage, 2018

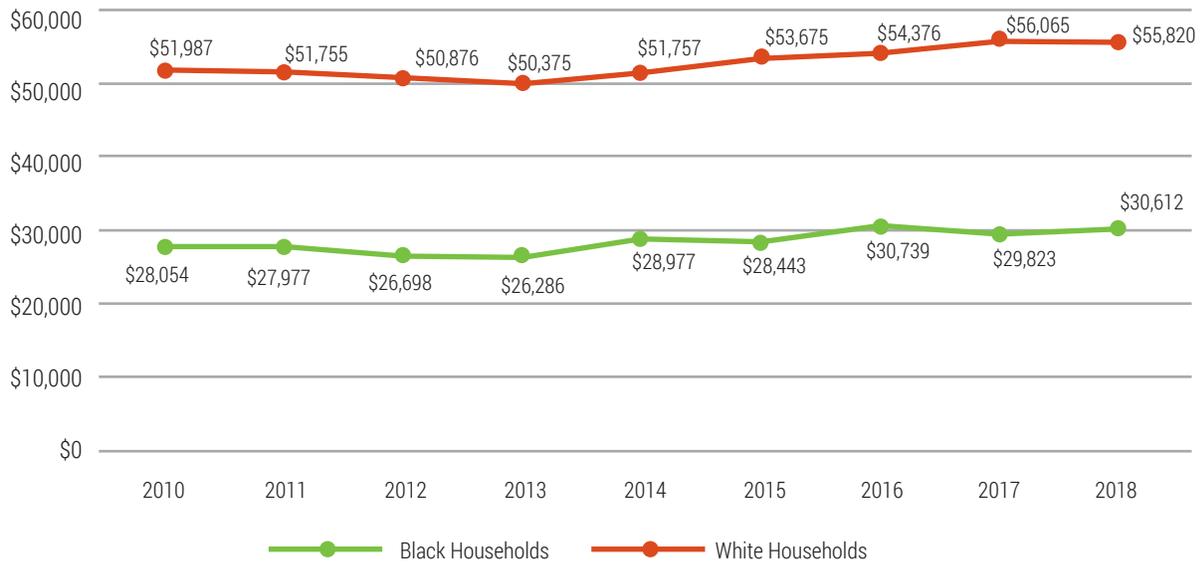


Source: Insight analysis of 2018 Emsi data.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY IN MISSISSIPPI IS UNEQUAL

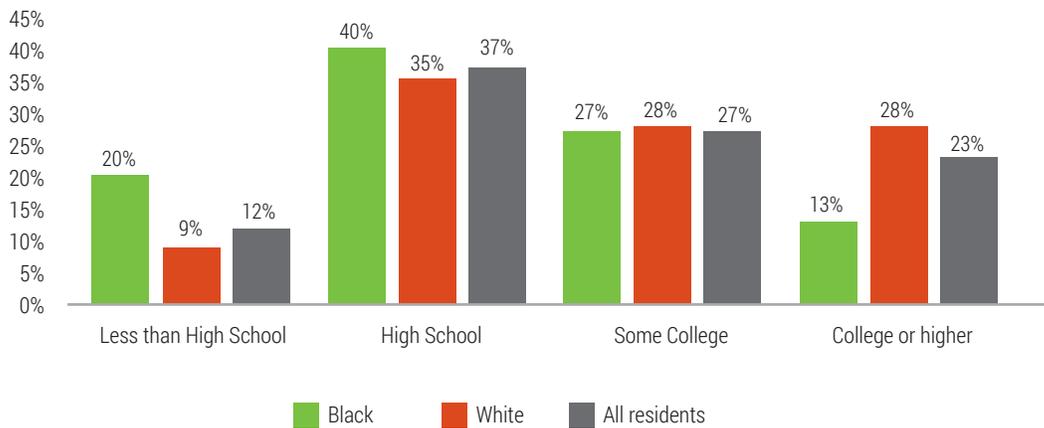
Regardless of race or gender, employers pay most workers low wages. **However, there is one group that has access to the highest paid jobs: White workers, and in particular white men,** are the only group that is consistently found in the highest-paying occupations. While household income for all races and ethnicities has been increasing since the Great Recession, the difference between white and Black residents has remained largely the same. Today, Black household income is 45 percent less than their white neighbors (Figure 3). Notably, this income difference is not fully explained by educational attainment. A plurality of both Black and white people in Mississippi have a high school diploma as their highest level of education, and a similar percentage of the population have attended some college (Figure 4). That more white people receive college degrees and more Black people drop out of high school still does not fully explain overall income gaps. Black people's lower income is due to systemic racism and discrimination in the job market—not because of individual choices or actions.

Figure 3: Median Annual Household Income in Mississippi by Race, 2010-2018



Source: US Census Bureau, 2010-2018 American Community Survey.

Figure 4: Educational Attainment in Mississippi by Race, 2018



Source: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey.

While most employers pay working people low wages, white workers have greater access to higher-wage jobs. For white workers in Mississippi, the most-common occupation is working as a retail salesperson. The second and third most-common occupations, registered nurses and general and operations managers, pay almost three times the hourly wage as retail salespersons (Table 1).

Black workers in Mississippi are most likely found in the lowest-paying occupations and are left out of higher-paying occupations. The most-common occupation of Black workers is a cashier, one of lowest paying. All of the five most-common occupations for Black working people pay less than half of what a registered nurse or general and operations manager are paid.

Table 1: Mississippi Occupations with the Highest Number of Black and White Workers, 2018

Highest Number of White Workers	Median Hourly Earnings	Highest Number of Black Workers	Median Hourly Earnings
Retail Salespersons	\$10.40	Cashiers	\$8.79
General and Operations Managers	\$29.42	Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	\$11.09
Registered Nurses	\$27.31	Retail Salespersons	\$10.40
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive	\$14.56	Assemblers and Fabricators, All Others, Including Team Assemblers	\$13.62
Cashiers	\$8.79	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	\$9.56

Source: Insight analysis of 2018 Emsi data.

The fastest-growing occupations in Mississippi pay relatively low wages, with a median wage of \$11.37 an hour.

This trend largely mirrors national estimates in which six of the 10 fastest-growing jobs are expected to pay less than \$15 an hour or \$27,000 a year.²¹ America is mirroring Mississippi, as since 2001, the five occupations in Mississippi with the most growth are food preparation workers, nurses, personal care aides, general managers, and administrative assistants (Table 2). While three of those fastest-growing jobs pay above the statewide average, the occupations that have seen the greatest growth pay well below it. Food preparation jobs have grown by 68 percent since 2001 but have a median wage of just \$8.90 an hour. Personal care aides rose by more than 300 percent in that same time period but pay only \$9.63 an hour.

The best-paying positions among those growing at the fastest rate are disproportionately held by white working people. Registered nurses and general managers, by far the highest-paying occupations with hourly wages over \$27, are overwhelmingly made up of white workers. Administrative assistants, the only other position that is paid above the state median wage at \$14.56 an hour, is 72 percent white. Food preparation workers and personal care assistants, the lowest-wage positions but also the fastest growing, are both majority Black occupations. All five of the fastest-growing jobs are sharply divided by race: Black workers are more likely to be relegated to low-paying jobs with unpredictable scheduling and limited paths for advancement, while white workers dominate higher-paid positions with greater access to employer-sponsored benefits.

Table 2: Fastest-Growing Occupations in Mississippi and Median Hourly Earnings by Race, 2018

Added the Most Jobs	Median Hourly Earnings	Percentage of Growth, 2001-2017	Percentage of Jobs Held by White Workers	Percentage of Jobs Held by Black Workers
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food	\$8.90	68%	43%	51%
Registered Nurses	\$27.31	36%	68%	29%
Personal Care Aides	\$9.63	316%	27%	71%
General and Operations Managers	\$29.42	35%	78%	19%
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive	\$14.56	35%	72%	25%

Source: Insight analysis of 2018 Emsi data.

A TWO-TIERED LABOR MARKET: MISSISSIPPI IS SEGREGATED BY RACE AND GENDER

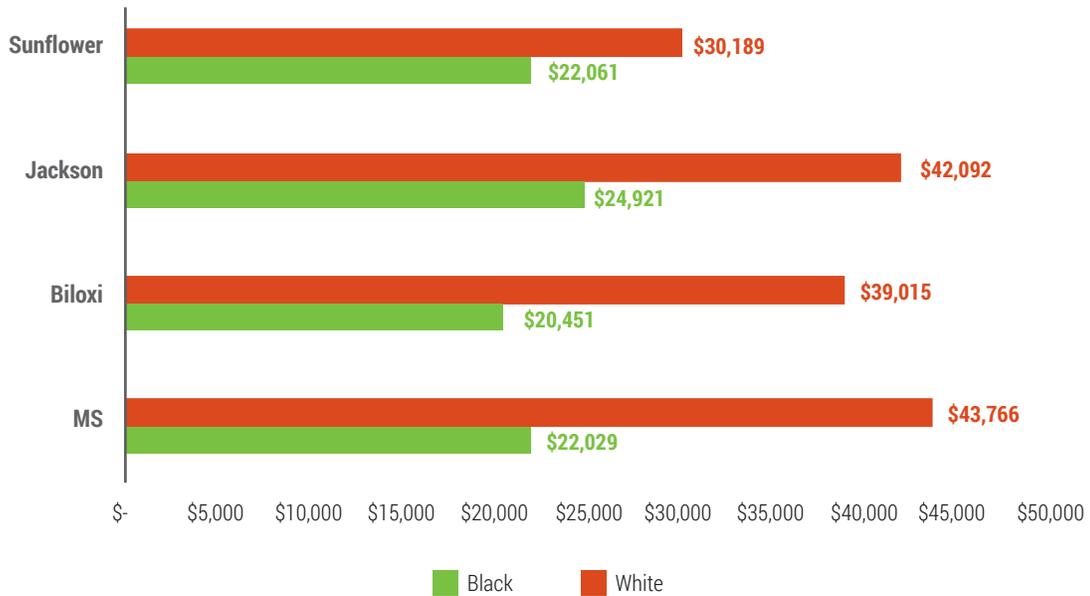
The research conducted for this report underscores persistent and pervasive racial segregation in the labor market, as well as the resulting wage gaps and overall financial instability. Occupational crowding, sometimes called occupational segregation, measures the degree to which a demographic group is over-, under-, or proportionally represented in an occupation given their educational attainment and the educational requirement for jobs.

We find a clear racialized and gendered hierarchy when it comes to occupations and earnings in Mississippi. Figure 5 shows that employers pay Black people an average of \$22,000 a year in occupations in which they are overrepresented, almost one-half of what white people are paid in the occupations in which they dominate. While there are regional differences, with Sunflower county in the Delta having the smallest gap between white and Black working people in overrepresented occupations, the pattern is the same: Black people are crowded into the lowest-paid occupations and denied access to higher-paying occupations, while white people have access to better-paying occupations.

WHITE MEN EXPERIENCE UNDUE ADVANTAGE AND HIGH-INCOME OCCUPATIONS IN THE LABOR MARKET

In Mississippi, white people are overrepresented in 61 percent of all jobs, meaning that they hold more of those positions than they should when all else is equal. On the other hand, Black working people are crowded out of 62 percent of all occupations, meaning they are underrepresented in a majority of positions they should have access to given their education level.

Figure 5: Annual Average Wages in Overrepresented Occupations by Race and by Selected Regions



Source: *Biu, Famighetti, and Hamilton analysis of American Community Survey 5-year sample (2012-2016) drawn from the IPUMS-USA database.*

Table 3 shows the average hourly wage for the occupations in which demographic groups are overrepresented. Black people and white women are crowded into lower-wage occupations. White men are crowded into occupations that pay nearly three times more than Black women.

Table 3: Average Hourly Wages in Top Five Overrepresented Occupations by Race and Gender and by Selected Regions

Gender/Race	Mississippi	Biloxi Area	Jackson Area	Sunflower-Delta
Black Women	\$11.67	\$12.02	\$10.02	\$9.39
Black Men	\$12.71	\$12.37	\$10.39	\$12.24
White Women	\$15.74	\$18.74	\$15.88	\$17.12
White Men	\$33.03	\$24.20	\$29.03	\$15.88

Note: Data based on the median of the average wage among the top five overrepresented occupations

Source: *Biu, Famighetti, and Hamilton analysis of American Community Survey 5-year sample (2012-2016) drawn from the IPUMS-USA database*

White men experience a dramatically different labor market experience than any other demographic group, with access to a wide range of occupations. White men are found in the lowest-paid occupations as well as the highest. However, white men dominate occupations that are highly paid, such as engineers, managers, and supervisors, making up 67 percent or more of the jobs that they are overrepresented in. **The top-five occupations in which white men are overrepresented pay an average annual wage of \$60,124 a year, double the wage of overrepresented occupations for white women and triple that of Black men and women.** White men in the Jackson area have some of the highest shares of average earnings as compared to other places. They are paid 300 percent of average wages across all occupations. White men in particular tend to earn more in both men- and women-dominated occupations while Black women earn the least. For example, in Sunflower County (Delta), two female dominated jobs—financial clerks and health technologists and technicians—show the most earnings for white men. Respectively, they earn 143 percent and 114 percent of average wages compared to 90 percent and 71 percent for white women.

BLACK WOMEN FACE UNIQUE HURDLES IN THE JOB MARKET DUE TO THEIR RACE AND GENDER

As it stands, race and gender are perhaps the most predominant indicators of the type of job someone can land in Mississippi—and in the US more broadly. For Black people and for women, it is usually to their detriment. Research shows that employers pay men at a higher rate more in occupations that are dominated by men regardless of skill or education level. In sharp contrast, employers pay women less in occupations held primarily by women. **As the rate of women working in a given occupation increases, their pay declines—even when controlling for education and skills.**²² In Mississippi, being a woman is a distinct indicator of being stuck in low-paying occupations. Notably, Mississippi and Alabama are the only two states that have not passed an equal pay law. Mississippi's gender wage gap, one of the nation's largest, disproportionately affects Black women, but women of all races and ethnicities face hurdles due to their gender.²³

Black Women

Black women act as “canaries in the coal mine” of our economy, as they bear the burden of both race and gender. Black women remain at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and bottom rung of our nation's economic ladder. **In Mississippi, Black women are locked out of 62 percent of all jobs, the highest percentage among all groups.** They are overrepresented in occupations like home health aides, counselors, and food processing workers. Among the top-five occupations in which Black women are overrepresented, three have average annual wages that are less than \$18,000.

In the Jackson area, three of the top-five occupations in which Black women are overrepresented pay less than \$15,000 a year. This diverges from statewide data in which there are no jobs that pay less than \$15,000 for the top-five jobs in which Black women are overrepresented. Black women in the Jackson area are crowded into the occupation of home health aide where they comprise an overwhelming majority (88 percent of workers) and are paid a mere wage of \$8.00 an hour. In the Biloxi area, they make up 92 percent of home health aides and are paid about \$11.00 an hour.

“I’ve been in radio for 21 years. But I’ve served as underemployed because our station has been sold three times. [I get paid] \$7.25, and I have the experience. I do the commercials. I do ads and everything else. But they feel that because workers serve as part time, they don’t have to give us a raise. I’m underpaid for my experience.”

— Angie, Black Woman, Jackson

“I want a job that will allow me to be free to still live the life that I want to live, being able to raise my kids and be there on days that they need me to be off.”

— Janelle, Black Woman, Jackson

White Women

White women are relegated to jobs that have traditionally been seen as women's work, working as administrative support staff, legal support workers, financial clerks, and health technicians. They dominate these positions, making up 50 percent or more of all workers in these occupations. While these occupations pay relatively low wages, an average of \$15.74 an hour (Table 3), they still pay much more than the occupations Black women and men are crowded into but pay almost one-half of what white men are paid. In the Delta region, however, white women are overrepresented in occupations that pay more on average than white men. In the Biloxi area, the overwhelming share of support occupations are held by white women. They make up 94 percent of administrative assistants and 82 percent of financial clerks, which pay an average hourly wage of \$14.50.

“There's only a few routes you can go as far as being employed, that's what I see from my experience with my friends.”

—Tyrone, Black Man, Jackson

Black Men

Black men in Mississippi have very few employment options. Similar to Black women, Black men are packed into low wage work with limited advancement opportunities. However, Black men benefit from the perception of what is “men's work,” allowing them access to a few higher-paying jobs. Among the five occupations in which Black men are the most overrepresented the average hourly wage is just \$12.71 an hour. Of the positions Black men are crowded into—such as protective service supervisors, motor vehicle operators, material moving workers, ground maintenance workers, and construction helpers—one pays more than \$40,000 a year (more than any occupation in which Black or White women are overrepresented), and two pay less than \$11,000 a year. In the Jackson area, the state's capital and an overwhelmingly Black city (with 82 percent of residents identifying as Black), Black men are crowded into lower-paying occupations than in other parts of the state. Three of the five overrepresented occupations pay under \$16,000 a year.

CONCLUSION

From chattel slavery, through the Jim Crow South, and into the 21st century, the foundation of Mississippi's economy remains one that, through racism and sexism, extracts the cheapest possible labor from the most disadvantaged. Black workers have been relied upon to generate wealth for others while they struggle to make ends meet. Black people in Mississippi are excluded from a majority of positions in the state, are paid below living wages in nearly every occupation they have access to and are forced into the lowest-paying jobs with the fewest opportunities for advancement. Black women, more than any other group, deal with the most difficult aspects of this economic reality.

A complicated (and intentional) network of laws, policies, and practices ensures that Black people, regardless of their education, are unable to reach the same economic standing of their white counterparts. The struggles Black people face to gain a foothold in the labor market did not happen by accident but rather stem from historical disadvantages that, through ongoing policy choices, have become an enduring feature of American society. Black working people have been forced into the most devalued work as they are subjected to harmful narratives about deservedness. And this economic reality is not unique to Mississippi. Across the country, Black workers are denied the same economic opportunities as their peers and are relegated to the worst corners of the labor market .

While the structure of Mississippi's economy and its deeply racist and sexist history history make these inequities more readily apparent than in some places, it remains a microcosm of the problems at play in the United States as a whole. Mississippi is America; America is Mississippi.

APPENDIX: OCCUPATIONAL CROWDING METHODOLOGY

Occupational crowding measures the degree to which a group is over-, under-, or proportionally represented in an occupation given their educational attainment and the educational requirement for occupations. Bergmann's 1971 crowding theory²⁴ held that Black workers face discrimination in the labor market which crowds them *into* lower paying occupations and *out of* higher paying occupations. Bergman's study found that of 29 occupations studied, Black workers were overrepresented in eight occupations and underrepresented in the remaining 18. The 18 occupations with an undersupply of Black workers paid more than the occupations where Black workers were overrepresented.

This report uses an update to Bergmann's method;²⁵ the latest method more explicitly controls for education. For example, in measuring crowding among all Black workers relative to white workers, only Black individuals with a consistent educational attainment held by *all persons* in a particular occupation, between the 20th and 80th percentiles, are considered eligible for the relevant occupation.

As noted in our findings, we calculate a crowding index ratio for various groups in the geographies of interest, namely Black people, white people, Black women, Black men, white women, and white men between the ages of 25-64 and 16-29.

To estimate crowding, we compare all race and gender groups to white men, reflecting Mary King's "access model,"²⁶ which posits that white men have the most access to desirable occupations. For this reason, we compare white men to the entire economy.

Occupations composed of more than 10 percent of the expected number of the group are considered to be cases of overrepresentation (having a crowding score of more than 1.1) while occupations with less than 10 percent of the expected number of the relevant group are considered to be cases of underrepresentation (having a crowding score of less than .9). Occupations where the expected number of the relevant group does not exceed nor is less than 10 percent (that is, between .9 to 1.1) are considered proportionally represented.

$$CROWD_INDEX_X^i = \left\{ \frac{Actual\ Share_X^i}{Expected\ Share_X^i} \right\} = \left\{ \frac{\frac{X^i}{Y^i}}{\frac{X^{k^i}}{Y^{k^i}}} \right\}$$

About the Insight Center

The Insight Center is a national racial and economic justice organization working to ensure that all people become and remain economically secure. Through research and advocacy, we expose hidden truths to unearthing and address the root causes of economic exclusion and racial inequity.

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