

How historical racism influences modern poverty and racial inequality

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Penn sociologist Regina Baker. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

To understand modern racial inequalities, historical context is crucial. That's according to new research from Penn sociologist Regina Baker published in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Baker found that in Southern states with a strong historical racial regime—a notion she conceptualized and then measured using a scale she created—Black populations today experience worse [poverty](#). These states also have a wider poverty gap between Black and white populations.

"In general, Black people are more likely to be poor than [white people](#)," says Baker, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology. "Living in a state that has a stronger historical racial context exacerbates that poverty."

'I was meant to dig deeper'

Baker grew up in Georgia, and both her parents came from South Carolina. "The South has always been of interest to me," she says. In graduate school, she knew she wanted to research poverty and inequality, but she didn't home in on what would eventually become this research until one particular news article got her thinking.

The piece ranked states in many categories, from poverty to child well-being and health care. "For nearly every category, so many of the states at the bottom were in the South," she says.

She wondered why, yet looking through the previous literature got her nowhere; little sociological research existed on poverty in the contemporary South. She happened upon a paper from respected sociologist Ronald C. Wimberley making a plea to colleagues to do more research about the South and to use their expertise to better understand social problems like impoverishment through a Southern lens.

"Here I am reading this article. I had all these questions in my mind about why the Southern states were coming up in indicators as being worse off. There was this call for work on the South and for sociologists

from the South to do more of this work. It just seemed like I was meant to dig deeper," Baker says. "That's what really got me interested in focusing on this topic specifically."

Building an empirical study

Given the dearth of previous research, Baker opted to take a novel approach, conceptualizing and constructing a measure of what she called the "historical racial regime," or HRR. It built on the commonly held sociological notion of the "U.S. racial regime," which Baker describes in the paper as "a system of rule based on race that essentially functions to sustain [racial inequality](#)."

The HRR concept went a step beyond. In particular, Baker developed the HRR scale to measure past manifestations of the U.S. racial regime across time. She incorporated various historical state-facilitated institutions that shaped the lives of people who lived there, starting with slavery.

"Slavery itself is one institution, a crucial one, but there are also others that states put into place, mechanisms of inequality that contributed to racial inequality," Baker says. Here, she mentions facets of Jim Crow like sharecropping, disenfranchisement, and segregation. Using historical state-level data around each of these, plus slavery, she built the HRR scale.

"Scholars have said that history matters but rarely test it or show it," she says. "For instance, they may theorize about the role of racism in America or about white supremacy in racial inequality, but then they're not able to test it." Baker decided to change that.

Because Southern states vary in their level of such institutional state mechanisms—which could have implications for their legacy and racial

inequality in poverty—Baker set out to assess the relationship between HRR, poverty, and racial inequality in poverty in the contemporary American South.

She incorporated 15 states into her study: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. For each, she tabulated a score using the HRR scale.

To ensure she was focused on modern-day poverty, she selected the time frame from 2010 to 2018. Then she looked at U.S. Census Current Population Survey data for more than 525,000 individuals from the Luxembourg Income Study database. From there, she plotted poverty data and HRR data together to examine the relationship between a state's HRR score, poverty levels, and gaps for people living there today.

What she found, and the implications

Baker says she noticed a link almost immediately. "Plotting those data was telling in and of itself, suggesting there's an association there," she says. "This historical manifestation of a racial regime seemed to matter much more for Black people than white people and especially for the poverty gap between them."

Further, more advanced statistical analysis confirmed the preliminary findings, even after accounting for several individual-level variables like family structure, employment status, and education level. "After controlling for those, some that plausibly mediate the relationship between HRR and poverty, I still found this significance of HRR, where the likelihood of poverty for Black people today and Black-white inequalities in poverty are exacerbated," Baker says.

These results challenge the enduring racial inequality narrative "that it's

all about the individual, especially [family structure](#) and single motherhood," she says. They also suggest that the steps previously taken to ameliorate poverty that focus primarily on the individual aren't very effective; if they had been, she says, this racial inequality would not endure.

In the future, Baker says she hopes to use the HRR concept to understand the role of historical racism for other outcomes, as well as broaden it to other populations and parts of the country. Ultimately, she envisions such information could help reshape how the United States confronts poverty and racial inequality.

"We can't fully understand the context of modern-day poverty or [inequality](#) if we don't consider the role that history played. We can't act like the past doesn't matter if we want to move forward," Baker says. "We can't just think about the individual in a vacuum; we must think about the broader context in which individuals live, not just the micro but also the macro and how they help inform each other. Only then can we think more purposefully and creatively to address these enduring issues."

More information: Regina S. Baker, The Historical Racial Regime and Racial Inequality in Poverty in the American South, *American Journal of Sociology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1086/719653](https://doi.org/10.1086/719653)

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