

THE JOURNAL OF BLACKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

at Stanford, Deval Patrick, a civil rights attorney who is now governor of Massachusetts, Elena Kagan, former dean of Harvard Law School who was appointed by President Obama to the post of solicitor general of the United States, and Sonia Sotomayor, a judge on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals.

Sotomayor would be the first Hispanic justice on the Supreme Court and would serve to solidify Obama's political support with Hispanic voters. A graduate of Princeton University and Yale Law School, she is considered a moderate jurist and her appointment might anger Obama's core liberal constituency.

It is likely that President Obama's next choice for the Court will have clear sailing through the Democratic-controlled Senate. But once the nomination is made, blacks will have lost their leverage. It is imperative that blacks make it known now that a nominee who is opposed to race-sensitive admissions in higher education is an unacceptable choice.

**Martha S. Putney
(1916-2008)**

Martha Putney, military historian and educator, has died in Washington from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She was 92 years old.

A native of Norristown, Pennsylvania, Putney won a scholarship to Howard University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in 1939 and a master's degree in history a year later.

Unable to find a teaching position, Putney joined the Women's Army Corps in 1943. After World War II, she used the GI Bill to earn a Ph.D. in European history from the University of Pennsylvania. She then began a long teaching career, first at Bowie State University and later at Howard University. At Bowie State, she was chair of the history and geography department.

Putney was a well-regarded historian. Her books included *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalemens Prior to the Civil War* (1987), *When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (1992), and *Blacks in the United States Army: Portraits Through History* (2003).

A story on the life of Dr. Putney appeared in Tom Brokaw's best seller, *The Greatest Generation*.



□ **Why Family Income Differences Don't Explain the Racial Gap in SAT Scores**

Family income differences among the races are often said to explain the SAT scoring gap between black and white college-bound students. But it turns out that the SAT scoring gap is almost as large among high-income blacks and high-income whites as it is among low-income blacks and low-income whites. Here are some suggestions as to why this is so.

Suppose you are permitted one question whose answer would give you the most simple and best lead to an individual's score on the SAT college entrance examination. The best question to ask would be: "How big is the bank account of the family of the student taking the test?"

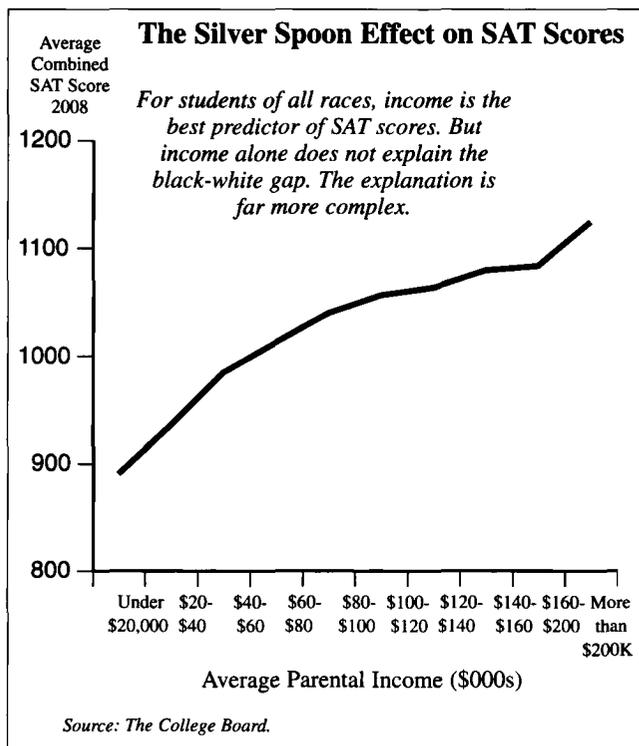


For both blacks and whites, family income is one of the best predictors of a student's SAT score. Students from families with high incomes tend to score higher. Students from low-income families on average have low SAT scores. Because the median black family income in the United States is about 60 percent of the median family income of whites, one would immediately seize upon this economic statistic to explain the average 200-point gap between blacks and whites on the standard SAT scoring curve, which ranges from 400 to 1600.

"Black students from families with incomes of more than \$200,000 score lower on the SAT than students from white families with incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000."

But racial conservatives — as well as the "biological" racists who believe that blacks are inherently less intelligent than whites — call attention to SAT statistics that tend to refute the belief that family income differences are largely responsible for the racial scoring gap. Here, the first point made is that for black and white students from families each with incomes of more than \$200,000 in 2008, there still remains a huge 149-point gap in SAT scores.

Second and most difficult to explain is the fact that in 2008 black students from families with incomes of more than \$200,000 did in fact score *lower* on the SAT test than did students from white families with incomes between \$20,000 and \$40,000.



Comparing Apples and Oranges

The comparison of the SAT scores of groups of blacks and whites who earn similar incomes naturally leads one to the conclusion that we are comparing students from similar educational, social, and cultural backgrounds. But the fact is that we are often comparing apples and oranges. Black and white families with incomes of \$100,000 tend to have completely different backgrounds and social and educational characteristics. Consider, for example, the following differences between high-income black families and high-income white families:

“For black and white students from families each with incomes of more than \$200,000 in 2008, there still remains a huge 149-point gap in SAT scores.”

- According to census statistics, white families with very high incomes have three times or more the wealth of black families with high incomes. The possession of wealth dramatically changes the demographic characteristics of these higher-income families. Three or more times the wealth often permits white families to afford home computers and private SAT test-preparation courses and tutors and other test advantages that can cost several thousand dollars.

- Without regard to levels of income, white families are more likely to have grandparents, uncles, and aunts who went to college and who treasure and transmit to their offspring and relatives the value of a college education. These college-educated relatives tend to help financially and to motivate their grandchildren, nieces, and nephews in tackling the tasks necessary for successful college preparation.

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- Black students who come from families with high incomes are more likely than high-income whites to be the first generation in their family to seek a college education. Black students who are the first generation in their family to go to college often cannot draw on the educational experience of their parents for advice in preparing for and taking the SAT exam.

- Even when the parents in high-income black families are college graduates, the education they received is on average inferior in quality to the education received by high-income white parents. For this reason, the college-educated black parent is in many cases less qualified educationally to assist children in the host of efforts that prepare young adults for the SAT.

- Even when two members of a black family produce an

At All Family Income Levels, There is a Persisting Racial Gap in SAT Scores

Family Income	Mean Black Score	Mean White Score	Racial Gap
Under \$20,000	798	978	180
\$20,000 to \$40,000	836	995	159
\$40,000 to \$60,000	864	1017	153
\$60,000 to \$80,000	889	1032	143
\$80,000 to \$100,000	908	1052	144
\$100,000 to \$120,000	922	1066	144
\$120,000 to \$140,000	926	1073	147
\$140,000 to \$160,000	942	1087	145
\$160,000 to \$200,000	943	1091	148
More than \$200,000	981	1130	149

Source: The College Board.

income of \$100,000, the history of racial segregation and unequal treatment in this country is such that very large numbers of African-American SAT test takers still come from low-quality, segregated, and underfunded high schools.

Similar Incomes, Different Families Altogether

Consider the following comparisons of two hypothetical families. A white family with an income of \$100,000 will typically live in an upper-middle-class suburb with superior public schools. The mother and father are both college graduates. The father is literate, well connected, and reasonably sophisticated in moving with some skill in the white world of business, commerce, and the professions. The mother is also very likely to be college educated but still may be a traditional homemaker who volunteers at her children's school. The family has a home computer and a high-speed Internet connection. Both the mother and the father are relatively comfortable and skilled in confronting the problems facing their children in entering the fearsome world of testing for higher education. One parent is often home to help children with homework and other educational activities.

A black family with an income of \$100,000 still may live in a central city community. Despite their economic success, there is considerable probability that one or both of the parents may be high school dropouts. The father holds a \$60,000 unionized job with the city sanitation department. The mother may work in a service busi-



"Due to lingering racism, many black students of all income levels will not be challenged academically by their teachers."

ness. She often works nights and weekends and earns a salary of \$40,000 annually. The family has six children, pays high rent and big-city prices for food and other necessities. There is little money for a home computer or broadband Internet access. The parents who are black are likely to have little knowledge of the complex world of standardized tests or higher education.

Clearly these two families with equal incomes share very little in other characteristics that nurture successful test

takers. The children of these families cannot be expected to perform at the same levels on standardized tests for college admission.

The sum of our position is that if one were to randomly pick out a group of 100 families whose combined income of the husband and wife was more than \$100,000 a year, one quickly would see that, in terms of educational sophistication, family educational heritage, and access to educational tools and resources, the average white family in the same income group would be far better equipped than the average black family to prepare their children for success on the SAT test.

Stereotype Vulnerability

Even if we were to find a group of blacks and whites with identical economic and social characteristics, blacks may still score lower on standardized tests due to what Stanford social psychologist Claude M. Steele calls "racial stereotype vulnerability." According to Professor Steele's thesis, black students from middle- and upper-class families perform poorly on standardized tests because they experience an anxiety that if they do poorly on the SAT they will confirm the racial stereotype of the inferior intellectual ability of black people. This anxiety, according to Steele, causes the students to test poorly and to score at levels far below their capability. Steele says his research shows that test-scoring gaps between blacks and whites with similar backgrounds tend to disappear when test takers are informed before the exam that the results will not be used to evaluate their ability or qualifications.

Whether the parents of a child earn \$100,000 a year or \$10,000, very large numbers of public school teachers and guidance counselors will succumb to traditional stereotypes that black students are not college material and treat them as such. Due to lingering racism, many black students of all income levels will not be challenged academically by teachers. They will be placed into academic tracks that do not lead to college and they will be assigned to courses taught by inexperienced instructors.

For these reasons alone, African-American students will tend to have significantly lower scores on college entrance examinations than white students.