

Brian Defferding: What can Wisconsin do to alleviate racial inequality?

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Wisconsin's racial inequality has consistently been ranked as worst in the country. Year after year, the racial disparity of income has been so vast, it's difficult not to notice. Why is that?

Well first off, Wisconsin incarcerates more minorities than any other state in the union. That should be alarming. When anyone gets incarcerated, the first thing it does is ruin that person's chance of better employment, because employers are less likely to hire convicted felons; or those with a string of misdemeanors on their record. Once you get into the state system, it's difficult to get out. Those who serve jail time are often due restitution after their time served; so even if the state claims they "paid their debt to society," they haven't yet paid their debt to society; they may have \$20,000-\$30,000 in debt pay off; keeping them poor and keeping convicts away from any opportunity of recovery.

What offenses are minorities being convicted for? In 2013 an article, NPR broke down some hard numbers. The numbers are skewered by the city of Milwaukee - a city that is known to be the most segregated city in America. Milwaukee, a city that grew from its heavy German socialist roots, can be seen on maps as a place where you can draw a line right on the highway to show exactly where minorities live vs where whites live. Also, roughly a third of these are considered to be non-violent offenses. While non-violent offenses include theft and vandalism, it also includes things such as unpaid parking tickets, driving with expired tabs or un-registered vehicles, speeding, etc. In 2011, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analyzed 46,000 traffic stops and found that minorities get stopped more than whites do inside city limits. The result was staggering, in fact - a black person is seven times more likely to get pulled over than a white person. This was an even greater disparity than southern cities like in Charlotte North Carolina.

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Lastly to note, the other lion's share of these convictions, per NPR's analysis, shows the offenses are drug-related offenses.

Does this mean that minorities are using drugs more often than whites, though? Not at all. This can simply mean that minorities are being convicted more of drug offenses, while turning a softer eye towards whites. In fact, a recent study by Duke University, published in Archives of General Psychiatry, discovered that whites abuse drugs more than minorities, not less. Despite controlled variables of socioeconomic status, substance abuse rates turned out to be 9.0% for whites, 7.7% for Hispanics, 5% for African Americans and 3.5% for Asians and Pacific Islanders. And seeing that whites are a majority, 9% of whites are millions more than 7.7% of blacks. A 2010 study by the ACLU actually confirms that blacks are times more likely than whites to be arrested for marijuana. This arrest rate is higher in Waukesha county nearby. The conclusion of the study is a heavy recommendation to legalize marijuana to alleviate this disparity.

These are telling statistics that paint a rather disturbing picture of our state. It means police could very well be racial profiling, while also exploiting the war on drugs to keep minorities both in prison and poor.

What can be done, then?

Two clear, simple things that can be done is both end the war on drugs and end racial profiling within the police force. Incarceration cripples anyone's chances of both opportunity and growing wealth over time. Police need to stop spending their time jailing people that may or may not have addiction issues and spend more time actually tracking down murderers, rapists, thieves, vandals and con artists - people who are actual criminals.

But one element not often talked about is how the police are using traffic stops to both invade our privacy and become revenue generators for the state. Along with additional training of our police force to educate annually (or even twice a year) about the importance of racial harmony between the police and the community, we need to see a sea change in how the police patrol our roads. Thankfully, Milwaukee

has taken steps in that route, issuing less than half the tickets they did ten years ago. But that hasn't alleviated where they enforce those tickets - according to Milwaukee Police Chief Edward Flynn, police are conducting more traffic stops in "high crime neighborhoods" but issuing less tickets. High crime neighborhoods are, right now, those neighborhoods where they issue more arrests for drugs, which is de facto going off of older historical data pointing at racial profiling data. And even if they are issuing less traffic tickets, they can use these stops to search for drugs and arrest for drugs instead.

Remove the drug war, remove the crime. Less crime, less incentive to stop more people in traffic, less people in jail, less arrests, less people in the system, less debt, and we will see that racial gap close up rather quickly.

Marijuana economic potentials aside, it's evident the drug war along with racial profiling is keeping Wisconsin as an incarceration machine for minorities - and keeping them poor. The Libertarian Party of Wisconsin endorses the state to end the war on drugs entirely; and end racial profiling entirely from our police force. It's an embarrassment to our great state to have our state government to perpetuate racial tensions and racial disparity. Let's stop putting minorities in jail, shall we?

— *Defferding is a libertarian activist, member of the Libertarian Party of Wisconsin Executive Committee and founder of the Fox Valley Libertarian Party.*