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## Study: Life span of black males in Miss. shorter

But Rankin County residents live longer, complete more schooling than some others

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A black male born in Mississippi today can expect a shorter life span than the average American in 1960, a new study shows.

The average life expectancy for a black male born in Mississippi is 68.2 years - more than 11 years shorter than that of white females born in the state.

By contrast, a resident of top-ranked Rankin County lives an average of six years longer, is almost twice as likely to complete high school and three times more likely to complete college, and earns more than \$12,000 more than an average resident of Tunica, Coahoma, Tate and Panola counties.

Those disparities are spelled out in "A Portrait of Mississippi: the Mississippi Human Development Report 2009," a county-by-county assessment released Monday, broken down by race, of such indicators as life span, earnings, incidence of diabetes, high school completion, crime and birth weight. The study recommends the Legislature adopt an earned income tax credit, state minimum wages, affordable housing, affordable health care and subsidized child care to help lift up the state's poorest.

"Investing in people is not just good for individual Mississippians," the study says. "It is also necessary for the economic growth and future competitiveness of Mississippi in the fast-changing, knowledge-based global marketplace of tomorrow."

The study suggests doing a better job of ensuring at-risk males stay in school. About half the Mississippi males do not graduate on time, and a third of black males over 25 do not have a high school diploma. "Alarming high numbers of African American boys are leaving high school without graduating," the study says. "Without a high school diploma, prison becomes a far likelier destination than college."

The state Department of Education wants to reduce the dropout rate in Mississippi from 15.9 percent to 13 percent by 2013. The department launched a campaign called On the Bus to promote its dropout prevention efforts and has instructed all of the state's 152 school districts to develop dropout prevention plans.

The United Nations has used the Human Development Index to examine poorer nations in the areas of health, education and income. Last year, the index was used to examine the U.S. - the first time the index had been used to examine any of the world's eighth wealthiest nations. The new study makes Mississippi the first state where the index has been used.

The report shows great disparities in income by sex and race. In Mississippi, women have more education and live longer, but men earn a third more on average.

Overall, white men in Mississippi earn about \$5,000 more per year than the \$33,390 earned by the typical American worker.

The earnings for white women? About equal to what typical Americans earned nearly three decades ago - \$21,453.

As for black women, they earn less today than the typical American in 1960. African American men earn what typical Americans earned in 1970. Overall, the earnings for white Mississippians span from \$22,000 to \$38,000, compared with \$13,000 to \$25,000 for black Mississippians.

In other words, white Mississippians who are worse off in income are still better off than the majority of African Americans, said Sarah Burd-Sharps of the American Human Development Project, one of the authors of the report. In terms of infant mortality, the overall rate for nonwhites in Mississippi is more than 18 per 1,000 births for some of the poorest areas of Mississippi.

That's nearly three times the infant mortality rate nationwide, nearly twice the rate of Mississippi as a whole and about the same as the infant death rates in countries such as Libya and Thailand. "It's very troubling," said Burd-Sharps. The average infant mortality rate for white Mississippians is 6.6 - less than the national average of 6.9.

But, overall, white Mississippians are doing less well than the rest of white Americans, ranking 40th in income and 46th in education.

Overall, black Mississippians are worse off than other black Americans, ranking second to last on the health and income index (ahead of Louisiana) but dead last in education. On average, an African American living in Maryland lives four years longer, earns twice as much and is twice as likely to have a college degree.

Gross national product is typically used to look at nations, said Raymond Offenheser, president of Oxfam America, which paid for the report. "But GNP is not telling the whole story."

The report shows how many people still are struggling in Mississippi with shorter lives, lower incomes and limited access to education, he said. By taking a look at this report, Mississippi officials can better analyze their actions, such as where they might locate a new auto plant, he said.

Derrick Johnson, president of the Mississippi NAACP, which commissioned the study, said he hopes lawmakers will read the report, which shows Mississippi is spending twice as much per inmate as it is on education per school child.

The state also has a gap in access and affordability of health care, he said. "There are also jobs that individuals work at every day, yet are not offered any kind of health benefits because of the cost of health insurance, which directly impacts black male health and thus life expectancy."

Lawmakers, he said, "should take a critical look at this report and adjust their priorities so all Mississippians have a quality of life that any human being should have, particularly citizens of this country."

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