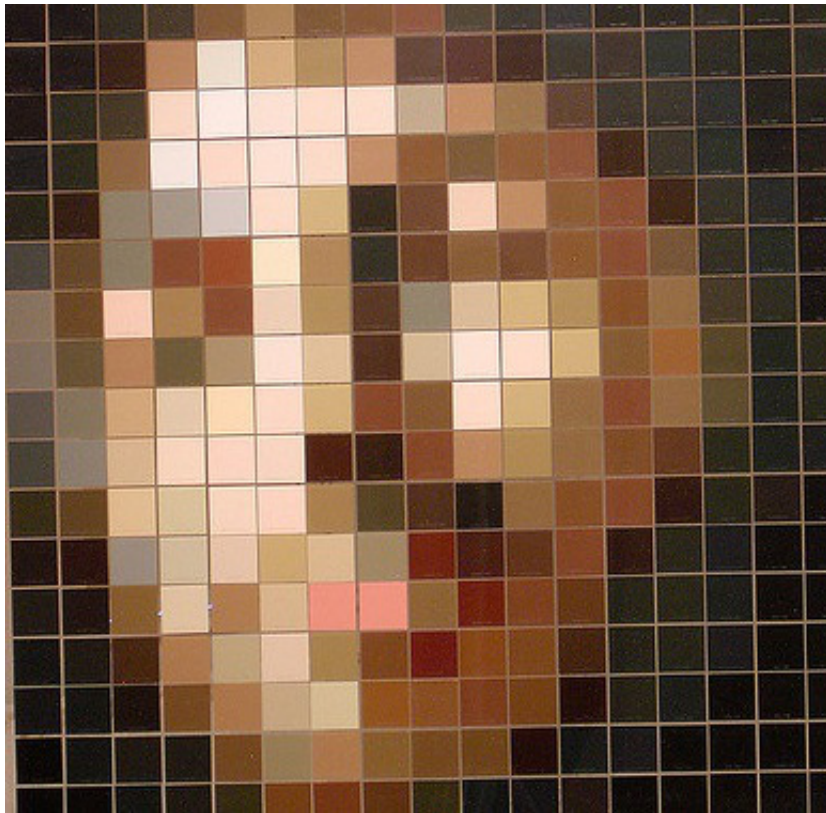


Global Rights Blog



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Racial Discrimination in Latin America: The “Pigmentocracy” Approach

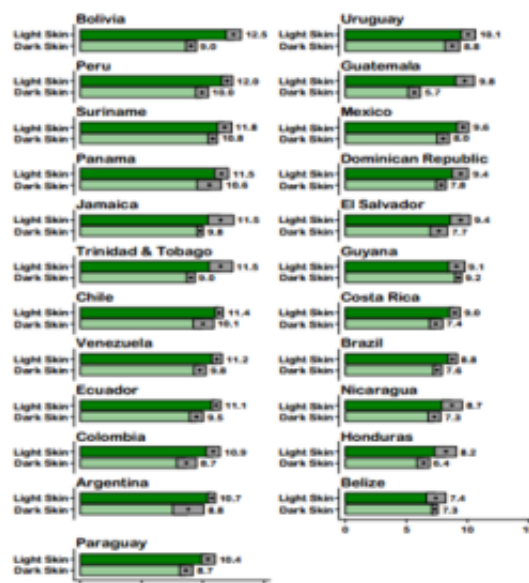
By Juan Andrés Paez*

Several weeks ago during the International Seminar on Ethnic-Racial Statistics (<http://socioeconomia.univalle.edu.co/index.php/cidse/grupos-de-investigacion/etnico-raciales/seminario-internacional-sobre-estadisticas-etnico-raciales>) held in Cali, it was evident that discrimination and racial discrimination is a current and worrisome problem in Latin America. The Seminar coincided with the release of the book Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America (http://books.google.com.co/books/about/Pigmentocracies.html?id=1lyCBAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y), which undertakes a statistical analysis of economic variables such as income, years of education, employment quality, and socioeconomic status, and their

relationship with the skin color of people interviewed in Colombia, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. In general terms, the study proves what many already knew intuitively: the darker the person's skin tone, the worse his quality of life in Latin America.

For example, in **Brazil** (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/IO873en.pdf>), light skinned people finish nearly 9 years of education, while those with darker skin have 7.6 years of education. Similarly, in Peru, those with lighter skin obtain an average of 12 years of education, while those with darker skin finish an average of 10 years.

Average Educational Attainment for Persons with Darkest and Lightest Skin Colors in the Americas, 2010



(<https://dejusticiablog.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/average-educationalattainment1.png>)

Source: Americas Barometer by LAPOP

These differences in education, which are also present in Colombian and Mexico, are reflected in access to quality employment and income level in the labor market. Thus, in Mexico, 10 percent of individuals with light skin have highly qualified positions, while only 5 percent of those with darker skin have similar positions. Similarly, in Colombia, on average, those with light skin earn twice as much as those with darker skin.

This discrimination, in addition to constituting an alarming social justice and human rights problem, also creates inefficiencies and costs for the State.

First, this discrimination creates a vicious cycle, which economist such as Leopoldo Fergusson have referred to as the **"public goods trap."** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXEz_xT-qiA) In the case of Pigmentocracy, the vicious circle begins when States offer little access to public goods to the population with darker skin. For example, in **Colombia** (http://economia.uniandes.edu.co/investigaciones_y_publicaciones/CEDE/Publicaciones/documentos_cede/2012/Equidad_en_la_Diferencia_Politicas_para_la_Movilidad_Social_de_Grupos_de_Identidad.Mision_de_Movilidad_Social_y_Equidad), in Departments with a higher percentage of Afro-Colombian and indigenous population, there are lower levels of coverage for primary and secondary school than in Departments with lower percentages of Afro-Colombian

and indigenous people. In general, as **Racial Discrimination Watch** (http://www.odracial.org/files/r2_actividades_recursos/fi_name_archivo.276.pdf) has demonstrated, Afro-Colombians have less access to water, sewage treatment, and housing, than the white or mixed race *mestizo* population.

Similarly, States' low offer of public goods creates a low demand for those goods. On one hand, demand is low because those who have necessary economic resource, the majority light-skinned, obtain such goods through the private market. On the other hand, those with darker skin who suffer discrimination in the job market and receive lower salaries than similarly qualified lighter skinned people, may lose motivation and decide that education is irrelevant. This lower demand for public goods, in turn, generates an even lower offer of public goods, and the vicious cycle worsens, leading to a weak State that is incapable of fulfilling the rights of all its citizens, regardless of their skin color.

Secondly, in addition to violating the rights and equality of opportunity of those with darker skin, discrimination also negatively impacts the productivity and development of a country. Discrimination results in the exclusion of those with talents and abilities from employment opportunities that require such talent, and where they would be highly productive. Thus, the country suffers productivity losses by placing talented dark-skinned individuals in jobs that do not make the most use of their abilities. Recent studies from Stanford University show that between 15-20 percent of the increase in worker productivity between 1960 and 2008 in the United States was the result of **increased participation of African Americans in highly qualified employment** (<http://web.stanford.edu/~chadj/HHJK.pdf>). For example, while in 1960 94 percent of doctors were white, in 2008 this percentage had dropped to 62 percent.

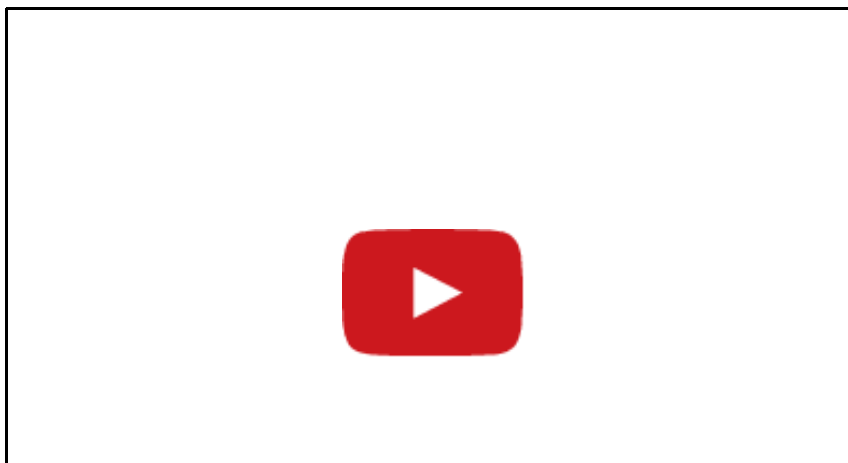
For these reasons, it is vitally important that we end discrimination and inequality in Latin America, through inclusive public policies that guarantee representation and equality of those with darker skin. In terms of education, States should make an effort to guarantee access to quality education to ethnic and racial minorities, starting with pre-school, which has proven to be most cost effective. Similarly, promoting access to quality employment should be undertaken using affirmative action policies, such as quotas, which can be supported using tax incentives, bidding advantages for companies, or special, low-interest financing. Additionally, States can draw attention to companies that **support diversity and equality** (<http://www.portafolio.co/negocios/politicas-inclusion-empresas-frente-comunidad-lgbt>) through rankings that improve their reputation and name.

Through measures such as these, we can create an equal society in which skin color truly does not matter, where a strong civil society flourishes, and that trades the vicious cycle of the public goods trap for one in which the State guarantees the rights of all its citizens.

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