**#1**

**Yes, Madison is a racist city**

*We all need to change that together*

by [Sasha Debevec-McKenney](http://isthmus.com/topics/sasha-debevec-mckenney/)

April 17, 2014

  



David Michael Miller

**I recently posted a**[**short essay**](http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/2014/04/on-being-black-in-madison-wisconsin.html)to my personal blog about my everyday life in Madison as a young black woman. I wrote that Madison is the most racist place I have ever lived. I do not see very many black people on the east side. White women grab at my naturally styled hair. A man asked me once how I would be celebrating Black History Month. I love living in Madison but I do not always feel comfortable here.

The idea that Madison is a city with massive structural racism may not be so obvious to you if you live in it as part of the majority. The idea might make you uncomfortable. It might make you angry or scoff or roll your eyes. Instead of doing those things, take one minute to consider that it's not an exaggeration. Take one minute to consider that somebody else's point of view might be valid and that maybe black people deserve to be a little sensitive about race. Race is a part of my daily life because I'm black. If you don't think about race every day, then you're lucky. It's a lot easier that way. But if you want Madison to be a more inclusive place, then it's not going to be easy.

First, admit to yourself that you have probably said something to somebody that they interpreted as racist. It doesn't mean that you are a racist. But if you think that you have no prejudices about people because of their race, or that you're too good of a person to have ever said anything racist, you're wrong.

If you ask to touch my hair, I'm not going to assume you're part of the KKK. But I am going to assume that you don't know that black women are just now starting to wear their hair natural again after centuries of treating it to make it look more white, or that black women have had the least amount of control over their own bodies, historically. In other words, you don't know that we're a little touchy about the things on our bodies we can finally control. Maybe you don't know that because nobody ever told you. Maybe nobody ever told you because Madison is so segregated that it's never been relevant to you before. If you want Madison to change, things like that have to be relevant to you now.

**Right now, that blog post I wrote has almost 5,500 views**. People in Madison are ready to talk about race. It isn't fun, but it is necessary. Madison has to prove itself as liberal and progressive right here and right now. We can control how we behave every day. This doesn't mean just being nicer to black people, or ignoring our differences as human beings. It means being absolutely outraged that Wisconsin is the [worst state in the union](http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#WI/2/2/3,4,5,6) for black children to grow up, even though your children are white. It means, for example, going to Forest Hill Cemetery, where one of President Thomas Jefferson's half-black sons, [Eston Hemings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eston_Hemings%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), is buried. Ask yourself why he isn't buried at Monticello, and then ask yourself why his presence in Madison isn't something you already knew about.

Seeing racism now isn't as easy as it was back then. We are past slavery and Jim Crow, but we cannot forget our history. Those horrible times are part of American history, and Madison is part of America. We have to keep talking about race or else it makes it easier for people to get away with racism. I shared my experience because I couldn't just smile and be polite anymore.

Racism is inherent in people's disbelief that there is inequality in Madison. It is possible to be progressive and ethical and still have racist tendencies. You cannot get rid of those racist tendencies by ignoring them. It might make you vulnerable and it might make you feel bad about yourself for a little while, but once you see the racism here for yourself, you won't be able to ignore it anymore.

*Sasha Debevec-McKenney blogs at*[*sashawrote.blogspot.com*](http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/).

<http://isthmus.com/opinion/opinion/yes-madison-is-a-racist-city/>

## #2

## Wednesday, April 2, 2014

### [On Being Black in Madison, Wisconsin.](http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/2014/04/on-being-black-in-madison-wisconsin.html)

There was absolutely nothing surprising to me about reading [this Cap Times headline](http://host.madison.com/news/local/writers/mike_ivey/wisconsin-worst-in-nation-for-black-children/article_7ec1a1fc-b923-11e3-828c-0019bb2963f4.html) today: "No state worse than Wisconsin for black children, says new national study"  I love Wisconsin--my mom grew up in Clark County and I visited in the summers until finally moving here to attend Beloit College in 2009. Instead of graduating from college and going immediately back to graduate school, I decided to move to Madison and "find myself," or maybe something similar. I've been living in Madison since May, and on the near east side since August.  I have never lived or operated in a place that was more racist.

People are constantly making me aware that they are white and I am black. I look different. My hair is different. My body is different. I am so consciously aware of being black, all the time. Part of this might be my job--I cashier at a local grocery cooperative, where I stand in a small box and am gawked at by small white children for eight hours at a time. (For example: "Mommy! What's wrong with her hair? Why is it going straight up like that? It looks like broccoli!:")  I stand in my small box and watch as almost exclusively white people swarm around me, pushing each other to get to the organic juices. Sometimes, when I'm bored, I watch all the co-op customers until I see a black one. Sometimes that game lasts more than an hour, or until  I have a panic attack. Nobody I work with really understands these panic attacks, or any of my problems with race there, save for a few allies, but writing about it here would be unprofessional. All I know is that I am one of maybe three or four people at my job that are of African American descent at my job, and that that figure is way too low. I can't imagine this is a new problem--but it certainly isn't a problem that anybody is going to do something about, or else it would have been fixed before.

My hair is probably a big part of why I stick out so much in Madison. I have a big afro, and the front part is bleached blonde. It looks awesome, and I am never not going to wear big hair so that I get less attention from white people. I'd rather stick out and make them notice me, make them uncomfortable. It's easy to ignore a problem like race in Madison--especially on the east side. From what I've gathered, being a progressive/liberal when it comes to Scott Walker and buying organic food and bringing your own canvas bags is enough.*(If you ride your bike to work, then don't even worry about being overtly racist to me, because I didn't realize you were busy singlehandedly saving the planet. While you're at it, take the image of the Black Power fist and constrict it to the shape of the state of Wisconsin, we didn't need that any more anyways.)* Don't even get me started on white people with dreadlocks.

Actually, hair is a really big part of this for me. According to people I've met in Madison, my hair is basically magic. They don't understand how or why it grows so fast or so unruly or in weird directions. My hair mystifies white people. It mystifies them so much they think it's okay to touch it. It is not okay to touch my hair, or even to ask to touch it, or even to ask me questions about it as if I have some sort of black people voodoo magic in my scalp. If you've never been the minority, then you might not understand why this is so upsetting to me. When white people touch my hair, I feel like a weird animal in a cage. It doesn't connect us, it pushes us further apart. It is a privilege to not be othered. But my experience so far has made me realize that a lot of people in Madison are so blinded by their own privilege that they can't even begin to empathize or understand. A woman once asked to touch my hair, and when I told her no, she got angry at me. How dare I infer that her want to touch me was in some way racially motivated? But through my lens, this older white woman felt as though she had ownership enough over my body to touch my hair if she wanted. Nobody has ownership over my body but me.

I'm not in Madison right now. I took almost a month off work and came home to Connecticut (not *that* part of Connecticut). My hometown is incredibly diverse. Its not perfect--I moved away for a reason--but being home for less than a week so far has already made me situation in Madison much clearer. I don't have the time or energy to teach every ignorant person in Madison how to properly interact with people of color. I don't know what to do about Madison, or how to change it for the better. Right now, I'm mostly just angry-and I can't be black and angry, or else that's all people will see. So that's what I'm going to be thinking about for the next few weeks in Connecticut: being  black in Madison. Because its going to keep being an unsafe place for black people to work, live and be educated until everybody stops ignoring that fact. I refuse to enable people's ignorance anymore.

<http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/>

Posted by [Sasha Debevec-McKenney](https://plus.google.com/111505531777897806380)at [3:26 PM](http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/2014/04/on-being-black-in-madison-wisconsin.html) [95 comments:](http://sashawrote.blogspot.com/2014/04/on-being-black-in-madison-wisconsin.html#comment-form)

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#3

# Study: Madison 10th most-racist city based on tweets

Author: Madison365

Published On: Mar 07 2016 11:49:57 AM CST

# Madison365

### [Madison Black Chamber of Commerce under new leadership](http://www.channel3000.com/news/opinion/Madison-Black-Chamber-of-Commerce-under-new-leadership/39089252)

Best place to live.
Best place to work.
Healthiest city in the U.S.
#1 most livable city.
Top-10 U.S. city for anti-black tweets?

[A new report](https://www.abodo.com/blog/tolerance-in-america/) says that Madison, Wisconsin — a city of dozens and dozens of accolades — just made a list that they should not be proud of.

Using data culled from Twitter by apartment-location startup Abodo, Madison has sent the 10th-most anti-black tweets in an 18-month span starting in June 2014. The study analyzed 12 million Tweets for derogatory language against LGBT people, blacks, Hispanics and women.

Buffalo, meanwhile, recorded the highest rate of anti-gay tweets, and the eighth-highest rate of anti-black tweets, which prompted a recent story about the rankings from [The Buffalo News](http://www.buffalonews.com/city-region/buffalo/buffalo-ranks-no-1-for-anti-gay-slurs-used-in-tweets-20160305).

Overall, as U.S. states were concerned, Louisiana had the highest rate of derogatory tweets — 1 per 87 — followed by Nevada and Texas. However, West Virginia had the highest rate of racist tweets, with 83.2 per 100,000, more than double that of any other state.

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* <http://www.channel3000.com/news/opinion/Study-Madison-10th-most-racist-city-based-on-tweets/38382846>



#4

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The most racist city in the U.S.?

**Sarah Blaskey and Phil Gasper** report on a new study that shows the pernicious effects of racism as it afflicts African Americans in liberal Madison, Wis.

October 31, 2013

On the march against racism in Madison (Wisconsin Bail Out the People Movement)

MADISON, WIS., has a reputation as one of the most liberal cities in the country. It is also possibly the most racially unequal.

In early October, [Race to Equity](http://racetoequity.net/)--a Madison-based initiative started by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families--[released a report detailing racial disparities in Madison](http://racetoequity.net/dev/wp-content/uploads/WCCF-R2E-Report.pdf), and more broadly in Dane County, Wis. The findings are staggering.

The Race to Equity researchers expected the numbers compiled for racial disparities in Dane County to be similar or slightly better than the national averages. After all, Madison has long prided itself on having quality public education, good jobs, access to health care and human services programs, a relatively high standard of living and, in general, a progressive outlook on social, economic and political questions.

But while living standards for the white population in Dane County are higher than the national average, for the Black population, the opposite is true. On every indicator, with only two exceptions out of 40 measures, statistics collected in Dane County demonstrated equal or higher racial disparities between whites and Blacks than the national averages.

Here are just a few examples of the extreme inequality that exists in Dane County.

-- In 2011, the unemployment rate was 25.2 percent for Blacks compared to just 4.8 percent for whites. Nationally, the unemployment rate was 18 percent for Blacks and 8 percent for whites.

-- In the same year, "over 54 percent of African American Dane County residents lived below the federal poverty line, compared to 8.7 percent of whites, meaning Dane County Blacks were over six times more likely to be poor than whites."

-- More than 74 percent of Black children live under the poverty level as opposed to just 5.5 percent of white children. The report suggested "that this 13 to 1 disparity ratio may constitute one of the widest Black/white child poverty gaps that the Census Surveys reported for any jurisdiction in the nation."

-- "In 2011, African American youth in the Madison Public School District had about a 50 percent on-time high school graduation rate, compared to 85 percent for white students."

-- "African American adolescents, while constituting less than 9 percent of the county's youth population, made up almost 80 percent of all the local kids sentenced to the state's juvenile correctional facility in 2011."

After uncovering these alarming truths, the report tries to explain them. How can such an apparently well-to-do and progressive place be so racist?

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**Structural Racism in Dane County**

The United States' long history of slavery and Jim Crow racism created deep-seated structural inequalities that have persisted long past the abolition of legal racism and account for the racial disparities that we see today in all 50 states. But there are several structural factors unique to Madison and Dane County that make the situation especially bad here.

Madison in a college town. It is centered around a high-powered university that often ranks amongst the best public universities in the country--a status Madison works hard to maintain.

As a result, the majority of jobs in the city and surrounding areas demand a highly skilled workforce with advanced degrees and work experience. Often these jobs get taken by recent university graduates who elect to stay in the city. By contrast, the area has few opportunities for less skilled, entry-level workers seeking quality jobs.

The presence of some 40,000 college students also means that there is a lot of competition for the limited entry-level positions available in "retail, hospitality, personal service, construction, manufacturing and transportation." Students take these jobs as part-time employment to get through college. This creates more obstacles for other, less-credentialed job-seekers looking for full time employment.

These barriers for obtaining quality jobs are exacerbated, according to the report, "by hiring and human resource practices that set credential, reference, training or background thresholds at levels that operate, perhaps unintentionally, to discourage or exclude highly motivated and capable applicants who possess less developed resumes or less formal education."

Unemployment disparities and other factors mean that the Black poverty rate in Dane County is 54 percent, almost twice the national average.

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**"Small, Under-Resourced and Disconnected Neighborhoods"**

Another structural disadvantage faced by people of color, in particular African Americans in Madison, is the highly fragmented areas on the fringes of the city where most of them live. Location has disenfranchised African Americans politically and socially and made it even harder for them to find accessible jobs.

The Race to Equity report showed that about "half of the area's low-income Black households live in approximately 15 small, compact residential concentrations scattered within the city and around its perimeter."

These enclaves are mostly rental developments, tend to be home to between 100 and 400 families of color and are usually surrounded by larger, predominantly white neighborhoods.

There are no large-scale, permanent Black neighborhoods anywhere in the city that would provide a social or political anchor for African Americans. In fact, county-wide, "there is not a single aldermanic district, supervisory district, planning unit, or even a census tract where African Americans constitute the majority of residents," preventing significant political visibility. In 2013, African Americans only held a handful of public offices out of the hundreds in the county.

These African American enclaves generally lack "a church, a full-service grocery, a public school, social or civic clubs, developed open spaces, a bar, a restaurant, or a significant employer," and tend to be "thinly or unevenly served" by public transportation systems.

High turnover rates, mobility, small size and many of the factors listed above inhibit strong community building in these neighborhoods.

According to the report, "Kin networks, for example, appear less wide, less deep, and less multi-generational in Dane County's Black areas than in the larger, more rooted African American neighborhoods found in most American cities."

This ghettoization has led to a fractured community of color, fewer social programs and fewer support networks, which limits the ability of African Americans to organize.

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**Madison Public Schools and the Achievement Gap**

A major factor that prevents progress toward racial equity in Madison is the public school system. For white students, Dane County public schools have a reputation for excellence. But, in general, county schools channel Blacks students into remedial classes that offer little opportunity for college preparation.

Black students on average have drastically lower reading scores from an early age, lower on-time graduation rates, higher suspension rates and are less likely to take college preparatory classes.

In Dane County, "in the 2011-12 school year, Black 12th graders were only half as likely as white 12th graders to take the ACT [college admissions and placement] exam. Finally, of those taking the exam, African Americans averaged a score of 18, compared to a white average of 24."

The existing disparities create stereotypes about new students, leading to differing academic expectations that exacerbate racial inequalities in the county.

The report documents many cases in which African American parents worry about sending their children to Madison schools, fearing that they will have fewer opportunities to thrive than in other cities. Many have considered moving away for this reason.

Stereotypes and uneven expectations are also present in disciplinary processes. "In 2011, for example, public schools in Dane County reported 3,198 suspensions of Black students as against 1,130 suspensions of white students," although African Americans are only 17 percent of the total public school population.

In other words, Black students in Dane County schools are 15 times more likely to be suspended than white students.

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**Criminal Injustice**

Disparities in disciplinary processes extend beyond the public school system. In 2010, Black youth in Dane County were six times as likely as white youth to be arrested. This compared to a 3-to-1 ratio in the rest of the state and about 2-to-1 nationally.

"The striking result of these disparities is that African American adolescents, while constituting less than 9 percent of the county's youth population, made up almost 80 percent of all the local kids sentenced to the state's juvenile correctional facility in 2011," according to the report.

The numbers are even worse for adult sentencing disparities.

"While Black men made up only 4.8 percent of the county's total adult male population, they accounted for more than 43 percent of all new adult prison placements during the year [2012]."

Wisconsin as a whole has by far the highest rate of imprisonment for Black men in the United States. A [from researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee on*Wisconsin's Mass Incarceration of African American Males*](http://www4.uwm.edu/eti/2013/BlackImprisonment.pdf), issued at the same time as the Race to Equity report, found that in 2010, 12.8 percent of Black men were imprisoned in the state--almost twice the national average, and more than 3 percent higher than the next worst state.

But while the incarceration rate for Black males in Dane County is lower than the rest of the state, the racial disparities are higher.

A [2009 report from a Dane County Task Force on Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System](http://danedocs.countyofdane.com/webdocs/pdf/oeo/final_report.pdf) found that "Blacks were 25.6 times more likely to enter prison from Dane County than Whites."

The Race to Equity report also gives numbers for arrests. "In 2012, African American adults were arrested in Dane County at a rate more than eight times that of whites. That compares to a Black-white arrest disparity of about 4-to-1 for the rest of Wisconsin and 2.5-to-1 for the nation as a whole."

According to the report, "the alarming truth is that our numbers, taken as a whole, suggest that the distance between whites and Blacks (in terms of well-being, status and outcomes) is as wide or wider in Dane County than in any jurisdiction (urban or rural, North or South) for which we have seen comparable statistics."

The report concludes with well-intentioned but vague calls for change directed at "community leaders." But reports and fine words directed mainly to people at the top will change little. What is needed is a movement from below that will challenge both racial and economic inequality. Until that is built, the huge disparities in Madison and Dane County will remain.

<https://socialistworker.org/2013/10/31/most-racist-city-in-the-us>