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Racial divide now a chasm on SAT scores

Experts encouraged test
reaching more students

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The achievement gap between whites and underrepresented minorities grew wider on the SAT college admissions test this year, far exceeding the disparity of 10 years ago.

Yet experts said the numbers are a source of some encouragement because they indicate that the test — one of the primary factors used by many universities in admissions decisions — is reaching more students.

Scores tend to decline with a rise in the percentage of test takers, according to the College Board, which administers the test and released the scores yesterday.

But education and testing experts stressed that the increasing gap in scores between white and underrepresented minorities — African American, Latinos and American Indian and Alaskan Natives — is a troubling trend. Underrepresented minorities are those that make up a larger percentage in the total population than they do on college campuses.

"To me it is distressing and it tells an old story, which is about access to educational resources," said Seppy Basili, vice president at Kaplan Inc., a leading test preparation company. "In the end, what

► SAT: Page A10 Col. 1

Racial divide in SAT now a chasm

► SAT
From Page 1

they are getting are far less resources."

Minorities, including Asians, made up one-third of the 1.3 million students taking the SAT I this year, the largest number ever to take the college admissions test. And one-third of the total are also first-generation college students. However, underrepresented minorities were only about one-fifth of the total.

While test scores shift incrementally year to year, the trend over 10 years is alarming, the experts said.

For example, the gap between white students' average math score and black students' average math score increased 11 points over the decade — from a spread of 94 points in 1991 to 105 points in 2001.

The gap between whites and Mexican American's math scores grew even faster, from 54 points 10 years ago to 73 points this year.

Because of results like these, the test has come under fire for favoring privileged students and putting minorities at a disadvantage.

In February, UC President Richard Atkinson proposed dropping the SAT I and replacing it with an exam tied closely to the curriculum for college-bound students. Other states, like Texas, have de-emphasized the use of scores by accepting the top 10 percent of graduates to the public universities automatically.

"That is the real issue, who needs the test, not if the scores go up and down," said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for FairTest, a nonprofit organization that works against bias in testing. "The test undermines equity and excellence because of its many flaws, including biases, inaccuracies and coachability."

However, College Board President Gaston Caperton said at a news conference in Washington, D.C., yesterday that tests are not

the problem. Instead, the unequal education system is to blame for the disparity, he said.

"A lot of students are not getting the preparation they need to participate in this society. We need a Marshall Plan for education to change this," he said.

Nationally, the average for white test takers increased from 528 to 529 on the verbal portion, while African Americans' average fell from 434 to 433. Mexican Americans dropped from 453 to 451 and Latinos from 461 to 460. American Indians and Alaskan Natives slipped from 482 to 481. Puerto Ricans gained from 456 to 457, but still trailed far behind whites.

Overall, verbal scores jumped one point from 505 to 506, while math scores remained the same at 514.

California students dropped one point in math from last year, but still did better than the national average on the SAT I, scoring a 517, compared with the national 514. However, they gained a point on the verbal portion and still lagged behind the national average, scoring a 498 to the national average of 506.

San Francisco students outdid the state and national averages in math, scoring an average of 519, up from 514 last year. They were also up in verbal from 457 to 463, but remained below the national and state levels.

"We are encouraged that the verbal is up. However, we do test a different population in a sense," said Jim Stack, director of achievement and assessments for the San Francisco Unified School District, referring to the number of students whose first language is not English. "That might be a bit reflected in the verbal score."

Among California's 161,975 SAT I test takers, 67 percent learned English as their first language, compared with 81 percent nationally. In San Francisco, only 29 percent of the test takers spoke English first.

He said that the district provides practice tests in 10th and 11th grades and urges all students to take the test, even if they don't think they are going to go to college.

"We are trying to encourage these kids to try and reach for college opportunities," Stack said.

In San Francisco, 69 percent of graduating seniors took the SAT, compared with 51 percent at the state level and 45 percent nationally.

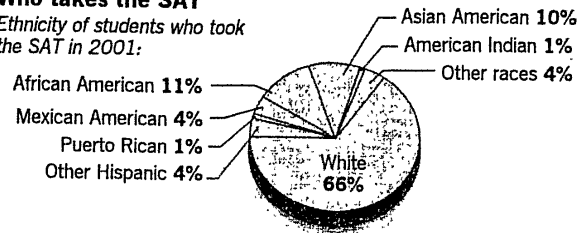
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Students who take the SAT and scores by race

Who takes the SAT

Ethnicity of students who took the SAT in 2001:



Increasing disparity

The gap between whites and underrepresented minorities grew during the past 10 years.

	1991	2000	2001	VERBAL	MATH
American Indian	470	482	481	468	481
Asian, Pacific Islander	485	499	501	548	565
African American	427	434	433	419	426
Mexican American	454	453	451	459	460
Puerto Rican	436	456	457	439	451
Hispanic/Latino	458	461	460	462	467
White	518	528	529	513	530
Other	486	508	503	492	515
All college-bound seniors	499	505	506	500	514

Source: The College Board

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