

# Social stratification and inequality in South Africa

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## Funding information

Office of the Provost, Haverford College

## Abstract

South Africa is the most economically unequal country in the world. Moreover, research shows that inequality has only risen since advent of multi-party democracy in 1994. In this article, I review research that documents how economic inequality has formed over the past century, and the relationship between these structural conditions and contemporary social stratification. The literature shows that since the end of apartheid racial inequality has declined somewhat, but increases in inequality within race have more than offset this. Despite momentous political change and formal legal equality, economic equality remains elusive for most South Africans. Research on South Africa shows that accounting for the historical construction of institutions that shape inequality is crucial not only for understanding stratification within the country, but for explaining it in any contemporary industrial society.

## KEYWORDS

economic change, inequality, labor market, racial inequality, social stratification, South Africa, unemployment

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

South Africa is generally agreed to be the most unequal country in the world. Whether measured in terms of income, wealth, or living standards, the vast majority of the economic benefits of the country are concentrated in the hands of a small proportion of the population. The history of settler colonialism, ties to expansive European empires, reliance on natural resources, and politically enforced population distinctions have all contributed to economic inequality being both quite high and tied to racial categorization. The advent of formal democracy in 1994 held for many the

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# Social Stratification In Africa

**Tao Wei**



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