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HOW DEMOGRAPHY SHAPES THE NATIONAL AGENDA

ECONOMY

Minorities Seek to Power to American Dream With Lottery

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AP Photo/Paul Sancya

Says Detroit's Donna Fields, after picking her Powerball numbers on Wednesday, "If I won, I would take care of God first, then my family and do some traveling, and oh, yeah, quit my job."

The [Powerball jackpot](#), which has soared to a historic \$550 million, has people of color across the country standing in long lines for a slim shot to win big.

Studies show that blacks and Latinos [play the lottery](#) at higher levels, as well as spend more per game. A *Los Angeles Times* poll, conducted two years after the [California](#) state lottery act was passed in 1984, found a higher in-state lottery participation rate among Hispanics than among whites, blacks, or Asian-Americans. And a 2009 [South Carolina news investigation](#) showed that

minorities and the poor were more likely to frequently try for the jackpot, although TV ads for lotteries generally do not target them.

But some organization say that lotteries, particularly in individual states, prey on low-income residents and communities of color, often because they see a ticket as a way to escape poverty or achieve the American Dream. The odds of winning Wednesday's drawing are 1 in 175 million, The Huffington Post [reports](#).

State lotteries make 80 percent of their money from 10 percent of players, noted Les Bernal, executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling. Based in [Washington](#), the nonprofit organization advocates getting government out of gambling. Bernal said that state lotteries have contributed to increased personal debt by “turning millions of citizens into gambling addicts.”

In the past week, Powerball ticket sales in the 42 participating states, plus the District of Columbia, have lured players into lines made long by the prospect of winning a half-billion dollars. Most state lotteries rely on “hard-core players,” Bernal said, not simply those who occasionally shell out \$2 or participate only when the jackpot reaches a mind-boggling level.

A 2006 study found that more than one-fifth of Americans view the lottery as the most practical way of reaching long-term [financial security](#), according to a *Market Watch* article.

“When more than one out of five people believe that making it in society is to play the lottery, it embodies how the American Dream is broken,” Bernal told *The Next America*. “The government has found it easier to provide people with fun than real opportunity.”

Advocacy groups have long accused states of targeting lower-income residents and minorities in their advertisements to sell more scratch-off and Powerball tickets. Amid the recession, [Florida](#) moved to increase sales by adding ticket-selling locations at places frequented by minorities, such as restaurants and Wal-mart, according to an [investigative story](#) by the *Tampa Tribune*.

Leo DiBenigno, Florida's lottery secretary, told the *Tribune* that the goal is to “reach people who have never played.”

However, the newspaper's investigation showed that people who were poor and less educated bought more than half of Florida's \$4 billion in tickets in 2008-09.

For this week's mega-jackpot, with the drawing set for 10:59 p.m. Wednesday, Americans have flocked to stores to buy tickets, some for their first time.

Chicagoan Lamar Fallie, who is jobless, [told](#) the Associated Press after buying six \$2 tickets that were he to win, he'd donate to his church and to schools, then "retire from being unemployed."