

Improving Race Relations in America

What do *you* think can be done to improve relations between the white majority and minorities in America?

Despite calls for serious conversations about racial issues from political leaders and public intellectuals, it seems that little progress has been made towards having a serious conversation about race in America. Commentators point to the disproportionate number of African Americans who make up the U.S. prison population, the large numbers of African Americans living at or below the poverty level, and the social and educational problems in black ghetto areas in our cities as undeniable indications that racial justice issues need to be addressed. They suggest that race relations will not improve significantly until the root causes of these problems are addressed and resolved. But, as the editor of *Newsday* noted, white people seem reluctant to own much responsibility for the racial tensions and the divide that continues to plague America, which makes having a “conversation” difficult. <http://www.newsday.com/opinion/columnists/michael-dobie/stop-blaming-blacks-for-racism>

Many who study the history of racial problems in the U.S. suggest that racism and racial discrimination are deeply engrained in the prejudices and fears of the white community from the days of slavery. In the book *Blindspot*, Harvard University researchers reveal that hidden racial biases are at work consciously and unconsciously among white people, based on results from their Implicit Association Test. <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/user/agg/blindspot/indexrk.htm>

Perceptions about the racial divide in America that has persisted since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s vary significantly among whites and blacks. Pew Research Center polling consistently shows that blacks and whites have very different views about many aspects of race—from confidence in the police to progress on racial equality. For example, according to a 2013 survey conducted just before the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s March on Washington, 48% of whites said a lot of progress has been made compared with 32% of blacks. The divide widens further when the question is: “How much more needs to be done in order to achieve racial equality?” Seventy-nine per cent of blacks say “a lot” compared with just 44% of whites. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/26/ferguson-highlights-deep-divisions-between-blacks-and-whites-in-america>

African Americans complain about what they considered to be unwarranted and unrestricted violence by law enforcement, while many white critics argue that those who were shot were either breaking the law or giving police justifiable reasons to use deadly force. A Feb. 9, 2015 *New Yorker* magazine article argued that Michael Brown’s death “became a proxy for our on-going argument about race where some seek to expose what America is doing to the black community, while others insist that the real problem is what black communities are doing to themselves.”

Glenn Loury: “Nevertheless, as anyone even vaguely aware of the social conditions in contemporary America knows, we still face a “problem of the color line.” The dream that race might some day become an insignificant category in our civic life now seems naively utopian. In cities across the country, and in rural areas of the Old South, the situation of the black underclass and, increasingly, of the black lower working class is bad and getting worse. No well-informed person denies this, though there is debate over what can and should be done about it. Nor do serious people deny that the crime, drug addiction, family breakdown, unemployment, poor school performance, welfare dependency, and general decay in these communities constitute a blight on

our society virtually unrivaled in scale and severity by anything to be found elsewhere in the industrial West.”

<http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/1998/03/spring-poverty-loury>

Calls for action have been made repeatedly over the past two decades. In 1997, President Clinton developed the One America in the 21st Century initiative—an invitation for Americans to “deal openly and honestly” with racial differences and to create an atmosphere of trust and respect that could overcome generations of racial discrimination and inequities (see “Ten Things Every American Can Do To Promote Racial Reconciliation.”)

<http://clinton2.nara.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/america.html>

Those who seek to promote racial reconciliation efforts at both the local and national level often conclude that attempts to improve racial relations are stymied by several factors:

- White denial about how skin color still contributes to segregated communities, homogenous social relationships, and economic and political advantages for white people (white privilege)
- The enormous challenges involved in redressing generational poverty and unemployment opportunities, family fragmentation, diminished educational resources, inadequate support in criminal justice cases, substance abuse issues, and poor health services among African Americans.
- The failure in the dominant American culture to confront how racism and discrimination are perpetuated by commitments to maintaining existing social, economic, and political power structures that marginalize minorities.
- The unwillingness among both white and black people to initiate and engage in honest, open and respectful conversations about racial issues with the intention to overcome distrust, erroneous perceptions, and to find healing for past injuries and injustices.

African Americans also argue that racial injustice is complicated by the inability of white people to acknowledge the social, economic, and political privilege given to them simply by their skin color in a predominately white America. Structural racism relies on the social, economic, and political power of a dominant community to marginalize and exploit minorities (i.e. banks red-lining black communities in their lending practices, etc.). In addition to confronting conscious racism, many African Americans believe that structural racism is more harmful and insidious to race relations today.

Most everyone seeking to improve race relations today agrees with a large scale community report that argued “while civil-rights laws have made racial discrimination illegal, laws themselves cannot change longstanding practices, resolve distrust, or erase racial stereotypes and prejudices. Individual discriminatory behavior remains evident in the workplace, in renting or buying homes, in retail stores, and in other arenas of public life...Addressing racial discrimination...requires intentional change by individuals, families, businesses, government, and other community institutions.” <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/jcci2.pdf>

Finally, with apologies to John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*):

You are asked to create a society with a political, economic and social structure. The catch is—you do not know beforehand what position you will occupy in that society. You don't know your race, your sex or any other relevant characteristic. What sort of society would you create? Would it look anything like our current society?