

Despite claims of a “post-racial” society, widespread bias continues in America

Written by By Marjorie Valbrun, America's Wire
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WASHINGTON—Recent public opinion polls show that more whites than African-Americans believe that the United States has entered a “post-racial” era in which racial bias doesn’t exist. But social psychologists and experts on race relations dispute that, citing wide racial disparities in education, unemployment, housing, health, wealth, incarceration rates and other quality-of-life measurements as proof of persistent structural racism in American society.

“It’s time for us to change our approach to polling,” says Dr. Gail C. Christopher, vice president for program strategy at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which promotes the welfare of children and works to strengthen families and communities. She believes that polls about race are overgeneralized and fail to address whether people understand more nuanced questions about what constitutes modern discrimination.

Christopher says most people are unfamiliar with the term “structural racism,” which has been defined as “a system of social structures that produce cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities,” and likely couldn’t define it if polled. However, most people, she says, could answer questions about specific racial barriers to opportunities.

“What we have done in our polling and in trying to educate the public is interview teachers, doctors, social workers, lawyers, people who have the most interaction with children of color,” Christopher says. “They may not know what structural racism is, but they know that there are barriers to opportunities for these children because of the daily interactions that they have with these children.”

Part of the problem is how Americans think about racial discrimination, says Algernon Austin, *director of the Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy program* at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington.

“One of the legacies of the civil rights era is that we have a very powerful visual image of racism coming from media images of the civil rights movement,” he says.

These images make people look for obvious examples of racism that are no longer commonplace — identifiable and openly hostile and racist characters such as Bull Connor or Ku

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Klux Klan members in white hoods. “Not the sort of day-to day-discrimination that we have now,” Austin says.

“People look for these hateful angry people, but what’s more important is for people to look at these broad institutional practices,” Austin says. “While we have removed the laws that prevent black students from accessing integrated, high-quality education, we still have the same type of segregated and unequal schools there were in the 1950s. The same goes for housing patterns and criminal justice practices. While there are no legal barriers, we still have de facto barriers. By law, they have been removed, but by practice they’re still there.”

Austin says articles about race relations today often cite absence of blatant racism as an example of improved race relations but overlook less obvious but pernicious effects of institutional racism.

“It does have policy implications because if you believe there are no obstacles for African-Americans to get ahead, then you're less likely to want to support programs that provide opportunities for African-Americans,” he says. “If you look at the research and look at American institutions, you will find significant and very powerful evidence of continuing discrimination against blacks.”

This is precisely why the “declarations of having arrived at the post-racial moment are premature,” Lawrence D. Bobo, the W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University, writes in the spring 2011 edition of *Daedalus*, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, of which he has been a fellow since 2006.

“The central tendencies of public opinion on these issues, despite real increasing overlap, remain enormously far apart between black and white Americans,” Bobo writes in *“Somewhere between Jim Crow & Post-Racialism: Reflections on the Racial Divide in America Today,”* one of a collection of essays on “Race, Inequality & Culture” in *Daedalus*.

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“When such differences in perception and belief are grounded in, or at least reinforced by, wide economic inequality, persistent residential segregation, largely racially homogeneous family units and close friendship networks, and a popular culture still suffused with negative ideas and images about African Americans, then there should be little surprise that we still find it enormously difficult to have sustained civil discussions about race and racial matters,” he writes.

“Despite growing much closer together in recent decades, the gaps in perspective between blacks and whites are still sizable.”

Andrew Grant-Thomas, deputy director of the Kirwan Institute at Ohio State University that is focused on ending racial and ethnic disparities, says those gaps in perspective are based on people's different experiences and life circumstances.

“Everyone agrees that there is less racial discrimination, but there's a huge racial difference in opinion on how much racial discrimination there is and how much it matters,” Grant-Thomas says. “White people are more likely to believe that the socioeconomic status of black people is better than it actually is.

“African-Americans are in a better position to gauge what is happening to African-Americans than whites are, and they certainly bring different perceptions of race to the debate,” he says. “When whites are asked about their views, whites are more likely than blacks to think the playing field is level, while blacks will not agree.”

Therein lies the challenge of improving “race relations,” says Dr. Anthony B. Iton, senior vice president of healthy communities for The California Endowment, a private foundation focused on expanding access to affordable and quality health care.

“Race relations, what does that mean?” he asks. “How I get along with my neighbors or my co-workers, or how I understand the relative status of various groups with respect to their economic status, employment status and health status? The concept of racism is an enormous envelope that holds a lot of issues, some of which relate to racial legacy issues and structural issues. In some ways, we do suffer from an inability to express our feelings on this issue.”

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Grant-Thomas says the key to bridging the racial divide is not endlessly talking about it or polling people but working together to find real solutions for decreasing or ending structural barriers that have discriminatory results.

“Polls have a lot of problems,” he says. “For one thing, they assume a sort of static opinion or attitude and that people have more or less fixed opinions and I’m just going to ask them what that is. But most of our opinions are fluid. If you ask white people about affirmative action, you’re more likely to get a much different answer than if you ask them about equal opportunity.

“We’re not going to lead to anything by just having conversations. We need policies behind them and to acknowledge specific problems that are there and identify possible solutions and how we can implement those solutions.”