

Public Opinion on Racial Inequality in America

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Abstract

The present research paper investigated the public opinion on racial equality and the Black experience in America and whether these beliefs differ among demographic groups; specifically, gender, income, ideology, and education. Studies and articles, such as those from the Pew Research Center and Harvard University, were selected based off verified credibility and efforts to explain results from an unbiased perspective. The participants in this analysis and the subsequent studies used ranged from college students to older adults, and were all either White, Black, or Hispanic. The main results of this research paper found that most the majority of people who don't believe that racial inequality and inequity exist in America tend to be Republican, White, upper middle class to upper class, highly-educated or little educated, male, and Mormon. Most people who do believe that racial inequality and inequity exist are going to be Democratic, belong to minority groups, middle class to lower-middle class, educated to little educated, and mixed gender. These results show that there is a clear divide between those who believe that there is racial inequality and those that do not, and that this divide falls along specific demographic lines in American society.

Keywords: racism, black, white, America, racial inequality, studies, demographic, gender, income, ideology, education

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Introduction

Racism and the mistreatment of people of color in the United States has always been a part of our past and present. Four hundred years ago, a ship arrived in Virginia, carrying human cargo in exchange for “victuals” – the process of trading food for slaves (Waxman, 2019). However, they were not the only ones being mistreated by their white counterparts. In 1565, for example, the Spanish Armada brought enslaved Africans to present-day St. Augustine, Florida, the first European settlement, as well as indigenous people - specifically, those of the 30 tribal communities led by Pocahontas’s father. They were enslaved around the time of 1619 and later sold to the British Colonies in the West Indies to pay for their wars with indigenous people on the East Coast (Waxman/Spivey, 2019). There is a common misconception that with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, all slaves were now free and equal to their white counterparts. In reality, the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to those bound by unfair and unequal working agreements in the North, as well as those enslaved in bordering Union states, and despite the freeing of slaves from cruelty through involuntary servitude, freedmen and women still faced insurmountable barriers in attempting to live as free and equal members of society. (History, 2009).

Enforcement of Jim Crow was left in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, an American terrorist organization that instigated race riots to settle social discontent. The origin of this rioting stems from southern whites, who, resentful of black advancement, attacked to disenfranchise black Americans of their vote and deprive them of any economic prosperity (Garrison, 2020). In 2015, the Equal Justice Initiative released a report documenting that more than 4,400 lynchings

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took place between 1877 and 1950, bringing the overall death toll between 1865 and 1950 to nearly 6,500. Additionally, the report details nearly 2,000 white supremacist massacres and killings of Black men, women and children during the Reconstruction era of 1865 to 1876 following the Civil War. These findings show that while Black Americans left slavery behind, they were nevertheless forced to endure mass violence against their neighborhoods, physical, destructive manifestations of the racism that White Americans and the Ku Klux Klan held. But white civilians weren't the only ones to perpetrate these killings; white police officers, who were sworn to protect everyone yet held clear biases against Black Americans, ranged in their behavior from complicity to outright participation, contributing to a fraught history of policing that still manifests today. (Fox, 2020). Granted, though we do not still see these types of large-scale massacres in the streets as we did in the early to mid 1900's, we have also not seen an adequate change in the systemic racism against Black Americans that keeps them in generational poverty and subject to racist inequalities at various levels of our government. While citizens and government officials have publicly stated that racism does not exist or that they are not racist, they continue to support unequal polices against Black Americans and the dismantlement of the Black Lives Matter movement. We have seen everyday citizens using racist language towards people of color, police using force over simple calls such as mental health disturbances, and the staggering increase in the the incarceration rate of Black Americans. This year specifically, we have seen Americans divided more than ever in our lifetime during this election. As of September 2020, 18% of white Americans felt that when it came to giving Black people equal rights with White people, our country had gone too far (Horowitz, Parker, Brown & Cox, 2020). Not only is this shocking by itself, but that same study conducted by the Pew Research Center

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showed that 13% of Hispanic people and 15% of Asian people felt the same. This election has centralized the issue of racial inequality in America in a profound and personal way, down to the very comfort of not fearing to leave ones own home. America is supposed to be the land of the free and the equal, but both the history and the present reality of the United States have shown anything but that if you're a person of color.

This topic has interested me since before I can remember, and has grown even more topical over the past few years, as an increase in police killings involving Black Americans and racist protests organized by White Americans have swept the country. My mother is Puerto Rican and my father is French Canadian, meaning that my brother and I come from a mixed marriage, which was not always supported in the United States. Growing up, my parents always taught us that we are all born equal, and that you need to treat everyone with respect. However, as I grew up, I witnessed multiple racist incidents in person and in the media, and was confounded at the mistreatment of those who I understood to be no different in dignity and rights to me. As I got older, my brother and I both sought to alter people's antiquated perspectives on race, and do our part to correct injustice for future generations.

Demographic Characteristics

The demographic scope of systemic racism involves all aspects of the rights of Americans such as criminal justice, education, housing, banking, health care, and social welfare. It is not individualized to one portion of our society, it is deeply rooted in every aspect that make up our democratic society. To see some large changes in our society on the treatment and opportunities awarded to Black Americans, there must be a dramatic overhaul over several years

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of the policies and ideologies that are in place in America. However, to fully understand the ideologies and inequalities that are in place, we must break them down demographically by gender, income, broad ideology, and education to its purest form to move forward.

Gender

When it comes to racism not only is there a stark difference between Black and White genders on opinions, but there is also a difference of men and women in the Black community in terms of their experiences with racism, which needs to be addressed to fully understand issue of racism in this country. 73% of Black men have experienced people acting like they were suspicious of them compared to 59% of Black women, 59% of Black men have been unfairly stopped by police compared to 31% of Black women, and 57% of Black men have been subject to racial slurs or jokes compared to 49% of Black women (Anderson, 2019). However, there are some experiences equally common for both groups such as a 6% difference in fearing for their personal safety, a 2% difference in people acting as if they were not smart and being treated unfairly in hiring, pay or promotion (Anderson, 2019). Additionally, four in ten Black women experience physical violence from an intimate partner during their lifetime, Black women experience significantly higher rates of psychological abuse than women overall, more than 20% of Black women are raped during their lifetimes, and Black women are two and half times more likely to be murdered by men than their White counterparts with nine in ten Black female victims knowing their killers (Green, 2017). These statistics show that personal experiences with racial discrimination is common for Black Americans, however certain situations are going to be faced depending on their gender whether it be an experience with the police or with their intimate partner. These numbers show the deep-rooted biases in our country when it comes to Black men

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and women and the crises that they're facing. We cannot fully understand why these statistics are the way they are without accepting that they are the product of the biases in our society and that we need to change them to protect our Black neighbors; no matter what gender they are.

On the other hand, we have the White counterpart, where ideologies stemming from this group are the foundation of the systemic racism we see today. 48% of White young men believe diversity efforts will harm White people and only 28% of young White women believe the same (Vandermaas-Peeler, Cox, Fisch-Friedman & Jones, 2018). Additionally, only 57% of White young men say Black people face a lot of discrimination in the U.S. today, compared to 72% of White young women while 55% of White young men and 41% of White young women believe that racism is more of a problem for other generations (Vandermaas-Peeler, Cox, Fisch-Friedman & Jones, 2018). These statistics show that not only do a percentage of White people not fully understand nor support fighting for racial equality, but that these beliefs are mostly supported by White men. Additionally, they also show that there is a part of our society that does not believe that racial inequality is a problem in our generation as well which shows why it has shown to be a battle to break these biases in our society; they do not think anything is wrong with the system. For America to move forward and break the chain of systemic racism in our history, the fact that there is many young White men and women who believe that it is a harm to White people makes the likelihood of anything changing slim because those same people are going to raise our next generation showing them those ideologies.

Income

When it comes to income, there are sharp disparities between Black Americans and White Americans when it comes to their lifestyle. At \$171,000, the net worth of a typical White

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family is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family (\$17,150) in 2016 (McIntosh, Moss, Nunn & Shambaugh, 2020). These large gaps in wealth between Black and White households reveal the effects inequality, racism, and discrimination, as well as the sharp differences in power and opportunity that can be traced through history back to the beginning of the United States. However, there is no single explanation for the racial wealth gap. Some examples of why White families are wealthier than Black families with the same incomes is white families receive much larger inheritances and high- and middle – income Black families are more likely than their white counterparts to be called upon to assist family members and neighbors which in turn affects young adults due to the lack of family wealth (McIntosh, Moss, Nunn & Shambaugh, 2020). On top of that, unemployment rate before the COVID-19 pandemic was 12.1% among Black workers compared to 7% among White workers (Inequality, 2020). Due to this, these families are stuck in generational poverty and less likely to be offered opportunities to change their family's history. Additionally, disparities in wealth also stem from anti-racist or racist ideologies which increases the chance of Black Americans to be looked at differently in jobs, schooling, and leadership roles.

The most significant proof of the comparison of wealth disparities and views on race relations is connected through the political party of choice and the average income level of those parties. About six-in-ten (59%) of White Republicans say too much attention is paid to racial issues these days; 11% say there is too little attention, and 26% say the amount of attention is about right compared to about half of White Democrats (49%) say not enough attention is being paid to racial issues, while 21% say the amount is too much and 28% say it is about right (Pew Research Center, 2020). The Pew Research Center also stated that 87% of Democrats are Black

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Americans compared to 7% are Republicans. Due to most Republicans being White and most Democrats being Black, we can correlate the average income levels of each party to each majority. This is important when it comes to income and race views because Republicans have generally been less inclined to say that any group in America faces high levels of discrimination; for our purposes, specifically 45.4% of Republicans compared to 77.5% of Democrats when it comes to Black Americans (Conroy & Bacon Jr., 2020). We will go into further detail using ideology characteristics, however, when it comes to income, 63% of Republican supporters earn \$200,000 or more a year compared to 63% of Democrat supporters earning \$15,000 a year or less (Fay, 2017). This is important to note when we discuss the correlation of income and race views because most of the Republican supporters do not believe in supporting racial issues further and most of the Republican supporters earn over \$200,000 while more than half of the Democrat supporters do believe in fixing racial issues and most of the Democrat supporters earn \$15,000 a year or less. This proves that people who make more than \$200,000 are more common to not support anti-racism policies and are more likely to be White and it is more common for people who make less than that to support anti-racism policies and to be Black. By proving these disparities in income and the correlation with race views and discrimination against Black people, it shows the sizable difference between two halves of the United States and how hard it is to pass anti-racism policies that attempt to dismantle the systemic racism because of the amount of wealth invested into it.

Ideology

As stated in previously, ideology differences can be traced by the political identity and level of hate group support of the public. In 2018, there were 1,020 hate groups located in the

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United States with a 55% increase in white nationalist hate groups since 2017 alone (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d). Additionally, 31% of Republicans believe America has gone too far with giving Black people equal rights with White people compared to 5% of Democrats as well as 77% of Republicans believe the bigger problem for the country today is people see discrimination where it does not exist compared to 22% of Democrats (Horowitz, Brown & Cox, 2020). These numbers are important to note for our purposes because it illustrates the sharp differences in opinions on the racial problem in America. With this percentage of citizens denying the existence of discrimination and systemic racism against Black people, it creates a toxic society that pushes aside the trauma and experiences of the Black community in America. It has been found that left-leaning, young, more educated people are more in favor of increasing diversity in America with 72% left-wing, 65% center, and 53% right-wing (Poushter & Fetterolf, 2019). By measuring the ideological standpoints of the citizens, it gives an insight of the opinion of diversity in America and how many people do not support diversity out of their own race. It has created what we can consider a “time bomb” between White people and Black people; especially during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests which have resulted in the deaths of at least 25 people on both sides and injured hundreds (Beckett, 2020).

Another proof of the differences in ideology is through the connection of religion. Roughly half of Republicans and those who lean towards the Republican party see some conflict between their own religious beliefs and mainstream American culture (48%), higher than the 37% of Democrats and Democratic leaners who say the same (Pew Research Center, 2020). Additionally, White respondents (46%) are more likely than those who are Black or Hispanic (33%) to perceive conflict between their own beliefs and the broader culture (Pew Research

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Center, 2020). To successfully tie this to religion, we must consider the majority of each party that identifies with a certain religion. According to data from Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, Mormons are the most heavily Republican-leaning religious group (70%) in the United States, while the African Methodist Episcopal Church (92%) and the National Baptist Convention (87%). These specific religions are important to note because of their background on race; until the 1970s, Mormons restricted black members' participation in rituals and until recently taught that Mormons "shall be a white and a delightsome people" with 100% of all Mormons currently being White (Green, 2017) while the African Methodist Episcopal Church and National Baptist Convention are outspoken protestors of racial discrimination. By comparing the three biggest supporters of each side of racial and religious views, we can trace back how each side would support anti-discrimination and anti-racism laws in America and how they aid in either fueling or dismantling these beliefs.

Education

The final demographic characteristic that we can use to better explain the distribution of public opinion regarding racism and the Black American experience is education. A 2016 study published in *Social Problems* found that survey respondents with better scores on the verbal ability test were much less likely to have a negative view of Black people's intelligence and work ethic and less likely to oppose black-white intermarriage and having black neighbors (Wodtke, 2016). This study stands out because it does not measure whether a person has a specific degree or not; it measures their intellectual standing with specific questions that gives the researcher a better understanding of their education level and verbal ability. However, Wodtke also states that

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White people with lower verbal test scores as well as high-scoring White people who were born earlier in the 20th century have expressed racial attitudes that are like “old-fashioned racism.” It is also important to note that in the study, just because a respondent may liberal responses about anti-black prejudice and support for racial equality did not necessarily translate liberal attitudes when it comes to remedying racial inequality. One example of this is 95% percent of study participants who scored higher on the test said that Black and White children should attend the same schools, only 22% support school-busing programs. However, Lori Brown, professor of sociology at Meredith College, stated race is an issue that involves more than intellect because “some people ‘need’ to be prejudiced because they feel so bad about themselves it makes them feel better to hate others. So, better educated or ‘smart’ people may know facts but may still not like people who are different” (Haq, 2016). It is easier to hate someone and treat them poorly, if you’re never around them. I believe that the reason study participants support diversity, but do not support the programs the support that is because they do not want their taxes to go up to fund these programs because they’re not seeing the effects of racial discrimination and inequality daily. With only an average of 22% of respondents supporting programs to restructure relations of inequality, it proves to be difficult to make strategic changes for the Black American experience. One theory is that education has a profound liberalizing influence that promotes a heightened commitment to democratic norms of equality due to the large amount of evidence that shows highly educated Whites are more likely to reject negative racial stereotypes, agree with explanations for Black-White inequality, and endorse principles of equal treatment (Schuman et al. 1998). This perspective argues that the more educated you are, the more you will support equality for all and reject negative stereotypes that are supported in society of all

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minorities. However, why is it that Whites, no matter what education level, are less likely to support specific policies designed to overcome racial inequality? As we said before, as current as 2016, White people will support the idea of racial equality when asked, but not the specific stepping stones that would bring us there. One theory for this is that the ideological refinement perspective views education not as enlightening but rather as an institution that endows dominant groups with a keen awareness of their group interests, more advanced cognitive skills, and a set of ideological commitments that enable them to articulate an astute defense of their privileged position in the social hierarchy (Jackman & Muha, 1984). This perspective argues that education does not help racial attitudes change, but rather helps fuel them. By receiving an education, it gives Whites a way to materialize and support their beliefs while also feeling vindicated rather than teach them the clear bias they hold is hindering the progression of society.

Interpretation

After further research and analysis of data, I have concluded that most people who do not believe that racial inequality and inequity exist in America tend to be Republican, White, upper middle class to upper class, highly-educated or little educated, male, and Mormon. Most people who do believe that racial inequality and inequity exists tend to be Democratic, minorities, middle class to lower-middle class, educated to little educated, and mixed gender. Though a strong majority of public opinion rests in favor of changing society to achieve further racial justice and equality, there is little agreement on the question of how. Additionally, the Black experience in America is not a monolith; it can range from name-calling to hate crimes or loving relationships to abusive relationships. Men and women experience different things depending on their place of employment, where they live, how much money they make, and who they surround

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themselves with. However, the one take-away from it all is clear: racial inequality in America is as deeply woven in our society as it was 100 years ago. It has gone from slavery, to segregation, to denials of rights and equal chances of the American Dream. It has changed the way it looks over the years to better fit mainstream society, however, it is still there and there is a lot of work to do. The broader the message gets that something needs to change and the bigger movements get to force that change, the better chance there is of finally enacting it.

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