

7 Ways We Know Systemic Racism Is Real

It wasn't too long ago that a lot of people were talking about a [post-racial America](#). We had elected a Black president for the first time, and then went ahead and re-elected him four years later, and the country was feeling pretty good about itself.

While Barack Obama's presidency was indeed a profound and meaningful mark of true progress, racism, of course, never really went away. The presence of a black president, [hockey star](#), or movie-franchise [superhero](#), however welcome and exciting, cannot reverse centuries of racial injustice.

In fact, racism is built right into every level of our society in ways that might surprise you.

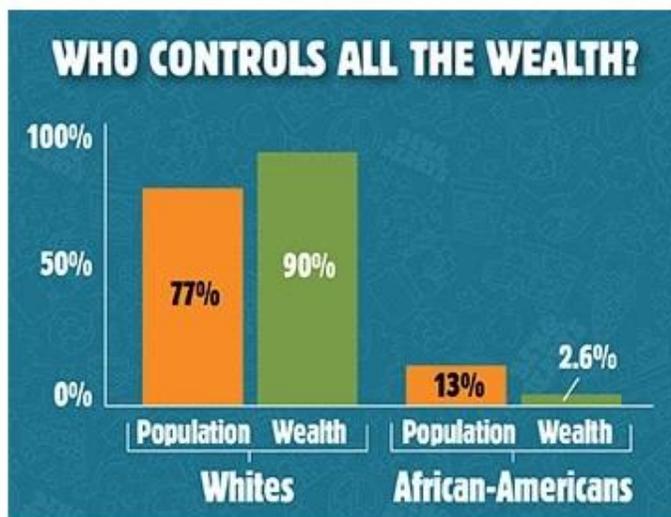
Racism at Every Level of Society

Racism of this kind, racism that infects the very structure of our society, is called systemic racism. And at first glance, it may be difficult to detect. Since the election of Donald Trump, [hate crimes](#) have been on the rise. [White supremacists](#) have been emboldened. [Anti-immigrant](#) rhetoric has intensified. We condemn these awful examples of prejudice and bias and hate, but systemic racism is something different. It's less about violence or [burning crosses](#) than it is about everyday decisions made by people who may not even think of themselves as racist. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has [said](#), "The main problem nowadays is not the folks with the hoods, but the folks dressed in suits."

Systemic racism persists in our schools, offices, court system, police departments, and elsewhere. Why? Think about it: when white people occupy most positions of decision-making power, people of color have a difficult time getting a fair shake, let alone getting ahead.

We all have to do a better job of calling out systemic racism. Here are seven ways we know that it's real.

WEALTH



According to one [study](#), white families hold 90% of the national wealth, Latino families hold 2.3%, and black families hold 2.6%. Not only that, the Great Recession hit minority families [particularly hard](#), and the [wealth gap](#) has increased. [Think about this](#): for every \$100 white families earn in income, black families earn just \$57.30. That's almost unbelievable—and it's a huge racial-justice issue.

EMPLOYMENT

**AFRICAN-AMERICANS ARE
2X
AS LIKELY TO BE
UNEMPLOYED.**

It's next to impossible to build wealth without steady and rewarding employment. But the **black unemployment rate has been consistently twice that of whites** over the past 60 years, no matter what has been going on with the economy (whether it's been up or down). Hmm, maybe higher education would help with that? Well, according to the data, **blacks with college degrees** are twice as likely to be unemployed as all other graduates. That may be because, **as one study found**, job applicants with white-sounding names get

called back about 50% more of the time than applicants with black-sounding names, even when they have identical resumes. (This seems to be a widespread problem: even guests with **distinctively black names** get less positive reviews from property owners on Airbnb.)

EDUCATION

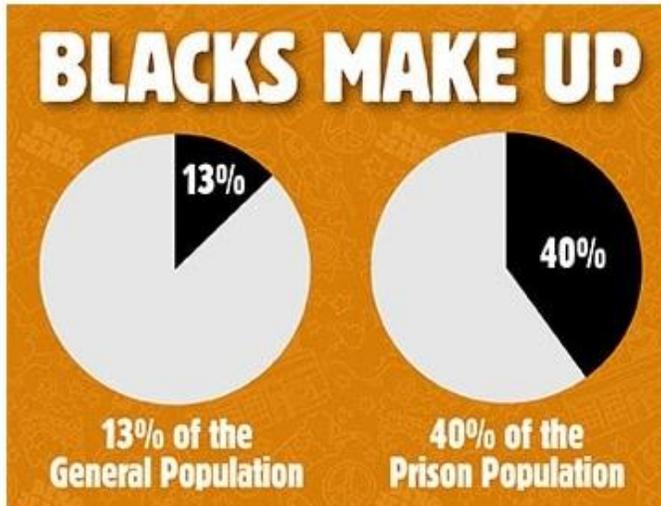
**BLACK STUDENTS ARE
3X
MORE LIKELY THAN WHITE STUDENTS
TO BE SUSPENDED
FOR THE SAME INFRACTIONS.**

Let's discuss education a little more in depth. If you thought that preschool, at least, was a racism-free zone, well... consider that while black children constitute 18% of preschoolers nationwide, **they make up nearly 50% of suspensions**. When all age groups are examined, black students are **three times more likely** to be suspended than white students, even when their infractions are similar. Overall, black students represent 16% of student enrollment and 27% of students referred to law enforcement. And

once black children are in the criminal justice system, they are **18 times more likely** than white children to be sentenced as adults.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Given this, perhaps it should not come as a surprise that even though, as we said, blacks make up 13% of the population, they represent about



40% of the prison population. **Why is that?** Perhaps because if a black person and a white person each commit a crime, the black person has a better chance of being arrested. It's also true that, once arrested, black people are convicted more often than white people. And for many years, laws assigned **much harsher sentences** for using or possessing crack, for example, compared to cocaine. Finally, when black people are convicted, they are about **20% more likely** to be sentenced to jail

time, and typically see sentences **20% longer** than those for whites who were convicted

of similar crimes. And as we know, a felony conviction means, in many states, that you lose your right to vote. Right now in America, **more than 7.4%** of the adult African American population is disenfranchised (compared to 1.8% of the non-African American population).

HOUSING

**BLACKS ARE SHOWN
18% FEWER
HOMES &
4% FEWER
RENTAL UNITS THAN WHITES.**

When the government sought to make mortgages more affordable back in the 1930s, thereby jumpstarting the epoch of suburban living, the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (and thereafter private banks) ranked neighborhoods all around the country, giving high marks to all-white neighborhoods and marking those with minorities in red as risky investments.

Redlining, which essentially barred blacks and other minorities from sharing in the American Dream and building wealth like their white

counterparts, was officially outlawed in the '60s, but the practice really never went away. In fact, during the Great Recession, banks routinely and purposely guided black home buyers toward subprime loans. A recent study demonstrated that people of color are told about and shown fewer homes and apartments than whites. Black ownership is now at an all-time low (42%, compared to 72% for whites).

SURVEILLANCE

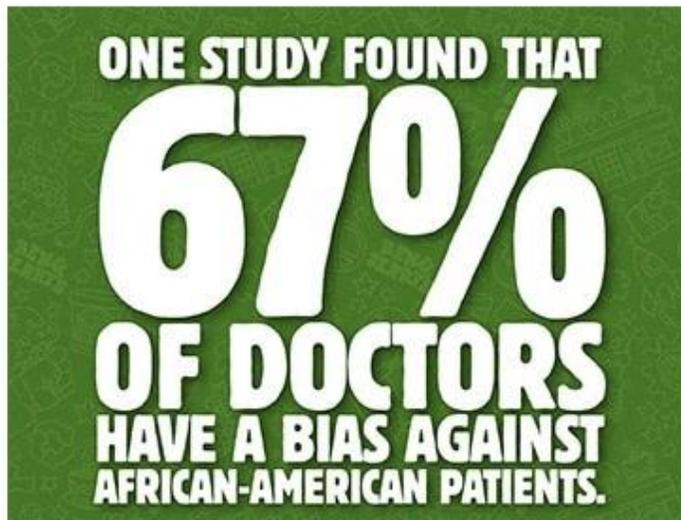
If you're white, you don't usually need to worry about being monitored by the police. But

the day-to-day reality for African Americans is quite different. More than half of all young black Americans know someone, including themselves, who has been harassed by the police. Statistics also show that black drivers are about 30% more likely than whites to be pulled over by the police. (So African Americans can expect to be monitored wherever they go—but did you

**BLACK DRIVERS ARE
30%
MORE LIKELY
TO BE PULLED OVER.**

know that they can't even expect to safely cross the street? Blacks are twice as likely to die in pedestrian accidents than whites, perhaps because, according to [one study](#), motorists are less likely to stop for blacks in the crosswalk.) And of course it's well-known that [Muslims are under increasing and often illegal surveillance](#)

HEALTHCARE



ONE STUDY FOUND THAT
67%
OF DOCTORS
HAVE A BIAS AGAINST
AFRICAN-AMERICAN PATIENTS.

African Americans in particular [face discrimination in the world of healthcare too](#). A 2012 study found that a majority of doctors have “unconscious racial biases” when it comes to their black patients. Black Americans are far more likely than whites to lack access to emergency medical care. The hospitals they go to tend to be less well funded, and staffed by practitioners with less experience. But even black doctors face discrimination: they are less likely than their similarly credentialed white peers to receive government

grants for research projects. And it seems that facing a lifetime of racism leaves African Americans vulnerable to developing stress-related health issues that can lead to chronic issues later in life.

Let's be clear: systemic racism is a corrosive and widespread problem in our society, and we all need to do a better job of confronting it—in our towns, in our neighborhoods, and in ourselves.

Want to be part of the solution? Here's how you can take action: Start a conversation. Once you know the truth, it's hard to keep it to yourself. So tell a friend, a sibling, a roommate, your kooky uncle...that systemic racism is real, and we all need to be fighting to end it.

Implicit Bias Link & Resources Inbox x

 **Robin Hopkins**
to WE ▾ Aug 21, 2020, 9:36 AM (11 days ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮

Harvard University's Implicit Association Test

- This test measures any implicit bias that you may hold in a number of categories. It takes about 8 to 10 minutes to complete.
- You are to take the "Race IAT" test.

Go to: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Suggested Books:

- [Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor](#), by Layla F. Saad
- [White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism](#), by Robin DiAngelo
- [So You Want to Talk About Race](#), by Ijeoma Oluo
- [Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America](#), by Ibram X. Kendi

Other Resources:

- Documentary: 13th (watch on Netflix or [on YouTube here](#))
- [Collection of Articles: The 1619 Project by The New York Times](#)

7 Reasons Why 'Colorblindness' Contributes to Racism Instead of Solves It - Invitation to edit Inbox x

 **Robin Hopkins (via Google Docs)**
to D-South ▾ Fri, Aug 21, 9:04 AM (11 days ago) ☆ ↶ ⋮

robin.hopkins@weschools.org has invited you to **edit** the following document:

 **7 Reasons Why 'Colorblindness' Contributes to Racism Instead of Solves It**

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7 Reasons Why 'Colorblindness' Contributes to Racism Instead of Solves It

February 23, 2015 / [Jon Greenberg](#)

Author's Notes: *While this article argues that colorblindness as a concept is problematic, I'd also like to acknowledge that colorblindness as a term is problematic, as it could easily be considered an example of [ableist language](#). In the end, I chose to use the term, but I hope that in ridding ourselves of the concept, we can also rid ourselves of the term.*

Thank you to my former students who have shared their race-based experiences, enabling me to write this article.

You've heard it said before. You might have been the one to say it. "**I don't see color. I just see people.**" Or maybe: "We are all just people." Or it might have been "..." – the sound of silence. Such comments (and racial avoidance) have a name: *colorblindness*.

The colorblind approach to race is not an accidental phenomenon; rather, it is the result of an education – a training – that many of us have received, *especially* White Americans. **Many of us are taught from an early age that talking about race – even just acknowledging race – is a no-no.** In some ways, colorblindness makes sense: Race can be uncomfortable – its mere mention can thicken the air with tension.

Moreover, this country's racist history is deeply uncomfortable: "*Let's just start fresh in a world where we don't acknowledge racial differences and, with luck, we can move beyond our racist past. After all, this country is a big melting pot anyway.*"

Unfortunately, like many other lessons we have been taught – [drinking juice](#) is good for you, [complimenting appearances](#) is always nice, [menstruation](#) is gross and shameful, asking [Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders](#) where they are *really* from is okay – **colorblind ideology is fraught with problems and pitfalls.** Before I elaborate, please don't feel judged if you have espoused such an approach in the past. As I mentioned, how could many of us *not* do so after years of training? I have spent nearly 15 years in public high school classrooms, and my students – particularly my students of color – have provided a wealth of evidence that, when it comes to colorblindness, **we desperately require an alternate training.**

Since it's the responsibility of White folks to educate ourselves and each other (and [not expect people of color to be our trainers](#)), I encourage you take to heart the seven reasons I've already been taught:

1. Colorblindness Invalidates People's Identities

Because of the prevalence and history of racism, just the word "race" can conjure negative connotations. However, racial oppression (not to mention the flipside, racial advantage and privilege) is just one dimension of race. **Race is also intimately tied to people's identities and signifies culture, tradition, language, and heritage – genuine sources of pride** (and not in the [White Pride](#) kind of way). Like many other factors – *gender, religion, socio-economic status* – race is a basic ingredient that makes up our being, whether or not you consciously

acknowledge its role in your life. Imagine being forced to suppress one such ingredient that you openly acknowledge and value. Imagine, for example, being forced to let go of your religion. For people whose [faith is a fundamental part of their lives](#), such a thought is unfathomable. **Yet doing so for race makes no more sense.** Asked what he appreciates about his race, one student – who describes himself as Japanese, Black, and English – responded, “**My race is everything to me.**” For this student, not to mention many others for whom race is a valued part of identity, what would colorblindness leave him with? Denying people their identities is not racial progress, but rather harkens back to this country’s sordid racist history. [Slavery](#) depended on severing the cultural ties of stolen people. The [Indian Boarding School](#) movement had similarly devastating effects on Indigenous groups. **True progress will come when White Americans no longer feel [threatened](#) by the racial identities of groups of color.**

2. Colorblindness Invalidates Racist Experiences

Colorblind ideology takes race off the table. But for many people of color – *as well as for White people who work to dismantle systems of privilege* – race is very much on the table. Racism forces it to the tabletop. Colorblindness just pretends the table is empty. I’ve worked with a Mexican American student who overheard a White American student say, “[I hate Mexicans.](#)” I’ve worked with an African American student who endured being [called the N-word](#) by a classmate and another Black student mistaken for a drug dealer. Students of color at the predominately White school in which I work have described themselves as “bad seeds” and “outcasts.” **Who benefits when those stories are suppressed?** Most certainly not these students of color, who must swallow their stories and bury their experiences. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author and president of Spelman College, explains that the cost of such silence on students of color is isolation, “self-blame,” and “self-doubt of [internalized oppression.](#)” Instead, **we need an environment where such stories are heard, valued, and then *thoroughly addressed.*** Unfortunately, colorblindness derails the process of addressing racism before it has even started.

3. Colorblindness Narrows White Americans’ Understanding of the World and Leads to Disconnection

White Americans are not the only ones who adopt a colorblind approach to race but, in my experience, *they are far more likely to than any other racial group*. Ultimately, however, colorblindness hurts them as well. I explore this topic in much more depth in a previous [article](#). In it, I argue that White Americans who avoid race, a behavior that colorblindness encourages, have a skewed view of the world. After all, understanding any situation requires multiple points of view. A news story must consider various sides of any conflict to keep itself out of the editorial section. A court trial could never be considered fair if only the prosecution presented its case. A novel could never be fully understood if we only read about *some* of the characters. Novelist, and perhaps coolest-person-ever, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls for multiple perspectives so that we avoid what she calls, "[the danger of the single story](#)."

Colorblind ideology limits the stories that get told, keeping White America comfortable, but also keeping racism thriving. It also causes disconnect. If you are espousing colorblindness, your failure to deeply understand race means you have likely been tripping down a long unnecessary road paved with stereotypes and [microaggressions](#). And while you may have been banking on the bliss that comes with ignorance, **the people who know full well that race really fucking matters — people of all colors — do not trust you.** The result: Colorblindness cuts you off from so much beauty in this world.

4. Colorblindness Equates Color with Something Negative

The comment "I don't see color; I just see people" carries with it one huge implication: **It implies that color is a problem**, arguably synonymous with "I can see who you are *despite* your race."

As evidence, note that **the phrase is virtually never applied to White people**. In over 40 years of life and nearly 15 years as an anti-racist educator, I have yet to hear a White person say in reference to another White person, "I don't see your color; I just see you." In my experience, it is *always* applied to people of color (nearly always by White people). For the students of color whose race is core to their identities, the comment effectively causes many to feel "invisible."

"Then you don't see me," one student of color once responded.

Multiracial students [who look very White](#) have shared stories of having their faces examined, often by White people, looking for "what else" is in there. The whole scenario assumes white is the norm and the something "else," the color, is not. [Altering the scenarios](#) often serves to illuminate the flaws in such comments. For example, I once said to my Jewish wife,

“I don’t see your Jewishness; I just see you.” Until I explained my intentions, the experiment did not help our marriage.

5. Colorblindness Hinders Tracking Racial Disparities

Racial labels and terms are [complex](#), evolving, sometimes limiting, and often [problematic](#). But the problems associated with the colorblindness are arguably far worse. Without being color conscious, we would never know:

- Black preschoolers are [three times more likely to be suspended](#) than White students. *Preschoolers*. This data from a [federal study](#) has prompted some to rename the [school-to-prison pipeline](#) the **preschool-to-prison pipeline**.
- In Seattle, despite making up just a tiny fraction of the district population, Native American students had a “push-out” rate (more commonly known as “drop-out” rate) of [42%](#) during the 2011-2012 school year.
- In the school district in which I work, Seattle Public Schools, Black middle school students are [nearly four times more likely to suspended](#) than White students, a disparity that prompted a federal investigation by the Department of Education. (See graph below.)

Unfortunately, [deep racial disparities](#) are not limited to education. If a person’s race truly shouldn’t matter – which I acknowledge most people *are trying to communicate* when they espouse colorblindness – then such disparities wouldn’t exist. With such staggering disparities, **again I ask: Who benefits when we ignore such racial categories?** Certainly not those most negatively affected.

6. Colorblindness Is Disingenuous

If you are saying “I don’t see color; I just people,” I’m sorry, but I just don’t believe you. Essentially, you are saying that that you don’t notice any difference between Lupita Nyong’o and, say, Anne Hathaway, two similarly aged actresses who I’m betting have never been confused for each other. They are both just people, exactly the same. Really? Again, I just don’t believe you. And Idris Elba playing James Bond won’t [ruffle any feathers](#), right? (Just like no one noticed when he played a [Norse god](#) in

Thor.) Was it really just openly racist people who objected to these casting choices or were they joined by proponents of colorblindness? Or when you see a group of Black youth walking toward you on the sidewalk, you feel the exact same feeling as when it's group of White youth? Though the concept of race is a [social construct and ever changing](#), let's just be honest that those of us who can see really do see the physical differences (skin, hair, eye shape) commonly associated with what we call "race." If you are choosing colorblindness to avoid being racist, you have chosen the wrong strategy.

7. Colorblind Ideology Is a Form of Racism

In fact, just a few years ago, *Psychology Today* published an article titled "[Colorblind Ideology Is a Form of Racism](#)." See? Colorblindness is far more of a threat to racial justice than White Supremacists (who seem to be quite color conscious). After all, **if you can't discuss a problem, how can you ever solve it?** As Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun famously wrote, "To overcome racism, one must first take race into account." But if you don't believe Blackmun, just ask PBS, arguably the least controversial resource a teacher can ever hope to use in the classroom. On the website of the PBS series, *The Power of an Illusion*, it is written in no uncertain terms: "[Colorblindness will not end racism](#)."

As investment firm president Mellody Hobson says, let's be "[color brave](#)," not colorblind. Without such bravery, Selma director Ava DuVernay confirms, "[You're missing out on a lot of beautiful colors](#)."