

Structural Racism Doesn't Wear A White Hood

Can we recognize racism when we see it?

Many of us think of stereotypes of overt white supremacists: the KKK in white hoods, skinheads, burning crosses, swastikas.

While that sort of outright hate is unfortunately still present, it is less common and less socially acceptable today than it once was. But racism is not over. Racism is alive and with us every day, in structures and systems and cultural norms that reaffirm the virtue of whiteness and oppress people of color.

Often, these systems are superficially race-neutral and operated by people who are caring and good-hearted. But when you see so-called “colorblind” systems that persistently generate better outcomes for some groups than others, that’s your cue to look more deeply and carefully for the ways bias may be built in.

American racism looks like this:

- Black and Latinx people are twice as likely to live in poverty as White people. Native Americans are 2.5 times as likely. ([KFF](#))
- Job applicants with white-sounding names get 36% more callbacks from employers than people with Black-sounding names and 24% more callbacks than Latinx-sounding names. ([National Academy of Sciences](#))
- Women’s Equal Pay Day is sometime in April. But Black Women’s Equal Pay Day won’t be until AUGUST. For Native women it is in SEPTEMBER. And for Latinas, it is in NOVEMBER. ([Equal Pay Today](#))
- The Black unemployment rate is consistently more than twice as high as the white unemployment rate (1962 to 2015, with only 7 exceptions). ([American Bar Association](#))
- Black and Latinx homebuyers are 2-3 times more likely to be denied for mortgages, and pay higher interest rates when they can get approved. ([Pew](#))
- People of color receive less preventive health care and a lower quality of care. Even after taking into account income, neighborhood, underlying medical conditions, and health insurance types, Black people still have worse health outcomes than whites. ([The Commonwealth Fund](#)) One heartbreaking example: Black mothers are 3-4 times more likely to die from pregnancy or childbirth-related causes than white mothers, and Native American mothers are 2-3 times more likely to die. Even when you control for education, college-educated Black mothers are more likely to die than white mothers who did not complete high school. ([NPR](#), [CDC](#))
- Black people are five times more likely to be incarcerated than white people; Latinx people are 3 times more likely to be incarcerated—even for crimes, like marijuana usage, where white people commit that type of crime at comparable rates. For the same crime, people of color are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be charged, more likely to be charged with something that carries a mandatory minimum sentence, are likely to serve more years. ([The Sentencing Project](#))

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- Hiring managers assume that Black and Latinx men are probably felons. The well-intentioned Ban the Box campaign sought to end the practice of asking job applicants if they have ever been convicted of a felony. A 2016 study found that ban-the-box policies actually *reduced* the chances that Black and Latinx men find a job. ([The Atlantic](#))
- Even the computers are racist. Efforts to eliminate human bias by using race-blind algorithms often turns out to perpetuate racist outcomes. For example, a lending program designed to make loans *more* accessible and affordable turned out to charge higher interest rates to graduates of historically Black universities ([NPR](#)). Criminal courts are increasingly making sentencing decisions with input from predictive algorithms that over-rate the risk that Black people will re-offend in the future and under-rate the risk that white people will re-offend, ([Propublica](#)). The algorithms may be race-blind, but the programmers who write them and the datasets they rely on are all shaped by past and present racism.

Our Black colleagues, students, and neighbors live with the ever-present threat of discrimination, arrest, violence, and even death for engaging in simple, everyday acts:

Shopping while black. Napping while black. Studying while black. Taking a college admission tour. Going to the doctor. Applying for a mortgage. Checking into an Airbnb. Having a family grill-out in the park. Standing in their own front yard. Calling the police to report an intruder. Playing video games with the front door open.

The opposite of “racist” isn’t “not a racist.” We live in a world built for whiteness, where people of color face automatic skepticism in every part of life for no reason other than they are not white.

So it can’t be enough just to not be a bigot. There is no neutral.

Unless we are acting to see, identify, name the infrastructure of racism—and then to dismantle it—we are complicit.

The opposite of racist is anti-racist.