

RACE

9

CHAPTER

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, THE DEATHS OF UNARMED BLACK MEN AND BOYS, SOME AS YOUNG AS 12, HAVE SPARKED A NATIONAL DEBATE ON INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM. HOWEVER, RACIAL TENSIONS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE NOT JUST A BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE.

Terry Collins had just started the ninth grade in September 1963 when he walked out of his high school classroom to join thousands of young people in protest on the streets of Birmingham, Alabama. The city's 16th Street Baptist Church, which served as a meeting place for civil rights activists, had just been bombed by white supremacists. Four young girls were killed.

Collins says he was scared. "Sometimes, seeing injustice every day, you realize that it is better to live free. ... I realize it could have been live free or die," he says.



 Terry Collins, Birmingham, Alabama

At the time, Birmingham, like much of the country, was segregated: African-Americans were forced to attend separate schools, live in separate neighborhoods and even use separate bathrooms from their white peers.

Many government and law enforcement officials across the country were active supporters of these discrimina-

tory laws. Collins remembers seeing Birmingham's public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, use his infamously brutal tactics, such as fire hoses and police dogs, against peaceful protesters, including young students.

Despite the very real dangers, thousands of Americans protested the racist legislation and practices, and eventually the laws were changed. President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin, and established that all people should have equal access to employment and public spaces.¹ Legislation that followed protected further rights, particularly voting rights, which had been under attack since African-American men were given the right to vote following the Civil War in 1870. Women in the United States did not receive the right to vote until 1920.

"Some of the same things that were happening in the '50s and '60s [are] happening today. They're just kind of undercover."

————— Terry Collins

"The Civil Rights Movement ... was nothing short of a revolution, where people came together, not just black folks who were marginalized, but all kinds of people came from the North and the South, the East and the West, to help ensure the civil rights for every person in



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the United States,” says Lecia Brooks, director of the Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

THE SCARS

For decades after the most violent episodes of the civil rights struggle, a quieter tension prevailed in the United States, interrupted by occasional spasms. Instead of marches, bombings and “whites only” signs, an argument arose, peppered with terms such as “affirmative action,” “racial profiling,” “white privilege” and “reparations.” Even though respondents typically told pollsters they held a reasonably favorable view of other ethnic or racial groups, surveys also repeatedly found that minorities perceived greater conflict among such groups than did whites.² In addition, one respected poll taken over the years found that whites are much less likely than blacks to believe that blacks are treated unfairly in many public situations.³

Those differing viewpoints are hardly surprising, given that minorities and whites seldom mix. The percentage of public schools with student bodies that are at least 75 percent poor and black or Hispanic is on the rise, and the country’s large metropolitan areas are still highly segregated.⁴

“Some of the same things that were happening in the ’50s and ’60s [are] happening today. They’re just kind

of undercover,” says Collins, second vice president of the Birmingham chapter of the NAACP, America’s most visible civil rights organization. He says employment and housing discrimination, for example, persist, even if signs are no longer openly posted forbidding African Americans from entering certain spaces.

Broadly speaking, relations between African-Americans and some white Americans have entered a stalemate, in which blacks want acknowledgement of the systems and institutional racism – slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, preferred university admissions for the children of alumni, predominantly white word-of-mouth hiring networks – that have helped cement an income and achievement gap between whites and blacks, while many whites protest that they are not racist and in at least one respected poll say racism against whites is more widespread than against blacks.⁵

Meanwhile, Muslims – or those perceived as Muslims – and immigrants are increasingly targets of violent attacks by the rising number of hate groups in the United States.⁶

Dorcas Harris of Huntsville, in northern Alabama, also grew up among segregation, but is white. She has thought a lot about the scars that racism has left on her community and the vestiges of segregation that

remain. “A big part of my upbringing was to think of black people as separate and different and inferior,” she says. “And I’ve spent a large part of the last four, five decades trying to get past that. Because it’s really difficult to undo something you learned as a child. Not that my parents were wicked people, or that they were Klansmen, or that they ever had anything to do with ill-treatment of blacks. But in terms of attitude, it was very much ingrained in me.”



 Dorcas Harris, Huntsville, Alabama

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————— Dorcas Harris

Harris credits her daughter’s open-mindedness and commitment to equality with helping to change her perspective.



 Pastor Garry Brantley, Birmingham, Alabama

“I’m a white guy, in my 50s, grew up in the South, to a conservative – religiously conservative – family, politically conservative. If that didn’t shape how I view the world, I’d be lying.”

————— Pastor Garry Brantley

Pastor Garry Brantley of Birmingham’s Crossbridge Church teaches a college-level sociology course to students, most of whom are working throughout their studies and many of whom are African-American. He says he begins his course by telling his students, “I’m a white guy, in my 50s, grew up in the South, to a conservative – religiously conservative – family, politically conservative. If that didn’t shape how I view the world, I’d be lying.” He acknowledges that for him, particularly as a pastor, it is critical to “recognize the issues and the biases that we bring to any conversation. I think that’s the only way to get forward.”

NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE

Although some of the nation’s most egregious sins, starting with slavery, have been committed against its African-American citizens, race in the United States is not simply a black and white issue. The country is also home to sizable Hispanic and Asian-American populations, as well as Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. Each of these groups has faced its own challenges. Though it can be easy for those outside the country to assume that all racial tensions exist between white Americans and those of other races, this is certainly not the case. Race is an issue between and even within other groups. “The racial divide is not just black and white. It’s also black and brown, it’s also African-American – Asian-American. It’s also documented – undocumented. There’s a lot of stressors and a lot of fractures, even within communities of color,” explains LeDawn Sullivan of the Colorado nonprofit the Denver Foundation.

HISPANICS

Hispanics have their own recent history of segregation. “The church where I went to church, we were not allowed to sit in the center aisles; we had to sit on the side aisles,” recalls former Colorado State Senator Polly Baca. “The theaters were segregated. We only could sit in the balconies, not the main floor. There were signs like, ‘no Mexicans or dogs allowed.’”

UNITED STATES RACIAL DEMOGRAPHICS ⁷	
White alone (non-Hispanic)	61.3%
Hispanic or Latino	17.8%
Black or African-American alone	13.3%
Asian alone	5.7%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	1.3%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	0.2%
Two or More Races	2.6%



 Polly Baca, Denver, Colorado

America’s nearly 57 million Hispanics amount to almost 18 percent of the population, making them the country’s largest minority group. By 2060, the Census Bureau projects they will make up nearly 30 percent of the U.S. population. With those numbers have come a fitful growth in political influence: more Hispanics are winning elective office at the local and national level, especially in the Southwest.⁸

“The racial divide is not just black and white. ... There’s a lot of stressers and a lot of fractures, even within communities of color.”

————— *LeDawn Sullivan*

In the late 2000s, it seemed as if Republicans, whose base of older white voters is shrinking, might start trying to woo Hispanic voters away from the Democrats. Some Republican senators and Republican President

George W. Bush tried unsuccessfully to create “a path to citizenship” for undocumented immigrants, most of whom are Hispanic. Later, after Mitt Romney lost the presidential race to Barack Obama in 2012, an internal Republican Party report urged Republicans to reach out to Hispanic voters.

But much of that was forgotten with the 2016 campaign, especially by supporters of Donald Trump, who made stopping the flow of immigrants to the country a central pillar of his platform. Thus Hispanics were driven further into the arms of the Democrats.⁹ That dynamic is unlikely to change: The shifting demographics of the United States, of which Hispanic population growth is a key part, have helped ignite a cultural anxiety among white working-class voters that in turn inspired fervid support for Trump’s backward-looking Make America Great Again campaign.¹⁰

ASIAN-AMERICANS

Most of the 21 million Asian-Americans live in the Northeast or on the West Coast.¹¹ The country’s fastest-growing ethnic group, they are better educated and enjoy a median income higher than the population at large.¹²

Asian-Americans lean heavily Democratic, and they registered a record number of new voters – more than 1.1 million – between the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. In a major survey after the 2016 election, they identified their biggest concerns as the costs of college, health care and elder care, and the quality of their children’s schools.¹³ Few reported facing conventional

types of discrimination – at the workplace, in housing and the like – but majorities of almost every Asian group said people frequently assume they are good at math or science.

Trump’s efforts to ban immigrants from majority-Muslim countries and anti-China rhetoric carry troubling echoes of late-19th century efforts to bar Chinese immigrants and of the World War II-era internment of more than 100,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans in camps. Only about 25 percent of Asian-Americans voted for Trump, according to the post-election survey.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Census-takers lump American Indians into a category with Alaska Natives. Together, they number about 6.6 million, or about 1.3 percent of the population. More than half of American Indians live away from their tribal lands, which include 362 reservations. These various nations have never recovered from wholesale dispossession and the extermination campaigns waged against them by European settlers: American Indians and Alaska Natives are significantly poorer and less-educated, and they own homes and businesses at a lower rate than Americans as a whole.¹⁴

“They cut our hair, they took our language, they took our culture, they took our traditions. ... When you tell people that everything you are was evil, ... it brings you to a shame. ... To come back from shame is a really hard. You have to heal.”

————— Clarinda Underwood



 Clarinda Underwood, Quinault Nation, Washington

Clarinda Underwood, a Tribal Council member of the Quinault Nation in Washington state, says after her tribe

signed a treaty with the U.S. government in 1855, native ways were nearly extinguished, setting off a cycle of shame that continues.

“They cut our hair, they took our language, they took our culture, they took our traditions,” she says. “From what I remember growing up, one grandmother told me not to – not to sing our songs and not to dance our dances because it was evil. That’s kind of what was put on us. We were to be ashamed of who we were. And so that was really hard for me to go through a healing as an adult and to relearn who I was. ... When you tell people that everything you are was evil, ... it brings you to a shame. ... To come back from shame is a really hard. You have to heal.”

There is evidence that in 2016, counties where American Indians make up the majority voted for Hillary Clinton, although in fewer numbers than had supported Barack Obama.¹⁵ The former president made an effort to improve health care for Native Indians, and his administration settled more than 100 lawsuits tribes had brought against the government over decades concerning management of their lands.¹⁶

ISLAMOPHOBIA

An estimated 3.3 million Muslims live in the United States, and they – and those perceived as Muslim – are increasingly subject to violence or intimidation.¹⁷ The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported more than 2,200 “anti-Muslim bias incidents” in 2016, up 57 percent from the previous year. These most often included harassment, workplace discrimination, denial of religious accommodations, hate crimes and generalized questioning by the FBI unrelated to specific cases.¹⁸

Maha Jahshan, who works in the city of Seattle’s Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, says Islamophobia is an issue in the region. “A lot of our folks in Washington state ... might not interact a lot with Muslim folks or people from the Middle East who are not Muslim. ... But to them, a Middle Easterner equals Muslim, equals terrorist, equals ‘I don’t want that person in my back yard.’”

It’s not only the people of Washington state. CAIR’s report documents outlandish statements about Muslims by public officials across the country, accusing them of plotting to convert or kill Americans, calling them “the enemy” and calling Islam “a death cult.”



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————— Maha Jahshan

In making the link between the Middle East, Islam and terrorism, many Americans take their cue from the White House. After one week in office, Trump issued an executive order banning entry to the United States for people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The executive order, titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” referenced the September 11th attacks and suggested that there was a serious danger of Middle Eastern terrorists entering the United States – although none of the hijackers in that attack was from the affected countries.¹⁹ The constitutionality of the order is under review by the Supreme Court.

GEOGRAPHY

The country as a whole is diverse, but it contains many pockets of homogeneity. As mentioned, blacks and whites remain segregated in most major metropolitan areas. States in the Northeast tend to be heavily white, and some counties in Appalachia and the Midwest are near or at 100 percent white.²⁰ The most diverse counties form a crescent shape across the South and Southwest and they roughly coincide with the greatest concentrations of Hispanic and African-American residents.

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

One of the most diverse regions in the country is the South, partly because slavery left behind poor, black communities in the region. The effect is that whites and blacks in the South interact regularly and most of the time encounter little personal friction. Partly for this reason, sociologists who have spent time with Trump supporters in the South and the Midwest say these white voters reject the notion that they are racist but give little thought to how racism is embedded in American institutions.



 Timothy Nelson, El Paso, Texas



“They see that brown skin, they see those dreads and, boy, I pray to God he’s not the victim of, ‘Woah, show me your hands.’”

————— Nathaniel Jones

But zooming out the lens shows it is widespread. White Americans – particularly white men – have long dominated the government, business world and much of academia, even as police forces, universities and board rooms slowly become more diverse. Systems and norms, often within institutions – such as unconscious, biased hiring practices, police tactics, college admissions requirements or criminal justice sentencing practices – may benefit certain types of people and discriminate against others. Some examples among many: the unemployment rate in 2013 for young college graduates who are black was more than twice the rate for young college graduates as a whole; in New Jersey, a study found that black drivers were much more likely to be stopped and even arrested by the police, although black and white drivers violate traffic laws at the same rate.²¹

“Racism is still here and you can see it wrapped in our institutions, and until we start understanding how institutions are supporting that racism we’re going to continue to have it,” Timothy Nelson, racial justice director at an El Paso nonprofit, says.

THE POLICE

In 2015, police shot and killed 965 people.²² Of the 875 who were armed, 564 – 64 percent – had guns. Of the

135 law enforcement officers who died on the job in 2016, 64 were killed by firearms.²³

As discussed in Chapter 12, guns are prevalent in the United States, so the stakes can be especially high for police officers. But statistics suggest that white people get a bigger benefit of the doubt in contacts with police than minorities do. Although a plurality of those shot and killed by police in 2015 were white men who had pulled out guns or other weapons, “a hugely disproportionate number – 3 in 5 – of those killed after exhibiting less threatening behavior were black or Hispanic.”²⁴

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Over the past five years, the deaths of unarmed black men and boys, some as young as 12, have sparked a national debate on institutionalized racism in policing. Police brutality is not new, but a combination of factors, including the prevalence of video-equipped mobile phones and the founding of the Black Lives Matter protest movement, have put the issue in front of a larger public.

The 2014 death of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, set off a wave of protests.²⁵ Brown was shot by a white officer, who was not indicted. Protests broke out again in April 2015 when Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old resident of Baltimore, Maryland, died of injuries sustained in the back of a police van after his arrest. Both men's encounters with police were at least partly caught on videotape, but no police have been convicted of wrongdoing, leaving many further disillusioned with the criminal justice system.

The deaths of unarmed African-American men are a reminder of the menace that people of color – especially African-American men – say they feel every day in situations that seem innocuous to white Americans.



 Nathaniel Jones, El Paso, Texas

Nelson says at least six law enforcement agencies patrol his 37-mile daily commute from Las Cruces, New Mexico, to his job in El Paso. He says all that law enforcement activity “is going to do is increase the anxiety ... for me, because I drive around with dreadlocks. There’s a reality that comes with wearing the dreads too.”

Nelson’s colleague Nathaniel Jones has a son who wears dreadlocks as well. At 15, he is excelling in high school and plans to study engineering. But Jones fears that the dreadlocks mark out his son as a potential troublemaker and could lead to a dangerous encounter with police.

“They see that brown skin, they see those dreads and, boy, I pray to God he’s not the victim of, ‘Woah, show me your hands.’ What I’m saying is I’ve got to fight those odds every day,” Jones says.

Philadelphia native Mike Green says that as an African-American he is extremely careful when he interacts with

any law enforcement, like when he was pulled over last month for a broken taillight on his car. “I’m going to break it down for you in white and black issue. I believe that the white police are ... scared of the black man,” he says. “We as blacks are taking the brunt of the white police fear or they just don’t care. I don’t know.”



 Mike Green, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

VOTER ID LAWS

In the past decade, Republican lawmakers across the country have pushed laws to require that voters have specific forms of identification in order to cast a ballot. Proponents of voter ID laws say they guard against voter fraud, but credible research has shown that voter fraud is extremely rare.²⁶

These laws do, however, effectively make it harder for minorities and poor people – who favor the Democrats – to vote.

In the United States, residents are not required to have photo IDs that are valid nationwide. This comes as a surprise to many Europeans who are used to and expected to carry personal identification (Personalausweis in Germany) at all times. Many Americans feel that a mandatory ID card could give the government too much control. Most adults have photo identification in the form of a driver’s license or passport. However, many who do not drive or travel outside the country lack photo identification. Only 5 percent of white Americans do not have a photo ID, compared with 13 percent of African-Americans and 10 percent of Hispanics.²⁷ Likewise, only 2 percent of Americans in households that earn over \$150,000 a year do not have photo IDs, compared with 12 percent of Americans living in households that earn less than \$25,000 a year.²⁸

Thirty-three of the 50 states have voter identification requirements. Eighteen of those states require voters to present a photo ID, while the other 15 accept other forms of identification, such as apartment leases and utility bills.²⁹

“Many times, people aren’t able to purchase the ID that’s required, again because of economics. Also, they may have to travel great distances. They might be incapacitated. How would you allow for a person in a nursing home, in a hospital, in some kind of an institution to vote, exercise their rights?”

————— Terry Collins

Applying for identification can be too costly or complicated, or might require a trip to a local government agency, which can present serious barriers for the poor or those without easy access to transportation. In addition, sometimes government officials make it more difficult to obtain an ID card, including by limiting opening hours for the office that would issue it.³⁰

“Many times, people aren’t able to purchase the ID that’s required, again because of economics,” Terry Collins says. “Also, they may have to travel great distances. They might be incapacitated. How would you allow for a person in a nursing home, in a hospital, in some kind of an institution to vote, exercise their rights?”

Given current political realities – and the Supreme Court’s 2013 decision weakening parts of the Voting Rights Act to effectively give states with a history of voter suppression more freedom in crafting their election-related laws – Lecia Brooks is pessimistic.³¹

“I think that what we’ll continue to see [is] a push to further suppress voting rights,” she says. “I don’t think we’ll ever see – in this administration anyway – a full restoration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which is a shame. [We’ll see] more voter ID laws, more ways to disenfranchise people from voting, as opposed to finding ways to ensure that everyone gets to vote.”

HONESTY OR RACISM?

While concern over the state of race relations has inched upward among Americans in the last couple of years, Republicans view it much less urgently than Democrats,

according to a recent survey.³² And some conservatives say right-wing populism should not be mistaken for racism.

Drawing a comparison with the election of Trump, Marty Connors, former chairman of the Alabama Republican Party, says, “Why did England leave the EU? Well it’s really pretty simple. ... They were tired of top-down, heavy-handed bureaucratic government, and they were tired of being force-fed immigration. ... It’s not racism, it’s just people want to have some sovereignty, and you’re seeing a rise around the Western world of nationalism and populism. Witness Donald Trump.”

For Connors and many Americans, particularly conservatives, Trump’s brash willingness to speak his mind on controversial topics was a breath of fresh air. Many say they feel constrained from doing the same, for fear of being labeled racists. They deride their opponents on the left as politically correct thought-police and say it has become more difficult to have honest conversations. On the other hand, a major survey designed to detect racial bias in respondents has over the years found that white respondents blame blacks’ perceived lack of ambition more than economic factors for continuing inequality and that more whites accept racist practices, although the gap is closing.³³

“They were tired of being force-fed immigration. ... It’s not racism, it’s just people want to have some sovereignty, and you’re seeing a rise around the Western world of nationalism and populism. Witness Donald Trump.”

————— Marty Connors

A 2016 poll found that 59 percent of Americans, and 83 percent of Trump supporters, believe people are “too easily offended these days over language.”³⁴ On the other hand, 59 percent of Clinton supporters said they believed, “people need to be more careful with language to avoid offending people.”³⁵ The line between frankness and openness and offensive speech is becoming increasingly debated – and partisan.

THE BACKLASH

To many minorities, Trump’s rise feels like a bull’s eye painted on their backs. “The African-American population and small Latino population in Alabama are



“It really is a pushback on a lot of the advances we’ve made relative to civil and human rights.”

————— *Lecia Brooks*

very concerned. I would say the same is true for folks of color, non-white, immigrant folks across the U.S. because it really feels like, it really is a pushback on a lot of the advances we’ve made relative to civil and human rights,” Brooks says. She posits that white anxiety over changing demographics is helping fuel Trump’s support. “This whole kind of movement toward ‘Make America Great Again’ is really in the minds of most civil rights or social justice folks, a cry to take the United States back to a place where there was a clear [white] majority. ... Good for some people, not good for some other people.”

Timothy Nelson in El Paso agrees. “[Trump] is a throwback to what America was. Making America great again is a reference to a very specific racialized, white supremacist, top-down understanding of what America is,” he says.

Layra Marivani, Nelson’s colleague at the El Paso non-profit, lived many years in her native Mexico before living in the states of Illinois, California and Washing-

ton. She says she “never felt the need to defend my Mexican-ness until right now. [I never needed to argue that] my Mexican-ness doesn’t define how smart I am or what I’m capable of, and I think that’s something that is really dangerous.”

Ana, a Hispanic college student from Alamosa, Colorado, says she has seen more racism from her peers since the election. “Once [some classmates] find out you’re Mexican or from a family of Mexicans. ... They’re really Trump-supportive. They call you names,” she says. “I was born here. ... I mean, just come on. Grow up.”

Terry Collins offers a realistic yet optimistic take on the implications of Trumpism: “The truth of the matter is [we] still have a long way to go. There’s still a fight to be won. The struggle continues. It is not hopeless. Because if it was hopeless, what reason would we have to try to continue? I think the distance that [we’ve] come is the indication of the many changes that are possible for this country.”

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