

# Systemic Racism

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Institutional racism, or structural racism, not individual acts of racism.

Look at the big picture of how society operates, not one-on-one interactions.

In 1973, Steve Biko, a South African anti-apartheid activist and philosopher, wrote an essay entitled, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity." He characterized racism in this way: "Racism does not only imply exclusion of one race by another – it always presupposes that the exclusion is for the purposes of subjugation." It is about enforcing the power of one race over another for the purposes of exploitation of labor and control of resources.

**Jobs.** A Harvard Business School study found that applicants were more likely to get interviews for a job if they whitened their names and did not disclose their race. (2017) *The Explainer*, 2020.

**Jobs.** Minimum wage jobs? Necessary to have more than one to feed and house a family. But it is expensive to be poor. Travelling back and forth to multiple jobs, and buying food when there is no time to prepare it, means many extra expenses to make it on wages that are already low to begin with.

**Health Care.** "Why A Hospital Might Shun a Black Person" (*NYT* 10/6/20)

"The way medical professionals are paid keeps structural racism alive."

"A value-based payment model seems as innocent as a daisy." But "penalizing hospitals for excessive re-hospitalization," which is what happens under this model, with its rewards for outcomes, means that Blacks and ethnic minorities are penalized. "Sicker patients who need more care or those who face other challenges, like not having a caregiver at home, become economically unattractive to hospitals."

"Since people with worse living and working conditions are readmitted more frequently, hospitals that serve more worse-off racial and ethnic minorities were more frequently penalized."

"Because statistically, outcomes are generally worse for Black patients because of larger issues of systemic racism. So surgeons avoid them to protect their scores."

"Minority populations are more likely to be shunned" in favor of "better off white ones whom doctors see as likely to have better outcomes."

The solution? "The Pennsylvania Rural Health model, for example, is a collaborative effort by Medicare, Medicaid, and private health insurers to provide a fixed payment to rural hospitals each year for all the health care services they provide."

**Schools.** Resegregation of schools. *Brown v Education* (1954) decision. Separate is not equal. Afterwards, there is integration in almost half of schools by 1988, with African American children attending majority white schools. Today our schools are nearly as segregated as in 1954.

**Prisons.** U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics: 34% of inmates are Black. Sentences are longer for the same crimes. U.S. is the world leader in incarceration with 1.3 million in state prisons. Welcome to "the land of the free." In twelve states more than half the prison population is Black. Blacks are five times more likely than whites to be in prison.

**Pandemic.** Herd immunity? The President and the Governor advocate herd immunity. They say open the doors to all traffic and interaction in the economy and in society. The ones who are fit will make it, and the ones who need to be protected will be protected by those who care about or are responsible for them. The survival of the fittest.

There was a time when this position was called Social Darwinism. It was thought to be a backward ideology that for the most part disappeared after the nineteenth century.

What are the consequences of the doctrine of herd immunity for the health of African Americans today? The unchecked spread of the virus has severe consequences. If they are living in public housing projects, then several people are likely to be living in two or three rooms. They cannot easily separate themselves from someone with the virus. If it is a high-rise building, then elevators become incubators for transmission of covid-19. No matter where one is, contracting the virus is much worse than what typically happens to whites. Moreover, for Blacks, preexisting conditions are a predictable outcome of inadequate health care throughout life, when income is so far below the average for whites. The die-off for whites will be much less severe than the die-off for Blacks.

Is herd immunity just one reasonable belief, among others, about what to do in a pandemic? Or, is it a right-wing political ideology with genocidal implications? Is herd immunity the perfect 21<sup>st</sup> century ideology for someone whose racial views are still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

The Governor has ordered all faculty and students at UF to return to classes as if there were not a virus to think about. The UF President dutifully obeys, allowing only those with a documented disability to receive an "accommodation."

In 2019, the historian Ibram X. Kendi, publishes *How to Be an Antiracist*. He suggests a way of moving toward racial justice. "Kendi asks us to think about what an antiracist society might look like, and how we can play an active role in building it." It is not about assessing what is in the heart of someone who is a racist and asking how one can change to be a non-racist. The opposite of a racist is an antiracist, someone who wants to "reexamine every policy and social arrangement" and make the change toward antiracism in practice.

Have we reached a turning point, after witnessing as a nation the evidence of the police murder of George Floyd? Are we ready to make the change? The demonstrations across the nation are a sign of the times for a change. Surveys keep indicating that two thirds of the nation identify with the BLM movement. The time is now.