



Discrimination
in Society

Racial Discrimination

Peggy J. Parks

A background illustration of a diverse crowd of people walking. The people are depicted in various styles, some in modern casual wear, others in traditional or religious attire like hijabs and a niqab. Some are carrying shopping bags, others are using a cane or a wheelchair. The overall scene suggests a busy, multicultural public space.

CONTENTS

Introduction 4

Perspectives on Racial Discrimination

Chapter One 9

The Years-Long Struggle for Equality

Chapter Two 21

Law Enforcement

Chapter Three 33

Housing Discrimination

Chapter Four 44

Employment and Education

Chapter Five 56

Efforts to End Racial Discrimination

Source Notes 69

Organizations and Websites 74

For Further Research 76

Index 78

The background of the entire page is a teal-colored illustration of a large, diverse crowd of people walking in various directions. The figures are stylized and colorful, representing a wide range of ages, ethnicities, and abilities.

INTRODUCTION

Perspectives on Racial Discrimination

Something was very wrong in Flint, Michigan, during the spring of 2014. In an effort to save money, the city, which is about 60 percent African American, had changed its water source in late April. Residents started having problems almost immediately. The water coming out of their faucets was a reddish-brown color and foul smelling, and it tasted as bad as it smelled. Children and adults developed painful rashes on their skin, and many were also losing their hair. Some children developed more severe health issues, such as memory loss, dizziness, headaches, and convulsions. The residents of Flint were convinced that the water was causing these health problems.

A City in Crisis

Lee Anne Walters was one of many Flint residents who feared for her family's health. Her three-year-old twins broke out in rashes, and her teenage daughter panicked when clumps of hair fell out in the shower. Walters's teenage son developed headaches and abdominal pain, as well as a severe skin rash that burned when he took a bath or shower, causing him to cry out in pain.

Walters bought a testing kit to test her home's water. She was shocked to find that it contained alarmingly high levels of lead, which can cause profound, permanent health damage,

especially to the brain and nervous system. She took her children to have blood tests and the results confirmed her worst fears. All four had been exposed to lead, and one of the twins had lead poisoning. She reported these issues to city officials more than once, but no one ever responded. The same was true for other Flint residents, whose pleas for help were ignored for more than a year. They showed up at city council meetings and were brushed off, even accused of lying about the water samples they brought with them.

In 2015 researchers from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University went to Flint and tested the water at dozens of homes. They found concentrations of lead that were hundreds of times higher than limits set by federal law. “The levels that we have seen in Flint are some of the worst that I have seen in more than 25 years working in the field,”¹ says researcher Marc Edwards. Subsequent research by a Flint pediatrician found dangerous lead levels in the bloodstreams of many Flint children.

“The levels [of lead] that we have seen in Flint are some of the worst that I have seen in more than 25 years working in the field.”¹

— Marc Edwards, a researcher from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

How Could This Happen?

As news of the Flint water crisis spread, charges of discrimination were leveled at city officials and others who had made the decision to switch water sources and then ignored the concerns of residents. To address these claims, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission conducted an investigation and held public hearings. In February 2017 the commission released a scathing report, in which members declared that racial discrimination was absolutely at the root of the crisis in Flint. The report states, “The commission believes that we have answered our initial question, ‘Was race a factor in the Flint Water Crisis?’ Our answer is an unreserved and undeniable—‘yes.’”²

A separate investigation that examined the city’s new water source revealed aging and corroded pipes that had allowed

lead to leach into the water supply. This problem, the Civil Rights Commission argues, would never have occurred in Michigan's wealthier white communities. "Would the Flint water crisis have been allowed to happen in Birmingham, Ann Arbor or East Grand Rapids?" the commission asks. "We believe the answer is no, and that the vestiges of segregation and discrimination found in Flint made it a unique target."³

Just One Example

Although the specific circumstances of the Flint water crisis were unique, how people in the largely black, low-income community were treated was not. At least, that is the perspective of many

African Americans, civil rights groups, and other concerned individuals, who believe that what occurred in Flint was not an isolated incident. Rather, they view the Flint crisis as a microcosm of what is happening throughout the United States.

According to Anthony DiMaggio, assistant professor of political science at Lehigh University, there is a "mountain of statistical data showing American institutions treat citizens very differently based on race."⁴

DiMaggio and other like-minded individuals believe this widespread racial discrimination is evident in numerous ways, from racial profiling and police brutality to being called racially offensive names at work or at school.

"We believe . . . that the vestiges of segregation and discrimination found in Flint made it a unique target."³

—Michigan Civil Rights Commission, which investigates the state's discrimination complaints

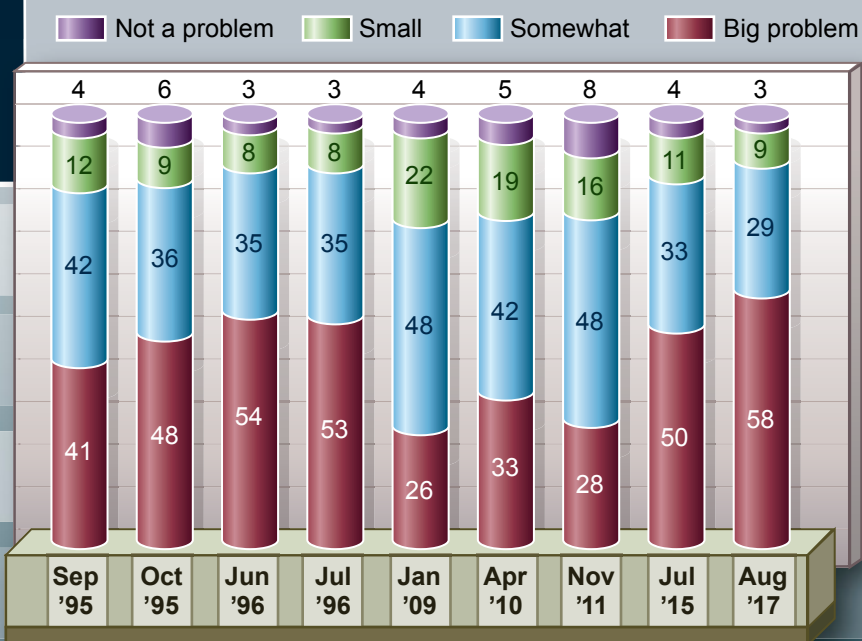
Different Viewpoints

Yet not everyone shares that view about racial discrimination. Although increasing numbers of Americans see racism as a major problem, they also have widely differing perceptions of how serious a problem it is. Surveys have shown that those perceptions differ significantly by race. In a February 2017 Public Religion Re-

More Americans Today See Racism as a Big Problem

The number of Americans who consider racism to be a big problem is growing. The percentage of Americans who feel this way rose 8 percent between 2015 and 2017 and more than doubled since 2011, according to a 2017 Pew Research Center article based on surveys conducted from 1995 to 2017.

How big a problem is racism in our society today? (%)



Source: Samantha Neal, "Views of Racism as a Major Problem Increase Sharply, Especially Among Democrats," Pew Research Center, August 29, 2017. www.pewresearch.org.

search Institute poll, for example, 87 percent of black respondents said that black people face a lot of discrimination in the United States. In contrast, only 49 percent of whites share that view about discrimination.

The institute's report closely parallels other surveys that have also found wide disparities in how people of different races view racial discrimination. One example is an August 2017 poll by the Pew Research Center, in which respondents were asked how big a problem racism is in American society today.



Police in San Francisco talk with a young black man. Surveys have shown that when people of color have experienced racial profiling, a natural reaction is to distrust the police.

31 percent said they had avoided calling the police even when in need because they feared they would be discriminated against. Similarly, 27 percent of African Americans said they had avoided certain activities, such as driving a car or participating in social or political events, in order to avoid potentially interacting with police. “African-Americans do not have a high level of trust in the police,” says Elizabeth Hinton, assistant professor of history and of African and African American studies at Harvard University. “More than a

quarter avoid doing ordinary activities due to fear of coming into contact with them.”³⁰

Excessive Force

In communities where racial profiling is a serious problem, people of color often report being treated roughly by police. In fact, research has shown that nonwhite citizens (particularly blacks) are more likely to be subjected to violent treatment by police than white citizens. “Black suspects are more likely to be pushed against a wall, handcuffed without being arrested, pushed to the ground, pepper sprayed, touched by hand, or had a weapon drawn on them,”³¹ says Anthony DiMaggio, assistant professor of political science at Lehigh University.

In its report on Ferguson, the DOJ notes that police have used a disproportionate amount of force against black people compared with white people. Nearly 90 percent of documented force used by the city’s police officers was found to be against African Americans. This included using police dogs to bite people, including children, in situations where such excessive force was uncalled for. And in every police dog biting incident for which racial information was reported, the person bitten was black. The DOJ states that the Ferguson Police Department’s “use of dog bites only against African-American subjects is evidence of discriminatory policing in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment and other federal laws.”³²

Police departments in numerous US cities have been criticized and investigated for using excessive force against black citizens. One of these is in Chicago, Illinois. Based on an investigation of law enforcement data, the DOJ concluded that Chicago police officers used force nearly ten times more often with black suspects than with white suspects. From 2011 to 2016 African Americans in Chicago were the target of 80 percent of police firearm uses

“African-Americans do not have a high level of trust in the police.”³⁰

—Elizabeth Hinton, assistant professor of history and of African and African American studies at Harvard University

Résumé Whitening

Job hunting can be stressful for anyone. People searching for jobs face tough competition and an economy in which high-paying positions are in short supply. Nonwhite job applicants face these barriers along with another that is especially daunting: racial discrimination. Studies have shown that compared with white applicants, people of color get far fewer interviews—even if their qualifications are the same or better. Researchers who study this issue say people are being screened out based on racial clues found on their résumés, which is illegal. With that in mind, minority job hunters have begun “whitening” their résumés by deleting references to their race.

Asian Americans, for instance, have Americanized names on their résumés, such as replacing Lei with Luke. African Americans have omitted mentions of race by not including black organizations to which they belong or purposely listed outdoor hobbies that are popular among whites, such as kayaking or hiking. These tactics have proved to be effective. According to a 2016 study, 25 percent of black job candidates received callbacks after whitening their résumés, compared with 10 percent who left their ethnic details intact. Of Asian Americans, 21 percent were called for interviews if they whitened their résumés, compared with 11.5 percent whose résumés contained racial clues. Many minority job hunters have put this technique to use, but not everyone is willing to do that. “I wouldn’t consider whitening my résumé,” said one college student, “because if they don’t accept my racial identity, I don’t see how I would fit in that job.”

Quoted in Dina Gerdeman, “Minorities Who ‘Whiten’ Resumes Get More Job Interviews,” *Forbes*, May 17, 2017. www.forbes.com.

observed that nonblack employees were rarely asked for their IDs. She often heard people telling racist jokes and was left out of social events and even group e-mails. Being treated differently because of her race was terribly upsetting and started to affect her mental health. “There were times I cried at my desk,” she says. Finally, after working at Google for two years, she quit her job. “I was invisible,” she says. “It was like I didn’t matter. So what was the point of being there?”⁶²

SOURCE NOTES

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3. Demashkieh et al., *The Flint Water Crisis*.
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5. Ryan Struyk, “Blacks and Whites See Racism in the United States Very, Very Differently,” CNN Politics, August 18, 2017. www.cnn.com.

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11. David Pilgrim, “What Was Jim Crow?,” Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 2012. <https://ferris.edu>.
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ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

125 Broad St., 18th Floor
New York, NY 10004
website: www.aclu.org

The ACLU works with courts, legislatures, and communities to defend and preserve the rights and liberties that are guaranteed for all Americans under the US Constitution. Its website offers a number of articles, reports, and opinion pieces about racial discrimination.

Anti-Defamation League

823 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017
website: www.adl.org

The Anti-Defamation League fights anti-Semitism and all forms of bigotry, defends democratic ideals, and protects civil rights for all. Its website offers a resource library with a wealth of articles and other publications about racial discrimination.

Century Foundation

One Whitehall St., 15th Floor
New York, NY 10004
website: <https://tcf.org>

The Century Foundation seeks to encourage opportunity, reduce inequality, and promote security at home and abroad. Its website's search engine produces numerous articles about racial discrimination and related issues.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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INDEX

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

affirmative action, 53–55, 66

African Americans

civil rights movement, 18–20

current degree of racism, 7, 8, **11**

effects of racial profiling, 29–32, **30**

extent of racial profiling, 25, 26, 29

Great Migration, 14–15

percentage of Flint, Michigan, population, 4

percentage reporting employment

discrimination, 45, 46

public opinion on effective tactics to achieve equality, **61**

résumé whitening by, 50

unemployment among, 44

See also specific individuals

Airbnb, 65–66

Anderson, Michael, 25

Angwin, Julia, 42

Arradondo, Medaria, 63–64, **64**

Asian Americans

Airbnb's discriminatory practices and, 65–66

current degree of racism, 8

percentage reporting discrimination in employment, 46

résumé whitening by, 50

Bank of Green Bay (Wisconsin), 42

Bass Pro Outdoor World, 47–48, **49**

Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 33

Birmingham, Alabama, 13

blockbusters, 36

Blow, Charles M., 67

Brelo, Michael, 26, **27**

Bridges, Ruby Nell, 13

Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, 47

Browder v. Gayle (1956), 18

Brown, Michael, 27–29

Brown v. Board of Education (1954), 17

Buehler, James W., 22

bullying, 9–10

Burke, Terri, 24

Burks, Charles, 13

Charleston, West Virginia, 61–62

Charlotte, North Carolina, 56–59

Chicago, Illinois, 31–32, 38

Civil Rights Act (1964), 20, 39, 45

civil rights movement, 18–20

Cleveland, Ohio, 26–27, **27**

Coleman, Baron, 64

Copeland-Morgan, Youlonda, 66

Cops and Barbers program, 56–59

Corbett, Shaun, 56–59

covenants, restrictive, 34–35

cyberbullying, 10

Dance, Rob, 56–59

Detroit, Michigan, 40, 63

DiMaggio, Anthony, 6, 31

dogs, used by law enforcement, 31

Douaihi, Gustavo, 33

Douglas-Gabriel, Danielle, 34

educational discrimination

affirmative action and, 53, 55, 66

Bridges and, 13

reported by African Americans, **11**

segregation in South, 16–17

Edwards, Jordan, 22–24

Edwards, Marc, 5

Edwards, Vidal, 22–23

employment discrimination

affirmative action and, 53–55

harassment on the job, 48–50

in hiring

EEOC suit against Bass Pro Outdoor

World, 47–48, **49**

prevalence of, 44–45, 46

résumé whitening and, 50

Jim Crow laws and, 13

Kennedy and, 51–52

reported by African Americans, **11**

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

definition of harassment, 48

forerunner of, 52

lawsuit against Bass Pro Outdoor World, 47–48, **49**

responsibilities of, 45

Facebook and housing discrimination, 42–43

Fair Housing Act (1968)

effects, 39–40, 43

passage, 38–39, 43

provisions, 33–34

Ferguson, Missouri, 27–29, 31

Fisher, Abigail, 55

Flint, Michigan, 4–6

Fordham Law Review, 36

Fourteenth Amendment, 12

Fourth Amendment, 28

Glenn, John, 53

Google, 48–50

Great Migration, 14

Green Bay, Wisconsin, 42

Greensboro, North Carolina, 16