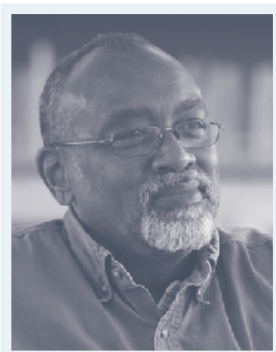


# Why Does Racial Inequality Persist?

## Culture, Causation, and Responsibility



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### Racial Inequality: A Conceptual Framework

Over the last 40 years, I've explored why, notwithstanding the success of the civil rights movement, the subordinate status of African-Americans persists. Key to my thinking about this intractable problem has been the need to distinguish the role played by discrimination against black people from that played by counterproductive behavioral patterns among blacks.

This puts what is a very sensitive issue rather starkly. Many vocal advocates for racial equality have been loath to consider the possibility that problematic patterns of behavior could be an important factor contributing to our persisting disadvantaged status. Some observers on the right of American politics, meanwhile, take the position that discrimination against blacks is no longer an important determinant of unequal social outcomes. I have long tried to chart a middle course—acknowledging antiblack biases that should be remedied while insisting on addressing and reversing the patterns of behavior that impede black people from seizing newly opened opportunities to prosper. I still see this as the most sensible position.

These two positions can be recast as causal narratives. One is what I call the “bias narrative”: racism and white supremacy have done us wrong; we can't get ahead until they relent; so we must continue urging the reform of white American society toward that end.

The other is what I call the “development narrative,” according to which it is essential to consider how a person comes to acquire those skills, traits, habits, and orientations that foster successful participation in American society. To the extent that

African-American youngsters do not have the experiences, are not exposed to the influences, and do not benefit from the resources that foster and facilitate their human development, they fail to achieve their full human potential. This lack of development is what ultimately causes the persistent, stark racial disparities in income, wealth, education, family structure, and much else. (The charts and tables on this and the next several pages offer a glimpse of the magnitude of these disparities.)

In terms of prescribing intervention and remedy, these causal narratives point in very different directions. The bias narrative says that we need to have a “conversation” about race: white America must reform itself; racism must end; we need more of this or that, whatever the “this” or “that” is on the agenda of today’s race reformers. One hears this kind of talk, one reads these exhortations, in newspapers and other media every day.

The development narrative puts more onus on the responsibilities of African-Americans to develop our human potential. It is not satisfied with wishful thinking like: “If we could only double the budget for some social program, the homicide rate among young African-American men would be less atrocious.” Or, “If we can just get this police department investigated by the Department of Justice, then....” The development narrative asks, *Then what?* Then it will be safe to walk on the south side of Chicago after midnight?

Meanwhile, the terms themselves—race and discrimination—are often bandied about without being

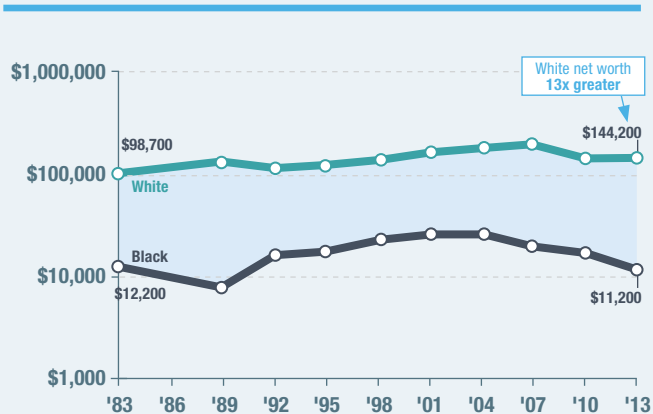
rigorously defined. In a 2002 book, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, I sketched a theory of race applicable to the social and historical circumstances of the U.S., speculated about why racial inequalities persist, and advanced a conceptual framework for thinking about social justice in matters of race.<sup>1</sup> Because there remains so much confusion in today’s public discussions about race and racial inequality, I need to revisit that framework. Bear with me. The relevance of this conceptual excursion will be clear soon enough.

## Categorization Versus Signification

For me, the term “race” refers to indelible and heritable marks on human bodies—skin color, hair texture, bone structure—that are of no intrinsic significance but that nevertheless have, through time, come to be invested with social expectations that are more or less reasonable and social meanings that are more or less durable. When we talk about race in America or anywhere else, we are actually dealing with two distinct processes: categorization and signification. Categorization entails sorting people into a small number of subsets based on bodily marks and differentiating one’s dealings with such persons accordingly. It is a cognitive act—an effort to comprehend the social world around us.

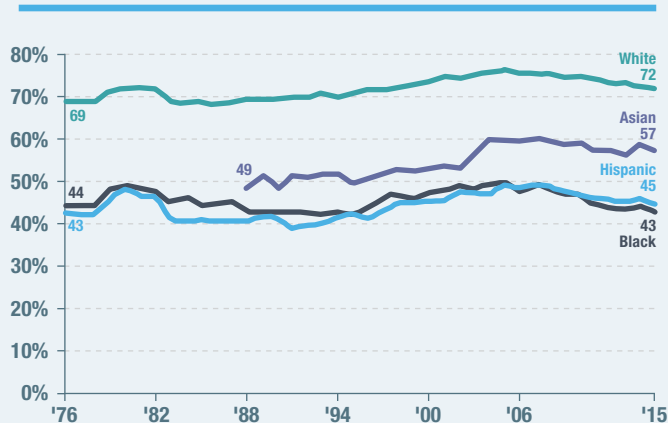
Signification is an interpretative act—one that associates certain connotations or “social meanings”

### Median Net Worth of U.S. Households in 2014 Dollars



Source: Pew Research Center, Social & Demographic Trends, “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being,” June 27, 2016

### Percentage of Householders Owning a Home



Source: Pew Research Center, “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being”

with those categories. Informational and symbolic issues are both at play. Or, as I like to put it, when we speak about race, we are really talking about “embodied social signification.”<sup>2</sup>

It is instructive to contrast a social-cognitive conception of race with acts of biological taxonomy—sorting humans based on presumed variations of genetic endowments across what had for eons been geographically isolated subpopulations. Such isolation was, until recently, the human condition, and it may be thought to have led to the emergence of distinct races. Nevertheless, using the term “race” in this way is controversial, particularly if the aim is to explain social inequalities between groups.

Thus, scientists, such as the population geneticist Luigi Cavalli-Sforza,<sup>3</sup> and social critics, such as the philosopher Anthony Appiah,<sup>4</sup> deny that “race” refers to anything real. What they have in mind is the biological-taxonomic notion, and what they deny is that meaningful distinctions among human subgroups pertinent to accounting for racial inequality can be derived from this notion. I am not arguing this point—though it would appear to be eminently arguable. What I am emphasizing is that to establish the scientific invalidity of race demonstrates neither the irrationality nor the immorality of invoking racial classification as acts of social cognition. So I shall employ the concept of race here, with an em-

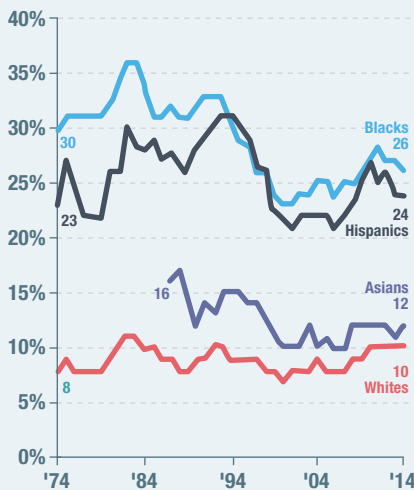
phasis on the negative interpretative/symbolic connotations attached to “blackness” in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

## Reward Bias Versus Development Bias

Given this theoretical understanding of race, what might one say about the causes of persistent racial inequality? Fundamental is the elemental distinction I first drew in 2002 between racial discrimination and racial stigma. Discrimination is about how blacks are treated; stigma is about how blacks are perceived.

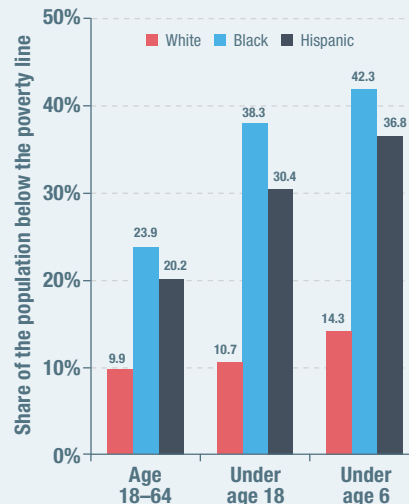
What I call “reward bias” (conventional racial discrimination) is now a less significant barrier to the full participation of African-Americans in U.S. society than what I call “development bias.” Reward bias focuses on the disadvantageous treatment of black people in formal transactions that limits their rewards for skills and talents presented to the market. Development bias refers to impediments that block access for black people to those resources necessary to develop and refine their talents but that are conveyed via informal social relations. This is where the consideration of culture enters the picture.

### Poverty Rates, 1974–2014



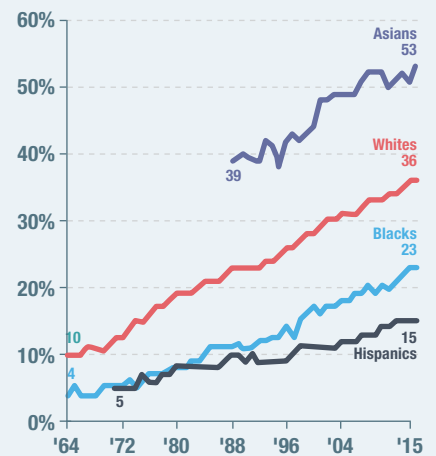
Source: Pew Research Center, “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being”

### Poverty Rates, by Race, Ethnicity, and Age, 2013



Source: Economic Policy Institute, *The State of Working America*

### Adults Aged 25 and Older Who Have at Least a Bachelor’s Degree



Source: Pew Research Center, “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being”

Reward bias is grounded in racially discriminatory *transactions*, but development bias is ultimately rooted in racially stigmatized *social relations*. Many resources that foster human development only become available to persons as the by-product of informal, race-influenced social interactions. Another way to put this expanded view of discrimination: reward bias reflects discrimination in contract while development bias reflects discrimination in contact.

Obviously, these two forms of bias are not mutually exclusive. The acquisition of skills can be blocked by overt discriminatory treatment, and a regime of market discrimination under pressure from the forces of economic competition may require informal instruments of social control to maintain that discriminatory regime.<sup>6</sup> Though both kinds of bias promote racial inequality, the distinction is useful.

The moral problem presented by reward bias is straightforward and calls for an uncontroversial remedy: laws against overt racial discrimination. Development bias presents a subtler and more insidious ethical challenge that may be difficult to remedy via public policies in any way that garners majoritarian support. Ultimately, development bias deals with some cultural patterns that are characteristic of both a racial minority group and the society at large, while reward bias deals with overt antiblack discriminatory treatment that, even though it has not been fully eliminated, is nevertheless nearly universally condemned.

The difficulties for remedying development bias have a cognitive and an ethical dimension. In terms of cognition, when confronted with a racial group's

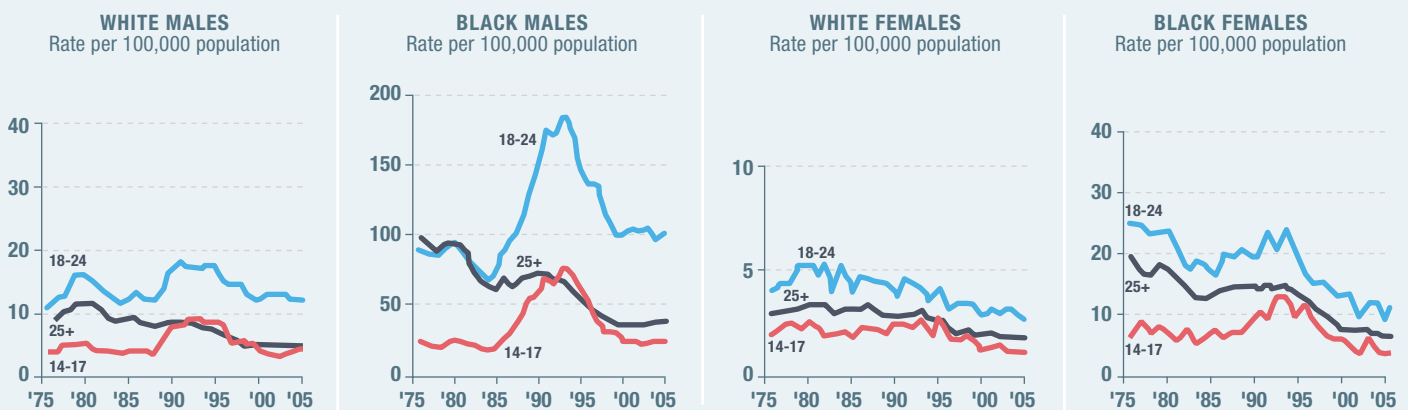
poor social performance, an observer may be unable to distinguish between blocked developmental opportunities and limited capacities or distorted values. In ethical terms, citizens who find the “transactional discrimination” associated with reward bias to be noxious may be less offended by the covert, subconscious “relational discrimination” that underlies development bias.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the distinction between reward bias and development bias: to understand persistent racial inequality in America, it is crucial to put relations before transactions. The focus on discriminatory economic transactions may not be sufficient; one will need also to consider the consequences of racially stigmatized social relations. Stigma—the distorted social meanings attaching to “blackness”—inhibits the access that some black people have to those networks of social affiliation where developmental resources are most readily appropriated. This might happen because black people are socially excluded; it might also happen because we choose to be socially withdrawn.

On this view, persistent inequality may no longer be due mainly to a racially discriminatory marketplace, or an administrative state that refuses to reward black talent equally, as was the case in decades past. Rather, today's problem may be due, in large part, to a race-tinged psychology of perception and valuation—a way of seeing black people, and a way of black people seeing themselves, that impedes the acquisition of traits that are valued in the marketplace and are essential for human development.

This can lead to a vicious circle. The status of a racial

## Homicide Victimization by Age, Gender, and Race, 1976–2005



Source: James Alan Fox and Marianne W. Zawitz, “Homicide Trends in the United States,” Bureau of Justice Statistics

group as stigmatized in the social imagination—and crucially, in its own self-understanding—can be rationalized and socially reproduced because of that group’s subordinate position in the economic order. Moreover, this way of thinking implies that the explanatory categories of “racial discrimination” and “racially distinct behaviors” are not mutually exclusive.

## Social Capital Versus Human Capital

A quarter-century before the publication of *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, I coined the term “social capital” to help account for persistent racial inequality in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> The concept behind social capital illuminates the difference between informal social relations and formal economic transactions—between reward and development bias—as mechanisms perpetuating the subordinate position of African-Americans.

As an economist, I sought to differentiate social capital with the more familiar term in my own field: “human capital.” Human-capital theory attempts to account for variation in people’s earnings capacities by analogy with well-developed theories of investment. These theories begin with the assumption of competitive markets and rational choice by forward-looking individuals, and then analyze investment decisions in light of individuals’ time preferences, their anticipated rates of return, and the available alternatives for uses of their time. Human-capital theory imports into the study of human

inequality an intellectual framework that had been well developed in economics to explain the investment decisions of firms—a framework that focuses on the analysis of formal economic transactions.

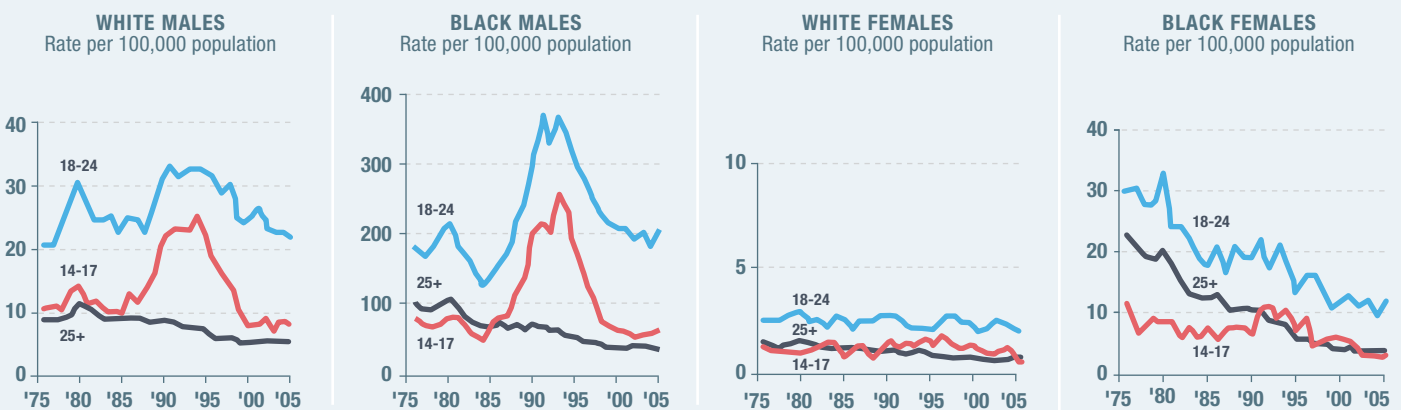
I argued that associating business with human investments is merely an analogy, not an identity—particularly if one seeks to explain persistent racial disparities. Human capital, as an economic concept, overlooks two important facts having to do with informal social relations.

*First, all human development is socially situated and mediated.* Human development takes place between people, by way of human interactions, within social institutions—the family, the community, the school, the peer group. Many resources essential to human development, such as the attention that parents give to their children, are not alienable. These resources, for the most part, are not commodities and are not up for sale. Instead, structured connections between individuals create the context within which developmental resources come to be allocated to individual persons. Opportunity travels along the synapses of these social networks.

The resulting allocation of developmental resources need not be responsive to prices or be economically efficient. The development of human beings is not the same as corporate investment, and it is not a good metaphor, or a good analogy, to reason as though this were so.

Human development begins before birth. The decisions a mother makes—about how closely to attend to her health and nutrition during pregnancy, for

## Homicide Offending by Age, Gender, and Race, 1976–2005



Source: Fox and Zawitz, “Homicide Trends in the United States”

instance—will alter the neurological development of her fetus. This, and a myriad of other decisions and actions, all come together to shape the experience of the infant, who will mature one day to become a human being, and about whom it will be said that he or she has this or that much productivity, as reflected in his or her wages or academic test scores.

This productivity, the behavioral and cognitive capacities bearing on a person’s social and economic functioning, are not merely the result of a mechanical infusion of material resources. Rather, these are by-products of social processes mediated by networks of human affiliation, and these processes are fundamentally important for understanding persistent racial disparities.

*Second, what we call “race” is mainly a social, and only indirectly a biological, phenomenon.* The persistence across generations of racial differentiation between large groups of people, in an open society where individuals live in proximity to one another, provides irrefutable indirect evidence of a profound separation between the racially defined networks of social affiliation within that society. There would be no races in the steady state of any dynamic social system unless, on a daily basis and with regard to their most intimate affairs, people paid assiduous attention to the boundaries separating themselves from racially distinct others. Over time, race would cease to exist unless people chose to act in a manner

so as biologically to reproduce the variety of phenotypic expression that constitutes the substance of racial distinction.

If the goal is to understand durable racial inequality in a society, one needs to attend in detail to the processes that cause race to persist as a fact of life, because such processes will be related to the allocation of human developmental resources in that society.

Race, as a feature of a society, rests upon the *cultural* conceptions about identity held by the people—in America, principally blacks and whites alike—in that society. These are the beliefs that people hold about who they are and about the legitimacy of conducting intimate relations (and not only sexual relations) with racially distinct others. Beliefs of this kind affect the access that people enjoy to those informal resources that individuals require to develop their human potential. Social capital is a critical prerequisite for creating what economists refer to as human capital.

Any conceptual framework for the study of persistent racial inequality is incomplete if it fails to consider the interactions between those social processes ensuring the reproduction of racial difference, on one hand, and those processes facilitating human development, on the other hand. If we consider these interactions, it becomes easier to see the many intimate connections between the antiblack

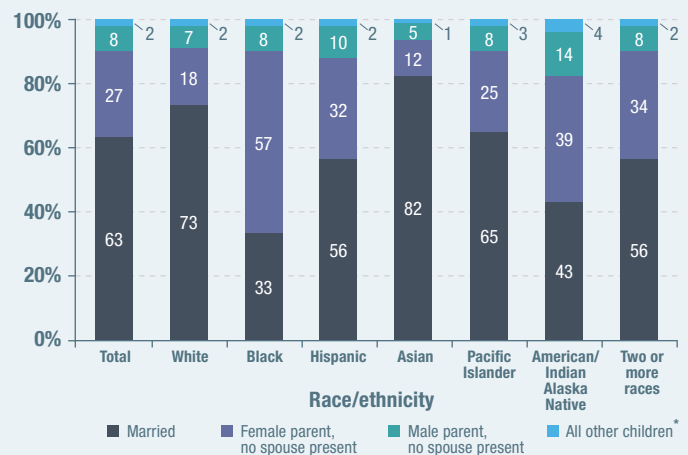
### Men’s Percentage Risk of Imprisonment, Ages 30–34, by Race and Educational Attainment\*

	All	High School Dropouts	High School/ GED	College
<b>1945–1949 cohort</b>				
White	1.4	3.8	1.5	0.4
Black	10.4	14.7	11.0	5.3
Latino	2.8	4.1	2.9	1.1
<b>1975–1979 cohort</b>				
White	5.4	28.0	6.2	1.2
Black	26.8	68.0	21.4	6.6
Latino	12.2	19.6	9.2	3.4

\*Cumulative risk of imprisonment, ages 30–34, men born 1945–49 and 1975–79, by educational attainment and race/ethnicity

Source: Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, “Incarceration and Social Inequality,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 139, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 8–19

### Household Living Arrangements of Children by Race



Source: Lauren Musu-Gillette et al., “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017,” U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), July 2017

\*Includes foster children, children in unrelated subfamilies, children living in group quarters, and children who were reported as the house holder or spouse of the householder.

“racial bias” that liberals emphasize and the “behavioral pathology” of (some) blacks that (some) conservatives are so keen to focus on.

## Nobody Is Coming to Save Us

I know how difficult it can be to see those connections—it has taken me many years to recognize them. My doctoral dissertation included an essay that was very close to the liberal, “racial bias” narrative. History, I wrote, casts a long shadow. Contemporary racial inequality in America reflects a history of deprivation, discrimination, and dispossession of black people. We can’t expect this problem to cure itself. Thus, social justice rightly understood would involve some kind of reparation. I didn’t use that word, but I did advocate for some intervention by the state on behalf of the explicit goal of racial equality. Otherwise, I reasoned, we would be stuck indefinitely with the consequences of an unjust past.<sup>9</sup>

That was Glenn Loury circa 1976. By 1985, I had become a Reagan Republican, emphasizing the problems of single-parent families, out-of-wedlock births among blacks, low labor-force participation and educational performance, and high criminal and victimization rates. My favored formulation: there is an enemy without—namely, racism; but there is also an enemy within—namely, behavior patterns inhibiting African-Americans from seizing such op-

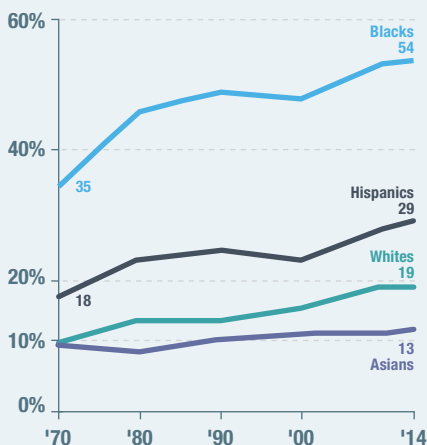
portunities as had come to exist. I stressed to other blacks that if we were ever to achieve equality within American society, we could not simply rely on the antidiscrimination laws and affirmative action; we would also have to address some of these internal behavioral patterns. I still believe this to be the case.

By pointing to the “enemy within,” I did not deny that the ultimate source of such adverse internal patterns might be historical discrimination. (Although as a social scientist, I recognized that this kind of causal inference question is nearly impossible to resolve convincingly by looking at data.) But it did not matter so much what the ultimate sources of internal behavioral patterns were; what mattered was how they were to be reversed.

The majority of African-American children are born to a woman without a husband. It is extremely implausible to imagine how this would be reversed by government policies such as the redistribution of resources. (I am aware of no evidence to this effect.) If this trend is to be reversed at all, it would require a determined effort by African-Americans to think differently about our responsibilities to our children and to one another.

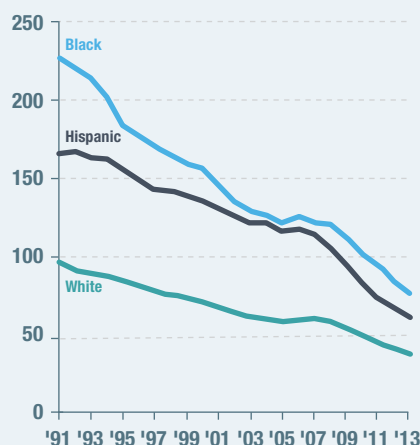
And so I would say to fellow African-Americans: No one is coming to save us! The situation in which we find ourselves is unfair, but this is not a question of justice. Nobody is coming, and, more fundamentally, no one *can* come into the most

### Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women



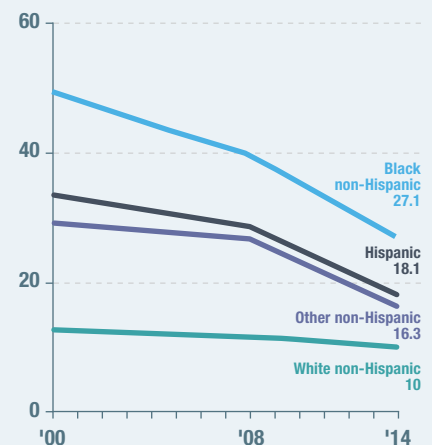
Source: Pew Research Center, “Demographic Trends and Economic Well-Being”

### Pregnancies per 1,000 Women Aged 15–19



Source: “U.S. Rates of Pregnancy, Birth and Abortion Among Adolescents and Young Adults Continue to Decline,” Guttmacher Institute, Sept. 17, 2017

### Abortions per 1,000 Women Aged 15–44



Source: “Abortion Rates by Race and Ethnicity,” Guttmacher Institute, Oct. 19, 2017

intimate relations between our women and men, into the families and neighborhoods where our children are being raised, so as to reorder those cultural institutions in a manner that would be more developmentally constructive.

These matters are ultimately and necessarily in the hands of African-Americans alone. They require facing up to such questions as: Who are we as a people? How should we live with one another? What will we do to honor the sacrifices that our ancestors made to leave us the opportunities we now enjoy? What do we owe our children?

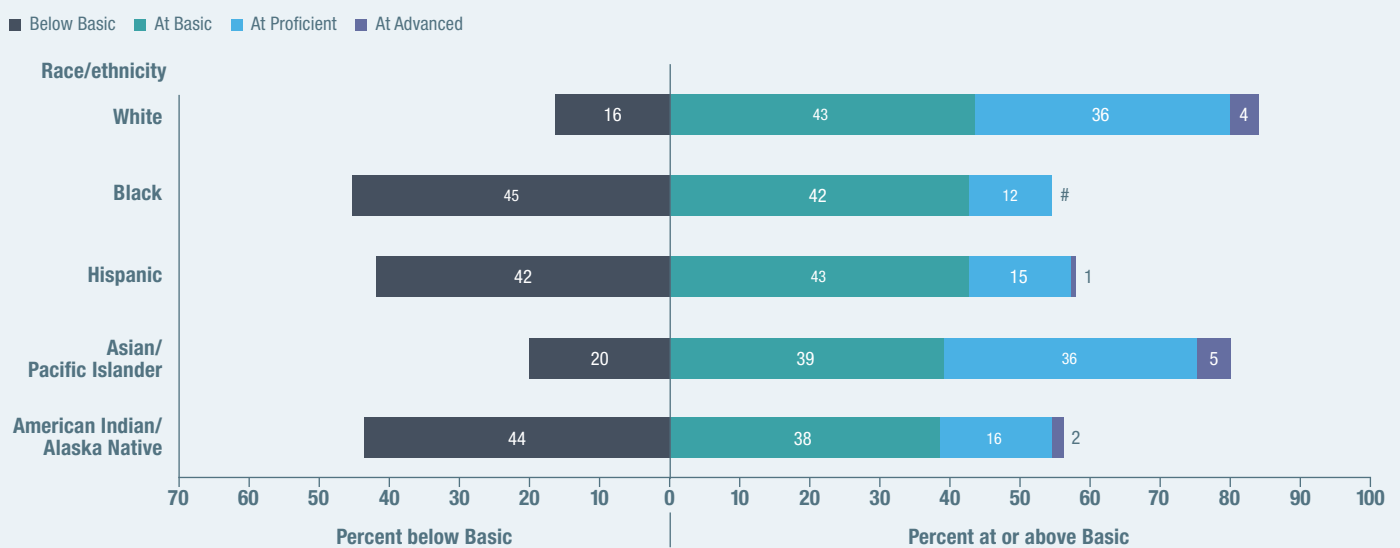
Think about black-on-black crime. Unemployment rates, wealth holdings, residential segregation, and biased policing all may be playing some role in this problem. But young black men are killing one another at extraordinary rates. Notwithstanding the potential beneficial effects of various social policies, no one is coming to save black people from that pathology. If we are not prepared to condemn this contemptible behavior and to cooperate with institutions of civil authority that are legitimately addressing it—if we are unable to recognize that this is a tragic failure with the way that black people are living—we will likely be facing exactly the same issues for many years to come.

## “Bias Narratives” Can Take on (Viral) Lives of Their Own

Today, as social-justice warriors take to the streets to protest against racism, it is important to recognize the role played by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media. Many people get news from online sources that play to the narrative that American society is overwhelmingly populated by white bigots; so incidents that are not at all representative nevertheless become iconic because they go viral. A student finds something resembling a noose near his dorm-room door; a security guard says to someone, “I am unsure whether you belong here. Let me see your ID”; customers are asked to leave a food-service establishment when the manager thinks that their behavior is inconsistent with the establishment’s rules. These incidents become national events. It is not simply that something has happened, or that a lot of people know about something having happened. Rather, what matters is that a lot of people know that many people know of the incidents in question.

Idiosyncratic occurrences then become “driving while black,” “barbecuing while black,” “swimming while black,” “shopping while black,” “walking while black,” and so forth. The narrative of pervasive antiblack racism becomes a trope. When millions of people focus on the same events and reinforce one

### Reading Achievement at the Eighth Grade



# Rounds to zero  
Source: “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups,” NCES, July 2010



another in their comments, declaring one's outrage at such incidents becomes a substitute for reasoning about what larger meaning, if any, should be attached to these events.

I often ask people who tell me about these incidents: Why do we care? Why should I care whether a woman was asked to put out her cigarette when a police officer stopped her for a broken taillight on a dusty road in Texas? Is that supposed to be emblematic of the treatment of black people in this country?

As a social scientist, I am loath to operate based on a few anecdotes. For many who embrace the bias narrative, however, that's what is happening. Incidents that are not representative but that are salient within a bias narrative go viral and shape the consciousness of many. The viral social construction of episodes that are not the substance of our lives comes to shape our politics via exaggerated projections onto the surface of our lives. This is not "politics"—if, by that term, we understand mechanisms of give-and-take and persuasion by means of which we govern ourselves. It is, rather, a certain kind of mass delusion.

A big part of the problem is virtue signaling. Only certain kinds of (immoral) people would refuse to go along with these delusions, and too many of us wish not to be thought of as being one of those people, so we avoid expressing skepticism publicly. To do so—to repeat things being said by those who scoff at the

outrage of the day and are thought to be racists—risks devaluing one's reputation among "progressives."

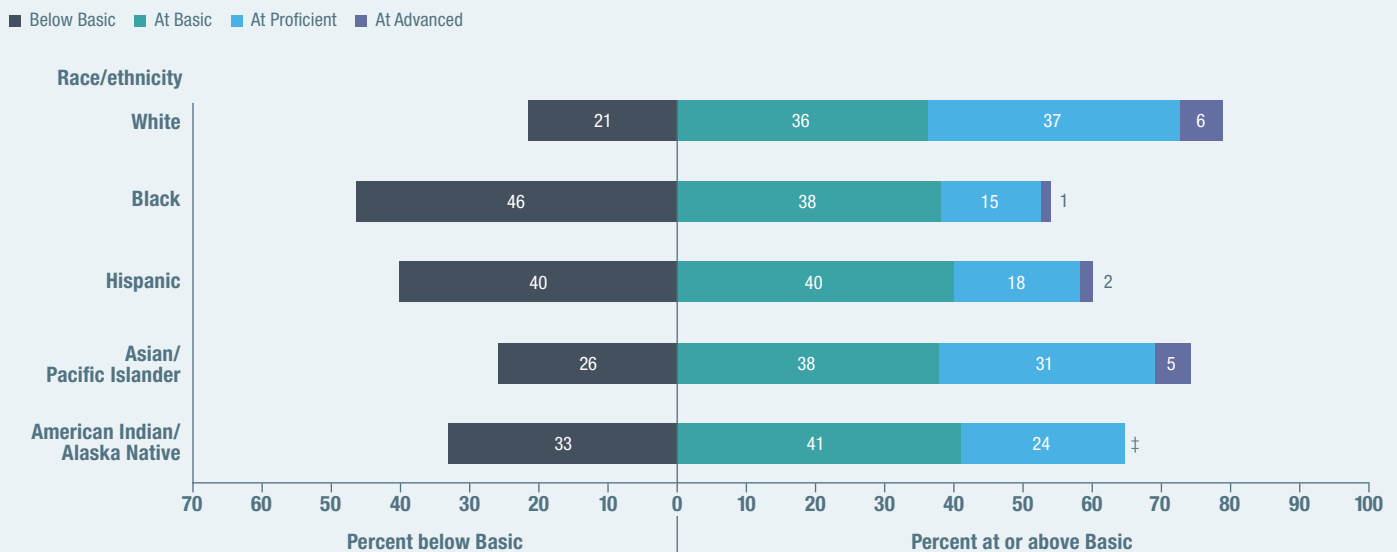
My theory of political correctness: a cognitive and intellectual dead end where too many people are motivated to remain silent on critical questions, to voice empty platitudes, or even to say things that they don't believe, all by their need to avoid appearing as though they're on the wrong side of history.<sup>10</sup>

## Those Who Downplay Behavioral Disparities Are Bluffing

People on the left of American politics who claim that "white supremacy," "implicit bias," and old-fashioned discrimination account for black disadvantage are daring you to disagree. Their implicit rebuke is that, if you do not agree, you are saying that there's something intrinsically wrong with black people, or with black culture; you must be a racist who thinks that blacks are inferior. Otherwise, they say, how else could one explain the disparities? Behavior? That leads to the accusation that you are "blaming the victim."

But this is a bluff. It is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand,

### Reading Achievement at the 12th Grade



† Reporting standards not met  
Source: "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups," NCES, 2010

a debater's trick. Why? Consider a statement that "mass incarceration," the high number of blacks in jails and prisons, is self-evidently a sign of American racism. If you respond that it's mainly a sign of the pathological behavior of criminals who happen to be black, you risk being called a racist. Yet common sense, not to mention the evidence, suggests that people are not being arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced because they are black. Rather, prisons are full of people who have broken the law, who have hurt other people, who have violated the basic rules of civility. Prison is not a conspiracy to confine black people. I maintain that no serious person believes that it is. Not really.

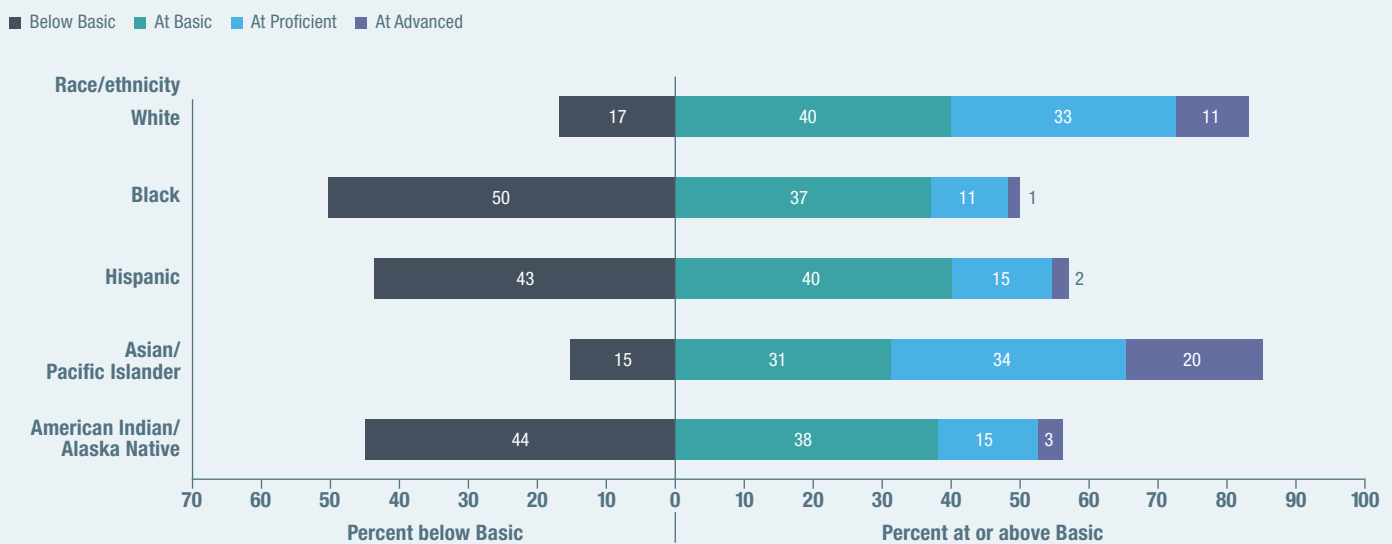
The young black men taking one another's lives on the streets of St. Louis, Baltimore, and Chicago are exhibiting behavioral pathology, plain and simple. The people they kill are mainly black, and the families who live with the misery are mainly black. Ascribing *that* to white racism is laughable. Nobody believes it. Not really.

Consider educational test-score data. Antiracism advocates are, in effect, daring you to say that some groups send their children to the elite universities in outsize numbers compared with other groups because their academic preparation is magnitudes higher and better. Such excellence is an achievement.<sup>11</sup>

One is not born with the knowledge, skills, and academic ability to gain admission into elite colleges. The people who acquire these skills do so through effort. Why do some youngsters acquire the skills while others do not? That is a deep question requiring a serious answer. The simple answer—that this disparity is due to racism, and anyone who says otherwise is a racist—is not serious. Do such disparate outcomes have *nothing* to do with behavior, with cultural patterns, with what peer groups value, with how people spend their time, with what they identify as being critical to their self-respect? Anyone who believes that is, at best, a fool.

Asians are said, sardonically, to be a "model minority." As a matter of fact, quite a compelling case can be made that "culture" is critical to their success. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou interviewed Asian families in Southern California, trying to learn how their kids get into Dartmouth, Columbia, and Cornell at such high rates.<sup>12</sup> They found that these families do exhibit cultural patterns, embrace values, adopt practices, engage in behavior, and follow disciplines that orient them so as to facilitate the achievements of their children. It defies common sense, as well as the evidence, to assert that they do not, or, conversely, to assert that the paucity of African-Americans performing at the very top of the intellectual spectrum—I am talking about academic excellence and about the low relative numbers of blacks who exhibit it—has nothing to do with behavior, that it is due en-

## Mathematics Achievement at the Eighth Grade



Source: "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups," NCES, 2010

tirely to institutional forces. That is an absurdity.

Some 70% of African-American babies are born to a woman without a husband. Is this a good thing? Is it due to the ongoing practice of antiblack racism? Some people say these things. Do they really believe these things, or are they daring you to deny them?

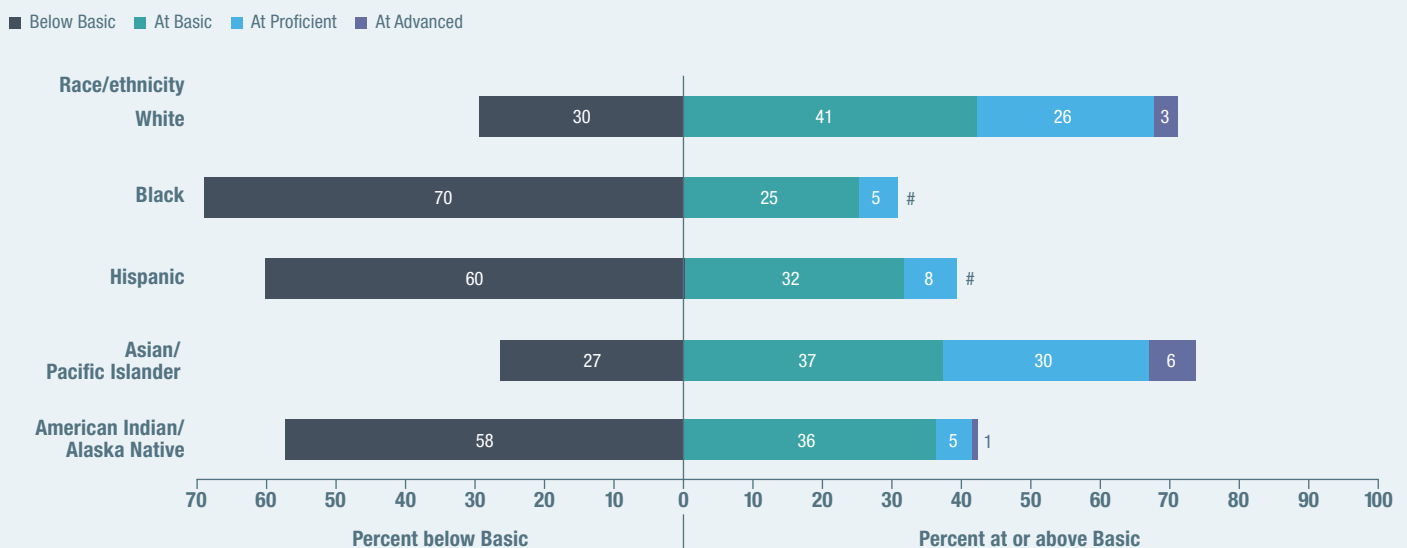
The 21st-century failures of too many African-Americans to take advantage of the opportunities created by the civil rights revolution are palpable, yet they are denied at every turn. This position is untenable. The end of Jim Crow segregation and the advent of equal rights for blacks were game changers. A half-century later, the deep disparities that remain are shameful and are due in large part to the behaviors of black people.

People tout the racial wealth gap as, ipso facto, an indictment of the system—even while black Caribbean and African immigrants are starting businesses, penetrating the professions, and presenting themselves at Ivy League institutions in outsize numbers. They are behaving, although black, like other immigrant groups in our nation’s past. True, they are immigrants, not natives, and immigration can be positively selected. But something is dreadfully wrong when adverse patterns of behavior readily visible in the black American population go without being adequately discussed—to the point that anybody daring to mention them is labeled a racist.

Thus, the Obama administration’s Department of Education issued a “Dear Colleague Letter”<sup>13</sup> that sought to cajole local school districts around the country to narrow the racial disparity in the suspension rates of students for disruptive behavior. The letter was supposedly advice—but failure to narrow the disparity meant that the district could be found guilty of a civil rights violation and potentially lose federal funding. Trump’s secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, rescinded that letter—resulting in a great deal of consternation.

Of course, if teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and school-based police officers are discriminating by race when they discipline students, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice *should* get involved. But based on all that we know—for instance, about crime and incarceration rates—it is at least plausible that there is an objective racial disparity in the frequency of disruptive behavior that occasions a difference in the suspension statistics. If behavior, not racism, is at the bottom of racially disparate suspension rates, think of the disservice being done—to the schoolchildren who act out (by failing to teach the lesson that bad behavior has consequences), to classmates (including, of course, minority students) who are hindered from getting an education by disruptive classroom behavior, and to teachers, who are trying to maintain a safe environment for learning.

## Mathematics Achievement at the 12th Grade



# Rounds to zero  
Source: “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups,” 2010

One more example of how this bluffing can do harm: the affirmative-action debate. We are now on the verge of permanently including African-Americans in elite and selective academic institutions through an openly acknowledged use of different standards. That is horrible—and not because of the Fourteenth Amendment, though the Supreme Court may yet find it so. It’s horrible because this is not equality. It is patronizing. It is horrible for black Americans to embrace, and the establishment to adopt, a set of practices rooted in the soft bigotry of low expectations. Yet other than Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell, and a few others, there is not even a debate among African-Americans about what should be a first-order question, if the goal is to attain genuine racial equality.

## No Responsibility Means No Glory

If the negative cultural patterns in some African-American communities are said to be a necessary consequence of oppression, what is one to make of positive cultural patterns of behavior? Are they, too, a necessary consequence of oppression? If an individual or a community refuses to take responsibility for failure, how can they claim any glory for success? No blame? No skin in the game? Then no credit.

You cannot help the hand you are dealt; but you can decide how to play it. To cast oneself as a helpless

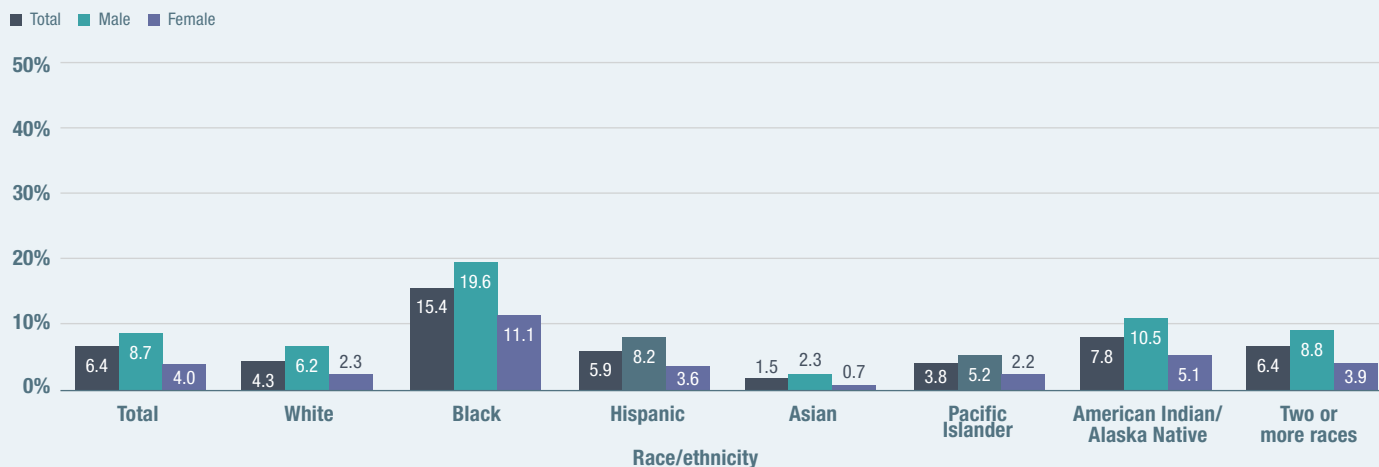
victim, to filter experience constantly and at every instance through a sieve that catches everything that one has control over while leaving the outcome to invisible, implacable historical forces: something is pathetic about that posture.

The struggle for equal rights for black people, from abolition through the civil rights movement, has always been thought of as a “freedom struggle.” But with freedom, rightly understood, comes responsibility. It is past time for all of us to start performing without a net. Rather than lamenting the lack of black billionaires, an outcome ascribed to some invisible force called “racism,” one can admit that you will never become a billionaire unless you build a billion-dollar business—which begins by starting a business. One will never win a Nobel Prize in physics unless one learns calculus at the age of 12. What black parents are insisting that their 12-year-old kids learn calculus—those few kids capable of doing so? White people are not responsible for the fact that black people are, or are not, doing this.

## Not All Black People Are the Same

All this having been said about the behavioral roots of racial inequality, it is dangerous to talk about “black culture” as if it were only one thing—with pathological behavior (such as high levels of urban violence) becoming a stereotype about all black people. Here an insight by UCLA sociologist Rogers

### Out-of-School Suspension Rates, by Race/Ethnicity and Sex



Source: “Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017,” NCES, July 2017

Brubaker is crucial for understanding race and inequality: one should never invoke racial aggregates as the subjects of social analysis unreflectively.<sup>14</sup>

This is a major concern among African-Americans about “culture talk.” Culture talk overly focuses on pathology; but many positive things could be mentioned that will not typically appear in an op-ed. Black people are not a this or a that. They are a population in excess of 30 million, with cultural patterns as variegated as one would expect in such a large aggregation.

Moreover, American society is a polyglot mixture where cultural dynamics influence one another. For example, some middle-class, suburban white kids download rap music produced by black artists from the inner city. These musicians come to have a market substantially influenced by the preferences of their middle-class white customers. To a certain degree, they play to that audience, including that audience’s stereotypes about thuggish behavior. Along comes a schoolteacher who announces: “Rap music is bad, and it’s pathological. Can’t you see just how troubled black people are?” This is ludicrous—how is it that a few hundred musicians and artists responding to a national market consisting mostly of white customers suddenly become emblematic of black culture or black people?

Another example involves the drug trade, which in the U.S. is worth billions of dollars annually and includes marijuana, heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, and crystal meth. It involves people of every race in every geographic location and every walk of life. But the street trafficking in drugs in large urban areas is largely in the hands of black and Latino youth—in substantial part because the only people who would do such dangerous, low-paying work are those whose alternative employment opportunities are scant. It is no surprise that those incarcerated for street-level trafficking are disproportionately blacks. Their arrests and imprisonment are not in themselves evidence of racism—or evidence of black culture. But given the bare facts of racial stigma in American society, many observers will be inclined to think so.

## We’re All in This Together—at Least We’re Supposed to Be

This point about racial stigma is fundamental. Without understanding it, one might say (as many conservative commentators do), “Look at recent immigrants from Asia and even from Latin America. They, too, have been victims in various ways. Yet they have advanced in our society even as the blacks of in-

### Some Data from Harvard’s Affirmative-Action Case

Applications by Academic Index Decile and Race

Academic Index Decile	Share of Applicants in Each Decile				
	White	African-American	Hispanic	Asian American	TOTAL
1	4.98	38.85	20.47	3.92	10.55
2	7.58	22.76	20.52	5.11	10.23
3	11.01	15.2	17.15	7.14	11.12
4	10.32	7.52	11.29	7.16	9.12
5	12.11	5.46	9.29	8.97	10.03
6	12.6	3.84	7.12	10.8	10.31
7	12.19	2.68	5.09	11.23	9.85
8	11.14	1.89	4.37	13.08	9.85
9	9.75	1.17	2.76	15.85	9.76
10	8.31	0.64	1.94	16.73	9.18

Admission Rates by Academic Index Decile and Race

Academic Index Decile	White	African-American	Hispanic	Asian American	TOTAL
1	0.00%	0.04%	0.00%	0.00%	0.01%
2	0.30%	0.80%	0.18%	0.21%	0.39%
3	0.48%	4.51%	1.83%	0.53%	1.45%
4	1.66%	10.60%	4.76%	0.84%	2.83%
5	2.25%	19.62%	7.80%	1.49%	3.91%
6	3.54%	26.28%	11.19%	2.42%	4.79%
7	3.91%	37.60%	15.76%	3.35%	5.62%
8	6.42%	41.48%	20.30%	4.00%	6.85%
9	9.32%	50.90%	22.27%	6.26%	8.77%
10	13.59%	49.45%	28.04%	9.36%	11.70%

Source: *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard*, no. 14-cv-14176-ADB (D. Mass), Expert Report of Peter S. Arcidiacono, doc. 415-1, Tables 5.1 and 5.2 June 15, 2018  
 Note: See endnote 11 of this essay for explanation.

ner-city Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Oakland continue to lag. Whatever is wrong with those people?" In effect: "It must be something about 'those people,' *not about us*, that causes them to be so backward."

By looking at America this way, one eschews social, political, and moral responsibility for the plight of those people. One will conclude that blacks' failure to develop their human potential reflects the absence of such potential (and there are books making that argument), or it reflects a backward culture that, sadly but inevitably ("What more can we do?") causes them to lag behind. Yet blacks are not the authors of the stigma that engenders developmental bias against them. When we understand that the way people come to value things or make decisions is partly created via interactions in society, their flourishing, or lack thereof, reflects on society as a whole, as well as on themselves. It reflects on an "us," not merely on "them."

The mistake is to ignore the extent to which racial inequality reflects not only cultural patterns among insular groups of people but also the interactions that run through society. To impute a causal role to what one takes to be intrinsic cultural traits of a subordinate racial group, while failing to see the systemwide context out of which dysfunctional cultural patterns emerged, is to commit a significant error of social cognition. That members of a particular group seem to perform less well routinely on a set of transactions of interest is a matter not of a cultural essence but of the network of social relations that has (or has not) prepared the members of that group for those transactions.

In the U.S. context, "blackness" is associated with stigmatizing meanings. This stigma leads nonblack people to be reluctant to enter into intimate social or individual relations with them, which in turn affects the social allocation of developmental resources.

People don't make social judgments based on straightforward benefit-cost calculations. Rather, they often act on identity considerations. They ask such questions as: Who am I? How should I live? With whom should I associate? When should I extend to this "other" a benefit of the doubt? Racial inequality is, in substantial part, the outcome of a system of nonmarket social interactions such as these that entangle us together.

Consider the high out-of-wedlock birthrates among blacks. This pattern of behavior has consequences

for socioeconomic racial disparities. But that is not the whole story.

Racial intermarriage rates in the U.S. remain quite low (though they have risen in recent decades).<sup>15</sup> The reasons for this low rate are unclear. Are black women, perhaps, receiving marriage proposals from white men and turning them down? I don't know. But I strongly suspect that a low rate of cross-boundary mating between these two groups has implications for human development, for resources available to children, and for the generation and transmission of wealth.

Moreover, the low rate of intermarriage has implications for the dating and mating market among blacks because they are a small minority of the population—roughly one in eight Americans. If white men and black women were marrying at a higher rate, black men and black women would be interacting in a different way. To observe a social equilibrium in which blacks and whites exhibit different out-of-wedlock birthrates and, on the basis of that observation, to impute the difference to something called black culture, reflects one's failure to see how the intra-racial marriage market is nested within a larger context, where a higher rate of cross-boundary mating could substantially alter intra-boundary behavior.

What may be perceived as a characteristic of "those people" (Why don't they marry? Why do they bear their children in such a disorderly manner?) might be seen instead as a question about society as a whole. From the perspective of the white population, perhaps the real question about out-of-wedlock births is: "Why do we avoid intimacy with them?" I use "us," "we," "them" to emphasize how stigma operates. It operates in the very definition of who one understands to be the social "we."

How a society answers the question, "Who are we?" has far-reaching implications. When Americans talk about crime, violence, school failure, and urban decay, do we understand these matters as "us versus them"? If so, it becomes possible to say, regarding people languishing in the ghettos of our great cities: "That's not my country. That's some third-world thing."

This was actually said during the flood of New Orleans that followed Hurricane Katrina. But black people have been in New Orleans for 250 years. They're not aliens. They're as American as anybody can be. That was *us* crawling up on the rooftops. That was *us* huddled in the Superdome. The abject

poverty that was exposed to a national audience after the flood was a quintessentially American affair, not simply a measure of the inadequacy of black culture. It reflected as well upon our social inadequacy.

The perspective I am promoting about social capital does not require special, race-targeted social policy. Most policy initiatives aimed at improving the lives of our most disadvantaged citizens should not, and need not, be formulated in explicitly racial terms or understood as a remedy for racial injuries. We have to find what works for disadvantaged people in America, period. If we get that right—if we can fashion an American welfare state consistent with our demographic realities, our own values, and our fiscal capacities—we will go a very long way toward assisting African-Americans to develop their full human potential.

Finding what works is especially pertinent for education policy. Disadvantaged youngsters who live in large cities are poorly served by the majority-minority school districts on which they and their parents must rely. This is a huge area for policy innovation, with respect to charter schools and increased options for parents. Yet black politicians who speak publicly on the issue are virtually unanimous in adopting the hostility toward charter schools that animates the country's largest teachers' union, the National Education Association. Thus, at the NAACP's annual board meeting in Cincinnati in 2016, delegates were overwhelmed by black American parents who had stormed the meeting to protest that the organization's board was about to endorse a resolution that opposed more funding for charter schools in various states.<sup>16</sup>

Are police good or bad for the security and safety of black lives in U.S. cities? It is hard to imagine a more important question. Yet one is hard-pressed to find any effective political debate among African-Americans. Instead, we get the shopworn and ineffective stances that people on the left are taking.

Social-justice warriors are supposed to care about black lives. But if they did, they'd seriously care about securing the safety and property of African-Americans in the South Bronx, the west side of Chicago, and other cities. A real argument is to be had over public safety and the role of the police, and the answers are far from self-evident. Yet I'm not sure that social-justice warriors care about black lives. They seem to care more about remaining in lockstep with fashionable liberal opinion.

## Conclusion: Who Are We?

How should we think about the persistence of racial inequality in America? To deny the relevance of behavioral patterns among some black families and communities is folly. To wash one's hands of their problems because of such cultural and behavioral impediments is profoundly unjust. There are no easy answers, but I suggest that the view here is worth considering as a way to account for, and then respond to, an enduring dilemma that confronts and frustrates us still.

Take the poor central-city dwellers who make up perhaps a quarter of the African-American population. The dysfunctional behavior of many in this population does account for much of their failure to progress—and conservatives' demand for greater personal responsibility is necessary and proper. Yet, confronted with the despair, violence, and self-destructive behavior of so many people, it seems morally superficial in the extreme to argue, as many conservatives do, that "those people should just get their acts together; if they did, like many of the poor immigrants, we would not have such a horrific problem in our cities." To the contrary, any morally astute response to the social pathology of American history's losers would have to conclude that, while we cannot change our ignoble past, we must not be indifferent to contemporary suffering issuing directly from that past. Their culture may be implicated in their difficulties, but so is our culture complicit in their troubles; we bear collective responsibility for the form and texture of our social relations.

While we cannot ignore the behavioral problems of the so-called black underclass, we should discuss and react to those problems as if we were talking about our own children, neighbors, and friends. It will require adjusting ways of thinking on both sides of the racial divide. Achieving a well-ordered society, where all members are embraced as being among us, should be the goal. *Our failure to do so is an American tragedy. It is a national, not merely a communal, disgrace.* Changing the definition of the American "we" is a first step toward rectifying the relational discrimination that afflicts our society, and it is the best path forward in reducing racial inequality.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Glenn C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). See also my collection of critical essays, *One by One from the Inside Out: Race and Responsibility in America* (New York: Free Press, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> A self-conscious awareness that the marks on one's body may convey profound significations to others in society may be an impediment to one's psychological health—particularly in the U.S., where, because of the need to justify chattel slavery in a nation self-consciously defining itself as “the land of liberty,” the mark of blackness has, over the last two centuries, come to be infused with long-enduring, derogatory significations.
- <sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Luigi Cavalli-Sforza, Paolo Menozzi, and Alberto Piazza, *The History and Geography of Human Genes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- <sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- <sup>5</sup> The powerful and derogatory social meanings associated with the bodily marks that define race in American society may even be internalized by persons identifying with a stigmatized racial group—even people like me, who might hope to study such matters scientifically. How does one achieve the objective observer's stance while enmeshed in the tangled web of identities, fealties, and conflicting narratives that surrounds racial discourse in America?
- <sup>6</sup> For example, norms against trading with stigmatized “others” may be established and enforced via threats of social ostracism.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, the same citizens who object if a white police officer treats black youths unfairly might say nothing when white families flee an integrating residential community because of an exaggerated fear of what they perceive to be “black crime.”
- <sup>8</sup> Glenn C. Loury, “Essays in the Theory of the Distribution of Income” (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976). The sociologist James S. Coleman, in his *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990), credits me, along with Jane Jacobs (*The Economy of Cities*, 1970), as having been an originator of this concept. Political scientist Robert Putnam also cites my dissertation to this same effect in *Making Democracy Work* (1993).
- <sup>9</sup> Glenn C. Loury, “A Dynamic Theory of Racial Income Differences,” in *Women, Minorities and Employment Discrimination*, ed. P. A. Wallace and A. LaMond (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1977).
- <sup>10</sup> See Glenn C. Loury, “Self-Censorship in Public Discourse: A Theory of ‘Political Correctness’ and Related Phenomena,” *Rationality and Society* 6, no. 4 (November 1994): 426–61.
- <sup>11</sup> See, e.g., the two tables in this paper on p.12 taken from the affirmative-action lawsuit against Harvard University. For recent African-American applicants, more than 60% presented academic credentials falling in the bottom two deciles of the applicant pool (meaning that 80% of all applicants presented better credentials) while fewer than 2% of African-American applicants placed in the top two deciles (those for whom 80% had worse credentials). By contrast, nearly one-third of all Asian-American applicants ranked in the top two deciles, and fewer than 10% were among those in the bottom two deciles. Yet, as the second table makes clear, when comparing African-American and Asian-American applicants with academic credentials in the same decile, one finds blacks being admitted to Harvard at rates five to 10 times higher than the admission rates for Asian applicants.
- <sup>12</sup> Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> See U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, and U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), “Joint ‘Dear Colleague’ Letter,” Jan. 8, 2014. See also Arne Duncan, “Rethinking School Discipline,” speech delivered at the Academies at Frederick Douglass High School, Baltimore, Jan. 8, 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- <sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- <sup>16</sup> Mark Curnutte, “Protesters Interrupt NAACP Board Meeting Here,” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Oct. 15, 2016. The NAACP adopted the anti-charter resolution.



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