

Black-white racial divide is worse, researchers say

by [David Briggs](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue

Nearly 60 years after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a “separate but equal” doctrine that reinforced segregation, almost a quarter of Americans say it is OK for races to be separate as long as they have equal opportunities.

Half a century after Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of carving out “a stone of hope” from the mountain of despair in race relations, black Americans are five times as likely as white Americans to think about their race every day and more than three times as likely to report being treated unfairly because of the color of their skin.

As the world commemorates the passing of Nelson Mandela, a man who forced his country to confront apartheid and led South Africa through a peaceful transition to a multiracial democracy, more than half of Americans, including six in ten whites, say one of the best ways to improve race relations is to stop talking about race.

The new findings from the second wave of a major study on religion and race lay bare the dramatic and growing gap in racial attitudes and experiences in America.

The United States is not a postracial nation, the 2012 Portraits of American Life Study suggests, but a land of two Americas divided by race and less willing than ever to find a common ground of understanding.

The Portraits of American Life Study is a massive effort involving thousands of face-to-face interviews exploring more than 600 aspects of religious life, with a particular focus on ethnic and religious diversity. The study received funding from Lilly Endowment, Rice University and the University of Notre Dame.

The 2006 study was led by sociologists Michael Emerson of Rice and David Sikkink of Notre Dame. Emerson, codirector of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice, also led the 2012 study, which drew responses from a random sample of 1,314 U.S. adults who participated in the first study.

The 2006 study showed a vast gap in perspectives on race among black and white Americans. In many key indicators, however, the gap increased by 2012.

Among the findings:

- Importance of race: In 2006, about four in ten blacks said they were aware of what race they were every day. In 2012, nearly half of blacks, including 52 percent of black Protestants, said they thought about their race daily. Just 10 percent of whites in both studies reported the same degree of racial awareness.
- Role of government: In 2006, slightly more than a third of white respondents, including 42 percent of white mainline Protestants, said the government should do more to help minorities increase their standard of living. In 2012, just a quarter of white respondents, and only 21 percent of white mainline Protestants, favored such government action. In the same period, the percentage of black respondents favoring a greater role for government rose from 71 percent in 2006 to 79 percent in 2012.
- Racial prejudice: Perceived racial injustice rose for both whites and blacks. The percentage of whites who said they had been treated unfairly because of their race in the last three years rose from 8 percent in 2006 to 14 percent in 2012. The percentage of blacks reporting prejudice rose from 36 percent in 2006 to 46 percent in 2012.

Given these increasing racial gaps, the apparent growing indifference to efforts for integration or reconciliation may be of particular concern.

For example in 2006, 15 percent of white respondents and 21 percent of black respondents agreed with the statement, “It’s OK to have a country where the races are basically separate from one another, as long as they have equal opportunity.” In 2012, 24 percent of white respondents and 27 percent of black respondents backed such a separate but equal approach.

A great deal of research has suggested that increased understanding and contact among people of different groups reduces prejudice and increases civility.

In a campaign speech in 2008, then Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama lifted up the different experiences and perspectives of black and white Americans. They are part, Obama said, of “the complexities of race in this country

that we've never really worked through—a part of our union that we have not yet made perfect.”

A national dialogue on race is necessary, he said. “If we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care or education or the need to find good jobs for every American.”

Five years into the tenure of the first African-American president, however, America is further away from having that type of conversation, the Portraits of American Life Study indicates.

Forty-five percent of white respondents in 2006 said one of the most effective ways to improve race relations was to stop talking about race. In 2012, 59 percent wanted to stop talking about race, including 69 percent of white evangelical Protestants and 65 percent of white Catholics.

The percentage of black respondents favoring less talk about race rose from 31 percent in 2006 to 39 percent in 2012, including 44 percent of black Protestants.
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