

Action plan

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A Black Lives Matter protest April 30, 2015, in downtown Cincinnati, Ohio. [Some rights reserved](#) by [5chw4r7z](#)

As recently as 2013, most whites told pollsters they thought race relations in America were good. Now, according to a *New York Times* survey, nearly two-thirds of whites say race relations are bad and getting worse. Black people overwhelmingly agree.

Maybe there is some good news here. Maybe it means that white people have a new awareness of racial dynamics. Perhaps the past year of “officer-involved” incidents—in Ferguson, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and elsewhere—and the massacre at a black church in Charleston have broken through some white complacency. Perhaps more people understand why black author Ta-Nehisi Coates writes in *Between the World and Me* that the black people he knew growing up were “powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid.”

The message on many sides is that the time for discussion is over. In his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, the slain pastor at Emanuel AME Church, President Obama observed that “every time something like this happens, somebody says we have to

have a conversation about race.” But “we don’t need more talk,” he said. “To settle for symbolic gestures without following up with the hard work of more lasting change—that’s how we lose our way again.”

Tawnya Denise Anderson echoed that sentiment. “We have had the benefit of years—centuries, literally—of thought, narrative, scholarship, literature, film, fiction, nonfiction, and discussion to help us all understand these issues,” she wrote on the *Century* website. “Class has been in session. The school bell has now rung.”

The bell announces that it’s time for acting on what is known. Action can begin with reforming the criminal justice system—knowing that blacks, though only 12 percent of the population, make up 60 percent of the prison population and though no more likely to use or sell illegal drugs than whites, have a higher rate of arrests and receive longer prison sentences. It can begin with working to end gun violence and regulate gun ownership—with the knowledge that blacks are twice as likely as whites to die from gun violence. It can begin with expanding Medicaid in all states to extend health coverage to those who can’t afford it and as an immediate way to reduce the racial disparity in health coverage. It can begin with increasing the minimum wage to bolster low-income workers and families, especially black workers and families. It can begin with recognizing that discrimination against black voters continues in our time by means of voter ID laws, the closing of polling places in minority neighborhoods, and the elimination of early voting days.

Theologian Willie Jennings says that whiteness is not a skin color but a way of life, a way of seeing the world in which people of color are marginalized. Americans can discuss the structure of whiteness and seek to be instructed about its impact, and those discussions are needed. But the times call for actions that change it, and some of those actions are right at hand.