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Is Racism Real?

by John Robbins

On December 23, the Los Angeles Times published an article by Shelby Steele, a research fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, essentially saying that racism is a thing of the past in the U.S. today. "The truth is," he wrote, "in today's America, intolerance is no longer tolerated."

Steele is not alone in thinking this way. Many well-meaning white people in the U.S. think that racism is an ugly part of our history that was essentially dealt with by the civil rights movement of the 1960s. They see we now have black mayors and police chiefs in some of our largest cities. They see we now have black corporate executives. They see the phenomenal success of prominent African-American athletes and entertainers. They see people of Asian and Hispanic descent rising to prominence in business, sports, and many other spheres of life. They want to believe that people with black or brown skin now have equal opportunities and are treated fairly.

During the O.J. Simpson trial, the great majority of white people in the country thought the former football player was guilty. Things were different, though, among African-Americans. The majority of blacks thought he had been set up by the police. Typically, whites found this difference puzzling. It seemed obvious to them that Simpson had committed the murders.

In the Simpson case, many whites could not understand why blacks would be so suspicious of the police. They did not grasp how differently people of color experience life in this country. They did not understand the enormous inequalities that characterize the way people of color are often treated by police and courts in the United States.

- Young black males make up 6 percent of the U.S. population, and 50 percent of the prison inmates.
- Three out of every four (76 percent) African American 18-year-olds living in urban areas can anticipate being arrested and jailed before age 36.
- In Massachusetts, blacks and Hispanics make up 9 percent of the state's population, but 83 percent of imprisoned drug offenders.
- African-American teens are more than ten times as likely to be incarcerated in California Youth Authority facilities as white or Asian youth.
- Danville, Virginia, regularly executes more people than any county in the country outside of Texas, but has never once since its incorporation in 1890 executed a white person.

It is painful for anyone who appreciates the goals of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s to see that racial disparities still affects the lives of people of color in this country. When you have been taught to believe this nation promises "liberty and justice for all," when you want to see this become a land of equal opportunity, it can be hard to grasp how unfairly people of color in this country are still treated. But despite the efforts and prayers of many people to remedy the injustices, it remains the case that the vast majority of people of color endure not only unequal treatment before the law today, but many other

forms of discrimination and injustice, including greatly diminished job opportunities, and far deeper and more intractable levels of poverty.

- In 1865, shortly after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves, blacks owned 0.5 percent of the nation's net wealth. Today, more than 40 years after the civil rights legislation of the 1960's became law, despite the wealth of a handful of black athletes and entertainers such as Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Bill Cosby and Oprah Winfrey, the percentage of the nation's net worth owned by blacks totals just 1 percent.
- Today, the median annual family income for whites is approximately \$47,000, while for African-Americans it's \$26,000.
- Black-owned small businesses are more than three times as likely as white-owned firms to have loan applications turned down, despite the same creditworthiness.
- Hispanics are rejected for home mortgages twice as often as whites, regardless of income.
- The poverty rate for Hispanics is 2.5 times greater than than for whites.
- Less than half the households on U.S. Indian reservations have phone service.

Of course, there has been some progress. The most blatant expressions of racism have lost legitimacy. Public lynchings and cross burnings are no longer tolerated. You won't often hear words like "nigger" or "spic" in public speech. There are laws now that forbid acts of conspicuous racial hatred.

Very few white people in positions of power today fit the old stereotypes of race haters. Most are decent and would object to obvious expressions of racial intolerance or prejudice. But when we believe that the only problem is hatred, we avoid facing the reality that racial inequality is perpetuated mostly by the ignorance and indifference of non-hating people. As racism has become less visibly obvious since the 1960s, it has become easier for those not directly harmed by it not to see the many ways that it continues to eat away at the lives and spirits of people of color.

Indifference on the part of those in positions of privilege toward the conditions in which people of color live is not racism in the classical sense of overt hatred and bigotry. But indifference and neglect allow conditions to continue that unfairly discriminate against people of color, undermining all of our hopes for a more just and compassionate world.

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