

Racism

ISSUE STATEMENT

Racism has been pervasive throughout U.S. history. However, it goes without saying that racism is not unique to the United States. Historians and cultural anthropologists have documented that racism and ethnocentrism have been present in societies worldwide for many thousands of years. Given those facts, it is useful to provide a standard definition of the term “racism.” According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Racism, also called racialism, is any action, practice, or belief that reflects the racial worldview—the ideology that humans are divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called ‘races,’ that there is a causal link between inherited physical traits and traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural behavioral features, and that some races are innately superior to others” (Smedley, 2014).

Relatively recently, an expanded definition of racism emerged in the concept of *institutional racism* which first gained prominence in Great Britain with the issuance of the MacPherson Report. The background of the report is as follows: On April 22, 1993, Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death at a bus stop in South London in an unprovoked, racist attack. The police were heavily criticized for their conduct of the investigation, and no one has ever been convicted for the crime. After years of campaigning by Stephen’s parents, authorities announced a judicial inquiry in July 1997 to be led by Sir William Macpherson. *The Macpherson Report*, published in February 1999, found that the police investigation into Stephen’s murder was “marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers” (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, n.d.).

Since the release of the report, the term “institutional racism” gained wide acceptance.

The history of racism in the United States dates back to the country’s origin. A prime example of the institutionalization of racism in the United States is the treatment of Native Americans during the 19th century. To open land for expansion to the western territories, President Andrew Jackson enacted the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Indian Removal Act mandated that Native Americans, mainly the Cherokee nation, were to leave from their lands located east of the Mississippi River. The forced march west, known as the Trail of Tears, resulted in many Native Americans suffering from exposure, disease, and starvation. It has been estimated that 60,000 of the 130,000 Cherokees died en route to their new destination (Studyworld.com, n.d.).

At the same time that the Native American were being subjected to genocidal racism, Africans were being kidnapped from their homeland and imported to the United States as slaves. The first slaves had arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 on a Dutch ship. By the end of the Civil War, there were over 4 million slaves in America (History.com, n.d.).

The Reconstruction may be said to have begun with the passage of the 14th Amendment, which gave former slaves full citizenship, including the right to vote. The African American population steadily grew in numbers and began to establish a political and civil rights presence in urban centers in the country. The late 19th and early 20th centuries also saw the arrival of more and more immigrants from Europe. Because these racially disparate communities tended to coexist in the urban areas of the country, new racial and ethnic tensions emerged.

In the early 20th century, the playwright Israel Zangwill coined the phrase “melting pot” (Owen, 2005) to describe how immigrants from many different backgrounds came together in the United States. In Zangwill’s 1908 Broadway production, feuding Russian Jewish and Cossack families immigrate to America, where they learn that hatred and intolerance have no place (Owen, 2005). The melting pot metaphor assumed that over time the distinct habits, customs, and traditions associated with particular groups would disappear as people assimilated into the larger culture. A uniquely American culture would emerge that would accommodate some elements of diverse immigrant cultures, such as holiday traditions and language phrases, in a new context (Owen, 2005). However, there were some who questioned whether the melting pot idea was the ideal approach to absorbing the many diverse ethnicities and cultures in the United States.

Even before the influx of European immigrants to the United States, scholars in Europe and America had recognized that issues of race and ethnicity play a considerable role in shaping societal norms and values. Furthermore, they came to understand that in large multiracial and multicultural (pluralistic) societies such as the United States, it is essential that governmental and civic leaders articulate, both in law and in policy, that dominance by any given race or ethnic group is unacceptable and unsustainable.

Mostly in response to the difficulties that the country had in absorbing mass immigration (along with existing African American, Hispanic, and Native American populations), a major philosophy for dealing with the conflicts related to racism and ethnocentrism emerged. It was referred to as “cultural pluralism” (Haas, 2011). As one of the early adherents to the concept of cultural pluralism, Randolph Bourne, stated, “To face the fact that our aliens are already strong enough to take a share in the direction of their own destiny, and that the strong cultural movements represented by the foreign press, schools, and colonies are a challenge to our facile attempts, is not, however, to admit the failure of Americanization. It is not to fear the failure of democracy. It is rather to urge us to an investigation of what

Americanism may rightly mean. It is to ask ourselves whether our ideal has been broad or narrow—whether perhaps the time has not come to assert a higher ideal than the melting-pot” (Bourne, 1916). In his essay “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” (1915), Bourne’s contemporary Horace Kallen called for a federal republic, a democracy of nationalities cooperating voluntarily and autonomously in the enterprise of self-realization through the perfection of men according to their kind” (Harvard University, n.d.).

Simultaneous to the advent of the cultural pluralism movement another phenomenon occurred that truly strained the idea of the assimilation as a solution to racial and cultural tensions in 20th century America. Between 1915 and 1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved out of the South to cities across the Northeast, Midwest, and West. This relocation, known as the Great Migration, resulted in massive demographic shifts across the United States. Between 1910 and 1930, cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland saw their African American populations grow by about 40 percent, and the number of African Americans employed in industrial jobs nearly doubled (Gross, 2010). The migration of black people meant that European immigrants and African Americans were living in close proximity to one another in the major industrial cities. Racial strife in major population centers worsened, with skin color being another variable that challenged the melting pot theory.

Black thinkers began to become attracted to ideas of multiculturalism and cultural identity as a response to the racism they encountered after the Great Migration. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s also reflected those principles, as seen by open expression of black pride and celebration of black culture. “Alain Leroy Locke (1886–1954), America’s first African-American Rhodes scholar and a former student of William James, furnished the guiding vision of the Renaissance and helped to achieve Bourne’s ‘beloved community.’ Finding beauty within him, through a rebirth of black art, the ‘new Negro’ would thereby achieve the moral dignity suited to a ‘collaborator and participant in American civilization.’ Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Mackay, Jean

Toomer, and others awakened black pride” (Science.JRank.org, n.d.).

It took decades of civil disobedience, protests, legal challenges to racist laws and practices, violent upheavals, and a resurgence of immigration (with many more immigrants coming from non-European nations) to force the country to begin to accept that racial and ethnic minorities could retain their cultural “roots” while still embracing their American nationalities. Such events triggered a resurgence of cultural pluralism as a means for a society with a history of racism and intolerance to accommodate racial and ethnic differences.

As we moved into the 21st century the country found itself on the verge of dramatic changes in its racial and ethnic makeup—the United States will soon become a majority minority society. “Minorities, which means those of any race other than non-Hispanic, single-race whites, were about a third of the U.S. population, according to Census figures. However, it is projected that by 2042, those racial and ethnic groups are likely to comprise more than half the population, and by 2050, 54 percent of the population will be minorities” (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

This fact has obvious socioeconomic and political implications for the country. More important, the idea of the United States becoming a majority minority country has huge sociological implications for which we need to be prepared. By 2054, the question of how to manage and adapt to pluralism and multiculturalism will need to have been answered. Generally, in democratic countries where there is a history of racism, dramatic demographic shifts that bring the oppressed minority to an equal or majority position with the oppressor result in tension, resentment, and sometimes violent resistance to the inevitable change. This is where strategies that prepare the country for change comes into play.

It is important to note that concepts and national policies that support multiculturalism and diversity *do not* represent a single theory in the fight against racism. History and the current presence of institutional racism (and person-to-person acts of racism) have taught us that antidiscrimination and antiracism laws have been effective in mitigating racism and

are still needed to defend against overt racism. The civil rights and social justice community will have to continue to be vigilant in responding to race-driven laws and policies that repress the rights of people of color.

For example, the spread of voter suppression laws and policies at the state level since the 2010 presidential election is clearly racially driven. In response, there was and continues to be a nationally coordinated response to monitoring and challenging voter suppression laws and policies. A similar antiracism and civil rights community response to the “Stop and Frisk” policy in New York City was successful in having that policy greatly modified because it was inherently racist.

Immigration reform is another area where it is clear that cultural pluralism, in itself, is not adequate for addressing racist undertones of the opposition, by some Americans, to offering legal status for over 11 million undocumented immigrants, a vast majority of whom are Hispanic but also include people of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent.

Racism is often discussed as a broad global issue. However, it is useful to look at the range of racial disparities within various systems as examples of institutional racism, which can often be intractable and pervasive. For example, the following systems have had to seriously reflect on and make policy changes that respond to institutional racism:

- **Education system.** There are significant disparities in the quality of education received by African American and Hispanic children as compared with white children.

- **Employment.** The overall national unemployment rate during 2013 was approximately 7.6 percent. During that same period, the unemployment rate for African Americans was 13.5 percent and for Hispanics it was 9.6 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

- **Housing.** Disparities in the housing market are exemplified by the disproportionate losses suffered by African Americans and Hispanics during the collapse of the housing market, which reached its peak in 2008. The so-called housing bubble, during which millions of

Americans lost their homes to foreclosure largely due to unscrupulous and outright fraudulent mortgage financing practices, was seen as one of the causes of the worldwide economic depression 2008 to 2012. According to a report released by the Center on Responsible Lending, Though most of “affected borrowers have been white, African American and Latino borrowers are almost twice as likely to have been impacted by the crisis. Approximately one quarter of all Latino and African-American borrowers have lost their home to foreclosure or are seriously delinquent, compared to just under 12 percent for white borrowers. Asian borrowers have fared better as a whole than Latino and African-American borrowers, but they, too, have been disproportionately affected, especially in some metropolitan areas” (cited in Waldron, 2011).

■ **Health and behavioral health.** Disparities are also evident in what are known as the social determinants of health—conditions in the environments in which people are born, live, learn, work, play, and worship (Healthy People.gov, 2014).

■ **Criminal justice system.** The criminal justice system is another area where we see lingering evidence of institutional racism. Racial disparity in the criminal justice system exists when the proportion of a racial or ethnic group within the control of the system is greater than the proportion of such groups in the general population. The causes of such disparity are varied and can include differing levels of criminal activity, law enforcement emphasis on particular communities, legislative policies, and decision making by criminal justice practitioners who exercise broad discretion in the justice process at one or more stages in the system (Sentencing Project, 2008). The following are indicators of racial disparities in the criminal justice system:

- African Americans make up 13 percent of the overall population, but 38 percent of all prison and jail inmates are African American compared with their 13 percent share of the overall population.
- Latinos constitute 15 percent of the overall population but 19 percent of the prison and jail population.

- According to one sobering statistic, 32 percent of all black men born in 2001 will have been to prison at some point in their life; compared with 17 percent Hispanic men and 6 percent white men (Sentencing Project, 2008).

The issue of racism in America has been a national concern since the country’s inception. Organized protests against racist policies have existed from the antislavery abolitionist movement that began in the late 18th century through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It seems that to truly achieve a race-neutral country there has to be a change in how individuals adapt to and accept racial and ethnic differences. As we move deeper into the 21st century, the expected changes in America’s demographics will almost certainly bring about a new dynamic in race relations. Whether or not that dynamic is conflict free is not clear. However, as was true in the past, social justice and civil rights advocates and political leaders have a role to play in helping to guide the nation in accommodating social change.

The social work profession has been on the cutting edge of leading the nation in responding to racism. Therefore, it would be appropriate for the profession to assert its ongoing leadership in working with other national leaders in developing policies and programs to significantly diminish if not eliminate racism in society, and within the social work profession. According to the *NASW Code of Ethics*, “Social workers . . . should advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice. . . . Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class” (NASW, 2008).

POLICY STATEMENT

As a matter of principle and in line with its historical values, NASW supports an inclusive, multicultural society in which racial, ethnic, class, sexual orientation, age, physical and mental ability, religion and spirituality, gender, and other cultural and social identities are valued and respected. NASW is a proponent of forward-thinking social policies that seek to

foster diversity at all levels of social discourse, ranging from the workplace to where we live. NASW encourages government, national social justice and civil rights organizations, and faith-based organizations to become vocal about preparing the nation for demographic changes that are imminent by openly advocating for

- respect for cultural differences
- racial and ethnic inclusion
- embracing the value of accommodation when dealing with cultural differences.

From a policy perspective, NASW espouses the principles of cultural pluralism as described in the Issue Statement of this document. By itself, cultural pluralism is not a remedy for racism; it is a mechanism for multicultural societies to adapt to the convergence of various cultures into a functional whole without major conflicts. A central tenet of cultural pluralism is that cultural groups can coexist without losing their cultural identities.

NASW recognizes that there are those in America who have an opposing view of multiculturalism as being an acceptable approach for easing racial conflict. Those voices espouse the viewpoint that the best way to bring about an end to racism is for ethnic groups to subordinate their ethnic and cultural identities and embrace an “American” identity. Their concern is that multiculturalism fosters racial disharmony because it leads to the disintegration of the value of a single national ethos (Etzioni, 2009). Although all viewpoints should be respected, we do not feel that the many decades of having cultural diversity policies in place in one form or another supports the idea of the continued incorporation of multicultural demographic planning.

Just as important, NASW believes that existing national and state-level civil rights laws, antidiscrimination policies, and all levels of equal protections against institutional racism are the most effective tools to protect against racism. We believe and will strongly advocate for constitutional protections for voters’ rights and equal access to housing, employment, and education.

NASW believes that our nation can and should institute proactive strategies that will lead to a greatly reduced number of communities and individuals who hold on to racist or ethnocentric values that become engrained in what is commonly called “white privilege.” Over the years, America made gains in acceptance of workplace diversity policies in government, industry, and in many communities.

This policy statement encourages and supports efforts by the civil rights community, social justice advocates, and individual social workers to monitor and respond to major incidents of racism and violation of national laws against racism:

- ending all forms of racial disparities in the criminal justice system
- ending all forms of racial disparities in the juvenile justice system
- ending racial disparities in the primary and secondary education system that lead to disproportionate and severe discipline for black and Hispanic children
- ending all forms of racial disparities in health care
- proactively advocating for an end to economic disparities, especially income disparities
- monitoring voter suppression and procedures that limit the access to voting by minorities
- supporting legislation that ends racial profiling of African Americans, Hispanics, immigrants, and profiling that is the result of Islamic phobia.

NASW supports and encourages its chapters and members to take a leadership role in joining national coalitions of civil and human rights organizations to combat racism and help to engrain a national ethos that respects cultural diversity while maintaining loyalty to America as a nation.

NASW believes that social workers have an ethical responsibility to commit to cultural competency in their workplace with fellow employees, with those under their supervision,

and, most important, in their areas of practice. In addition, with regard to policy for responding to current incidents of institutional and other forms of racism, change can be achieved by working with national and state coalitions, along with other organizations with a civil rights and social justice agenda, to advocate for reforms in public policies and to enact legislation that will eliminate discrimination and disparities based on race and ethnicity.

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Policy statement approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly, August 2014. This policy statement supersedes the policy statement on Racism approved by the Delegate Assembly in 2005. For further information, contact the National Association of Social Workers, 750 First Street, NE, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20002-4241. Telephone: 202-408-8600; e-mail: press@socialworkers.org