7.7: Race and Ethnicity in the 21st Century

Learning Objectives

- Discuss why there is cause for hope and despair in regard to race and ethnic relations in the United States.
- Summarize the debate over affirmative action.
- Summarize recent reaction to growing immigration into the United States.

At the beginning of this chapter we noted that the more things change, the more they stay the same. We saw evidence of this in proclamations over the years about the status of people of color in the United States. As a reminder, in 1903 sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his classic book *The Souls of Black Folk* that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” Some six decades later, social scientists and government commissions during the 1960s continued to warn us about the race problem in the United States and placed the blame for this problem squarely in the hands of whites and of the social and economic institutions that discriminate against people of color (Kerner Commission, 1968).


Now that we have examined race and ethnicity in the United States, what have we found? Where do we stand a decade into the new century and just more than one hundred years after Du Bois wrote about the problem of the color line? Did the historic election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 signify a new era of equality between the races, as many observers wrote, or did his election occur despite the continued existence of pervasive racial and ethnic inequality?
On the one hand, there is cause for hope. Legal segregation is gone. The vicious, “old-fashioned” racism that was so rampant in this country into the 1960s has declined dramatically since that tumultuous time. People of color have made important gains in several spheres of life, and African Americans and other people of color occupy some important elected positions in and outside the South, a feat that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. Perhaps most notably, Barack Obama has African ancestry and identifies as an African American, and on his election night people across the country wept with joy at the symbolism of his victory. Certainly progress has been made in U.S. racial and ethnic relations.

On the other hand, there is also cause for despair. The old-fashioned racism has been replaced by a modern, symbolic racism that still blames people of color for their problems and reduces public support for government policies to deal with their problems. Institutional discrimination remains pervasive, and hate crimes, such as the beating of the elderly African American that began this chapter, remain all too common. Americans of different racial and ethnic backgrounds remain sharply divided on many issues, reminding us that the United States as a nation remains divided by race and ethnicity. Two issues that continue to arouse controversy are affirmative action and immigration, to which we now turn.

**Affirmative Action**

Affirmative action refers to the preferential treatment of minorities and women in employment and education. Affirmative action programs were begun in the 1960s to provide African Americans and then other people of color and women access to jobs and education to make up for past discrimination. President John F. Kennedy was the first known official to use the term, when he signed an executive order in 1961 ordering federal contractors to “take affirmative action” in ensuring that applicants are hired and treated without regard to their race and national origin. Six years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson added sex to race and national origin as demographic categories for which affirmative action should be used.


One of the major court rulings just mentioned was the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265 (1978). Allan Bakke was a 35-year-old white man who had twice been rejected for admission into the medical school at the University of California, Davis. At the time he applied, UC–Davis had a policy of reserving 16 seats in its entering class of 100 for qualified people of color to make up for their underrepresentation in the medical profession. Bakke’s college grades and scores on the Medical College Admission Test were higher than those of the people of color admitted to UC–Davis either time Bakke applied. He sued for admission on the grounds that his rejection amounted to reverse racial discrimination on the basis of his being white (Stefoff, 2005). Stefoff, R. (2005). *The Bakke case: Challenging affirmative action*. New York, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark.

The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled 5–4 that Bakke must be admitted into the UC–Davis medical school because he had been unfairly denied admission on the basis of his race. As part of its historic but
complex decision, the Court thus rejected the use of strict racial quotas in admission as it declared that no applicant could be excluded based solely on the applicant’s race. At the same time, however, the Court also declared that race may be used as one of the several criteria that admissions committees consider when making their decisions. For example, if an institution desires racial diversity among its students, it may use race as an admissions criterion along with other factors such as grades and test scores.

Two more recent Supreme Court cases both involved the University of Michigan: *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 244 (2003), which involved the university’s undergraduate admissions, and *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003), which involved the university’s law school admissions. In *Grutter* the Court reaffirmed the right of institutions of higher education to take race into account in the admissions process. In *Gratz*, however, the Court invalidated the university’s policy of awarding additional points to high school students of color as part of its use of a point system to evaluate applicants; the Court said that consideration of applicants needed to be more individualized than a point system allowed.

Drawing on these Supreme Court rulings, then, affirmative action in higher education admissions on the basis of race and ethnicity is permissible as long as it does not involve a rigid quota system and as long as it does involve an individualized way of evaluating candidates. Race may be used as one of several criteria in such an individualized evaluation process, but it must not be used as the only criterion.

**The Debate Over Affirmative Action**

Opponents of affirmative action cite several reasons for opposing it. Affirmative action, they say, is reverse discrimination and, as such, is both illegal and immoral. The people benefiting from affirmative action are less qualified than many of the whites with whom they compete for employment and college admissions. In addition, opponents say, affirmative action implies that the people benefiting from it need extra help and thus are indeed less qualified. This implication stigmatizes the groups benefiting from affirmative action.

In response proponents of affirmative action give several reasons for favoring it. Many say it is needed to make up not just for past discrimination and lack of opportunities for people of color but also for ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity. For example, because of their social networks, whites are much better able than people of color to find out about and to get jobs (Reskin, 1998). Reskin, B. F. (1998). *Realities of affirmative action in employment*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association. If this is true, people of color are automatically at a disadvantage in the job market, and some form of affirmative action is needed to give them an equal chance at employment. Proponents also say that affirmative action helps add diversity to the workplace and to the campus. Many colleges, they note, give some preference to high school students who live in a distant state in order to add needed diversity to the student body; to “legacy” students—those with a parent who went to the same institution—to reinforce alumni loyalty and to motivate alumni to donate to the institution; and to athletes, musicians, and other applicants with certain specialized talents and skills. If all of these forms of preferential admission make sense, proponents say, it also makes sense to take students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds into account as admissions officers strive to have a diverse student body.

Proponents add that affirmative action has indeed succeeded in expanding employment and educational opportunities for people of color, and that individuals benefiting from affirmative action have generally fared well in the workplace or on the campus. In this regard research finds that African American students graduating from selective U.S. colleges and universities after being admitted under affirmative action guidelines are slightly more likely than their white counterparts

As this brief discussion indicates, several reasons exist for and against affirmative action. A cautious view is that affirmative action may not be perfect but that some form of it is needed to make up for past and ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity in the workplace and on the campus. Without the extra help that affirmative action programs give disadvantaged people of color, the discrimination and other difficulties they face are certain to continue.

### Immigration


One of the most important consequences is competition over jobs. The newcomers have tended to move into the large cities on the East and West Coasts and in the southwestern region of the country. At the same time, eastern and western cities were losing jobs as manufacturing and other industries moved South or overseas. The new immigrants thus began competing with native-born Americans for increasingly scarce jobs. Their increasing numbers also prompted native-born whites to move out of these cities in a search for all-white neighborhoods. As they did so, they left behind them neighborhoods that were increasingly segregated among ethnic lines.

### Sociology Making a Difference

Immigration and the Crime Rate

Many Americans take a dim view of immigration. In a 2009 Gallup Poll, 50% of Americans thought that immigration should be decreased, 32% thought it should stay at its present level, and only 14% thought it should be increased (Morales, 2009). Morales, L. (2009, August 5). Americans return to tougher immigration stance. Retrieved from www.gallup.com/poll/122057/Am...Return-Tougher -Immigration-Stance.aspx As the text notes, fear of job competition is a primary reason for the concern that Americans show about immigration. Yet another reason might be their fear that immigration raises the crime rate. A 2007 Gallup Poll asked whether immigrants are making "the situation in the country better or worse, or not having much effect" for the following dimensions of our national life: food, music and the arts; the economy; social and moral values; job opportunities; taxes; and the crime situation. The percentage of respondents saying "worse" was higher for the crime situation (58%) than for any other dimension. Only 4% of respondents said that immigration has made the crime situation better (Newport, 2007). Newport, F. (2007, July 13). Americans have become more negative on impact of immigrants. Retrieved from www.gallup.com/poll/28132/Ame...-More-Negative -Impact-Immigrants.aspx

However, research conducted by sociologists and criminologists finds that these 4% are in fact correct: immigrants have lower crime rates than native-born Americans, and immigration has apparently helped lower the U.S. crime rate.

Reinforcing the immigration-lower crime conclusion, other research also finds that immigrants’ crime rates rise as they stay in the United States longer. Apparently, as the children of immigrants become more “Americanized,” their criminality increases. As one report concluded, “The children and grandchildren of many immigrants—as well as many immigrants themselves the longer they live in the United States—become subject to economic and social forces that increase the likelihood of criminal behavior” (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007, p. 11). Rumbaut, R. G., & Ewing, W. A. (2007). The myth of immigrant criminality and the paradox of assimilation: Incarceration rates among native and foreign-born men. Washington, DC: American Immigration Law Foundation. As the United States continues to address immigration policy, it is important that the public and elected officials have the best information possible about the effects of immigration. The findings by sociologists and other social scientists that immigrants have lower crime rates and that immigration has apparently helped lower the U.S. crime rate add an important dimension to the ongoing debate over immigration policy.

One other impact of the new wave of immigration has been increased prejudice and discrimination against the new immigrants. As noted earlier, the history of the United States is filled with examples of prejudice and discrimination against immigrants. Such problems seem to escalate as the number of immigrants increases. The past two decades have been no exception to this pattern. As the large numbers of immigrants moved into the United States, blogs and other media became filled with anti-immigrant comments, and hate crimes against immigrants increased. As one report summarized this trend,

There’s no doubt that the tone of the raging national debate over immigration is growing uglier by the day. Once limited to hard-core white supremacists and a handful of border-state extremists, vicious public denunciations of undocumented brown-skinned immigrants are increasingly common among supposedly mainstream anti-immigration activists, radio hosts, and politicians. While their dehumanizing rhetoric typically stops short of openly sanctioning bloodshed, much of it implicitly encourages or even endorses violence by characterizing immigrants from Mexico and Central America as “invaders,” “criminal aliens,” and “cockroaches.”
The results are no less tragic for being predictable: although hate crime statistics are highly unreliable, numbers that are available strongly suggest a marked upswing in racially motivated violence against all Latinos, regardless of immigration status. (Mock, 2007) Mock, B. (2007). Immigration backlash: Hate crimes against Latinos flourish. Retrieved from www.splcenter.org/intel/intel...le.jsp?aid=845

As just one recent example of one of these hate crimes, a New York City resident from Ecuador who owned a real estate company, died in December 2008 after being beaten with a baseball bat by three men who shouted anti-Hispanic slurs. His murder was preceded by the death a month earlier of another Ecuadorean immigrant, who was attacked on Long Island by a group of males who beat him with lead pipes, chair legs, and other objects (Fahim & Zraick, 2008). Fahim, K., & Zraick, K. (2008, December 15). Killing haunts Ecuadoreans’ rise in New York. The New York Times, p. A28.

Meanwhile, the new immigrants have included thousands who came to the United States illegally. When they are caught, many are detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in local jails, federal prisons, and other detention facilities. Immigrants who are in the United States legally but then get arrested for minor infractions are often also detained in these facilities to await deportation. It is estimated that ICE detains about 300,000 immigrants of both kinds every year. Human rights organizations say that all of these immigrants suffer from lack of food, inadequate medical care, and beatings; that many are being detained indefinitely; and that their detention proceedings lack due process.

Learning From Other Societies

Immigration and Ill Will in the Netherlands

Sometimes we can learn from other countries’ positive examples, but sometimes we can also learn from their negative examples. In thinking about immigration and immigrants in the United States, the experience of the Netherlands provides a negative example from which there is much to learn.

Normally considered a very tolerant nation, and one whose crime policy was featured in the "Learning From Other Societies" box in Chapter 5, the Netherlands in recent years has exhibited marked intolerance for the immigrants in its midst. More than 4% of the Netherlands’ 16.7 million population are of Moroccan or Turkish descent, and many of these are Muslim. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, hostility toward Muslim immigrants increased not only in the United States but also in the Netherlands and other European nations. In the Netherlands, the political climate worsened in 2002 when a politician named Pim Fortuyn campaigned on an explicit anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim platform. He termed Islam “a backward culture,” wrote a book entitled Against the Islamization of Our Culture, and called for the repeal of an anti-discrimination amendment of the Netherlands’ constitution. He also said that immigration to the Netherlands should be sharply curtailed and even eliminated, explaining, “This is a full country. I think 16 million Dutchmen are about enough.” Just as Fortuyn’s popularity was reaching a peak, he was assassinated by a native white Dutch citizen who was angered by Fortuyn’s views. The assassination only served to win sympathy for Fortuyn’s beliefs. Sympathy for anti-immigration views strengthened in 2004, when a Dutch filmmaker, the great-grandson of a brother of painter Vincent van Gogh, was murdered by a Moroccan immigrant angered by the filmmaker’s production of a short movie that condemned the treatment of women in Islamic nations.

In the ensuing years, relations between native Dutch and Muslim immigrants have worsened. In March 2006 the Dutch
government established what were called “some of Europe’s most stringent requirements for would-be immigrants.” Among other stipulations, the new rules required anyone seeking a residency visa to pass both a Dutch language test and a “civic-integration examination” before arriving in the Netherlands. They also had to take an exam to prove their values were not at odds with Dutch values. Because the exam included a movie depicting a nude beach and gay people kissing, critics said the exam was explicitly designed to exclude Muslim immigrants, whose values would likely differ.

As 2009 began, the Netherlands’ anti-immigrant stance had spread across the political spectrum. In late 2008 the nation’s Labor Party, its largest left-wing political group, issued a position paper in which it called for an end to the Netherlands’ acceptance of people with non-Dutch backgrounds and urged that immigrants accommodate themselves to Dutch society rather than the reverse. “We have to stop the existence of parallel societies within our country,” the chair of the Labor Party said. In mid-2009 the anti-Islam Dutch Freedom Party, headed by Geert Wilders, made electoral advances. Wilders had once written, “I’ve had enough of Islam in the Netherlands; let not one more Muslim immigrate. I’ve had enough of the Koran in the Netherlands: Forbid that fascist book.”

The Netherlands’ experience indicates that ethnic prejudice can arise even in nations normally known for their tolerance and generosity. In view of the growing anti-immigrant prejudice in the United States discussed in the text, Americans who believe prejudice is wrong must maintain vigilance lest the Netherlands’ extreme experience replicate itself in the United States.


Reducing Racial and Ethnic Inequality: What Sociology Suggests

The American racial and ethnic landscape is expected to change dramatically during the next few decades. Figure 7.19 shows the current racial and ethnic distribution in the United States and the projected one for the year 2050. Whereas about two-thirds of the country now consists of whites of European backgrounds, in 2050 only about 46% of the country is expected to be white, with Latinos making the greatest gains of all the other racial and ethnic groups. On the other side of the coin, people of color now constitute about one-third of the country but their numbers will increase to about 54% of the country in 2050 (Roberts, 2008). Roberts, S. (2008, August 14). In a generation, minorities may be the U.S. majority. The New York Times, p. A1.

Figure 7.19 Racial and Ethnic Composition of the United States, 2008 and 2050 (Projected)
Four decades from now, then, whites, the dominant racial group today in terms of power and privilege, will constitute less than half the country. It is difficult at this early date to predict what difference this demographic shift will mean for racial and ethnic relations in the United States. As the number of Latinos and other people of color increases, whites may fear and resent the competition they will provide for jobs and other resources and respond with racial violence and legal efforts to control the growing population of color. As we saw earlier, this was the pattern of the white response in the late 1800s and early 1900s to the great waves of immigration and to black migration from the South. If whites repeat this pattern during the next few decades, we may well be in for even more racial and ethnic strife than we have been seeing in the recent past.

This possibility makes it even more urgent that individuals in their daily lives and the local, state, and federal
governments in their policies do everything possible to foster mutual understanding and to eliminate individual and institutional discrimination. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one message of both evolution and of religion is that we are all part of one human race, and if we fail to recognize this lesson we are doomed to repeat the experiences of the past, when racial and ethnic hostility overtook good reason and subjected people who happened to look different from the white majority to legal, social, and violent oppression. In the democracy that is America, we must try to do better so that there will truly be “liberty and justice for all.”

As the United States attempts, however haltingly, to reduce racial and ethnic inequality, sociology has much insight to offer in its emphasis on the structural basis for this inequality. This emphasis strongly indicates that racial and ethnic inequality has much less to do with any personal faults of people of color than with the structural obstacles they face, including ongoing discrimination and lack of opportunity. Efforts aimed at such obstacles, then, are in the long run essential to reducing racial and ethnic inequality (Danziger, Reed, & Brown, 2004; Loury, 2003; Syme, 2008). Danziger, S., Reed, D., & Brown, T. N. (2004). Poverty and prosperity: Prospects for reducing racial/ethnic economic disparities in the United States. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development; Loury, G. C. (2003). The anatomy of racial inequality. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Syme, S. L. (2008). Reducing racial and social-class inequalities in health: The need for a new approach. Health Affairs, 27, 456–459. Some of these efforts resemble those for reducing poverty outlined in Chapter 6, given the greater poverty of many people of color, and include the following:

1. Adopt a national “full employment” policy involving federally funded job-training and public-works programs.
2. Increase federal aid for the working poor, including earned income credits and child care subsidies for those with children.
3. Establish well-funded early-childhood intervention programs, including home visitation by trained professionals, for poor families.
4. Improve the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive, and expand early childhood education programs for poor children.
5. Provide better nutrition and health services for poor families with young children.
6. Strengthen efforts to reduce teenage pregnancies.
7. Strengthen affirmative action programs within the limits imposed by court rulings.
8. Strengthen legal enforcement of existing law forbidding racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring and promotion.
9. Strengthen efforts to reduce residential segregation.

Conclusion

- There is reason to be both hopeful and less hopeful in regard to the future of racial and ethnic relations and inequality in the United States.
- Affirmative action continues to be a very controversial issue. Proponents think it is necessary to compensate for past and continuing racial and ethnic discrimination and lack of opportunity, while opponents think it discriminates against qualified whites.
- Recent waves of immigration have increased anti-immigration prejudice, including hate crimes, in the United States. This result mimics earlier periods of American history.
For Your Review

1. How hopeful are you in regard to race and ethnicity in the United States? Explain your answer.
2. Do you favor or oppose affirmative action? Why?
3. Do you think the United States should try to increase immigration, reduce immigration, or let its level stay about the same? Explain your answer.