

# What have been the consequences of social constructs about race in our country?

Though there is no biological basis for race, centuries of deeply ingrained ideology about the differentness of the “races” has led to vast racial and ethnic inequalities in the United States. People of color face structural barriers daily in the form of laws and policies governing education, housing, voting rights and much more.

The 1954 landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ended the almost 60-year precedent of “separate but equal” in U.S. law. For the Browns and millions of other people whose children were forced to attend segregated schools, their education was anything but equal. Today, schools are much improved, yet disparities perpetuate. According to the UCLA Civil Rights Project, “intense levels of segregation” have been on the rise since the 1990s, when court decisions nationwide began releasing schools from desegregation orders and plans. Their research shows that about 15 percent of Black and Hispanic students today attend so-called “apartheid schools” that are less than 1 percent white—levels of segregation today have not been seen since the 1960s. “These trends matter,” notes a project report, “[because] segregation has strong, negative relationships with the achievement, college success, long-term employment and income of students of color.”<sup>1</sup>

Housing policy and trends similarly show the persistent nature of segregation and racial inequality. Beginning in the 1930s, there was a series of systematic policy decisions that reinforced and expanded residential segregation. During this era, for example, the notorious practice of “redlining” began, in which federal underwriters drew red lines around poor, mostly Black neighborhoods on zoning maps and marked them as “hazardous” or too risky for bank loans. After World War II, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) guaranteed mortgages for thousands of single-family homes in new suburbs, but prohibited the awarding of loans for homes in or near neighborhoods with “incompatible racial elements.” In 2018, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting exposed that redlining still occurs today, despite the 1968 Fair Housing Act banning this form of discrimination.<sup>2</sup> In fact, more than 50 years after that historic legislation, U.S. communities are just as segregated and struggling with many of the same problems, including inequality in mortgage lending and homeownership. In addition to being unjust, these practices have a “negative impact on everything from the quality of education Black children receive to the health and longevity of their parents.”<sup>3</sup>

1 Gary Orfield, Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, Jennifer B. Ayscue, “Harming Our Common Future: America’s Segregated Schools 65 Years after Brown,” UCLA Civil Rights Project, May 10, 2019, <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/harming-our-common-future-americas-segregated-schools-65-years-after-brown>.

2 Aaron Glantz and Emmanuel Martinez, “For people of color, banks are shutting the door to homeownership,” Reveal, February 15, 2018, <https://www.revealnews.org/article/for-people-of-color-banks-are-shutting-the-door-to-homeownership>.

3 Joseph P. Williams, “Segregation’s Legacy: Fifty years after the Fair Housing Act was signed, America is nearly as segregated as when President Lyndon Johnson signed the law,” U.S. News & World Report, April 20, 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2018-04-20/us-is-still-segregated-even-after-fair-housing-act>.

Nothing is more fundamental to U.S. democracy than the right to vote. However, since the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, granting Black men the right to vote, a host of discriminatory laws, policies and practices have ensued, aimed at depressing this right. These practices included poll taxes and literacy tests, as well as campaigns of violence and intimidation. It was not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 that these discriminatory laws and practices were outlawed and tens of millions of people of color were enfranchised for the first time. In 2012, the national voter turnout rate among Black citizens exceeded that of white citizens for the first time in U.S. history.<sup>4</sup> Yet in recent years, a new wave of voter suppression efforts, targeted mostly at people of color, threaten our democracy. Court rulings eliminating core voting protections have paved the way for voter ID laws, voter roll purges and felony disenfranchisement. According to the Center for American Progress, in 2017 “Native Americans, Latinos, and African Americans were two, three, and four times, respectively, more likely than their white counterparts to report experiencing racial discrimination when trying to vote or participate in politics.”<sup>5</sup>

In his speech on race, then Senator Barack Obama commented: “...for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn’t make it—those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination.” This is the legacy of structural inequality, the use of laws, policies and discriminatory practices by those in power to keep some groups from obtaining the resources and opportunities needed to attain their American dream.

4 Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, “Black voter turnout fell in 2016, even as a record number of Americans cast ballots,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots>.

5 Danyelle Solomon, Connor Maxwell and Abril Castro, “Systematic Inequality and American Democracy,” Center for American Progress, August 7, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/473003/systematic-inequality-american-democracy>