

When Whites Just Don't Get It After Ferguson, Race Deserves More Attention, Not Less

By Nicholas Kristoff

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MANY white Americans say they are fed up with the coverage of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. A plurality of whites in a recent Pew survey said that the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves. Bill O'Reilly of Fox News reflected that weariness, saying: "All you hear is grievance, grievance, grievance, money, money, money."

Indeed, a 2011 study by scholars at Harvard and Tufts found that whites, on average, believed that anti-white racism was a bigger problem than anti-black racism.

Yes, you read that right! So let me push back at what I see as smug white delusion. Here are a few reasons race relations deserve more attention, not less:

- The net worth of the average black household in the United States is \$6,314, compared with \$110,500 for the average white household, according to 2011 census data. The gap has worsened in the last decade, and the United States now has a greater wealth gap by race than South Africa did during apartheid. (Whites in America on average own almost 18 times as much as blacks; in South Africa in 1970, the ratio was about 15 times.)
- The black-white income gap is roughly 40 percent greater today than it was in 1967.
- A black boy born today in the United States has a life expectancy five years shorter than that of a white boy.
- Black students are significantly less likely to attend schools offering advanced math and science courses than white students. They are three times as likely to be suspended and expelled, setting them up for educational failure.
- Because of the catastrophic experiment in mass incarceration, black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated today than employed, according to a study from the National Bureau of Economic Research. Nearly 70 percent of middle-aged black men who never graduated from high school have been imprisoned.

All these constitute not a black problem or a white problem, but an American problem. When so much talent is underemployed and overincarcerated, the entire country suffers.

Some straight people have gradually changed their attitudes toward gays after realizing that their friends — or children — were gay. Researchers have found that male judges are more sympathetic to women's rights when they have daughters. Yet because of the de facto segregation of America, whites are unlikely to have many black friends: A study from the Public Religion Research Institute suggests that in a network of 100 friends, a white person, on average, has one black friend.

That's unfortunate, because friends open our eyes. I was shaken after a well-known black woman told me about looking out her front window and seeing that police officers had her teenage son down on the ground after he had stepped out of their upscale house because they thought he was a prowler. "Thank God he didn't run," she said.

One black friend tells me that he freaked out when his white fiancée purchased an item in a store and promptly threw the receipt away. "What are you doing?" he protested to her. He is a highly successful and well-educated professional but would never dream of tossing a receipt for fear of being accused of shoplifting.

Some readers will protest that the stereotype is rooted in reality: Young black men are disproportionately likely to be criminals. That's true — and complicated. "There's nothing more painful to me," the Rev. Jesse Jackson once said, "than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery — then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved."

All this should be part of the national conversation on race, as well, and prompt a drive to help young black men end up in jobs and stable families rather than in crime or jail. We have policies with a robust record of creating opportunity: home visitation programs like Nurse-Family Partnership; early education initiatives like Educare and Head Start; programs for troubled adolescents like Youth Villages; anti-gang and anti-crime initiatives like Becoming a Man; efforts to prevent teen pregnancies like the Carrera curriculum; job training like Career Academies; and job incentives like the earned-income tax credit.

The best escalator to opportunity may be education, but that escalator is broken for black boys growing up in neighborhoods with broken schools. We fail those boys before they fail us.

So a starting point is for those of us in white America to wipe away any self-satisfaction about racial progress. Yes, the progress is real, but so are the challenges. The gaps demand a wrenching, soul-searching excavation of our national soul, and the first step is to acknowledge that the central race challenge in America today is not the suffering of whites.

When Whites Just Don't Get It, Part 2 By Nicholas Kristoff

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In my column a week ago, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” I took aim at what I called “smug white delusion” about race relations in America, and readers promptly fired back at what they perceived as a smugly deluded columnist.

Readers grudgingly accepted the grim statistics I cited — such as the wealth disparity between blacks and whites in America today exceeding what it was in South Africa during apartheid — but many readers put the blame on African-Americans themselves.

“Probably has something to do with their unwillingness to work,” Nils tweeted.

Nancy protested on my Facebook page: “We can’t fix their problems. It’s up to every black individual to stop the cycle of fatherless homes, stop the cycle of generations on welfare.”

There was a deluge of such comments, some toxic, but let me try to address three principal arguments that I think prop up white delusion.

First, if blacks are poor or in prison, it’s all their fault. “Blacks don’t get it,” Bruce tweeted. “Choosing to be cool vs. getting good grades is a bad choice. We all start from 0.”

Huh? Does anybody really think that we all take off from the same starting line?

Slavery and post-slavery oppression left a legacy of broken families, poverty, racism, hopelessness and internalized self-doubt. Some responded to discrimination and lack of opportunity by behaving in self-destructive ways. One study found that African-American children on welfare heard only 29 percent as many words in their first few years as children of professional parents. Those kids never catch up, partly because they’re more likely to attend broken schools. Sure, some make bad choices, but they’ve often been on a trajectory toward failure from the time they were babies.

These are whirlpools that are difficult to escape, especially when society is suspicious and unsympathetic. Japan has a stigmatized minority group, the burakumin, whose members once held jobs considered unclean. But although this is an occupational minority rather than a racial one, it spawned an underclass that was tormented by crime, educational failure, and substance abuse similar to that of the American underclass. So instead of pointing fingers, let’s adopt some of the programs that I’ve cited with robust evidence showing that they bridge the chasm.

But look at Asians, Mark protests on my Google Plus page: Vietnamese arrived in poverty — and are now school valedictorians. Why can’t blacks be like that?

There are plenty of black valedictorians. But bravo to Asians and other immigrant groups for thriving in America with a strong cultural emphasis on education, diligence and delay of self-gratification. We should support programs with a good record of inculcating such values in disadvantaged children. But we also need to understand that many young people of color see no hope of getting ahead, and that despair can be self-fulfilling.

A successful person can say: “I worked hard in school. I got a job. The system worked.” Good for you. But you probably also owe your success to parents who read to you, to decent schools, to social expectations that you would end up in college rather than prison. So count your blessings for winning the lottery of birth — and think about mentoring a kid who didn’t.

Look, the basic reason young black men are regarded with suspicion is that they’re disproportionately criminals. The root problem isn’t racism. It’s criminality.

It’s true that blacks accounted for 55 percent of robbery arrests in 2012, according to F.B.I. statistics. But, by my calculations, it’s also true that 99.9 percent of blacks were not arrested and charged with robbery in 2012, yet they are still tarred by this pernicious stereotype.

Criminality is real. So is inequity. So is stereotyping.

The United States Sentencing Commission concluded that black men get sentences one-fifth longer than white men for committing the same crimes. In Louisiana, a study found that a person is 97 percent more likely to be sentenced to death for murdering a white person than a black person.

Mass incarceration means that the United States imprisons a higher proportion of its black population than apartheid South Africa did, further breaking up families. And careful studies find that employers are less likely to respond to a job inquiry and résumé when a

typically black name is on it. Society creates opportunity and resiliency for middle-class white boys who make mistakes; it is unforgiving of low-income black boys.

Of course, we need to promote personal responsibility. But there is plenty of fault to go around, and too many whites are obsessed with cultivating personal responsibility in the black community while refusing to accept any responsibility themselves for a system that manifestly does not provide equal opportunity. Yes, young black men need to take personal responsibility.

And so does white America.