

10.5 Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States

Learning Objectives

1. Describe three explanations for why racial and ethnic inequality exist in the United States.
2. Provide two examples of white privilege.

Probably the best way to begin to understand racial and ethnic inequality in the United States is to read first-hand accounts by such great writers of color as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Piri Thomas, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X, all of whom wrote moving, autobiographical accounts of the bigotry and discrimination they faced while growing up. Sociologists and urban ethnographers have written their own accounts of the daily lives of people of color, and these, too, are well worth reading. One of the classics here is Elliot Liebow's (1967) *Tally's Corner*, a study of black men and their families in Washington, DC.

Statistics also give a picture of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States. We can begin to get a picture of this inequality by examining racial and ethnic differences in such life chances as income, education, and health. [Table 10.3 “Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States”](#) presents data on some of these differences.

Table 10.3 Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States

	White	African American	Latino	Asian	Native American
Median family income, 2009 (\$)	67,341	38,409	39,730	75,027	39,740 (2007)
Persons who are college educated, 2008 (%)	32.6	19.6	13.3	52.6	12.9 (2007)
Persons in poverty, 2009 (%)	9.4	25.8	25.3	12.5	24.2 (2008)
Infant mortality (number of infant deaths per 1,000 births), 2005	5.8	13.6	5.6	4.9	8.1

Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab>; MacDorman, M., & Mathews, T. J. (2008). Recent trends in infant mortality in the United States. *NCHS Data Brief, Number 9 (October)*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db09.htm#arethere>; Ogunwole, S. U. (2006). *We the people: American Indians and Alaska natives in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Historical income tables: Families. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families/index.html>.

The data are clear: U.S. racial and ethnic groups differ dramatically in their life chances. Compared to whites, for example, African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have much lower family incomes and much higher rates of poverty; they are also much less likely to have college degrees. In addition, African Americans and Native Americans have much higher infant mortality rates than whites: black infants, for example, are more than twice as likely as white infants to die. These comparisons obscure some differences *within* some of the groups just mentioned. Among Latinos, for example, Cuban Americans have fared better than Latinos overall, and Puerto Ricans worse. Similarly, among Asians, people with Chinese and Japanese backgrounds have fared better than those from Cambodia, Korea, and Vietnam.

Asian Americans have higher family incomes than whites on the average. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority,” some Asians have been less able than others to achieve economic success, and stereotypes of Asians and discrimination against them remain serious problems.

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Although [Table 10.3 “Selected Indicators of Racial and Ethnic Inequality in the United States”](#) shows that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans fare much worse than whites, it presents a more complex pattern for Asian Americans. Compared to whites, Asian Americans have higher family incomes and are more likely to hold college degrees, but they also have a higher poverty rate. Thus many Asian Americans do relatively well, while others fare relatively worse, as just noted. Although Asian Americans are often viewed as a “model minority,” meaning that they have achieved economic success despite not being white, some Asians have been less able than others to climb the economic ladder. Moreover, stereotypes of Asian Americans and discrimination against them remain serious problems (Chou & Feagin, 2008; Fong, 2007). Even the overall success rate of Asian Americans obscures the fact that their occupations and incomes are often lower than would be expected from their educational attainment. They thus have to work harder for their success than whites do (Hurh & Kim, 1999).

Explaining Racial and Ethnic Inequality

Why do racial and ethnic inequality exist? Why do African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and some Asian Americans fare worse than whites? In answering these questions, many people have some very strong opinions.

One long-standing explanation is that blacks and other people of color are *biologically inferior*: they are naturally less intelligent and have other innate flaws that keep them from getting a good education and otherwise doing what needs to be done to achieve the American Dream. As discussed earlier, this racist view is no longer common today. However, whites historically used this belief to justify slavery, lynchings, the harsh treatment of Native Americans in the 1800s, and lesser forms of discrimination. In 1994, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray revived this view in their controversial book, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), in which they argued that the low IQ scores of African Americans, and of poor people more generally, reflect their genetic inferiority in the area of intelligence. African Americans' low innate intelligence, they said, accounts for their poverty and other problems. Although the news media gave much attention to their book, few scholars agreed with its views, and many condemned the book's argument as a racist way of "blaming the victim" (Gould, 1994).

Another explanation of racial and ethnic inequality focuses on supposed *cultural deficiencies* of African Americans and other people of color (Murray, 1984). These deficiencies include a failure to value hard work and, for African Americans, a lack of strong family ties, and are said to account for the poverty and other problems facing these minorities. This view echoes the "culture of poverty" argument presented in [Chapter 6 "Groups and Organizations"](#) and is certainly popular today: as we saw earlier, more than half of non-Latino whites think that blacks' poverty is due to their lack of motivation and willpower. Ironically some scholars find support for this "cultural deficiency" view in the experience of many Asian Americans, whose success is often attributed to their culture's emphasis on hard work, educational attainment, and strong family ties (Min, 2005). If that is true, these scholars say, then the lack of success of other people of color stems from the failure of their own cultures to value these attributes.

How accurate is the cultural deficiency argument? Whether people of color have "deficient" cultures remains hotly debated (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Steele, 2006). Many social scientists find little or no evidence of cultural problems in minority communities and say that the belief in cultural deficiencies is an example of symbolic racism that blames the victim. Yet other social scientists, including those

sympathetic to the structural problems facing people of color, believe that certain cultural problems do exist, but they are careful to say that these cultural problems arise out of the structural problems. For example, Elijah Anderson (1999) wrote that a “street culture” or “oppositional culture” exists among African Americans in urban areas that contributes to high levels of violent behavior, but he emphasized that this type of culture stems from the segregation, extreme poverty, and other difficulties these citizens face in their daily lives and helps them deal with these difficulties. Thus even if cultural problems do exist, they should not obscure the fact that structural problems are responsible for the cultural ones.

A third explanation for U.S. racial and ethnic inequality is based in conflict theory and falls into the blaming-the-system approach outlined in [Chapter 1 “Sociology and the Sociological Perspective”](#). This view attributes racial and ethnic inequality to institutional and individual discrimination and a lack of opportunity in education and other spheres of life (Feagin, 2006). Segregated housing, for example, prevents African Americans from escaping the inner city and from moving to areas with greater employment opportunities. Employment discrimination keeps the salaries of people of color much lower than they would be otherwise. The schools that many children of color attend every day are typically overcrowded and underfunded. As these problems continue from one generation to the next, it becomes very difficult for people already at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder to climb up it because of their race and ethnicity.

The Benefits of Being White

American whites enjoy certain privileges merely because they are white. For example, they usually do not have to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white, and they can count on being able to move into any neighborhood they desire as long as they can afford the rent or mortgage. They also generally do not have to worry about being the victims of hate crimes based on their race and to be mistaken for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid.

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Before we leave this section on racial and ethnic inequality, it is important to discuss the advantages that U.S. whites enjoy in their daily lives *simply because they are white*. Social scientists term these advantages white privilege and say that whites benefit from being white whether or not they are aware of their advantages (McIntosh, 2007). This chapter’s discussion of the problems facing people of color points to some of these advantages. For example, whites can usually drive a car at night or walk down a street without having to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white. They can count on being able to move into any neighborhood they desire to as long as they can afford the rent or mortgage. They generally do not have to fear being passed up for promotion simply because

of their race. College students who are white can live in dorms without having to worry that racial slurs will be directed their way. White people in general do not have to worry about being the victims of hate crimes based on their race. They can be seated in a restaurant without having to worry that they will be served more slowly or not at all because of their skin color. If they are in a hotel, they do not have to think that someone will mistake them for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid. If they are trying to hail a taxi, they do not have to worry about the taxi driver ignoring them because the driver fears he or she will be robbed.

Social scientist Robert W. Terry (1981, p. 120) once summarized white privilege as follows: “*To be white in America is not to have to think about it.* Except for hard-core racial supremacists, the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or ignoring one’s own whiteness” (emphasis in original). For people of color in the United States, it is not an exaggeration to say that race and ethnicity is a daily fact of their existence. Yet whites do not generally have to think about being white. As all of us go about our daily lives, this basic difference is one of the most important manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

Key Takeaways

- Three explanations for racial and ethnic inequality in the United States are that (a) people of color are biologically inferior, now considered a racist explanation; (b) people of color have cultural deficiencies; and (c) people of color face many structural obstacles, lack of opportunity, and discriminatory practices.
- Whites benefit from being white, whether or not they realize it. This benefit is called white privilege.

For Your Review

1. Which of the three explanations of racial and ethnic inequality makes the most sense to you? Why?
2. If you are white, describe a time when you benefited from white privilege, whether or not you realized it at the time. If you are a person of color, describe an experience when you would have benefited if you had been white.

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