

WHITE PRIVILEGE FACT SHEET

White Birminghamians for Black Lives

In the U.S., our relationships and the conditions in which we live are based to a large extent on our race. From birth until death, the whole range of our opportunities — what geographic community we will live in, whether we will live where the air is clean, how well-equipped our schools will be, whether our teachers will be educated in the field they are teaching us, what sort of job we will be hired for, whether police will behave toward us in a protective or a menacing manner, how likely we are to be arrested and imprisoned, whether we are likely to be allowed to vote, whether we will be able to protect and provide for our children, whether we can have a comfortable retirement and pass wealth on to our children and grandchildren, what type of healthcare we will have, whether healthy food will be readily available to us, the quality of our housing, how long we are likely to live — are greatly affected by our skin color.

White privilege is a fact of life in our country — a major one. The urgent need to redress these injustices is based not just on historic racial discrimination but on present discrimination as well. It is the compounding effect — the fact that in each generation African Americans in particular have been methodically deprived of the advantages reserved for whites — that accounts for the vast differences along racial lines in family wealth that we see today.

A few factors leading up to now are:

- Agricultural work and domestic work, two categories of work that black people have occupied in large numbers, were excluded from both the Social Security system¹ and the National Labor Relations Act² when these programs were enacted. Whether or not these exclusions were based on racism, the impact meant that people who worked in these industries could not participate in the program that did more than any other to lift the aged from poverty and into a dignified retirement, and did not have the protections to organize themselves for better wages and conditions that other categories of workers had.
- The social safety net in this country has largely been funded through tax breaks and deductions for favored companies and individuals rather than through direct spending from a common treasury on services to benefit everyone. Set up at a time when almost all good jobs were reserved for white men, this system has resulted in an invisible “white socialism”, making it easier for those with qualified employment to participate in programs covering health insurance, pension, child care, commuting costs, home ownership, and college savings, and making it difficult if not impossible for others to enter the middle class.³
- Millions of acres in the west and mid-west were given to settlers of European descent, and public colleges were set up to teach them efficient farming methods.⁴ At the same time, enslaved people of African descent, once freed, were simply turned out without acreage or a means of livelihood. In spite of this, between Emancipation and 1920, African Americans purchased land and established 925,000 black-owned farms. Subsequently, however, due to systemic discrimination in lending by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a stacked legal system, corrupt lawyers, and predatory developers, by 1975, that number had decreased to 45,000 and is still declining.⁵

¹ The Decision to Exclude Agricultural and Domestic Workers from the 1935 Social Security Act, Larry DeWitt, Social Security website, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v70n4/v70n4p49.html>

² Legal Obstacles to U.S. Workers’ Exercise of Freedom of Association, Human Rights Watch, [hrw.org, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/uslabor/USLBR008-08.htm](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/uslabor/USLBR008-08.htm)

³ Unspeakable Realities Block Universal Health Coverage in America, Chris Ladd, March 13, 2017, forbes.com

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4vdfugMFbg>

⁵ African Americans Have Lost Untold Acres of Land Over the Last Century, Leah Douglas, The Nation, July 17-24, 2017

- Discriminatory lending practices have made home ownership, the primary way in which white families leave wealth to the next generation, difficult if not impossible for African Americans. Both local governments (through zoning ordinances), and the federal government (through New Deal home-ownership programs), redlined black neighborhoods, increasing the value of white homes and relegating black ones to inferior status.⁶
- Following World War II, African Americans did not benefit nearly as much from the G.I. Bill as European Americans. Provisions in the law pertaining to both home ownership and higher education were administered in keeping with Jim Crow segregation practices wherever those prevailed, and the educational and economic gap between white and black nationally widened under the effects of the G.I. Bill.⁷
- African Americans were targeted for sub-prime loans leading up the housing recession of 2008. This caused Black households to experience seriously greater declines in household wealth than white households. These losses will mean that the ability of future generations to accumulate wealth will be hampered significantly.⁸
- Discrimination and abuse by police and court systems, and the “war on drugs” and its resulting mass incarceration, have disrupted and ruined millions of individual lives and deprived countless children of the attention and provision of their parents, destroying families and communities.
- Race-based gerrymandering ensures that the votes of black people have less impact than the votes of white people, and millions have been deprived of their right to vote because of a criminal record. Voter suppression tactics including i.d. requirements, purging of voter rolls, closing of registration offices and polling places, restriction of early voting, and voter intimidation, result in the disenfranchisement of African American communities in particular.

These are just some of the ways in which black people have been systematically discriminated against, and white people systematically privileged, by government and corporate policies.

There is nothing wrong with being European American. That is not the problem. The problem comes when we as white people don’t realize, or when we refuse to see, that we hold special privileges assigned to us because we are white, and when we don’t accept our responsibility to speak out against racial privilege and work to end it.

It is time for white people to come out as who we really are — people who love justice, who will not be silent when others are deprived of basic human rights, and who will work hard to bring our nation into line with the ideals we have always espoused but not yet achieved. Our own and our children’s futures depend on it.

White Birminghamians for Black Lives holds witness every Friday. Join us and learn about organized efforts in Birmingham to dismantle white privilege and achieve racial justice. Everyone is needed and all are welcome.

For more information, please email wb4bl@att.net.

Like us on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/whitebirminghamiansforblacklives/>

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⁶ Don’t Just Protect Affirmative Action From Trump — Demand More, Bryce Covert, The Nation, 8/25/17

⁷ Wikipedia article, African Americans and the G.I. Bill, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Americans_and_the_G.I._Bill

⁸ Impact of the U.S. Housing Crisis on the Racial Wealth Gap Across Generations, Sarah Burd-Sharps and Rebecca Rasch, Social Science Research Council, https://www.aclu.org/files/field_document/discrimlend_final.pdf