## “When Whites Just Don’t Get It”

# **After Ferguson, Race Deserves More Attention, Not Less**

## [Nicholas Kristof](http://www.nytimes.com/column/nicholas-kristof)

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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](http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/)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](http://ase.tufts.edu/psychology/sommerslab/documents/raceinternortonsommers2011.pdf) 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 t[han South Africa did during apartheid](http://jonjeter.wordpress.com/2013/10/24/worse-than-apartheid-black-in-obamas-america-3/). (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](http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/expansive-survey-americas-public-schools-reveals-troubling-racial-disparities)than white students. They are three times as likely [to be suspended and expelled](http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf), 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](http://www.nber.org/papers/w20283.pdf). Nearly 70 percent of middle-aged black men who never graduated from high school [have been imprisoned](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2014/05/10-crime-facts).

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](http://scholar.harvard.edu/msen/publications/identifying-judicial-empathy-does-having-daughters-cause-judges-rule-womens-issues) 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](http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/08/analysis-social-network/) 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](http://www.nursefamilypartnership.org/); early education initiatives like [Educare](http://www.educareschools.org/home/index.php) and [Head Start](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs); programs for troubled adolescents like [Youth Villages](http://www.youthvillages.org/); anti-gang and anti-crime initiatives like [Becoming a Man](http://www.youth-guidance.org/our-programs/b-a-m-becoming-a-man/); efforts to prevent teen pregnancies like [the Carrera curriculum](http://stopteenpregnancy.childrensaidsociety.org/); job training [like Career Academies](http://www.mdrc.org/project/career-academies-exploring-college-and-career-options-ecco#featured_content); 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.