

Set Up To Fail

By Matt Gurbarg

I've always had a fascination with trains. As a child, I loved watching my dad's model train set, and having him help me build one of my own. I also loved riding on trains and looking out the window and watching the scenery go by. More recently, I've noted how interesting it is to observe the scenery and passengers during the forty-minute SEPTA regional rail ride from my suburban town northeast of Philadelphia into center city. When I get on the inbound train, the few passengers are likely to be mostly white business people commuting to their job in the city, as my dad used to do. This predominantly white passenger trend continues for the few subsequent suburban stops, during which I see many large, beautiful houses with large amounts of land. As the train gets closer to center city, I see more row houses, graffiti, junked cars, and notice more passengers commuting in blue-collar job attire, and more black passengers. The trend is slightly disrupted at the Temple University stop, where I see white students getting on and off the train. By the time the train reaches center city, the passengers are a diverse mix. Just from this short train ride, I can observe that white people tend to have the best jobs, are most likely to attend a university, and most likely to live in the most desirable places. These facts are results of institutional racism. The results of institutional racism are everywhere. For some, institutional racism remains intentionally hidden, while others are surrounded by it every day.

I, and many white students like myself learned about racism in grade school only from a historical perspective. My peers and I were taught about the racial aspects of

events such as the Civil War, Apartheid in South Africa, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the American Civil Rights movement. I learned about racism as a single definite thing, when in reality, racism takes many complex forms. As a white student attending school in a township that is 88% white, 10% Asian, and 1% black, several forms of racism remained hidden while living in “The Lower Moreland bubble”. The Bubble is an infamous term commonly used by locals to describe the small, wealthy, and monotonous nature of the suburban township, and its bordering with the racially and economically diverse city of Philadelphia. I never asked myself what caused the formation and maintenance of the Lower Moreland Bubble, and why I observed what I did on train rides into the city.

My peers and I were left unaware of one of the most damaging forms of racism. Institutional racism is racial inequality that is held in place by a system intentionally or unintentionally. It is the type of racism that sculpted my observations on the train and the demographics of my area. Literally, it is the kind of racism they don't teach in school. Even as an 18-year old high school senior, I was unaware of the kind of racism that many minorities discover the hard way and often from a young age. The very fact that I was being taught about racism at only a surface level, surrounded by almost all white students and staff in a small, suburban, highly ranked school district where household income was over twice the national average, illustrates just one example of institutional racism.

Institutional racism is everywhere, but it exists in one of its most damaging forms in the American education system. The people with the highest education make the most

money. The master goal of the education system is based on this tendency. Public schools are funded partially by property taxes, so families who can afford to live in wealthy areas receive the best K-12 education for their children, and can afford the best colleges. This system makes it very difficult for lower class families to improve their economic standing over generations, but what does this system have to do with race? Remember that we are only a mere sixty years from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibited written segregation and overt discrimination in the education system among other areas. In Catherine Hansman's article *Beyond Diversity: Dismantling Barriers in Education*, she writes, "The focus now needs to be on understanding the systems and processes that were developed when the maintenance of an overt racist structure was the intention" (Hansman 1999). Currently, we are less than two generations from the people of color who were legally denied educational opportunity, and therefore economic opportunity. In the 21st century, Hispanics and African Americans make two thirds the income that white people make. This is due to the combination of the overt economic disadvantage of minorities during the Jim Crow era, and many vestiges that are still in place from that time. Minorities have always made less money in America, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 didn't change that fact. Nobody expected immediate equal opportunity via the Civil Rights Act, but still today there are countless systems which promote racial inequality.

The achievement gap in the education system between whites and minorities can be attributed to what causes it; the economic disparity. We live in a time where a college education is more valuable than ever, and costs more than it ever has. Lani Guinier, civil

rights theorist at Harvard Law School writes “...just as the business enterprise was responsible for the rags-to-riches dream..., so the campus community has now become the principle of guardian of our traditional opportunitarian ideals” (Guinier 2003). It has become harder and harder to increase one’s economic standing, and old money remains where it is, in the pockets of “college families”. According to the College Board, in 2001, before the economic downturn in 2008, only 54% of students whose parents didn’t continue their education past high school enrolled in college immediately after high school. Only 36% of students whose parents had less than a high school diploma enrolled in college after high school. In the time since 2001, the cost of public universities in 2014 dollars has doubled, further increasing the disparity between rich and poor. The poor, who because of years of written racial discrimination, tend to be largely minorities, are going to stay impoverished because of the design of the education system. Lani Guinier explains the alarming damage this system causes.

“At selective institutions of higher education, admissions decisions have a special political impact: rationing access to social influence and power, and training leaders for public office... Those admitted as students then graduate as citizens who shape business, education, the arts, and the law for the next generation” (Guinier 2003).

Those in power in our government and businesses are primarily white, and were wealthy enough to afford a college education. The priorities of those who shape the country we live in are hugely disconnected from the priorities of large groups of American citizens, reducing the likelihood of fixing institutional racism.

Looking at a racial demographic map, you'll likely see primarily white residents surrounding a major city, in which there will be racially defined neighborhoods. Switch to an income map, and you'll almost always see the same sectionality. Looking at a demographic map of center city Philadelphia, I observe mostly white residents living near the expensive business and arts districts of the city, and primarily black, Hispanic, and Asian neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity. West of Center City, University City, comprised of Drexel University and The University of Pennsylvania, is a primarily white neighborhood mostly surrounded by black neighborhoods. A similar trend can be found at Temple University. The suburbs surrounding the city, including my town are primarily white, and have a higher income than the urban minority neighborhoods. Comparing economics and race will likely yield the same observations anywhere in the country. Wealthy people can afford a large suburban house, land, and to commute by car to their job in the city. The Housing Act of 1937 and others like it supplied white America with subsidies from the government so more families could afford to own a home. Black families never had access to such economic favors from the government, and this fact shapes the race map today. Racism will continue to be a problem in America as long as income is correlated with race. Just because there are laws that prevent the intentional and direct disadvantage of minorities, the complex systems operating in America uphold the same institutional racism that has been around for centuries.

The hardest part about working to eliminate racism and achieving racial equality is the fact that we can't simply ignore inequality. In many ways, race in America is so

damaged that simply enforcing equality among the races isn't a viable option. Doing so can be compared to treating all patients in a hospital the same way and with the same urgency, despite varying maladies and injuries. Minorities, because of racism past and present, can't simply be thought of as "equal" to whites. The multitude of challenges minorities face and have faced for centuries eliminates any practical real equality at this time. The country has come closer to racial equality since written racial discrimination was eliminated from legislation in the 1960s, but the country is far from recovery. Indirect racism in our socioeconomic system continues to persist, which must be eliminated if the country has any hope of achieving true racial equality.

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