

# Being Black in Today's American Society: The Truth about Non-Post-Racial America

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The death of a Missouri teenager, Michael Brown, who was two days away from starting college, revived a nationwide conversation about race, the police's inhuman-ity, and the risk of being young and non-white in America. The United States of America is one of the most powerful countries in the world, known as "the land of opportunity", where the national anthem includes "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave", where Barack Obama was elected in 2008 as the 44<sup>th</sup> president and the first African-American to be elected to that office. However, is it really "the land of the free" for all citizens while black people get shot by the police when they are unarmed, or they are racially profiled illegally while just walking down the street with their friends and get arrested because they look suspicious, or the police feel like arresting them?

A black teenager, Hamza Jeylani, commented in a YouTube video on news of a young black man getting shot by a police officer: "There's stuff that's going on like this in the world. I could have been a person like this in the world, getting shot by a police officer for no reason." That is how a lot of young black people feel about living in America although slavery ended in the United States 150 years ago and Barack Obama has been president for almost 7 years. Though Obama's election gave citizens hopes of improving racial issues such as racial profiling and prejudice, black people still have to protect themselves from those who are supposed to protect the citizens and deep-seated racism still exists in the United States.

### History of African-Americans: Slaves to the President

In 1619, the first African slaves arrived in Virginia, and that was the beginning of slavery in the United States. In the year 1810, there were 1.2 million slaves in the U.S. ("Growth and Entrenchment of Slavery"). Even leaders of the movement for American independence and freedom such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington owned slaves themselves. After 4 years of Civil War from 1861 to 1865, slavery was finally effectively ended, but that didn't mean that African-Americans became completely free. Their lives started changing slightly for the better with getting the right to vote; however, they were still lynched, segregated and discriminated against.

Lynching mostly took place against African-American men in

the southern states after the American Civil War through the 1960s, and it killed thousands of black people just because they were a minority, voted for the wrong party or looked suspicious. Around the time when lynching was about to end, a lot of restaurants and transportation segregated black people. On December 1, 1955, an African-American woman, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama and was arrested and fined. The influence of the segregation and her arrest brought about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, beginning in 1955, in which African-Americans refused to ride city buses in Montgomery to protest segregated seating. The boycott lasted until December 20, 1956, and the buses were desegregated on the next day. The leader of this boycott, Martin Luther King Jr., became a civil rights activist and gave a speech at the March on Washington in 1963. In his speech, he said "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" Decades after his well-known speech, the first African-American president of the United States, Barack Obama, was elected, and his election was one of the biggest historical changing events ever and was a big step forward to make Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream come true.

### Barack Obama's Presidency

Obama's victory indeed gave hope, not only to black people but

also to all Americans and even to the world. His victory showed the world that the color of one's skin doesn't matter to be a leader of a country and that all races are created as equal. "Our country is showing its forward evolution, that the color of one's skin cannot inhibit one's ability, and that's worthy of celebration," said Corey Booker, mayor of Newark, N.J. ("What Obama's Election Really Means to Black America"). Many people had high expectations for Obama to improve racial tensions and violence in the country when he was elected in 2008. However, it seems like racial tensions between African-Americans and Caucasians hasn't been improved at all or it has become even worse during the Obama era.

The survey Gallup Poll has done over 10 years on race relations between whites and blacks proves that people are not quite satisfied with the relations. In 2015, 8% of whites feel relations between the two races are very good although more than 10% of them had been feeling it was very good until 2013. Also, total numbers of whites who feel the relations are either very good or somewhat good had always been more than 65% until 2013 when Gallup Poll started the survey, but the total number for 2015 dropped to 45%, which means more than half of whites feel the relations are not good. The numbers of blacks who feel the relations are very bad had never been over 14% until this year, and the number increased to 24% in this year ("Gallup Historical Trends"). Moreover, it is obvious that the opinion between the two races on the equality of police treatment is completely split from another survey that PBS Newshour/Marist Poll did on the

topic titled "How Equal Is American Opportunity?" Whereas the numbers of whites who don't feel the police treatment is equal between blacks and whites is 60%, the numbers of blacks who don't is 90%, which shows President Obama's presidency hasn't been successful for improving race relations even after his second term.

### Young Men's Deaths Lead to Nationwide Protests

The shooting of a black teenager, Michael Brown, which took place in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, brought about the nationwide activist movement called "Black Lives Matter." According to the New York Times in "What Happened in Ferguson?," on the day Michael Brown was killed, he and his friend Dorian Johnson stole a number of packages of cigarillos from a local convenience store and got caught by the store clerk. Officer Wilson arrived and encountered Brown and Johnson as they were walking down the street. They both fled, but Brown stopped and moved toward the officer. The officer fired at Brown several times and killed him. Testimonies are different from the officer and Johnson who was with Brown when the shooting happened. However, it is an indisputable fact that the young unarmed man was killed by the police officer and the officer did not face federal charges. Several months after Michael Brown's death, a 25-year-old African-American man, Freddie Gray, was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department, and his arrest led to his death. He was arrested because he was trying to run away

from the officers when he saw them, but nobody really knows why he ran away. He was taken to the police station, but he was unconscious when he arrived and had a severe spinal injury. He passed away a week after the arrest. The police officers charged in his arrest and death have pleaded not guilty.

Hundreds of black citizens of Baltimore started to protest against mistreatment of Freddie Gray and the police actions on April 18, 2015 outside of the Western District police station. The protest turned very violent, about 100 high school students began throwing bricks and bottles at police, destroyed patrol cars and more than ten police officers were injured, according to a CNN report on the Baltimore riots by Holly Yan and Dana Ford. Protests like this still have been happening across the country. People have been protesting against the deaths of black people in killings by law enforcement officers, police brutality and racial inequality as well as racial profiling. Protesters want their voices to be heard, and these struggles are not what they signed up for when they were born.

### Racial Profiling

Getting shot and killed by a police officer may sound too exaggerated, but that's what has actually been happening. Also, racial profiling is one of the things that black people experience daily. American Civil Liberties Union defines racial profiling as "the discriminatory practice by law enforcement officials of targeting individuals for suspicion of crime based on the individ-

ual's race, ethnicity, religion or national origin" and says it is "patently illegal." In spite of the fact that racial profiling is illegal, it is not often mentioned by media because "liberal and conservative pundits alike tell us that we now live in a post-racial America", Lani Guinier describes in the introduction of the book *Twelve Angry Men*.

In the book, Nii-Odoi Glover, originally from Washington D.C., shares his experiences with the police which started off when he was a teenager:

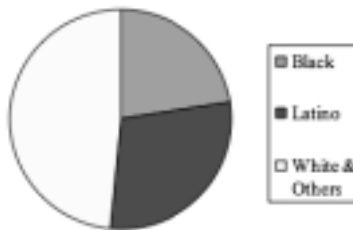
The cops would stop me and my friends and verbally harass us about where we were going and what we were doing all under the pretence that they were "looking for someone that fits your description." This was the socialization that we went through. Even though we came from diverse backgrounds, were of various ages, and had various levels of education, we were all stopped and harassed regularly by the cops. (72)

As he grew older, he would be stopped and harassed by the police at least once a month, sometimes three times a month just because he was black and looked suspicious to them. He has even told that he was searched by the police when he was watching his daughter in a park, that someone called the police and told them that "a black man was in the park watching kids." He explains a black man is the "usual suspect" to the police, and "half the time they'd get a black guy on some type of infraction or find a reason to lock him up." He has a job that lets him pay the bills and taxes that are supposed to secure his right to be protected. He

says:

Despite all that effort [of working hard to pay the bills and taxes], I am not a full citizen. I'm just a suspect. I'm someone who is not trusted to move about freely. This is the silent reality most black men have to live with. They won't say anything to you at work, it's not a part of their everyday conversation, but this is the reality. (75)

He is not the only one who feels that way. The California-born African-American rap-per, Kendrick Lamar, raps similarly how Glover describes living in America as a black man: "It's evident that I'm irrelevant to society/ that's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me" ("The Blacker the Berry").



New York Population in 2010

It might be hard to imagine how common it is for black people to be racially profiled, but numbers show it obviously. For example, the New York Police Department stopped citizens 601, 285 times in 2010. 54% of them were black, 33% were Latino and the rest were white and others, according to the analysis by the New York Civil Liberties Union. It's obvious that black people were stopped by the police the most among all the races, but are black



people the largest racial group that live in New York City? The answer is no; in the year of 2010, African-Americans made up to 22.8% of the total population, and Latino made up to 28.6%, and white, Asians and others made up to 48.6% according to NYC 2010 Census (14).

### Racial Injustice

In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*, an African-American man who has a wife and children, Tom Robinson, is accused of attacking Mayella Ewell, a white woman. All the witnesses say that Mayella was hit on the right side of her face, but in fact, there is no possibility that Tom Robinson attacked her since he can't use his left arm because it was injured when he was young. Although it is certain that he is innocent, he is sentenced to prison as the result of the trial and gets shot 17 times as he tries to escape. He was found guilty because he is a black man and nobody wanted to help him even though everyone knew that he was innocent. This book was published in 1960 during Civil Rights Movement and is fiction, but the author, Harper Lee based some of the events and characters in the novel on her own experiences, which means that racial injustice was a big issue even then. Many modern day racial injustice cases are like Tom Robinson's. For example, in 2015, Jason Goolsby, a black 18 years old college freshman claims he was harassed and assaulted by Washington D.C. police officers. Apparently, he was around a bank ATM with his friends and held the bank door open for a

white woman with a stroller. It is reported that the officers were responding to a 911 call reporting "suspicious people who may be trying to rob someone at the Citibank ATM lo-cated at 6<sup>th</sup> Street and Pennsylvania Avenue." The 911 call was made by the woman with the stroller. The police vehicle started following the teens, and the officers caught up with them and slammed Goolsby to the ground. Two officers twisted Goolsby's arm behind his back as he lay face down on the pavement and screamed "I'm not resisting!" Police later determined Goolsby committed no crime and let him go without a charge ("MailOnline" Jason Goolsby, by Snejana Farberov).

According to CNN Entertainment, an African-American rapper Wiz Khalifa was slammed to the ground and handcuffed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at Los Angels International Airport in August, 2015 for riding Hoverboards. A few weeks later, On Twitter, Yahoo Celebrity UK posted a picture of Brooklyn Beckham, son of David Beckham, riding a Hoverboard at the same airport where Wiz Khalifa was handcuffed, and the post says "literally love that Brooklyn Beckham rode his pink Wizboard through LAX airport" Wiz Khalifa was not allowed to ride his Hoverboard, but Brooklyn Beckham was not even stopped by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. U.S. Customs and Border Protection even said to CNN Entertainment on Wiz Khalifa's incident, they strive "to treat all travelers with respect and in a professional manner, while maintaining the focus of our mission to protect all citizens and visitors in the United States," but still they discriminate against Wiz Khalifa who is a black

man.

Sadly, African-Americans are self conscious about the fact that they won't be treated equally. The most popular rapper back in the 90s, Tupac Shakur, rapped "Cops give a damn about negro/ Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he's a hero" meaning police officers shoot black people for no apparent reasons, and the officer who kills the black man will be treated like a hero ("Changes"). It has been more than 20 years since the song was recorded, but many of the police officers who killed black men are still either fined or declared innocent and walk around cities. He also raps "cause both Black and White are smoking crack tonight." That doesn't just refer to "smoking crack", but he uses the reference here to emphasize the label that is specifically put on African-Americans. All races commit crimes, but the society encourages labeling Black people as "criminals."

Even while black people are shopping, some people suspect them as if those black people are stealing. There are many upsetting videos to watch on YouTube if you type "shopping while black." These videos are mostly taken by African-Americans while they are at stores and trying to shop. The videos catch store employees stalking the person who is taking the video because they think the person is stealing as the employees pretend like they are "fixing something" or "checking items." However, as Tu-pac raps "both Black and White are smoking crack", so you can't just determine African-Americans as criminals. Jessica Williams says in her book, 50 Facts That Should Change the World;

In one section of the I-95 highway running through Maryland, 17 per cent of drivers are black, but 73 per cent of those who are pulled over and searched are black. In the majority of cars searched in this manner, no drugs are found - and where they are, they are just as likely to be found in cars driven by white people. (142)

That explains well how the law is racially biased and that being a criminal is not a matter of the color of one's skin.

## Conclusion

There were so many of those who entrusted us with making this world a better place for everyone to live in and left us already. They dreamed of a multiracial democracy where people are not judged by the color of their skin, and it looked like their dreams had come true since Barack Obama was elected. What would they say if they were still alive today and see the "non-post-racial" America that Obama is leading? Martin Luther King Jr. might have been happy to see Barack Obama becoming the president, but Tupac Shakur might have said "See? I was right." His song "Changes" which was recorded in 1992 includes "we ain't ready to see a black president." After 16 years, the black president era has come, and his presidency is about to end in 2016. Even though Barack Obama has been the president for 7 years, his presidency didn't make the racial tensions between black and white in America or made the tensions even worse as numbers show. Nobody was really ready for a black president, in

fact.

Nii-Odoi Glover says that his humanity is being chipped away by society because of the inequality that he has to face outside of the door every day and that he wonders if he will ever heal from these events, also "I'm reminded of what the philosopher Hegel said: 'Each of us can know that we are free and independent persons only if we see that others recognize us as free.' I wonder when I will really be free." As long as African-Americans feel their lives are irrelevant to the society, America will never be the land of the free. As long as they are rejected to be in a store because the store employee thinks it's inappropriate for them to shop at the store or accused of shoplifting, America will never be the land of the free. As long as they are afraid of the police arresting them, harassing them or shooting them for no reason and people kill them for no apparent reasons and those murderers don't face federal charges as they should, America will never be the land of the free.

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