

## The effects of race, poverty and equal opportunity In America

Published: 05:11 p.m., Wednesday, March 3, 2010

By [Eric J. Cooper](#)

It's said that the opinions of other people needn't become our reality. Try telling that to a black or brown child growing up in poverty in America.

Among the societal influences these children have to confront are the following.

n Two-thirds of Americans believe many African-Americans have difficulty getting ahead in life because of personal factors, according to a 2007 [Pew Research Center](#) survey. Just 19 percent blamed racial discrimination. Such conclusions seem to be fueled by media, which, inadvertently or intentionally, reinforce stereotypes about black culture and innate intelligence. By contrast, a substantial majority of Europeans surveyed in 1990 by the [Commission of the European Communities](#) concluded that structural obstacles, rather than individual explanations, cause poverty.

- Social scientist [Charles Murray](#) of the [American Enterprise Institute](#) continues to suggest that intelligence is the salient reason for achievement and opportunity gaps between black, brown and white Americans, despite overwhelming neuroscience research data to the contrary.

Students of color and those challenged by poverty take these opinions to heart and make them their own. The [National Urban Alliance for Effective Education](#), the education advocacy nonprofit with which I am affiliated, sees it over and over. For example, a tutoring volunteer in an Indiana school district said some children told him that "the newspaper says we're not going to pass the state test." When he asked them if they thought they would, a girl replied, "Well, they don't think we will, so we probably won't." And when the volunteer talked to students about college, a boy said: "Kids from the 'hood don't go to college."

One question we must ask as a nation is whether young people are being prepared to turn aside the opinions of others and develop a "growth mindset" -- a belief that one can improve his or her achievement through individual efforts. Otherwise, a fixed mindset -- a fear of not being smart -- will continue to hinder development of self-confidence and other qualities essential to basic problem-solving.

There also are structural injustices to be addressed. "The challenge facing those of us who seek to change outcomes for the poor and the marginalized is to frame the issues so that the American public comes to recognize that structural inequities are the most powerful forces shaping individual and family responses (to poverty)," wrote Harvard's [William Julius Wilson](#), "and that cultural programs, although desirable, should be combined with strong efforts to attack structural inequities."

Those injustices include:

n continued racial segregation in schools and restricted access to advanced education that stress high intellectual performance;

- statistical discrimination in hiring caused by perceived negative stereotypes of prospective employees, especially African-American males;
- lack of access to transportation and good public housing in inner cities when compared to suburbs and exurbs;
- political, social and judicial policies that send a disproportional number of black and brown people to dead-end special education programs and prisons.

In his State of the Union speech, President Obama suggested that a world-class education is one of the best anti-poverty programs. His call has been supported by a growing number of opinion writers,



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educators, business leaders and pundits who warn, as did the [New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce](#) in 2007, that: "if we continue on our current course, and the number of nations outpacing us in the education race continues to grow at its current rate, the American standard of living will steadily fall relative to those nations, rich and poor, that are doing a better job. The core problem is that our education and training systems were built for another era, an era in which most workers needed only a rudimentary education. It is not possible to get where we have to go by patching that system. We can get where we must go only by changing the system itself."

Businessman [Bill Gates](#) is another who consistently has sounded alarms about the state of education in America. In a February 2010 Newsweek piece, he wrote: "If we don't find ways to improve our schools, making them more effective and more accessible, we won't fulfill our commitment to equal opportunity, and we will become less competitive with other countries."

Ignoring this call to action would hurt a growing number of black and brown citizens educated in schools that have been called the "drop-out factories of cities."

This problem won't disappear on its own. The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) widely has reported that America will go from a majority-white to majority-minority nation in 2037.

America must recognize that its own self-interests are ultimately framed by its ability to address the challenges of racism, poverty and equal opportunity -- recognizing the effects of each on the life trajectories of many of our citizens.

Ours is the only nation said to be founded not on the ethnicity of its people, but on a shared commitment to certain ideas and values, including, but not limited to, courage, respect, consideration, perseverance, industry, responsibility, justice, initiative, moderation and integrity. Being an American is a shared way of thinking and life. Our future needs to focus on what connects us and less on what divides us. As [Ben Franklin](#) said at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we must all hang together or we shall hang separately.

But if shared national values are not enough of an incentive, then the growing international focus on transforming education systems should motivate our country to action.

If the United States is to reverse underachievement in our students and workers, we must focus relentlessly on instruction and make learners understand that intelligence is not something consigned by their genes, but something they must work hard to develop in their heads. When meaningful, engaging and relevant instruction in K-12 classrooms fosters lifelong learning for all Americans, then the structural inequities in school and society may very well be reversed so more citizens might share in the American dream. That's a vision that serves us all.

Stamford resident [Eric J. Cooper](#) is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUA). He can be reached at [www.nuatc.org](http://www.nuatc.org).

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