10 Root Causes of Racism

According to [Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism), “racism” is the belief that race is a “fundamental determinant” of a person’s traits and abilities. This creates a hierarchy where certain races are “superior” to others. The second entry in the dictionary digs more into the idea of racism and power. “Racism” is the “systemic oppression” of a racial group so that another group has a social, economic, and political advantage. Both definitions matter in this article, which addresses ten root causes of racism on a systemic and also a personal or individual level.

**Cause #1: Self-interest**

Many experts believe self-interest is the root cause of racist beliefs. Through the 17th and 18th centuries, people from Africa were kidnapped and forced into slavery. This was because European investors figured out that indentured servants could not handle the work needed to grow tobacco, sugar, and cotton in the Americas. Instead of trying to attract voluntary laborers, Europeans decided to use slavery. They needed to justify barbaric action, so they claimed that slavery was acceptable because slaves were less than human.

**Cause #2: Scientific racism**

While many might say that ignorance breeds racism, some of history’s most intelligent minds supported racist beliefs. Around the end of the 18th century, science replaced religion and superstition as the intellectual authority. It was “science”, then, that justified many racist beliefs, like that mixed-race children had more health problems and shorter lifespans. It’s important to note that “[scientific racism](https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/ideology-racism-misusing-science-justify-racial-discrimination)” is junk science. It relies on physical anthropology, craniometry, and other discredited methods.

**Cause #3: Maintaining the status quo**

Maintaining a status quo that protects racism is often justified as “keeping the peace” or maintaining law and order. In the book [Stamped from the Beginning](https://bookshop.org/a/8691/9781568585987), Ibram X. Kendi writes that in America, racist ideas have long been used to suppress resistance to racial inequalities. When people believe racist things – like that Black people are naturally more violent and dangerous – they aren’t disturbed by police brutality or mass incarceration. Those who benefit from racist institutions need racist ideas that prop up discrimination or society would rebel against the status quo. “Keeping the peace” becomes more important than justice and equality.

**Cause #4: Discriminatory policies**

Policies that discriminate by race and keep people in poverty reinforce racist beliefs. Housing laws are a prime example of this. Many laws kept Black people from owning houses in certain neighborhoods, relegating them to lower-quality housing and preventing them from accumulating wealth. Society looks at this and believes it justifies beliefs about how Black people only live in low-income, crime-ridden neighborhoods and that it’s somehow a choice.

**Cause #5: “Good” people who don’t challenge racism**

One of the main reasons why racist ideas continue to flourish is that “good” people don’t speak out against it. Many don’t like racism, but they fail to truly understand it or challenge it. While white abolitionists fought against slavery, they did not go after the laws, beliefs, and societal habits that kept Black people from being full, equal citizens in America. Today, many well-meaning people believe that “loving everyone” will end racism, but given the systemic nature of racism, only systemic change can have a real impact. Martin Luther King Jr. put it well when he said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

**Cause #6: Media representation**

How the media (books, TV, music, movies, etc) represents race has a big impact on how society views race. While the media is a reflection of a culture at large, it keeps racial stereotypes alive and well and therefore fuels racism. Racism in the media is often subtle and without malicious intent, but it has incredibly negative effects. As an example, Black men are over-represented in the media as perpetrators of violent crime while Black people are also over-represented in news stories about poverty. This affects Black people’s view of themselves as well as society’s perception of Black people.

**Cause #7: Living in an echo chamber**

Only interacting with people who share the same beliefs is a root cause of racism for individuals. If someone is surrounded by racist family members or friends, they’ll likely share those same beliefs. Even “positive” generalizations about race are harmful and difficult to challenge if someone isn’t part of a diverse community. Never stepping outside an echo chamber keeps racism alive.

**Cause #8. Failing to recognize racism in oneself**

People aren’t good at recognizing racism in themselves. Many believe that racism can only look like slavery, segregation, or specifically-negative and blatant references to race. People often fall into the trap that as long as someone isn’t wearing a white hood or using racial slurs, they can’t be racist. This failure to recognize prejudices, accept responsibility, and be better is a key reason why racism is still so persistent.

**Cause #9: Quick judgments**

People are very quick to judge others based on their appearance, their clothing, how they talk, and other physical traits. Because of how the media represents race and the persistence of racist beliefs, it’s very easy to categorize entire groups of people as “lazy,” “violent,” “loud,” and so on. Sometimes, the generalizations aren’t necessarily bad, like how Asian people are frequently stereotyped as “smart” and “quiet.” When not challenged, these lightning-fast judgments have a significant impact on how people are perceived and the kinds of opportunities they get.

**Cause #10: Casting blame**

For many people, blaming others is a reflex. You can hear it in statements like, “Illegal immigrants are stealing our jobs!” Society always looks for a scapegoat when things aren’t going very well. Historically, racial (and often religious) minorities that put into that role. To justify this scapegoating, racist beliefs are deployed. This fuels resentment and bitterness, making already vulnerable people even more vulnerable.