Racism is still alive and well, 50 years after the UK’s Race Relations Act

[Kehinde Andrews](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/kehinde-andrews), Guardian 2015

Racism is the systematic oppression of communities based on their colour and can thrive even when open prejudice has declined. If we stopped measuring racism in attitude surveys and legislative change we would realise the real test is to analyse the disadvantages faced by ethnic minority communities. This is a test that Britain is hopelessly failing. In his 2008 book, [Racism and Education](https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415418980), Professor David Gillborn asks whether the racial inequalities that continue to plague Britain are a racist conspiracy or an unfortunate coincidence. He concludes that the problem is worse than either of those options, and that society is in fact structured so that it reproduces racial inequalities without the need for “racists”.

If we examine any area of life we will see significant racial inequalities. For instance, [the unemployment rate](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/labour-market-status-by-ethnic-group-annual-data-to-2014) for all ethnic minorities is 11.3%, more than twice as high as it is [for our white counterparts at 5.5%](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/08/www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06385.pdf) . This gets worse when we break the number down further, with black people almost three times as likely to be unemployed (15.5%) in general, and 38% of young black men currently unemployed, compared to 17.8% of young white men. These unemployment figures may go some way to explaining [the staggering wealth gap](http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate-uk/2011/04/08/the-racial-wealth-gap-not-just-an-american-problem/) that means the average white household has assets of £221,000, while the figure for black Caribbean households is £76,000, for Bangladeshis £21,000 and black Africans just £15,000. In fact, 60% of black and Asian households have no savings at all.

Health is another area of viscous inequality. Ethnic minority groups are significantly more likely to have a [long-term limiting illness](http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/medialibrary/briefingsupdated/which-ethnic-groups-have-the-poorest-health.pdf) or [diabetes](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph35/chapter/public-health-need-and-practice); and minority men are also significantly [more likely to have prostate cancer](http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/prostate-cancer-twice-as-likely-among-black-men-than-white-men-study-finds-10426426.html). [In terms of mental health](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/fundamental_facts_2007.pdf?view=Standard) the picture gets bleaker, with ethnic minority groups overall 60% more likely to suffer from depression; young Asian women are three times as likely to commit suicide and black people are up to 6.6 times [more likely to be detained](http://lankellychase.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Ethnic-Inequality-in-Mental-Health-Confluence-Full-Report-March2014.pdf) under the Mental Health Act. This last statistic intersects with the systematic overrepresentation of black people in the criminal justice system. [The disproportionate use of stop and search](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/07/stop-and-search-uk-rural-black-people-police) is well documented; [it is possible that the DNA of three-quarters of young black men](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/nov/24/dna-database-inquiry) between the ages of 18 and 35 is on the police database and black people are [more disproportionately represented in UK prisons than in the US](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/oct/11/black-prison-population-increase-england).

On the 50th anniversary of the Race Relations Act, not only is racism alive and well, but the nation has actively avoided dealing with the issue. Focusing on individual prejudice allows people to feel comfortable that they are not to blame, because it is the backwards racists who are the problem.

Policymakers have promoted black role models to light the way to success for those who have not taken advantage of the apparent opportunities that Britain offers. During the anniversary of the act we will see a lot of celebration about how far Britain has come, but the reality of racism in Britain is that the picture is now different – without being any better. It’s a picture that includes less open prejudice, more mixed friendships and families and some ethnic minority success stories.

But the backdrop is the systematic racial inequalities that blight communities, creating countless victims. The truth is that no legislative change will end systematic discrimination in Britain because racism is coded in to the DNA of the nation. If we are serious about addressing systematic racism then we need to stop focusing on the prejudice of individuals. Britain must acknowledge the uncomfortable history and reality of racial discrimination and be prepared to consider solutions that transform the conditions faced by oppressed groups. Maybe then we will be able to truly celebrate progress on race relations.