

When Racism Isn't the Only Problem

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By Alfie Kohn

I've been thinking lately about policies that are multiply flawed. Drilling for oil in the Arctic Refuge is a bad idea not only because it threatens wildlife but also because it exacerbates the climate crisis. Diverting taxpayer funds to religious schools undermines public education while simultaneously breaching the wall between church and state. You get the idea.

Now consider policies that have been rightly condemned as racist (in their impact and sometimes even in their intent) but that are also objectionable for other reasons. Racism is surely a sufficient basis for demanding change, but if other core values are imperiled by the same policies, our case is much stronger, both morally and practically, when we invoke those values, too. Here are seven examples.

** **Capital punishment** is applied in a racially discriminatory manner, with the likelihood of its being imposed depending on the race not only of the perpetrator but also of the victim. Yet even if it were administered fairly, the death penalty amounts to state-sanctioned murder. (As an old bumper sticker put it, Why do we kill people who kill people to show people*

that killing people is wrong?) Moreover, many defendants sentenced to death have turned out to be innocent. And having capital punishment on the books hasn't even been shown to reduce crime.

* **"Stand Your Ground" laws**, which now exist in a majority of states thanks to the gun lobby, allow people to shoot to kill if they report feeling threatened – even if they could have safely deescalated the conflict by walking away. While there is mixed evidence on the racial impact of these laws,¹ the fact that perceived threat may provide legal immunity for killing someone is ominous in a country where many white people have been raised to feel threatened by anyone who is nonwhite. (It has long been true in the U.S. that killings are much more likely to be ruled justified either when the perpetrator is white or when the victim isn't.) But it's also important to note that Stand Your Ground laws have led to more homicides in general, stoking macho fantasies of vigilante justice that make everyone less safe. Racial disparities aside, "with each successful 'stand your ground' claim...we are all in peril of becoming more frightened, more violent, and more apt to shoot first and justify it later."

* **Republican election laws** are obviously intended to make it harder to vote. Using the excuse of curbing voter fraud (which in fact is exceedingly rare), these restrictions are designed to have a disproportionate effect on Blacks and others likely to vote for Democrats. The racism here is transparent and shameless. But these same laws also politicize control of elections, possibly paving the way for reversing those that Democrats win, and that is "an act of a different magnitude than narrowing access." What's going on here isn't just about race; as Jamelle Bouie pointed out, it represents "a political party turn[ing] against democracy. It doesn't just try to restrict the vote; it creates mechanisms to subvert the vote and attempts to purge officials who might stand in the way." And this is now "happening...wherever

Republicans are in control.”

* Republicans also have been filing, and in some cases have begun to enact, dozens of **identically worded bills** (mostly created by a single conservative activist) to direct **how history can be taught** in schools. Such legislation mandates patriotic lessons, invoking “critical race theory” (which is actually an arcane branch of legal studies) as a catch-all label to **manufacture outrage** on the right and “suppress teaching and learning about the role of racism in the history of the United States,” according to the **American Historical Association**. But an effort to use the law to whitewash America’s deeply embedded racial disparities is terrifying for reasons that transcend the explicit content being required or prohibited. Suppressing teaching and learning about anything – banning the expression of certain ideas by teachers and prohibiting challenges to the conventional wisdom about the past – is, as one historian explained, associated with totalitarian governments.

* **Facial recognition** algorithms are far more likely to **misidentify** Black and East Asian faces than white faces, a fact that has come to dominate news coverage and commentaries about the technology. But, as the **ACLU** notes, even if this surveillance technology were “perfectly accurate, it would still be a nightmare for civil liberties [since it] gives governments, companies, and individuals the power to spy on us wherever we go – tracking our faces at protests, political rallies, places of worship, family planning clinics, substance abuse treatment centers, and more.”

* Resistance to **standardized testing** has lately focused on **race**: The field has an appalling racist history, and contemporary tests may still be plagued by racial bias in both their construction and their application. But even if none of that were true, standardized tests measure what matters least, intellectually speaking. The scores that result primarily reflect two things: the socioeconomic status

of whoever took the test and the amount of time that was spent teaching test-taking skills. As I and many others have argued, it is not only possible but actually quite common for a rise in test scores to accompany – indeed, to contribute to – a decline in the quality of teaching and learning.

* **“No Excuses” charter schools**, which rely on militaristic discipline to enforce a demand for absolute obedience, have been properly called out for imposing this regimen almost exclusively on African-American and Latino students. (“If there were middle-class white children here, the parents would rebel at this curriculum and stop it cold,” one teacher at such a school observed grimly.²) After decades of forcing children of color to bark out right answers on command, the (white) heads of two leading charter school chains, KIPP and Uncommon Schools, recently **announced** that they are rethinking some of their policies in the wake of recent widespread activism about systemic racism. It is striking that this epiphany occurred to them only after a quarter century of operating these schools, but it is no less remarkable that race is the sole reason being offered. It is indeed unspeakably offensive, if unsurprising, that low-income children of color are the victims of such dehumanizing treatment: enforced passivity, public humiliation for noncompliance and rewards or praise for mindless conformity, scripted instruction geared mostly to raising test scores, and an emphasis on the sort of character education that promotes not critical thinking but **“grit”** (persistence at whatever one has been told to do). Still, we need to call attention to what is offensive about this style of teaching in and of itself, not just to which students are disproportionately subjected to it. Researchers, parents, and former teachers at **KIPP** and **similar** schools (appalled by what they had participated in) have all offered searing criticisms of these schools’ **“strict control...that mimics animal training.”** This model never should have seen the light of day, and it should be condemned now for reasons that go well

beyond its repugnant racist implementation.

A simple thought experiment: Imagine that the racially discriminatory aspects of each of these policies are successfully addressed. Programmers eventually figure out how to eliminate the bias in facial recognition software so that its accuracy no longer varies by skin color. It can now be proved that efforts to raise test scores undermine good teaching regardless of race. A new study shows that Republican voter suppression and election subversion actually affect Black and white Democratic voters equally. And so on.

If the primary or even sole basis for having objected to these practices pertained to racial discrimination, have we not undercut our ability to challenge them once that factor is no longer relevant? And even if that factor persists, isn't our case stronger if we can appeal to other considerations as well?

Some readers may be perplexed or even offended that I'm making this argument even though the (long-overdue) struggle against racism is still inadequate and is being met with a dishonest and coordinated opposition from the right. Of course I realize that Blacks not only continue to suffer from discrimination, but their very lives are at risk from injustices that range from environmental threats to systematic police brutality. We live in a country where it is still controversial even to assert that the lives of Black people matter, for heaven's sake.

But no single lens – neither race nor anything else – can capture all the principles worth valuing or all the threats to those principles that we face. It does not minimize or trivialize the outrageous history of systemic racism to point that out. And our chances of making progress against everything from threats to our democracy to reductive

approaches to education will improve enormously if we are willing to say that these practices are racist...and that they are harmful in other ways as well.

NOTES

1. One set of **data** shows that the greatest increase in homicide rates from Stand Your Ground incidents was for white males and “there does not appear to be any statistically significant disparity that would imply that Stand Your Ground results in more deaths of African Americans.” However, the chances that a Black person’s death will be deemed justified is higher in a Stand Your Ground state. Indeed, one **study** found that “the number of homicides of Black people deemed justifiable more than doubled in Stand Your Ground states between 2005 and 2011, while remaining unchanged in the rest of the country.”

2. This comment was reported by Jonathan Kozol in *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (Crown, 2005). Later in that book, Kozol remarked that “there will always be ‘excuses’ – good ones, too – for children to resist” adult manipulation, and “those who give our children messages like these, no matter what the short-term gains they hope to get, are likely to exact a devastating price” (pp. 75, 273).

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