

Whites Underestimate The Costs Of Being Black, Study Finds

June 25 2007

How much do white Americans think it “costs” to be black in our society, given the problems associated with racial bias and prejudice? The answer, it appears, is not much.

When white Americans were asked to imagine how much they would have to be paid to live the rest of their lives as a black person, most requested relatively low amounts, generally less than \$10,000.

In contrast, study participants said they would have to be paid about \$1 million to give up television for the rest of their lives.

The results suggest most white Americans don't truly comprehend the persisting racial disparities in our country, said Philip Mazzocco, co-author of the study and assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State University's Mansfield campus.

“The costs of being black in our society are very well documented,” Mazzocco said. “Blacks have significantly lower income and wealth, higher levels of poverty, and even shorter life spans, among many other disparities, compared to whites.”

For example, white households average about \$150,000 more wealth than the typical black family. Overall, total wealth for white families is about five times greater than that of black families, a gap that has persisted for years.

“When whites say they would need \$1 million to give up TV, but less than \$10,000 to become black, that suggests they don't really understand the extent to which African Americans, as a group, are disadvantaged,” Mazzocco said.

These results also offer insight as to why more than 9 out of 10 white Americans reject proposals to give reparations to the descendants of slaves, said study co-author Mahzarin Banaji, the Cabot Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard University.

“Our data suggest that such resistance is not because white Americans are mean and uncaring, morally bankrupt, or ethically flawed,” Banaji said.

“White Americans suffer from a glaring ignorance about what it means to live as a black American.”

The study appears in the current issue of Harvard's Du Bois Review.

The researchers did a series of studies in which a total of 958 whites of different ages and from different parts of the country were asked variations of the same question: “How much should you be paid to continue to live the rest of your life as a black person?”

In most cases, the participants were told to imagine they were actually black, but had always passed for white. The imagined race change required no physical transformation, just a change in public status.

They were also asked how much they should be paid for giving up television, and how much they should be given to change their officially listed state residency (without having to move). These questions were asked, Mazzocco said, to compare what people requested for relatively trivial changes, like a new listed state residency, as compared to a more

life-changing request, like giving up television.

Results suggest white people considered a race change as relatively trivial, along the lines of a change in official state residency, as opposed to the seemingly big sacrifice of giving up television.

In some of the studies, the researchers changed the scenario in order to learn more about what white Americans thought about the costs of racial disparities.

One issue with the previous scenario is that participants may minimize the disparities they would face as a black person, because they had always passed as white. So in one study, whites were told to imagine that they were about to be born as a random white person in America, but they were being offered a cash gift to be born as a random black person. Once again, white participants requested relatively small sums to make a life-long race-change. In addition, some were given a list of some of the costs of being black in America, such as the racial wealth disparity. The result was that whites in this latter scenario requested significantly higher amounts than those in the previous studies – about \$500,000.

Finally, some participants were given a similar scenario except all references to blacks, whites and America were taken out. They were asked to imagine they were born into the fictional country of Atria, and were born either into the “majority” or “minority” population. They were given a list of the disadvantages that the minority population faced in Atria (which were identical to the real disadvantages faced by blacks in America). In this case, white participants in the study said they should be paid an average of \$1 million to be born as a minority member in Atria.

“When you take it out of the black-white context, white Americans seem to fully appreciate the costs associated with the kinds of disparities that African Americans actually face in the United States,” Mazzocco said.

“In this case, they asked for a million dollars, similar to what they want for giving up television.”

Mazzocco said blatant prejudice was not the reason for the findings. Results showed that whites who scored higher on a measure of racial prejudice did not answer significantly differently than others in the study.

The researchers are conducting new studies to examine more closely why whites do underestimate the costs of being black. Mazzocco believes many white Americans have a perception that race bias in the United States has been virtually eliminated, and that blacks are no longer disadvantaged.

“While there has been progress in making racial conditions in American more equal, there's clearly a lot more work to be done,” he said. “Blacks and whites are not experiencing the same America.”

When whites do understand the extent of racial disparities in the United States, they are more likely to support reparations. The findings showed that whites who wanted more money to be publicly recognized as black – suggesting they understood the true costs of racial disparity – were more likely than others to say they would support reparations.

But there are many reasons why nearly all whites oppose reparations. Mazzocco said some whites may believe slavery happened so long ago that slave descendants today don't deserve to be compensated. The researchers examined the “too long ago” rationale in another study.

The researchers asked participants to imagine that their great, great grandfather, a wealthy shipping magnate, had been kidnapped about 150 years ago. The kidnappers demanded and received a large ransom that bankrupted the shipping magnate. That ransom was used to start a

successful company that still survives today and is worth \$100 million. Participants were asked whether they would be willing to be a part of a large suit against the present-day company that could net them each about \$5,000.

In this scenario, 61 percent agreed to have their names listed on the lawsuit. The researchers noted that this is about the percentage of blacks today who support reparations for slave descendants.

“When white Americans find it within themselves to say ‘I must be compensated for a past injustice done to me’ but the same logic evaporates when the injustice concerns black Americans, they are staring straight at bias,” Banaji said.

Mazzocco said the results of this research have implications for the fledgling reparations movement in America. “Surveys show that 90 to 96 percent of white Americans are against slave descendant reparations. It is nearly impossible to get that many people to agree on anything, so it is an issue that really deserves attention to see why that is. We wanted to take a heated and emotional issue and look at it through a scientific lens,” he said.

The research was facilitated by a postdoctoral fellowship to Mazzocco from Ohio State's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.

Other co-authors of the study included Timothy Brock of Ohio State, Gregory Brock of Georgia Southern University and Kristina Olson of Harvard.

Source: by Jeff Grabmeier, Ohio State University

Citation: Whites Underestimate The Costs Of Being Black, Study Finds (2007, June 25) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-06-whites-underestimate-black.html>

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