

# During WW II, African American soldiers made England a less racist place, lasting until this day

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Can racial prejudice be reduced or is it a constant of the human condition? And can interventions unfold effects that persist? Especially in light of recent events such as the Syrian refugee crisis, and more recently, the Black Lives Matter protests in the US, answers to these questions are desperately needed. In the long run, integration appears to have a positive effect on racial attitudes, which are passed on from generation to generation.

The paper, "Shocking Racial Attitudes: Black G.I.s in Europe," by David Schindler, assistant professor of economics at Tilburg University and Mark Westcott, engagement manager at Vivid Economics, forthcoming at the *Review of Economic Studies*, sheds lights on these questions.

## **150,000 African-American soldiers**

During World War II, around 1.5 million American soldiers served in the United Kingdom, of which approximately 150,000 were African Americans, serving almost exclusively in segregated support units.

Troops were posted across England and Wales, solely according to military requirements, and without accommodating potential pre-existing differences in racial [prejudice](#). To estimate the causal effect of troop placement on [racial attitudes](#), the researchers exploit the fact that where African American support units were stationed (compared to white support units) should be orthogonal to any possible confounder.

Using survey evidence from the 1940s, the researchers demonstrate that African American soldiers updated their opinions about the British positively and they thought the British did improve their attitudes toward Americans. Descriptive evidence further demonstrates that British people tended to regard African American soldiers more favorably after having interacted with them. For most British, these interactions were the first with non-white people, as the United Kingdom only saw large

flows of non-white migration after the end of the War.

## Reduced racial prejudice

We find that the historical interactions between African American soldiers and the British population reduced racial prejudice even around 60 years after the end of World War II. Areas in which more African American troops were posted saw fewer members of and votes in local elections for the British National Party (BNP), a far-right party with racist policy positions, during the mid-2000s. These effects arise primarily in rural areas, where subsequent in-migration is lower than in urban areas.

Furthermore, the researchers incorporated results from a large online survey from the same period. Survey respondents living in areas hosting more African American units reported warmer feelings toward black people and displayed less prejudice in an Implicit Association Test (IAT) designed to capture implicit bias against black people. When splitting the survey responses into birth cohorts, the researchers observed that the estimated effect first appears for the generation who would likely be the descendants of those directly exposed to the troops at the time. This is consistent with a model of vertical transmission, where changes in attitudes are transmitted from parents to children.

The findings have important implications to reduce [racial prejudice](#) in an increasingly integrated world. Policymakers should make sure that minorities and majorities have a chance to interact to overcome negative racial attitudes. The study shows the effects can persist over long time periods and can be passed on over generations.

**More information:** Schindler et al. Shocking Racial Attitudes: Black G.I.s in Europe. *Review of Economic Studies* (2020).  
[www.cesifo.org/DocDL/cesifo1\\_wp6723\\_0.pdf](http://www.cesifo.org/DocDL/cesifo1_wp6723_0.pdf)

Provided by Tilburg University

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