

# New research reveals historic migration's link to present-day implicit racial bias

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Roughly six million Black people [moved away from the American South](#)

during the Great Migration between 1910 and 1970, hoping to escape racial violence and discrimination while pursuing economic and educational opportunities. Now, research has uncovered a link between this historic event with present-day inequalities and implicit biases.

In a new *Social Psychological and Personality Science* article, researchers report that current implicit bias among [white people](#) at the county-level is associated with the proportion of Black residents living in that county during the Great Migration (circa 1930). The research supports the Bias of Crowds theory—which emphasizes the role of unequal environments or situations in contributing to collective levels of implicit bias.

"Our work suggests that the consequences of historical racism are not confined to the past," says lead author Heidi Vuletich of the University of Denver. "The systems and structures that we all navigate can often go unquestioned and unchanged—the theory inspiring this work says that maintaining the status quo can mean allowing negative historical legacies to continue."

Researchers analyzed over 1.6 million responses from White people visiting Project Implicit and taking the [Implicit Association Test](#), which measures people's associations between the racial categories "Black" and "white" and evaluations "good" and "bad."

Respondents were spread across 37 states and 1,981 counties in the North and Western United States. In counties that had larger Black populations in the middle of the 20th century, present-day white people showed a stronger implicit preference for white over Black people.

Researchers also analyzed data from nearly 215,000 Black people who completed the Implicit Association Test, and did not find the same associations as white respondents to historical legacies. Dr. Vuletich notes that understanding their response can help researchers understand

the psychological processes and circumstances under which environmental factors relate to bias.

Dr. Vuletich explains that this data can help inform strategies for combatting racial inequity going forward.

"Even as explicit forms of racism have become less prevalent, [implicit biases](#) remain common and manifest even in people who value equity and inclusion.

Organizations, governments and other institutions pursue solutions that focus almost exclusively on how to change individuals' thoughts and behaviors," Dr. Vuletich says.

"Our results corroborate the need to spotlight structures and systems as contributors to bias in our communities."

Despite the community-level focus of this [research](#), Dr. Vuletich also emphasizes the need for people to examine their own prejudices on an individual level.

"Our findings do not exonerate people from responsibility to reduce their biases, but they do exhort them to pursue structural solutions and change."

**More information:** The Great Migration and Implicit Bias in the Northern United States, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/19485506231181718](https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506231181718)

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