



FAQ: Structural Racism

What is Structural Racism?

The word "racism" is often commonly translated to mean one individual intentionally or unintentionally targeting other people for negative treatment because of their skin color or other group-based physical characteristics. Using this definition, people who behave in racist ways are seen as out of style, a view that falsely and dangerously frames racism as a thing of the past, an obsolete historical phenomenon. Let's move beyond this individualist conceptualization. Racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. Racism is structural. Structural racism has a dual meaning. On one hand, the term describes racism as a system of *social structures* that produce cumulative, durable, race-based inequalities. On the other hand, structural racism is a method of analysis that is used to examine how historical legacies, individuals, *structures*, and *institutions* work interactively to distribute material and symbolic advantage and disadvantage along racial lines—a way of sorting who's in and who's left out of society. This shift to an analysis centering on structures, rather than on one-on-one interactions, produces important differences in understanding the process for developing and maintaining racial inequities. (Read more in [UPdate Fall 2005/Winter 2006](#))

What is an example of structural racism?

The government opened the suburbs to whites by subsidizing home mortgages for whites through the National Housing Act of 1934, which was implemented by the Federal Housing Administration (then called the Federal Housing Authority). This act, combined with FHA lending that disproportionately and purposefully benefited suburban whites, created racially homogenous unequal neighborhoods. Even after these overtly racist practices in lending, which made it very difficult, often impossible, for blacks to qualify for mortgages were declared unconstitutional in 1948, the legacy prompted private companies to engage in redlining, which continued to shape the industry. Shortly thereafter, the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 sanctioned the creation of a state-funded highway system funding "white flight" from the city, demarcating neighborhoods along racial lines, destroying African American neighborhoods, and transporting jobs out of urban areas. This denial of homeownership to people of color—and subsequent neighborhood segregation—has had severe intergenerational effects on wealth accumulation. These racialized structures have been produced through the interaction of various institutional and individual actors, and they continue to shape opportunity access through education, employment, health, and other institutions, effects easily assessed through outcome analyses.

How can we challenge structural racism?

Responses to racist structures must recognize that contemporary disadvantage has resulted from deeply entrenched historical legacies, has accumulated over time, and is produced through interactive networks of individuals and institutions. To redress the

consequences of structural racism, we must address disadvantage from multiple trajectories simultaneously. For example, David Rusk, an urban policy expert, has argued that "housing policy is school policy." In short, productive schools cannot be achieved merely by focusing on education but rather by establishing networks of opportunity that center on housing and neighborhoods. In this way, we underscore a public policy dimension without isolating it from other relevant and important policy areas/opportunities (e.g., education, health, transportation). Likewise, we need to formulate multi-temporal responses that address not only immediate concerns but also long-term goals.

Because structural racism is produced across multiple domains, the power or authority to respond can be understood as fragmented. Increased fragmentation and incoherency make coordination more difficult, which makes addressing racial and social inequalities more difficult. However, without coordination, even well-intentioned actors can produce misaligned and therefore discriminatory policies and practices. Furthermore, eliminating structural racism cannot be a top-down approach; community members must be involved and given a voice to help shape a new paradigm. Hence, coalition and community building are key elements in any strategy for challenging structural racism.

How does structural racism inform our work at the Kirwan Institute?

The structural racism approach informs and interconnects some of the research areas of the Kirwan Institute.

Affirmative action is a policy intervention redressing historically entrenched racial hierarchies in power, wealth, and status that continue to impede the capacity of certain groups to live a life they have reason to value. As part of our dual objective of creating a public understanding of the importance of racial and ethnic diversity in institutions and persuading the public to support policies and programs that dismantle structural racism, we have embarked on the Diversity Advancement Project (DAP). DAP is a policy intervention and the cultural arm for racially conscious policies (e.g., affirmative action policies).

Regionalism is a framework for creating policy interventions that connect people to regional opportunity structures. Recognizing that space and other infrastructure-related allocations are the main purveyors of continued racial stratification, metropolitan equity calls for the equalization of opportunities through regional strategies. A more specific policy perspective within regionalism is the Opportunity Based Housing model. This model suggests that the creation and preservation of affordable housing must be deliberately and intelligently connected on a regional scale to higher-performing schools, sustained employment, adequate transportation, child care, and institutions that facilitate civic and political activity.

(Read more in [Update Fall 2005/Winter 2006](#))