

How do Refugees and Migrants Come to Understand Race and Racism in the United States?

Racism and racial hierarchy are deeply ingrained in the history of the United States and continue to exist today. People who are new to the United States, such as refugees and migrants, are often affected by structural racism. Much of the current research assesses how refugees *experience* racism in the United States, but little explores how refugees *learn* about race before and after they come to the U.S., and how this understanding impacts their ability to integrate.

The following study sought to fill these research gaps by looking at how refugees learn about, experience, and replicate attitudes towards race, both before and after resettlement as well as in transit. This study uses qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand experiences and attitudes of refugees and migrants.

Key Findings

1. This is the one of the first studies of its kind that focuses on how refugees and migrants come to understand the concept of race and racism in the U.S.
2. The research shows that refugees learn about race and form perceptions from personal experiences, relationships with others, school and education, institutions and media influence throughout the migration journey (pre-departure, in-transit, and resettlement).
3. This research has implications not only for refugee adults but for all of the individuals and systems interacting with them along the stages of their migration. This understanding can contribute to more coordinated efforts to promote equity, successful integration, and anti-racism.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Definitions of key terms

Who are Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Immigrants and Newcomers? ¹
<p>Refugee: A refugee is an individual who lives outside of his or her home country and cannot or will not return because of persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution, based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a certain social group, or political opinion. In the United States, the refugee admissions process is lengthy and difficult. Various government departments conduct extensive interviews and background checks. Refugees have dictated their legal residence status prior to their arrival in the US.</p>
<p>Asylee or asylum seeker: An asylee or asylum seeker is an individual who faces persecution and/or human rights violations in their home country. However, unlike refugees, asylum seekers are not legally recognized upon their arrival in the United States. Asylum seekers can claim asylum from within the United States or at a U.S. port of entry. Asylum seekers' claims are then assessed in U.S. courts. Seeking asylum is a human right in accordance with international and U.S. law.</p>
<p>Immigrant or migrant: There is no single definition of an immigrant. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, an immigrant is a person who leaves his/her country of origin to seek temporary or permanent residence in another country. Immigrants and refugees may flee similar situations, though only refugees are legally recognized as persecuted individuals. Immigrants come to the United States for a variety of reasons.</p>
<p>Newcomer: A refugee, immigrant, or asylee who has been in the U.S. for less than 5 years.</p>

What is Race?

There is no widespread definition of race. Race is often defined differently between countries and regions. Other cultures may have no definition or conceptualization of race. As a result, race and racism are context-dependent. Some cultures, like the U.S., may view race as a physical characteristic, such as skin color or outward appearance. Other cultures may conflate race with ethnicity, religion, culture, or language. Political attitudes and cultural norms can influence one's understanding and awareness of "race" as a concept. For a deeper discussion of the racial history in the U.S.,² scientific racism³ and background on refugee and immigrant racial understanding⁴ visit these recommended materials.

¹ "Who Is a Refugee, a Migrant or an Asylum Seeker?" (October, 2022). Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>.

² Fredrickson, G.M (2003). The Historical Origins and Development of Racism. PBS. Available at: https://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-02-01.htm

³ Harvard Library. (n.d.) Confronting Anti-Black Racism Resource: Scientific Racism. Available at: <https://library.harvard.edu/confronting-anti-black-racism/scientific-racism>

⁴ Kawahara, Y., Mastellar, L., Morehouse, S.R. et al. (November, 2022). "Assessing Refugees' Understanding of and Response to U.S. Race Relations: An Analysis of Findings." Henry J. Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security. Available at: https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/files/2023/02/LeirInstitute_RITReport_v4_FINAL.pdf

Socio-Ecological Model

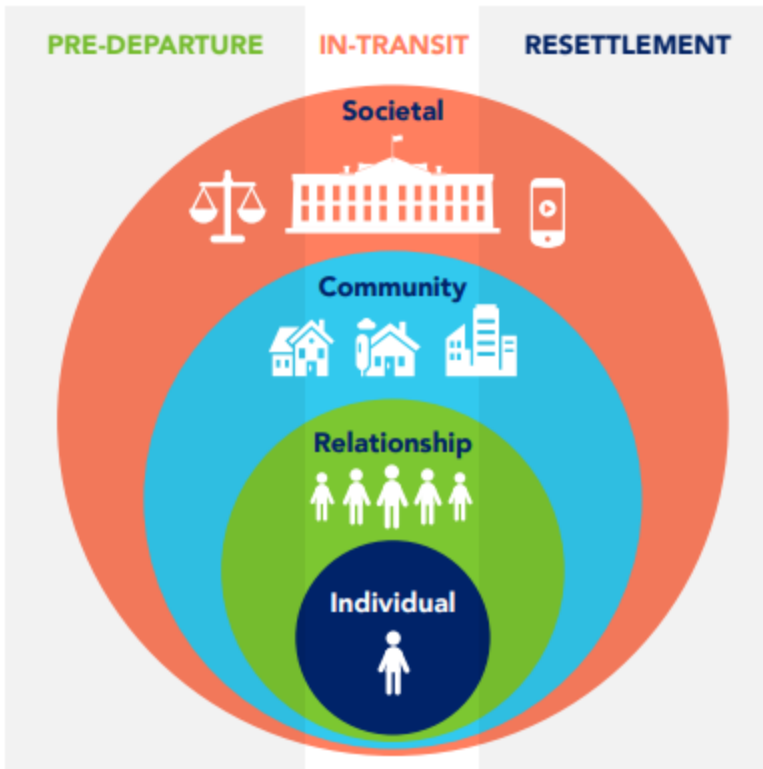


Figure 1. Social-Ecological model that depicts the Individual across levels of society, and across stages of migration.

A social-ecological model is a theory that is used to depict and illustrate the complexity and interactivity of social forces around us. In the model “Individuals” are influenced by and interact with others in “Relationships”, “Community and Institutions”, and “Societal” forces.

We present findings from our study in this way to depict the complexities of experiencing and learning about race and racism, and as a way to understand the levels at which we must be committed to anti-racism in the U.S.⁵

⁵Harper Brown, C., & O'Connor, C. (December, 2021.). A Social Ecological Model of Racism & Anti-Racism. Center for the Study of Social Policy. <https://cssp.org/resource/a-social-ecological-model-of-racism-anti-racism/>

Methods and Participants

This study gathered information by interviewing refugees in Mobile, AL, and Pittsburgh, PA, and by surveying refugees and migrants across the United States. For a more complete overview of the methods, please see the research reports available at Refugees In Towns initiative.⁶

A total of 146 refugees and migrants from 18⁷ countries participated in this study. Of those, 107 were surveyed, and 39 were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65, came from various religious backgrounds, had varying levels of English language ability,⁸ and had lived in the United States for a period ranging from 2 weeks to more than 10 years.

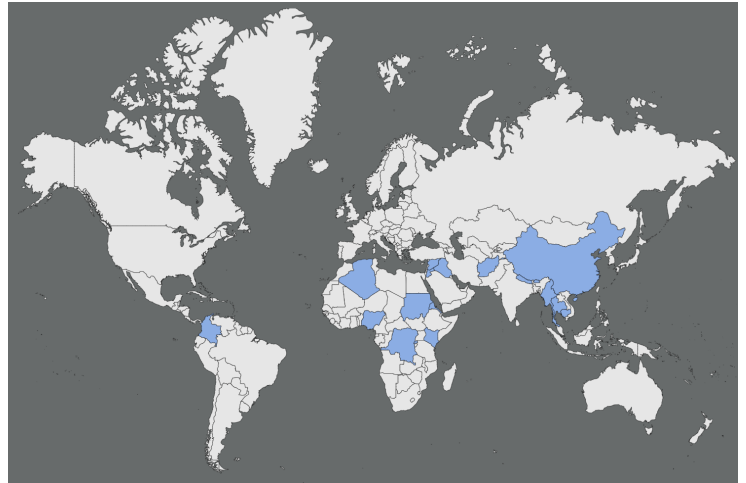


Figure 2. Map of respondents' countries of origin.

Findings

Refugees and migrants learn about race and racism in the U.S. through: personal experience, relationships with others, school and education, government institutions, and the media.

The study found that where refugees and migrants are in their migration journey impacts how they understand race, so the findings are presented by "level" and by "stage". The 3 stages of the migration

- Pre-departure before leaving home country,
- In-Transit after leaving home starting migration journey, and
- Resettlement after arriving in the U.S. as refugees, with permanent resident status.

Findings for each stage are presented in tables 2, 3, and 4, and for a summary of findings across stages please refer to Table 5.

⁶ Refugees in Towns, Tufts University. Race and Refugees: How Refugees Learn about Race in America.

<https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/race-and-refugees-how-refugees-learn-about-race-in-america/>



⁷ Participants' countries of origin: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Myanmar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand.




⁸ All interviews were conducted in English; future studies should aim to conduct research in the refugees' native language to draw from a larger participant pool and avoid misunderstandings due to a language barrier.

Pre-departure

Refugees first learn about race in what we call the "pre-departure" stage, which is before they leave their home country. As the survey touched on newcomers' experiences after they arrived in the U.S., this data came primarily from participants interviewed in Mobile and Pittsburgh.

Table 2. Findings across ecologies in the Pre-Departure stage of migration.





Pre-departure	
<p>Personal Experiences</p> 	<p>Existing beliefs may not reflect true demographics: Most refugees in the study thought the U.S. was mostly White with few minorities, others believed only Black and White people lived in the U.S.</p> <p><i>"We did not know Asian, Mexican people lived [in the United States]. Only after we come and see this." – Iraqi woman, Mobile</i></p> <p>The refugees who were aware of racism in the U.S. thought it was mostly targeted at Black people and knew little about discrimination against Hispanics, Asians, and Middle Easterners.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Pittsburgh, participants from Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo knew more about U.S. racism before their arrival compared to Afghans. <p>Prior experience with discrimination facilitates learning: Those who were mistreated in their home countries (colorism or other discrimination), such as the Hazara in Afghanistan, understood the U.S. racial hierarchy faster.</p>
<p>Relationships</p> 	<p>Participants report that having family in the U.S. made them more aware of race: Prior to arriving in the U.S. refugees and migrants with family in the U.S. knew more about racism and diversity in a U.S. context.</p>

<p>School and Education</p> 	<p>U.S. Literature is one way refugees learn about racial discrimination: Some refugees who attended secondary school (high school) in their home countries learned about discrimination in the U.S. through books like <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>, or through topics like the Transatlantic Slave Trade.</p>
<p>Government Institutions</p> 	<p>Race and ethnicity definitions are unclear: Many refugees didn't know the difference between ethnicity and race as it is defined in the U.S. In those countries, ethnicity and religion often determined treatment.</p> <p><i>"I'm always confused...Since Afghanistan is located in the center of Asia and I always tick Asia.... (B)ut most of our friends thought Asian is belonging to Chinese, Japanese, Korean people'... I always write Asian, other people write White." – Afghan man, Pittsburgh</i></p>
<p>Media</p> 	<p>Pre-departure media influences refugee and migrants understanding of race in the U.S.: Social media, television and movies, influenced respondents' views of the U.S. more than their understanding of racial dynamics.</p>

In-Transit

"Transit" refers to the time between when a refugee leaves their home country and when they finally settle in the United States. This includes travel time between destinations, time spent in refugee camps, military bases, and/or transit cities. Transit country media and attitudes shape refugees' perceptions of the United States. As mentioned in the preceding migratory stage, the survey touched on newcomers' experiences after they arrived in the U.S., therefore this data came from participants interviewed in Mobile and Pittsburgh.


Table 3. Findings across ecologies in the Transit stage of migration.

In-Transit	
<p>Personal Experiences</p> 	<p>Views of the U.S. differ by transit location: Those who transited through Turkey reported high levels of anti-U.S. sentiment, whereas respondents in countries like Lebanon, Uganda, and Tanzania reported more positive perceptions of the US.</p> <p>Experiences of racism in transit differ by race: African refugees and Afghans, in transit countries, faced discrimination because of their skin color. This was often their first identified encounter with skin-color based racism.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“In Turkey, they treated us differently because our skin was darker. They were racist there.” – Iraqi man, Mobile</i></p>
<p>Relationships</p> 	<p>Participants report being exposed to harmful racial stereotypes while in transit: Many refugees learned negative stereotypes about Black Americans in the U.S. via word of mouth, the media, and their peers in camps and transit cities.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“When we were in the... camp... they told us ‘In the United States there is Black people, they are very bad. They have guns.’ ... We told them we don’t have any idea about it because we are refugee... We are not from this country; we have to make our mind...” – Afghan woman, Pittsburgh</i></p>
<p>Government Institutions</p> 	<p>Orientation and materials do not prepare refugees and migrants for racial reality in U.S.: According to many Arab and African participants, the pre-departure orientation (PDO) training provided by the U.S. Department of State and UNHCR educated refugees on the cultural complexities of the United States but failed to address race-related issues that refugees may face in their new communities.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>“They taught us [about diversity] in preparation classes ... They show these people on the television and in the books so we can see photos of these people.” – Congolese woman, Mobile</i></p>
<p>Media</p> 	<p>Transit country media matters: Portrayals of life in the U.S. varied by location. For example, Iraqi participants in transit noted that they thought Black Americans were dangerous due to portrayals of Black people in Jordanian and Turkish media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congolese participants were afraid of Black Americans because of media portrayals in refugee camps.

Resettlement to the United States

Refugees and migrants learned about race and racism in the United States through their own experiences as both victims and perpetrators of racial discrimination. Data from this section was drawn from both the interviews and survey results. It is worth noting that participants in the study Many refugees interchanged the terms race and ethnicity, even after living in the U.S. for years. It wasn't until the researcher defined "ethnicity" as a social group defined by similar language and culture that some participants used ethnicity more specifically.

Table 4. Findings across ecologies in the Resettlement stage of migration.

Resettlement	
<p>Personal Experiences</p> 	<p>Many refugees experience first hand discrimination in the U.S.: The most common reasons for discrimination against them were ethnicity (68%), skin color (68%), accent (64%), and religion (49%).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 65% of Refugees and migrants in the study believe Black Americans face the most discrimination in the U.S. • 98% newcomers also reported a willingness to engage in collective action efforts in support of unfair treatment of Black Americans and newcomer populations. <p>Newcomers experience more discrimination: Newcomers that have spent less than 5 years in the U.S. reported the highest experiences of racial discrimination.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>"I remember my senior year (of high school in the U.S.), playing soccer, it was the time of my life. But I remember the White people screaming, 'Go back to Africa! You're a monkey.'" – Congolese man, Mobile</i></p>

Relationships



Participants learned about race through friends and family: 92% of survey respondents learned about race and racism through informal conversations with friends and family. Those who had friends and family who held negative attitudes toward members of other races were more likely to hold similar negative attitudes.

Positive attitudes arise from relationships with neighbors, coworkers, and individuals from other races: Many refugees and migrants developed positive attitudes after daily interactions with others, especially toward other races and felt accepted and respected.

- An Iraqi respondent noted the similarities between Mexican and Iraqi cultures and developed an admiration for “hard working” Mexicans.
- Another participant enjoyed trying various cuisines, including Chinese and Mexican food, and developed an appreciation of these cultures via food.

Refugees over 50+ reported the lowest levels of interactions with members of other racial groups

Racist attitudes may still result from negative interactions: Conversely, some negative interactions influenced newcomers’ perceptions of people of color (typically of Black Americans).

- Respondents who lived in predominantly Black housing projects in Mobile and Pittsburgh had negative experiences that influenced their perceptions of Black Americans.
- Specifically in Mobile, many African participants commented on tensions between African and Black Americans

School and Education



72% of the participants in the study reported learning about race and racism in the United States while at school.

Participants report that being bullied at school is one way refugee and migrant children learn about race: Refugee and migrant children were bullied by peers because of their race, accent, or other features.

Students learn from each other about race: Talking with classmates helped newcomers make sense of different racial categories in the U.S.

Refugee and migrant children learn about race through curriculum: particularly noting lessons on slavery and the civil rights movements.

Government Institutions



Many learned about race categories filling out official documentation in the U.S.: Refugees and migrants learned about U.S. racial categorization when self-reporting their race on official forms.

- Middle Eastern refugees, who were neither White, Black, Asian, or Hispanic, struggled to classify their race on these forms.

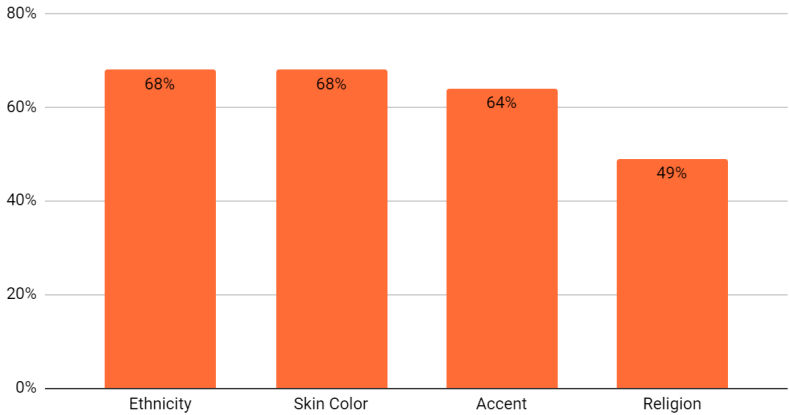


Social Media contributed to a deeper learning about race in the U.S.: 82% of survey respondents and most participants interviewed stated that social media (Facebook and Tiktok) contributed to a deeper understanding of race complexity in the US.

Younger people are more likely to learn about racial injustices from social media.

News and TV Shows teach many about race and racism: 81% of survey participants said they learned about race and racism from news and television shows depicting racial discrimination and police brutality.

Most common reasons reported by refugees for discrimination.



Data presented comes from a national survey conducted by Hello Neighbor and Tufts.

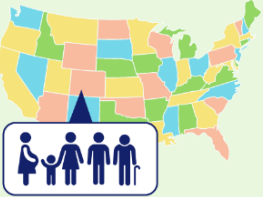




Data from the survey highlighted the most common reasons that refugees experience discrimination in the U.S. after arriving. The most commonly endorsed reasons include Ethnicity and Skin Color (68% respectively), followed by their Accent (64%) and Religion (49%).

Figure 3. Survey findings of most common reported reasons of discrimination.

Conclusion

One’s formulation of “race” depends heavily on their own experiences and culture. Refugees usually learn about race via both formal and informal channels, starting in their home country and continuing for years after they move to the U.S.. This study found that refugees and migrants learn about race through: personal experiences of discrimination, close relationships like friends and family, school, government institutions, social media, and the news. In order for refugees and migrants to be able to thrive and more easily integrate into U.S. society, we emphasize the importance of expanding pre- and post-resettlement programming to help refugees understand racial dynamics in the United States.

Table 5. Findings across ecologies in the Pre-Departure, In-Transit, and Resettlement stages of migration.

	PRE-DEPARTURE	IN-TRANSIT	RESETTLEMENT
Personal Experiences	<p>Existing beliefs may not reflect true demographics: Most refugees in the study thought the U.S. was mostly White with few minorities, others believed only Black and White people lived in the U.S.</p> <p>Prior experience with discrimination facilitates learning: Those who were mistreated in their home countries (colorism or other discrimination), such as the Hazara in Afghanistan, understood the U.S. racial hierarchy faster.</p>	<p>Views of the U.S. differ by transit location: Those who transited through Turkey reported high levels of anti-U.S. sentiment, whereas respondents in countries like Lebanon, Uganda, and Tanzania reported more positive perceptions of the U.S.</p> <p>Experiences of racism in transit differ by race: African refugees and Afghans, in transit countries, faced discrimination because of their skin color. This was often their first identified encounter with skin-color based racism.</p>	<p>Many refugees experience first hand discrimination in the U.S.: The most common reasons for discrimination against them were ethnicity (68%), skin color (68%), accent (64%), and religion (49%).</p> <p>Newcomers experience more discrimination: Newcomers that have spent less than 5 years in the U.S. reported the highest experiences of racial discrimination.</p> <p><5 YEARS</p>
Relationships	<p>Participants report that having family in U.S. made them more aware of race: Prior to arriving in the U.S. refugees and migrants with family in the U.S. knew more about racism and diversity in a U.S. context.</p> 	<p>Participants report being exposed to harmful racial stereotypes while in transit: Many refugees learned negative stereotypes about Black Americans in the U.S. via word of mouth, the media, and their peers in camps and transit cities.</p> <p><i>When we were in the... camp... they told us 'In the United States there is Black people, they are very bad. They have guns. ... We told them we don't have any idea about it because we are refugee... We are not from this country; we have to make our mind...'</i> – Afghan woman, Pittsburgh</p>	<p>Participants learned about race through friends and family: 92% of survey respondents learned about race and racism through informal conversations with friends and family.</p> <p>Those who had friends and family who held negative attitudes toward members of other races were more likely to hold similar negative attitudes.</p> <p>Positive attitudes arise from relationships with neighbors, coworkers, and individuals from other races: Many refugees and migrants developed positive attitudes after daily interactions with others, especially toward other races and felt accepted and respected.</p> <p>Racist attitudes may still result from negative interactions: Conversely, some negative interactions influenced newcomers' perceptions of people of color (typically of Black Americans).</p>
School and Education	<p>U.S. Literature is one way refugees learn about racial discrimination: Some refugees who attended secondary school (high school) in their home countries learned about discrimination in the U.S. through books like <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>, or through topics like the Transatlantic Slave Trade.</p> 		<p>72% of the participants in the study reported learning about race and racism in the United States while at school.</p> <p>Participants report that being bullied at school is one way refugee and migrant children learn about race: Refugee and migrant children were bullied by peers because of their race, accent, or other features.</p> <p>Students learn from each other about race: Talking with classmates helped newcomers make sense of different racial categories in the U.S.</p> <p>Refugee and migrant children learn about race through curriculum: particularly noting lessons on slavery and the civil rights movements.</p>
Government Institutions	<p>Race and ethnicity definitions are unclear: Many refugees didn't know the difference between ethnicity and race as it is defined in the U.S. In those countries, ethnicity and religion often determined treatment.</p> <p><i>"I'm always confused... Since Afghanistan is located in the center of Asia and I always tick Asia... (But most of our friends thought Asian is belonging to Chinese, Japanese, Korean people'... I always write Asian, other people write White."</i> – Afghan man, Pittsburgh</p>	<p>Orientation and materials do not prepare refugees and migrants for racial reality in U.S.: According to many Arab and African participants, the pre-departure orientation (PDO) training provided by the U.S. Department of State and UNHCR educated refugees on the cultural complexities of the United States but failed to address race-related issues that refugees may face in their new communities.</p> <p><i>"They taught us [about diversity] in preparation classes... They show these people on the television and in the books so we can see photos of these people."</i> – Congolese woman, Mobile</p>	<p>Many learned about race categories filling out official documentation in U.S.: Refugees and migrants learned about U.S. racial categorization when self-reporting their race on official forms.</p> 
Media	<p>Pre-departure media influences refugee and migrants understanding of race in the U.S.: Social media, television and movies, influenced respondents' views of the U.S. more than their understanding of racial dynamics.</p> 	<p>Transit country media matters: Portrayals of life in the U.S. varied by location. For example, Iraqi participants in transit noted that they thought Black Americans were dangerous due to portrayals of Black people in Jordanian and Turkish media.</p> 	<p>Social Media contributed to a deeper learning about race in the U.S.: 82% of survey respondents and most participants interviewed stated that social media (Facebook and Tiktok) contributed to a deeper understanding of race complexity in the US.</p> <p>Younger people are more likely to learn about racial injustices from Social Media Younger participants were more aware of racial injustice, because they were on social media.</p> <p>News and TV Shows teach many about race and racism: 81% of survey participants said they learned about race and racism from news and television shows depicting racial discrimination and police brutality.</p>