The Invisible Walls of Race

Recently, I visited a website that allows users to post questions for others to answer. When someone asked for examples of racism today, responses included "When someone is overlooked for a job they are qualified for because of the color of their skin," and stereotypes like "they steal" based on race. While most Americans agree that these examples are indeed racist and wrong, how do we feel about the many lesser apparent forms of racial injustice all around us that confine and limit our lives?
Do we consider it racially unjust when say, mostly-black neighborhoods have half as many chain supermarkets as predominantly white neighborhoods, and Latino neighborhoods have a third as many? Or how about statistics claiming blacks and Latinos are six times more likely to rely on public transportation than whites when 75 percent of the low- and middle-skill jobs that blacks and Latinos disproportionately fill are more than 90 minutes away by public transport? Even black and Latino Americans earning $200,000 or more can’t catch a break: They are more likely to have subprime mortgage loans than white Americans earning just $50,000.

There’s no denying that we have made tremendous progress in racial relations in America since the days of slavery and Jim Crow laws, when there was nothing outrageous about categorizing an entire race of people as inferior simply based on skin color. And, yes, we should celebrate. I know I do each time I remember that my grandfather had to settle for a job as a postal worker, which was still a prized job in segregated America, over becoming a reporter at a mainstream newspaper, because racism deferred his dream. But while we are proud of how far we have come, we are far from done.

Today, the walls that race built are mostly invisible. Newspapers don’t boast of lynchings. There’s even open discussion about whether it’s appropriate to use the N-word. Angry white people intent on protecting their white way of life by donning hoods and burning crosses is rarer these days. But equally and more important is that those making decisions in Congress and other institutions are still largely white and largely male. Their decisions, however, are not necessarily made with virulent racism on the brain. Instead, they are more benign, with most of the decision makers failing to take into account how their policies affect those outside of their circle. Whether the transit system runs on time, for example, is irrelevant when the majority of the people you know drive.

Take unemployment as another example. Yes, far too many Americans are out of work, and while 8 percent unemployment for the country isn’t great, black unemployment rates have historically been much higher. According to the National Urban League’s 2013 “State of Black America” report, black unemployment rose from 10 percent in 1963 to 13 percent today. In fact, unemployment rates, according to the report, among black men and women are twice as high as those for white men and women. At the height of the recession, black unemployment reached 15 percent, but the mainstream media didn’t label it a crisis. If a large number of black Americans rely on public transportation to get to work, then spending 80 percent of our federal transportation dollars on highways isn’t going to help lower black America’s unemployment rate.

Those aren’t the only alarming statistics. Groundbreaking reports from the Urban Institute and the Institute on Assets and Social Policy shocked many. They revealed that, while all of us need savings, home equity and stocks and bonds to build a financial future, black Americans, regardless of income, have much less wealth than white Americans. Even worse, our nation now has the largest racial wealth gap in 25 years, and unequal homeownership opportunities account for a significant portion of that gap.