

School Colors

The Class of 2000 weighs in on race

By Sarah Dutton

Between 1996 and 2000, CBS News surveyed 2,336 students who were expected to graduate from high school in the year 2000. Interviews began in January 1997, the midpoint of their freshman year, and were recorded in five separate polls, each consisting of a nationally representative sample of members of the Class of 2000. One of many topics covered in this research was race relations.



Race Relations in the US

The Class of 2000 held a rather optimistic view of race relations in the United States. By nearly three to one, students described relations as good, and these positive assessments increased slightly over the course of the research. In polls conducted in 1997 and 1998, 62% thought race relations in the US were good; that grew to 70% by 2000. And these students had a much more favorable assessment of race relations than adults interviewed at about the same time.

But that positive assessment masked an underlying divide between white and black students. By nearly twenty percentage points, whites were more upbeat than African Americans in their evaluations of race relations. Most whites viewed race relations positively; 72% called them good, while 25% thought they were bad. Black students were more evenly divided; 53% thought relations were good, and 40% called them bad.

Evaluations were highest among students in the west, where 79% said relations were good and 18% said they were bad. In the south, views were mostly positive, but more southern students expressed misgivings; in that region (which had twice as many black students), 65% said relations were good, and 31% said they were bad.

Closer to home, these students expressed higher satisfaction with the status of race relations in their own communities and schools. As juniors, 76% thought relations in their communities were good, and 76% were positive about race relations in their high schools. Later on, as these students approached graduation, about eight in ten said race relations in their high schools were good, a proportion consistent across all races.

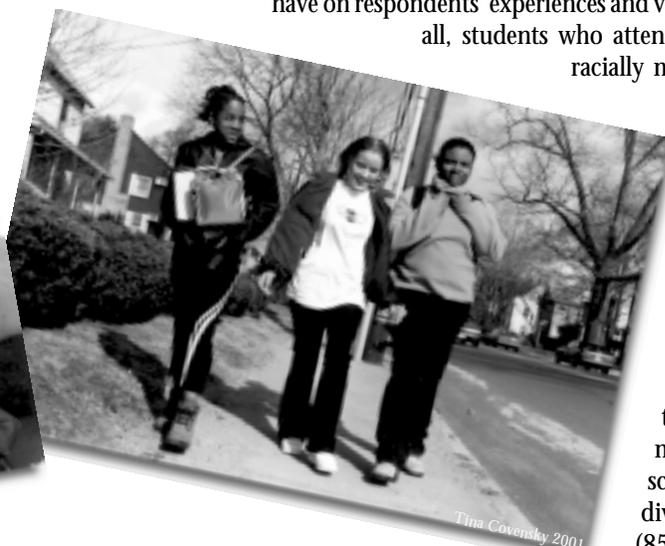
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Exposure to Other Races

Most members of the Class of 2000 experienced limited diversity at school—upon graduation, 60% said they had attended schools that were mostly white. However, one in four had a more racially diverse set of classmates; 27% attended schools that were fairly evenly integrated. Seven percent said their schools were mostly black, and 6% said their schools were mostly of another race.

Black students had much greater exposure than white students to people of races other than their own. Seventy-one percent of whites said they attended mainly white schools, but only 32% of blacks went to schools with a mostly black student body. Few whites found themselves as the minority race—only 2% attended mostly black schools. But for blacks, this minority experience was more common; 24% went to mostly white schools. Twenty-four percent of whites and 36% of blacks said their schools were fairly evenly mixed.

The racial composition of schools had little effect on students' views on race relations. Regardless of whether students attended schools composed mostly of whites, of blacks, or of a variety of races, about three in four said race relations at school were good.



Crossing Racial Boundaries

Whatever their school's racial composition, these students did not grow up in a homogeneous environment. Unlike previous generations, their lives included a fairly high degree of racial integration. Just under three-quarters had close friends of a different race, and 41% had dated someone of a different race.

“Greater exposure to other races leads to more positive views on race relations.”

Both white and black members of the Class of 2000 had racially diverse social lives—69% of whites and 75% of blacks had

close friends of other races. More African Americans than whites had gone on interracial dates; 48% of blacks had dated someone of another race, as did 36% of whites.

Unlike the young couple in the movie *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?*, these students did not have to contend as much with parental taboos against mixed race dating. Ninety percent of those who had dated people of other races said their parents were *not* against it.

Even if they had not already done so, most students were receptive to the possibility of dating people of other races. As juniors, 82% said they would date someone of another race, and 84% of these students thought their parents would support it. Blacks were more open to interracial dating than whites, although a majority of white students would consider it. Ninety-two percent of blacks said they would date someone of another race; 78% of whites said they would.

How much of an effect did exposure to students of other races have on respondents' experiences and views on race? Overall, students who attended schools with a racially mixed student body

were more likely to have friends and have dated someone of another race. And although white students called race relations in their schools good, that finding was more pronounced in schools with racially diverse student bodies (85%).

Racism and Prejudice

As juniors, few members of the Class of 2000 believed their classmates were prejudiced against African Americans. Ten percent said “a lot” of people in their school were prejudiced against blacks, 36% said “some” were, and 52% said “hardly any” or “none.” Even fewer black students perceived prejudice against black students.

While a similarly small number—16%—said they had been discriminated against because of their race, African American students were twice as likely to have experienced racism. Thirty percent of black students had encountered discrimination, compared to one in ten whites. Among black adults, that number is more than twice as high; in a February 2000 CBS News poll, 66% of black adults reported being discriminated against because of their race.

Despite students’ exposure to peers, friends, and dates of other races, some participated in ugly racist behavior. By the time they graduated, 32% of the Class of 2000 admitted making racist remarks. There were important demographic differences, with boys (especially white boys) most likely to have made offensive comments. Forty-two percent of all boys admitted to this behavior; only 23% of girls said the same. And reports of racist comments among white boys more than doubled those of white girls (44% versus 20%). Blacks as well as whites were guilty of racial slurs. Twenty-five percent of black students said they had used them, as did 32% of whites.

Students who made slurs likely learned this intolerant form of expression from their parents, since students with parents who made racist remarks were the most likely to have done so themselves. As juniors, 28% of the students had made racial slurs. Thirty-one percent said they had heard their parents make them, and among this group, the percentage that said they had also made racist remarks rose to 52%.

Likewise, students of parents who didn’t make derogatory comments about blacks in front of them were the least likely to make racial slurs. Among students who had not heard a parent make a racist remark, only 17% said they had done so themselves.

The Future of Race Relations

In 1998, the Class of 2000 had an optimistic view on the future of race relations. Thirty-four percent expected relations to get better in the next four years, and 54% expected no change; only 11% thought race relations would get worse. Black students were only slightly less optimistic. Thirty-five percent of whites and 30% of blacks believed that in four years’ time race relations would be better.

But at the same time, most members of the Class of 2000 expected racial prejudice and discrimination to continue. Sixty-one percent thought there would always be a lot of it, while only 38% felt there was real hope for ending it. Black students and white students held similar views. Compared to adults asked the same question, these students were surprisingly pessimistic about ending prejudice altogether.

Although their expectation that prejudice will always exist is disappointing, there is ample hope that the Class of 2000 will contribute to improved race relations as a result of their exposure to other races and the acceptance of diversity implicit in their friendships and romantic relationships. The Class of 2000’s positive beliefs will be especially important given the nation’s changing racial demographics and the role of these students in shaping America’s future as they become adults.

Evidence from this research suggests that greater exposure to other races leads to more positive views on race relations and more widespread interracial relationships, and that at least some racial insensitivity is learned at home. As these young adults become parents themselves, their own friendships and exposure to people of other races will perhaps prevent them from passing on that legacy to their children. If the graduating Class of 2000 is any indication, the next generation may do a better job than its predecessors in creating a more integrated and racially harmonious society. ●

