

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING IN U.S. RACE RELATIONS

By Burns W. Roper

I have always believed that public opinion polls make one of their greatest contributions when used to assess the validity of "common knowledge." With respect to race relations in America, the polls reveal how wrong "common knowledge" is. From what is said in much of the news media today, we would think the state of race relations in America had deteriorated to a post-war low. But nothing could be further from the truth.

There's no question that the racial climate in New York City is tense right now. Flatbush, Bensonhurst, the Central Park jogger, Tawana Brawley, and Howard Beach: These bring to mind serious examples of racial animus, deserving of wide attention and condemnation. And New York City society holds no monopoly on racial enmity. Recall the grave events last year in Virginia Beach. And a former Klansman is making a credible run for the US Senate in Louisiana.

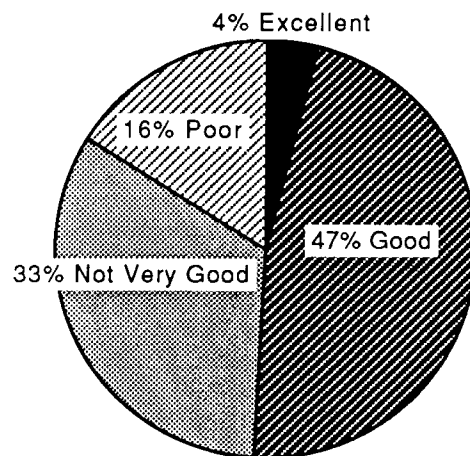
Although there may be reason to fear a rise in racial violence in cities and on campuses across the country, all of these remain isolated events that do not reflect the views or experiences of the vast majority of Americans — black or white. Blacks are far more satisfied with the quality of their lives than they were a decade ago, and whites have grown far more tolerant.

In 1978, a Roper poll sought to measure the conditions of the races, unaffected by any mention of race. To accomplish this, we asked about conditions "here in this neighborhood." Compared to whites, blacks reported far higher rates of unemployment, crime, drug abuse, and violence. In some cases, blacks were two, three, even four times as likely as whites to criticize the living conditions in their respective neighborhoods. This year we again asked the same series of questions and found major improvements. Although the experiences of blacks are still worse than those of whites, the differences have narrowed remarkably.

Fewer than a third of blacks complain, for example, about juvenile delinquency in their neighborhoods, down from half in 1978. At the same time, juvenile delinquency was mentioned as a problem by a fifth of whites, down from a quarter. Housing conditions also appear to have improved for blacks. Only 28 percent now cite a lack of good local housing, down 11 percentage points over the past dozen years. And fewer than a fifth criticize treatment by police, down ten points. Other problems are mentioned much less frequently by blacks this year than in 1978: auto thefts (down 18 points), drug dealing (down 22 points), attacks on older people (down 23), break-ins (down 25), and unemployment (down 28).

The topic of race was then raised in a later part of the survey. In both years, respondents were asked how many members of various racial groups they would ideally like to have in their neighborhoods. In 1978, 28% of whites said they preferred to have "no blacks" in their neighborhoods; today, 21% give this answer. Meanwhile, only 3% of blacks would prefer no *whites* where they live, down from 8% in 1978.

The most significant changes came in the area of employment opportunities. Asked to consider a situation in which a black and white person of equal intelligence and skill applied for the same job, a plurality of whites in 1978 feared reverse discrimination — they said the black would get the job; today the dominant answer is that both would have an *equal* chance. The shift in outlook among blacks is even more dramatic: only a third now think the white person would have the better chance of being hired, down from half. Four in ten blacks — twice as many as twelve years ago — say both candidates would have an equal chance. Half of all blacks call conditions for black people excellent or good, up from only 39% twelve years ago.



Blacks' Assessments of Conditions for Black People, 1990

How do we square these findings with the sense of racial violence? It may be that our equality-minded society has grown more sensitive to racial discord — that we've come to notice displays of racial animosity more than we used to. The news media also bear some responsibility for overplaying stories of racial tension. Indeed, when a recent poll of New Yorkers asked them which of nine individuals and institutions were making race relations worse in the city, the top two answers were the Rev. Al Sharpton (a black activist who has seemingly sought racial confrontation, mentioned by 84%) and the news media (69%). On this question, blacks and whites were in complete agreement.

**Blacks' and Whites' Perceptions of Problems:
1978 and 1990**

Here is a list of things that are problems in some neighborhoods. Would you go down the list and call off each you feel is a real problem in *this* neighborhood? Any others?

	Blacks		Whites	
	1978 %	1990 %	1978 %	1990 %
Unemployment	67	39	16	20
Juvenile delinquency	50	32	25	20
Crime	62	49	23	27
Street cleaning and street repairs	39	28	28	19
The supply of good housing	39	28	17	13
Treatment by police	28	18	6	7
Upkeep of houses and yard by people who live here	33	24	15	16
Inadequate parks and recreation facilities	27	19	18	12
Garbage collection	18	12	7	6
Schools and education	22	20	14	17
Concern of public officials about the neighborhood	20	18	11	10
Inadequate supermarkets and shopping facilities	18	16	8	8
Availability of places for working mothers to leave their children during the day	23	24	19	21
Street lighting	18	22	15	14
Public transportation	18	26	27	19
None (vol.)	3	15	23	26

SOURCE: Surveys by the Roper Organization, latest that of March 10-17, 1990. The order of the above items is not that in the questionnaire, but rather one determined by the amount and direction of change from the 1978 to the 1990 survey in the assessments of black Americans.

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