

TIME REPORTS

Kids and Race

A new poll shows teenagers, black and white, have moved beyond their parents' views of race

By **CHRISTOPHER JOHN FARLEY**

RODNEY GULLATTE JR., 17, AN African-American student at Sprayberry High School in Marietta, Ga., was still in middle school when he got his first lesson in racism. It was then that a group of white kids, whom he describes as part of a growing "skinhead" element in his school, began to harass him. After a time Gullatte punched one of the white kids in the face. That earned Gullatte an in-school suspension. Worse, nobody believed him when he explained why he had lashed out. "They kept saying the kid would not say something like that, that stuff like that doesn't happen in the Cobb County public schools," says Gullatte. "But people don't know what really goes on."

What *does* go on? With the number of hate crimes on the rise nationwide, what do today's children really think about the racial chasm that has divided this country since its inception?

The days of Bull Connor, police dogs and fire hoses are long gone, and many would find it comforting to believe that skin color is no longer an issue for kids. Has the newest generation of Americans finally arrived at that melanin-friendly Promised Land? No. But a new TIME/CNN poll of 1,282 adults and 601 teens (ages 12 to 17) has found a startling number of youngsters, black and white, who seem to

have moved beyond their parents' views of race. These kids say race is less important to them, both on a personal level and as a social divide, than it is for adults. It must be noted that more than half of both white kids and black still consider racism "a big problem" in America—however, more than a third classify it as "a small problem." Asked about the impact of racism in their own lives, a startling 89% of

black teens call it "a small problem" or "not a problem at all." In fact, white adults and white teens are more convinced than black teens that racism in America remains a dominant issue.

Furthermore, black teens are more reluctant than others to blame racism for problems. Indeed, nearly twice as many black kids as white believe "failure to take advantage of available opportunities" is more of a problem for blacks than discrimination. That's especially extraordinary given the fact that 40% of the black teens surveyed believe SATs are loaded against them, and that blacks have to be better qualified than whites to get a job. These responses seem to indicate that black teens believe color barriers exist, but, despite that, they retain an admirably dogged belief in self-determination.

Is this surprising portrait a sign of hope? Or is it just an example of youthful naiveté? Probably both. "One word explains it—experience," speculates sociologist Joe R. Feagin. "You have to be out looking for jobs and housing to know how much discrimination is out there. People doing that are usually over 19." Sure enough, only a quarter of

SPEAKING OUT: Teens and Adults See Different Worlds

■ Which of the following is more of a problem for blacks today?

| TEENS | ADULTS |
|-------|--------|
|-------|--------|

| | |
|---|-------------|
| <i>Failure to take advantage of available opportunities</i> | |
| Whites: 31% | Whites: 52% |
| Blacks: 58% | Blacks: 51% |

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Discrimination by whites</i> | |
| Whites: 47% | Whites: 22% |
| Blacks: 26% | Blacks: 26% |

■ Is racism a big problem or a small problem?

| TEENS | ADULTS |
|-------|--------|
|-------|--------|

| | |
|----------------------|-------------|
| <i>Big problem</i> | |
| Whites: 58% | Whites: 64% |
| Blacks: 62% | Blacks: 78% |
| <i>Small problem</i> | |
| Whites: 34% | Whites: 27% |
| Blacks: 34% | Blacks: 17% |

■ Have you ever been a victim of discrimination because you are black?

| BLACK TEENS | BLACK ADULTS |
|-------------|--------------|
|-------------|--------------|

| | |
|----------|----------|
| Yes: 23% | Yes: 53% |
| No: 77% | No: 45% |

■ Have you ever been a victim of discrimination because you are white?

| WHITE TEENS | WHITE ADULTS |
|-------------|--------------|
|-------------|--------------|

| | |
|----------|----------|
| Yes: 16% | Yes: 20% |
| No: 83% | No: 79% |

■ Will race relations in this country ever get better?

| TEENS | ADULTS |
|-------|--------|
|-------|--------|

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Yes</i> | |
| Whites: 76% | Whites: 60% |
| Blacks: 55% | Blacks: 43% |

From a telephone poll of 816 white adults, 374 black adults, 301 white teens and 300 black teens taken for TIME/CNN from Sept. 23 to Oct. 2 by Yankelovich Partners Inc. Margins of error are [±]3.4%, 5.1%, 5.6% and 5.6% respectively

black teens surveyed said they had been victims of discrimination, whereas half of black adults say they have. For all that, these kids remain astonishingly optimistic: 95% of the black youngsters think they're going on to college, as do 93% of the whites.

But is that gullibility? Or gutsiness? Today's teens have respect for the past, faith in the future—and a distaste for scapegoating that outstrips that of their parents. One of the survey's more

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notable findings: even though neither black teens nor whites tend to blame racism as a cause of problems facing blacks, they nonetheless support gender- and race-based scholarships in greater numbers than adults.

People don't always level with pollsters; they're notorious in fact for giving answers they believe to be socially acceptable at the expense of revealing their true feelings. But teens are less likely to do that than adults. Sociologist Howard Pinderhughes, author of the new book *Race in the Hood: Conflict and Violence Among Urban Youth*, says, “Teenagers are a mirror of our souls. They speak plainly about things that adults would like to hide. Political correctness isn't an issue to them. You're more likely to get what they think unfiltered.” Extensive interviews with children, parents, educators, researchers and law-enforcement officials make clear that the new optimism takes place against a backdrop of a number of new challenges, such as the growing presence of hate groups on the Internet, and old ones, such as interracial dating and ethnic turf wars.

A disinclination to blame problems on racism does not mean a reduced sense of racial identity. Psychologist Beverly Tatum, author of the recently published *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, says she often asks her psychology students to complete this sentence: “I am _____.” White students tend to answer with personality traits: “I am

friendly,” “I am shy,” etc. Students of color tend to fill in the blank with their ethnicity: “I am black” or “I am Puerto Rican.” The foundation for racial identity, Tatum argues, is constructed in adolescence by peer pressure, societal influences and self-reflection; it is a time when children make choices about who they are.

The attitudes expressed by respondents to the TIME/CNN poll are all the more remarkable given that outside of

school, black teens and white teens most often live in separate neighborhoods and sometimes, it seems, on separate planets. Danny, 17, a white Chicago youngster interviewed by TIME, professed to having “more black friends than I do white friends” but also admitted that “we just talk in school” and that he never visits the homes of his black buddies, who tend to live in crime-plagued housing projects.

Danny's situation is not uncommon. While few teens view their neighborhood as dangerous, 40% of black teens reported that they knew someone their age who had been murdered, in contrast to only 15% of white teens. Black teens also feel they don't get a fair shake from the police: one-third of them feel they are at risk of being treated unfairly by cops, while only 1 out of 5 white teens shares that fear.

Three-fourths of the white teenagers polled by TIME/CNN believe race relations will get better, as do more than half of the black teens. “What we're seeing here is a hidden aspect of the black survival process,” says Michael Eric Dyson, author of *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line*. “You imagine a reality better than the one in

which you presently live. I wouldn't call it optimism; it goes too deep. It's hope. Hope goes against everything you see.”

One black Newark, N.J., teen interviewed by TIME launched into an ugly tirade about Jews—but many more expressed a sense of catharsis simply to be talking about the racial difficulties they face. On the other hand, white teens interviewed seemed to have more trouble discussing racial issues, and were often unable to even find the words to describe their feelings about ethnicity. According to psychologist Tatum, some parents, particularly white ones, silence their children when racial issues are raised. This is done, sometimes, as part of a well-meaning effort to teach children that such distinctions don't matter. But as a result of such silencing, children are left without answers to their questions and without the social skills to deal with racial issues.

Some youngsters are trying to reach beyond the silence. After Gullatte had his fight with skinheads in his school, he felt he had no one to talk to. He has since joined Group X, a program started in the Cobb County school system in 1993 in which students meet on a semiregular basis and discuss race. Some 450 students are signed up. The meetings, held in groups of about 20, can get emotional. At a recent session, Alison Garcia, 12, stood up, tears in her eyes, and exclaimed, “All Hispanics are not dumb! You don't know me. My father and my uncle were part of the Cherokee tribe, and my uncle had the highest scores in school.” Says Gullatte: “What the Group X project did was help me to be able to tell other people about [my experiences] and say what I really feel.” It's just talk. But it's a start. ■

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ANALYZING THE ARTICLE

1. Why do kids' views on race relations differ from adults'?
2. **CRITICAL THINKING** Do you believe that race barriers exist in your world? Do you think the adults you know would disagree with you? Explain.