

OPINION

Numbers Don't Lie: The Racial Divide Isn't As Wide As You Think

Twin studies from the Brookings Institution and the National Collaborative for Health Equity show rising cross-racial relationships and a deep hunger for unity.

BY GAIL CHRISTOPHER March 30, 2026

Surveys show that, from friendships to workplaces to romance, Americans are building cross-racial ties and rejecting bias in daily life. The survey results flip the script on news headlines and political talking points that declare the racial divide in the U.S. is impossible to cross. Credit: Getty Images

OVERVIEW:

While institutional barriers linger, an overwhelming number of us have interracial friendships, work with someone of another race, believe in racial equality, and yearn for racial healing, according to two new surveys. Younger generations are at the vanguard of shifting attitudes: 35% of those under age 30 are in interracial romantic relationships.

If you consume a steady diet of daily news and political commentary, you might believe that, when it comes to race, our nation is hopelessly fractured. Yet, when we look past the noise and examine how people actually live their lives, a completely different reality emerges.

Indeed, new research shows Americans are rejecting explicit racial bias and are building meaningful, lasting relationships across racial lines.

The Brookings Institution's "[Interracial Cooperation in the United States](#)" report and the National Collaborative for Health Equity's (NCHE) [3rd Annual Heart of America Survey](#) show we are finding common ground, fostering cooperation, and that our capacity for connection is far stronger than the forces pulling us apart.

We are a nation evolving, healing, and yearning for unity.

Beyond the Hierarchy of Human Value

Decades ago, those of us devoted to social justice sought to move the conversation beyond basic "race relations" towards structural, institutional racism. We fought to dismantle the artificial hierarchy of human value — the deeply flawed belief that some groups of people matter more than others.

The Brookings report shows Americans reject that hierarchy.

Nearly 9 in 10 respondents say that race is not a factor in their business decisions, according to the report. Furthermore, 83% say the same when selecting their friends.

This trend extends directly into the workplace. In hypothetical hiring scenarios, 85% of respondents demonstrated entirely race-neutral preferences. Candidate qualifications, interview performance, and credentials carried the day. Race explained only a tiny fraction of hiring decisions.

These numbers validate a truth I have long believed: when we strip away racial politics and posturing, most Americans want fairness. We want to see ourselves in one another and move beyond the artificial barriers history has placed between us.

The Normalization of Diverse Lives

The Brookings data, produced alongside scholars at Gallup and the Brookings Institution's Center for Community Uplift, highlights how interracial exposure has become a normal part of the American experience. Today, 83% of Americans work next to colleagues of different races, and nearly half have diverse supervisors.

These everyday interactions foster deep familiarity, help dissolve lingering stereotypes, and reduce prejudice through shared experiences.

Andre M. Perry, a senior fellow and director at Brookings, captured this dynamic perfectly. He noted that people's day-to-day realities reflect a vastly different America from the one seen on social media or described by politicians.

We are witnessing genuine progress, mapped out in the millions of ordinary interactions Americans have with one another. The data contradicts constant assertions that our nation is hopelessly divided by race.

We see this progress most intimately in our friendship networks. The study found that 72% of adults have at least one friend of another race, and more than half have a close friend of a different race. Most importantly, the quality of these relationships matches that of same-race friendships. Once formed, these cross-racial bonds are deeply rewarding and entirely genuine.

Perhaps the most beautiful evidence of this societal shift exists in our romantic partnerships.

Among adults aged 30 and under, 35% are in interracial relationships, compared with 14% among those aged 70 and over. Those data points make the trajectory of our society unmistakably clear. For younger generations, racial boundaries are becoming irrelevant in matters of the heart. Love is leading the way, bridging gaps that previous generations thought were uncrossable.

A Deep Yearning for Healing and Unity

The NCHE's Third Annual Heart of America Survey, meanwhile, captures the nation's emotional pulse. Conducted by Burson's Insights, Data, and Intelligence Group, it reveals a citizenry exhausted by division and

hungry for healing.

For example, more than three-quarters of respondents believe we can overcome our current challenges through shared understanding. Moreover, 72% are proud of their American identity, reflecting widespread hope for a more cohesive society. Nearly 90% of respondents say they want to belong and trust one another.

We are a nation grappling with profound challenges, yet we maintain a powerful commitment to fairness and equality. When we adopt a human perspective — when we set aside our fears, politics, and greed — we fundamentally want peace.

One of the Heart of America survey's most encouraging aspects is the consensus on issues that are routinely portrayed as hopelessly divisive.

Surprising Consensus

Take immigration, for example: despite heated, often toxic rhetoric on the issue, nearly three-quarters of Americans agree that immigrants, regardless of their legal status, should be guaranteed due process. Even more striking, 77% believe that immigrants enrich American society. Majorities hold this view across both racial and political lines.

On the matter of racial healing, Americans largely agree on the necessary first steps. More than 8 in 10 believe educating children on the true history of race and racism in the U.S. is important for reconciliation. It's a belief that enjoys broad support: 90% of Democrats and 78% of Republicans agree.

Similarly, Americans understand the value of inclusive workplaces. The survey found that 89% of Democrats and 70% of Republicans agree that racial diversity on the job is vital to address the lingering harms of racism. We are also having more nuanced conversations about redress for past wrongs, with 43% of respondents reacting positively to reparations for the harms of slavery.

We are finding common ground. We are agreeing on the basic facts of our history and the necessary steps to build a fairer future.

Acknowledging the Work Ahead

Optimism does not require us to ignore reality.

The Brookings report notes that residential segregation and occupational clustering continue to limit interracial contact for many people. Black, Asian, and Latino workers often have fewer colleagues of different races than their overall population shares would predict.

Yet the studies suggest that our capacity for overcoming these remaining barriers is incredibly strong. Sustained exposure and collaboration are the keys to reducing racial prejudice, and we are engaging in that collaboration more than ever before.

Shannon-Janean Currie, founder of Empirica Advisors and lead researcher for the Heart of America Survey, said these findings challenge the limiting assumption that division defines the American experience. While structural barriers remain, the data show a broad, undeniable readiness for cooperation and fairness.

Americans are ready for leaders who prioritize this collaboration. A decisive 86% of respondents said they would support a leader who actively aims to unite the country, even if they disagree with that leader on specific policy issues. We are longing for leadership that matches our innate desire for cohesion.

An Undeniable Message of Hope

Viewed side by side, the Brookings and NCHE surveys deliver an undeniable message of hope. One study documents our daily interactions, showing they are increasingly cooperative, integrated, and fair. The other reveals the broader landscape, revealing a public that is empathetic, hopeful, and eager for unity.

As we look toward the future, these findings offer a blueprint for lasting progress. The path forward lies not in digging deeper trenches but in leveraging the massive reservoir of goodwill and cooperation that already defines much of American life. By recognizing our progress in interpersonal relationships and aligning our policies with the public's true desire for unity, we can bridge our remaining divides.

*Dr. Gail C. Christopher is the executive director of the National Collaborative for Health Equity. She is also a senior scholar at George Mason University's Center for Advancement of Well-Being and a former senior advisor and vice president of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Her latest book is [**Rx Racial Healing: A Guide to Embracing Our Humanity**](#).*



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