

The American Problem of Racism

By: Hannah Burbach

On September 26th, 1919, Will Brown was arrested for rape. A black rapist of white women, they called him. Two days later, the city of Omaha, Nebraska, broke into chaos. Young white men marched up to the courthouse with their signs and their justifications, demanding Will Brown's head. Fire hoses sprayed at the mob as police officers tried to dispel and discourage their attack. Broken windows rained down on the people, dragging blood with them on their journey to the cement. Black men, strolling home from work, were beaten and bloodied with the butts of revolvers. The white men who tried to help them faced the same fate.

Flames shot up in the sky as the crowd stormed the courthouse. The air, normally so clear and full of hope, was choked with smoke and the distinct smell of burning flesh. Humans became animals. Women, children, blacks, whites – they were all mutilated. Anyone who breathed felt their skins ripped open, exposing the same crimson blood to the world. Bullets rang through the atmosphere. People were shot, two of whom were fatally wounded. The courthouse handed over Will in an attempt to save the white prisoners on the roof of the building. He was yanked from the building and strung up on the telephone post of 18th and Harney. The shotguns and revolvers riddled his lifeless body with bullets. Then, it was taken down and dragged for four blocks before it, like the courthouse, was set aflame.



https://www.blackpast.org/wp-content/uploads/prodimages/files/event_omaha_courthouse_lynching.jpg

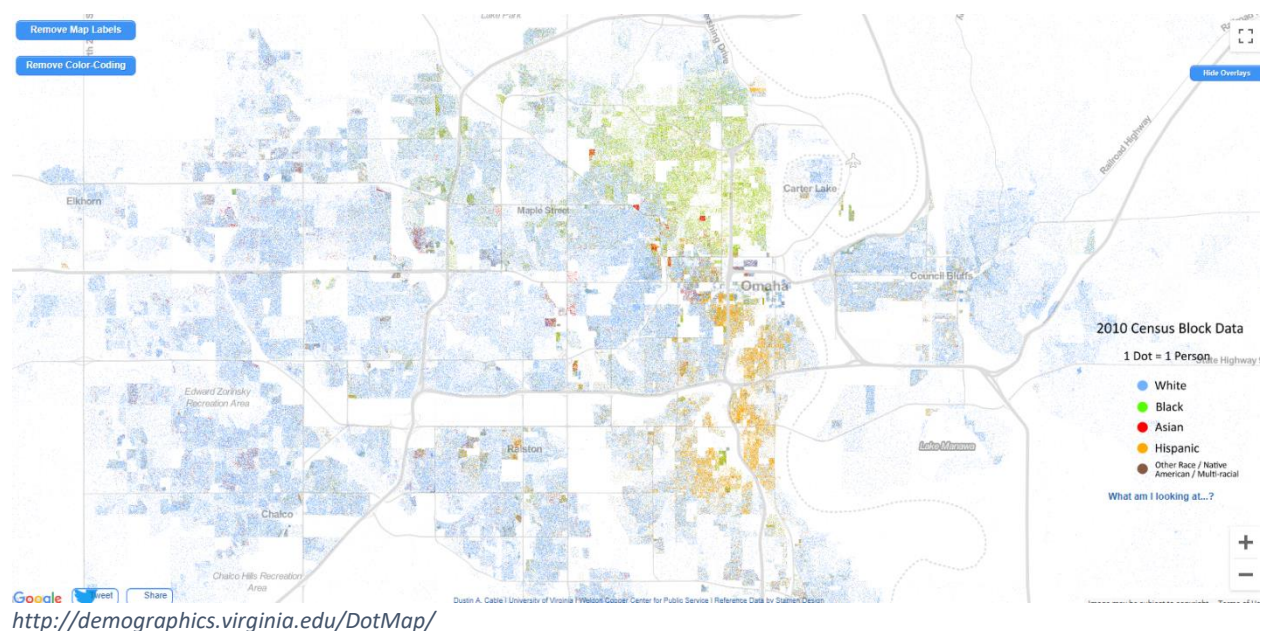
The citizens of Omaha know the story of the [lynching](#) of Will Brown, albeit in varying amounts of detail. It remains one of the darkest spots on the city's history to this day, discussed in hushed tones and omitted from history lessons. But it's a story that needs to be told. It is one among many race-related [events](#) in the past of Omaha, of Nebraska, of the United States. No one likes to admit faults – it's true. Yet, with one look at the news, you can see that racism is not entirely in the past. It is the United States' past, present, and, if not corrected, future.

As a learned behavior, racism is hard to diffuse. Young children follow their parents' every action, repeat every word. It's the reason you hear three-year-olds yelling curse words and then laughing like the maniacal devils – sorry, angels – they are. It's also the reason a third-grade boy, who happens to be white, refuses to sit next to another third-grade boy, who happens to be Latino. At that age, racism is like subliminal messaging – kids don't even realize they're receiving these messages and learning these behaviors until it's too late. But, it's not all lost hope

for children growing up in homes rife with racism. With adequate, *detailed* understanding of U.S. history and cultural dynamics today, they can learn. And most do.

Some don't.

De jure segregation is illegal; it has been since 1865. De facto segregation, however, is rampant. Societal constructs perpetuate stereotypes and isolation. Look at the city of Omaha. Zoomed in, the city seems more progressive than the rest of Nebraska. That's not saying much – Nebraska is notoriously “old-school” – but it's something at least. Zoomed out, things are different. A demographic map shows just how segregated the city is. African Americans were pushed to North O, where the city was first developed and has since not been updated. Latinos were pushed to South O, where almost every billboard is doubled in Spanish and English. Whites laughably dominate West O, and East O is just downtown. Everyone who lives in Omaha knows this is the status quo, but seeing it on a map reminds us all just how present segregation is in the 21st century.



In the past two years, public racism has seemingly skyrocketed. Now, while that correlates with the inauguration of President Trump, the cause cannot be definitively known. Still, 58% of Americans think race relations are bad and 56% believe that Trump has made them worse. It almost seems like the election of such a controversial figure released the fire that had been simmering underneath America's skin for eight years. It *almost* seems like that. But let's be honest here. One man holding office isn't the reason for the racial uproar. He has opinions just like the rest of us, and he simply has a significantly larger audience listening and waiting to critique his every word and deed. So, this isn't a discussion on President Trump. It's so much more than that because these fires started burning long before the 2016 election. Instead, it's a discussion on the racial slurs being hurled at African Americans as they walk down the street.

It's a discussion on the prejudices held against immigrants, assuming they're all dangerous drug lords or undercover terrorists. It's a discussion on the observation that Americans – despite the motto of life, liberty, and happiness – openly spew disgust at anyone that threatens the carefully curated ecosystem in which we all exist.

An ecosystem built on the fear of differences.

There's more data and statistics and [studies](#) that further the interrogation into the public view of racism in America. But they're numbers. Just numbers. What holds more importance is the fact that an overwhelming amount of people – specifically black people – believe that the legacy of slavery is still affecting minorities in the United States. And this can be seen everywhere: on Twitter, on Instagram, on Facebook, and on every TV screen in America tuned to the 6:00 news.

Something needs to be done. That much is clear. As the racial divide deepens, more divisions appear. Anti-semitic [attacks](#) are exploding, spreading fear throughout the Jewish community. Hate messages are being posted on [churches](#), places of worship and community, planting the seed of apprehension in the hearts of America. The great divide of our country happened years ago – years of finding reasons to separate one person from the next. If we don't unify now and start acting like we're all humans, then all hope *will* be lost.