

"Black Rage" or Conscious Dream?: A Demographic Profile of African Americans' Prejudice

By [David C. Wilson](#)

The lack of nationally representative studies of the African American population has left many questions unanswered with regard to sensitive topics such as blacks' prejudice toward whites. One such question centers on who is most likely to be prejudiced within the black population, and more curiously, why.

There is evidence to suggest that middle-class professional blacks are the most likely candidates, because they are highly susceptible to social frustration, disillusionment, alienation, and mistrust. This group includes blacks with higher incomes and more education, and others who are seeking economic upward mobility.

Although not all research supports this proposition, it is a compelling one that calls for continued exploration. What can survey research reveal about the notion that some have called "Black Rage" in the upper and middle classes of black America, and what demographic characteristics are most associated with blacks' prejudice?

Two fundamental viewpoints appear in studies of this subject. The "[sense of group position model](#)" predicts that those demographic groups who are most likely to be in economic, social, and political competition with other groups should also be most likely to perceive their racial environment as negative and potentially threatening. The consequence for educated, middle-class blacks is a pessimistic outlook, and a greater likelihood to report being prejudiced.

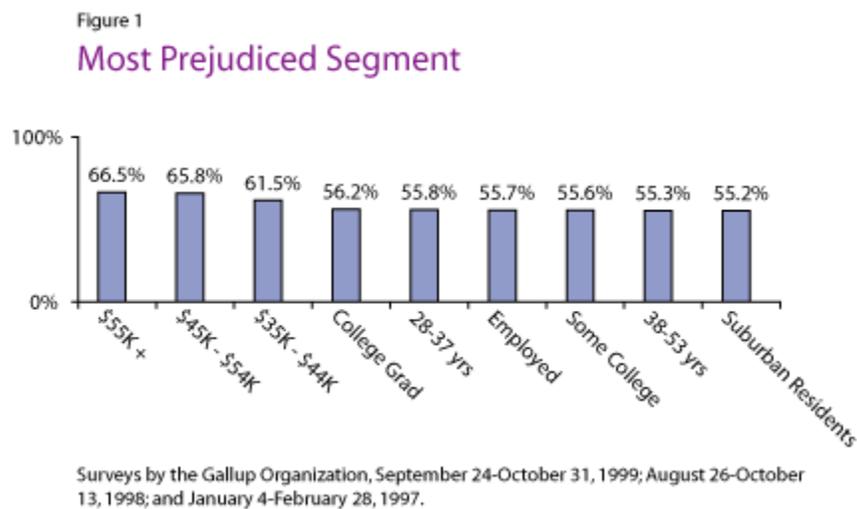
Other researchers believe that the black middle class is not disillusioned. In a 2002 analysis, Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza provided evidence that more-educated and higher-income African Americans are more likely than their lower-income and less-educated counterparts to believe that their financial situation will improve, and that there is hope for the future--in other words, that the black middle class still believes in the American dream.

Is or is not the black middle class disillusioned with the American dream? Are the views of blacks of higher socioeconomic status (SES) optimistic or pessimistic? This study attempts to answer these questions by testing the notion that segments of the black population who are most prejudiced are also most likely to perceive a negative racial context. If the optimistic view is correct, then higher SES African Americans should be less likely to report perceiving a negative racial context and less likely to be prejudiced. If the pessimistic view is correct, then demographic groups that represent the black middle class should be more likely to perceive a negative racial context and to be prejudiced, suggesting that middle-to upper-class blacks are less naïve about the American dream and more sensitive to the role that race can play in social, economic, and political differences.

Segmentation analyses are typically used in research to extrapolate which demographic attributes best relate to outcomes, attributes, or behavior. This analysis focuses on [eight demographic variables](#)--education, income, age, gender, "urbanicity," black population density, and employment status--and employs three years' worth of data collected from the 1997-99 Gallup Poll Social Audits on Black/White Relations, also known as the [Gallup Race Relations Social Audits \(GRRSA\)](#). Black respondents' prejudice was measured using an [eleven-point index](#) (ranging from zero to ten) of self-reported prejudice against whites, and their sense of group position was measured using a [combination of variables](#) that attempted to

account for how blacks might view their racial environment. These indexes were used to compare scores for the different demographic segments comprising the black samples in the surveys.

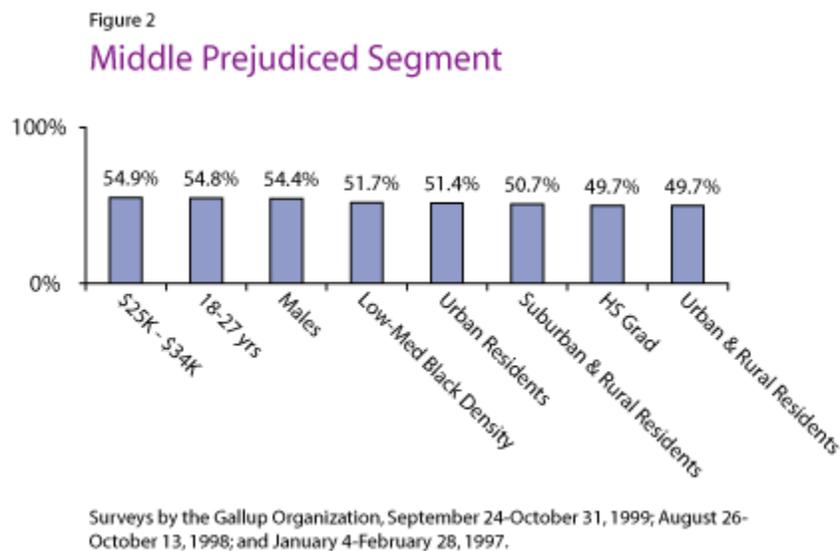
Figure 1 shows the demographic categories identified as "most prejudiced," based on the proportion of respondents who indicated they were prejudiced. Any demographic categories with 55 percent or more (the upper tercile) of their respondents indicating prejudice were placed in this group.



The first three bars on the left side of the graph show that the top three categories of annual income--\$35-44,000, \$45-54,000, and \$55,000 and over--have the largest percentages of persons who reported being prejudiced against whites. These income categories are each above 60 percent, and exhibit the most variance from the other categories in the "most prejudiced" segment. The next six categories in the most prejudiced segment have approximately 1 percent of variance separating their percentages. The two categories of education shown--college graduate and some college--represent the upper two education groups for that variable. The two age categories--twenty-eight to thirty-seven and thirty-eight to fifty-three--represent the middle two categories of the age variable. Blacks who are employed and living in suburban areas complete this most prejudiced segment. In sum, the

segment is characterized by upper income, higher-educated, employed, young, middle- to upper-middle-aged blacks, and blacks who reside in suburban areas. This generally represents what some would call the black middle class, or, more aptly, the black upper-middle class.

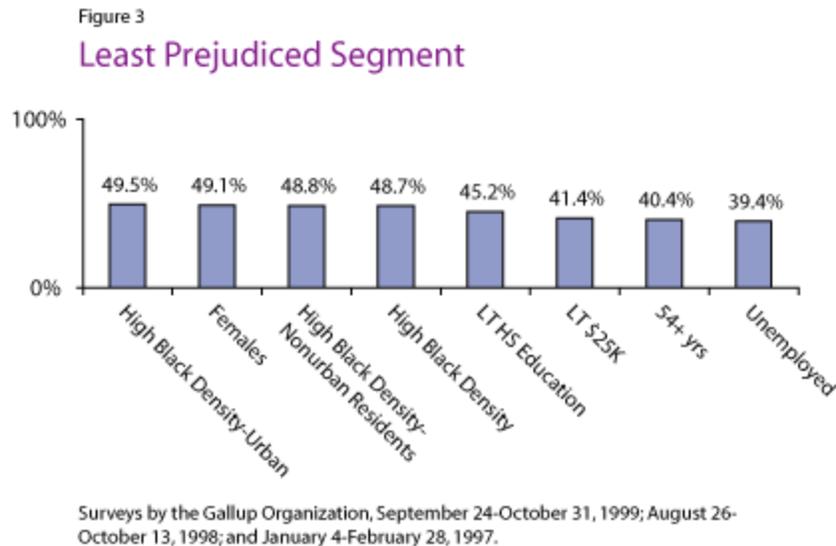
Figure 2 shows the categories of the "middle prejudiced segment." There is considerably less variance in the percentages for the categories in this segment. The category with the largest percentage of prejudice respondents--blacks who have an household income of \$25-34,000--is separated by only 5.2 percent from the group with the lowest percentage of prejudiced respondents--the combination of urban and rural residents (or nonsuburban residents).



This segment is characterized by lower-income, lower-educated, younger males, who live in either urban or the combination of suburban and rural areas. Those blacks who live in areas of low to medium black population density round out the middle prejudiced segment.

Figure 3 identifies those demographics in the "least prejudiced" segment, characterized by blacks who appear to be at the extremes of the demographic

categories. For example, older black females, respondents with the lowest income and least education, unemployed persons, and those who live in areas with larger black populations, form the profile of this segment. Its variance in percentages also mirrors that of the most prejudiced segment: At least ten percentage points separate the lowest and highest percentage values.



Together, these three graphs show that important variation exists in prejudice for the different demographic categories of African American survey respondents. The most prejudiced groups appear to be employed, well-educated, higher-income blacks, while the least-prejudiced have lower incomes and less education, and are unemployed. Another interesting trait separating the profiles of the most and least prejudiced groups is the greater likelihood for the former to live in suburban areas, while the latter live in high black density areas (both urban and non-urban).

So far, this analysis is consistent with the expectations of theories such as the sense of group position model. The groups most likely to be in competition with whites for political and social prerogatives, such as higher SES, upwardly mobile categories, comprise the most prejudiced segment. Since upward social and economic mobility have been key goals for blacks since the civil rights era, and both

liberals and conservatives have in large part considered economic equality to be the answer to the many issues related to race relations, these results tell a potentially grim tale.

Figure 4 provides a summary view of the demographic segmentation results.

Figure 4

Demographic Segmentation Results

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * High black density * Females * 54 + yrs * Less than HS education * Unemployed * Less than \$25K * High black density-urban 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * \$25K to LT \$35K * 18-27 yrs * Males * Medium to low black density * Urban resident * Suburban & rural combined * Urban & rural combined * HS Grad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * \$35K - LT \$45K * \$45K to LT \$55K * \$55K + * 28-37 yrs * 38-53 yrs * College graduate * Some college * Employed * Suburban residents
Least Prejudiced (Bottom Third)	Middle Prejudiced (Middle Third)	Most Prejudiced (Upper Third)
$X \leq 49.5\%$	$49.6 \leq X \leq 54.9$	$X \geq 55\%$

X = Percentage of blacks who are prejudiced

Surveys by the Gallup Organization, September 24-October 31, 1999; August 26-October 13, 1998; and January 4-February 28, 1997.

In the sense of group position model, a competitive context implies perceived group differences: a sense that a group is either a winner or loser in the social order. For African Americans, a negative racial context is one characterized by perceptions of historically unfair treatment, racial discrimination, and threat. This negative context reminds blacks that they are still competing for equal status. This is better understood when hearing statements indicating that blacks have to work "twice as hard" as whites in order to make it in society. On average, blacks understand that race matters. They understand that although they have education,

income, and equal housing opportunities, they might at any time face racial unfairness. This is apparently most frustrating for higher SES blacks.

According to Sniderman and Piazza, more formal education should breed acceptance. They argue that the more schooling people have, the greater the likelihood they will be exposed to such values as tolerance and equality. They further reason that more-educated individuals have a higher level of political sophistication, and are more likely to have an awareness of cultural norms. In essence, more-educated persons are in a better position to accept or reject notions that are inconsistent with democratic norms than less-educated persons.

If this is true, then why are the more-educated blacks in the most prejudiced segment? It appears that middle-class blacks are most likely to be prejudiced for the very reason that Sniderman and Piazza state: They are more aware of their context. Since education and income are highly correlated, it comes as no surprise that higher-income blacks share the same views as more-educated blacks. This is similarly true for blacks who are employed and live in suburban areas.

Tables 1 and 2 bring us to the next step of our analysis by showing that when the most prejudiced and least prejudiced segments of survey respondents are compared, there are significant differences in blacks' perceptions of their negative racial contexts. The columns represent the three sets of contextual measures: perceptions that blacks are treated unfairly, perceptions that the respondents themselves have been treated unfairly due to their race (that is, the respondent has experienced discrimination), and perceptions that blacks have limited opportunities in housing, employment, or education. The rows represent the demographic categories that make up the segments.

The cell values are percentages of respondents who provided a negative response--such as having experienced unfair treatment--for each of the listed demographic categories. In the next to last row of cells are the mean values for the columns. They represent the descriptive values for each negative context in the segment. For example, the percentage of respondents who are prejudiced for the nine demographic categories that make up the most prejudiced segment is 58.6 percent.

TABLE 1. Most Prejudiced Segment and Negative Context

Demographic Category	% Prejudiced	% Blacks Treated Unfairly	% of Blacks Experienced Discrimination	% of Blacks Perceived Limited Opportunities	N
\$55K or more	66.5	86.7	54.3	78.1	475
\$45K to LT \$55K	65.8	86.3	50.8	72.4	240
\$35K to LT \$45K	61.5	86.5	52.0	70.5	342
College Graduate	56.2	81.2	45.8	73.6	620
28-37 yrs	55.8	82.8	55.1	68.8	681
Employed Full or Part Time	55.7	82.8	52.1	69.6	2,298
Some College	55.6	84.9	50.5	71.1	782
38-53 yrs	55.3	81.9	48.5	72.7	1,035
Suburban residents	55.2	80.4	47.3	66.4	827
Segment Mean (Average)	58.6	83.7	50.7	71.5	
Sample Total	51.1	79.5	45.9	67.6	N ³ 3,207

Note: N sizes and percentages are based on unweighted counts; data are for black respondents only

The bottom row of the table contains the sample totals for all cases in the three years of data. This row is the same for both tables. Because of item nonresponse, some of the context measures have more respondents than others, and the sample total of 3,207 represents the number of respondents for the prejudice item, which is the minimum sample size for the context items.

TABLE 2. Least Prejudiced Segment and Negative Context

Demographic Category	% Prejudiced	% Blacks Treated Unfairly	% of Blacks Experienced Discrimination	% of Blacks Perceived Limited Opportunities	N
High Black Density-Urban	49.5	80.5	47.4	70.9	1,098
Female	49.1	78.6	44.0	66.5	2,044
All Others (non-Urban and High Black Density)	48.8	78.6	49.7	69.5	899
High Black Density Area	48.7	79.6	47.3	70.3	1,671
LT High School education	45.2	76.1	45.1	61.3	747
LT \$25K	41.3	77.4	42.6	65.4	1,295
54+ yrs	40.4	71.2	27.0	67.3	884
Unemployed	39.4	72.2	31.2	63.6	921
Segment Mean (Average)	45.7	76.8	41.8	66.9	
Sample Total	51.1	79.5	45.9	67.6	N ³ 3,207

Note: N sizes and percentages are based on unweighted counts; data are for black respondents only

The most important observation from the tables is that those demographic groups in the most prejudiced segment perceive a more negative context in all three of the measures. On average, the most prejudiced demographic groups are more likely to perceive blacks as being treated unfairly; they have experienced discrimination; and they believe that blacks have limited socioeconomic opportunities relative to whites. The differences in the segmentation percentages may not appear very meaningful, until one considers that the analysis is based on over three thousand cases, meaning one percentage point approximates thirty-two cases.

It may be surprising that persons in the highest income category represent the most prejudiced category, until one considers that they have the largest percentages of respondents perceiving unfair group treatment, the second largest percentage (after twenty-eight to thirty-seven-year-olds) who have experienced discrimination, and the largest percentages who perceive limits on their housing, employment, and educational opportunities. This finding fits neatly into the logic of

the group position model. While higher-income blacks perceive the most negative context they also represent the group who, presumably, should least have to deal with inequities. It also supports the view that those blacks attempting to live the American dream may also be disillusioned by it.

This analysis is informative primarily in two important ways. First, it is a rare segmentation study of blacks' prejudice that actually incorporates both a measure of prejudice and utilizes a nationally representative sample of blacks. The three years of data allow for a rigorous test of the segments' attitudes, and because the sample represents a cross-section of African Americans, the results have stronger external validity than previous studies. Second, the demographic categories found to be most prejudiced follow a pattern that identify middle- and upper-class blacks as the most prejudiced segments in black America. Generally, those socioeconomic categories that were most prejudiced also reported higher levels of perceived negative context. This highlights the utility of studying prejudice from the group position perspective, and supports past research about black middle-class cynicism.

Future research can take note that those blacks in higher income and education categories are most likely to be prejudiced. The next question to ask may be, why is the same not true for whites? Recent studies by researchers such as Sniderman and Piazza laud educated whites for their ability to see through the inefficiency of prejudice, racism, and intolerance, and present more egalitarian attitudes. This does not appear to be true for blacks.

If we combine the findings of the Sniderman and Piazza study with those presented here, we see a pattern that shows that blacks are able strategically to separate perceptions of hard work and financial optimism from the racially negative environment in which they live. According to Sniderman and Piazza, more-educated

and higher-income blacks are less [anomic](#) and more optimistic about their financial future. Yet, these findings show they also perceive a more negative context and a greater racial threat, and are more prejudiced towards whites.

Is it the case that African Americans actually go through a calculus as to the importance of race? I believe so. I believe that blacks have actually accepted, but not discounted, that race continues to be and will always be a problem, yet they realize it is not a complete barrier to political, social, and economic achievement. In a sentence, blacks are cautious, and conscious, dreamers; they know that the dream is tenuous and can easily turn into a nightmare if prejudice is still a part of their daily lives.

David C. Wilson is a senior consultant with the Gallup Organization. Wilson was the 2005 winner of the student paper award given by the [Pacific Chapter of the American Association for Public Opinion Research \(PAPOR\)](#) for his study, "Blacks' Perceptions of Their Racial Context and Prejudice Towards Whites."

Appendix: Demographics and Blacks' Racial Attitudes: The Sense of Group Position Model

In the early 1990s, Lee Sigelman and Susan Welch conducted an extensive examination of the impact of personal characteristics on African Americans' racial attitudes. The authors believed that as various background and demographic variables helped to shape perceptions, realities, and opportunities for blacks, they also had a strong potential to explain their views of racial discrimination. For example, older blacks who had experienced the struggles for civil rights might be most attuned to the existence of prejudice and discrimination. Or, in many cases, higher socioeconomic status might increase interracial contact, which might in turn influence attitudes towards whites. Thus, blacks with higher levels of education might be more likely to face real or perceived racial negativity in the workplace because they represent a threat to the status quo.

Sigelman and Welch acknowledged that there are far too many personal characteristics to capture fully what literally accounts for differences in personal perceptions, experiences, and opportunities. However, their point was that persons who are more likely to perceive treatment and opportunity differences between blacks and whites might also be more likely to blame those differences on racial prejudice and discrimination, and to see the racial environment as negative and potentially threatening.

It's no secret that blacks are sensitive to the racial perceptions and actions of the white majority. Awareness of these racial signals is typically manifested by the perception of a negative racial climate and negative racial attitudes. According to Lawrence D. Bobo, the "sense of group position" model explicitly considers the perceptions that racial groups are treated differently, and makes a prediction based on such perceptions. The more blacks perceive that they live in a negative racial

context, the more likely they are to perceive a competitive threat. It follows that blacks who perceive a more negative racial environment, as measured by perceptions of differences, might also be more likely to report being prejudiced.

The group position model predicts that those demographic groups that are most likely in economic, social, and political competition with other groups should also be most likely to perceive a negative context, and report being prejudiced.

The one variable that receives considerable attention in studies of prejudice is education. In their classic study, *Racial Attitudes in America*, Howard Schuman and colleagues found that more educated African Americans were more likely to believe there is discrimination in jobs, housing, and police treatment, and that whites don't care about blacks. This is an important indicator in the study of prejudice because it shows that more educated blacks also perceive a more negative racial context. More education has been strongly associated with a number of other racial attitudes, including greater perceptions of competitive threat and alienation, political frustration, black "rage," intolerance, and disillusionment.

As Sigelman and Welch state, "Education can be viewed as a source of enlightenment, fostering knowledge about members of difference races, teaching people to recognize prejudice and to understand its dangers." For example, Schuman and his coauthors found evidence that blacks with the highest levels of education were most likely to perceive unfair treatment by the police. Ninety percent of blacks with seventeen or more years of education and 88 percent with sixteen years of education believed that police treated blacks unfairly, as compared to 54 percent with zero to eight years of education, 68 percent with nine to eleven years, and 73 percent with twelve years of education.

Researchers have also sought connections between blacks' political activities and education. Michael Dawson and others have found that more-educated, higher-income, older, and employed blacks are more likely to be involved in political activism and voting. As a result, older blacks with higher socioeconomic status may be most likely to be politically competitive with other groups, and thus, according to H. Blumer and Bobo, may also be most likely to be prejudiced. It also stands to reason that blacks in racially mixed areas, such as those with low black population density and suburban or rural areas, are more likely to compete with whites for opportunities for housing, jobs, and education, and thus are also more likely to be prejudiced.

In the early 1990s, interviews of primarily black middle-class professionals conducted by Eloise Cose showed that many African Americans perceived a "brick wall" in society, characterized by discrimination, racial stereotypes, and other various manifestations of racial hostilities. A more recent study by Sigelman and Tuch showed that blacks who were more likely to interact with whites for extended periods were more likely to believe whites hold negative images of them.

Taken together, this evidence of perceived negative context and middle-class disaffection provide compelling evidence that more-educated and higher-income blacks are more likely to hold prejudiced attitudes towards whites. Yet there are dissenting opinions, such as those expressed by Sniderman and Piazza in their 2002 study and further explored in this analysis.

Additional reading

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