

# RACE

RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA



REASONS FOR  
HOPE



**IRR**

South African Institute of Race Relations

*The power of ideas*



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## The state of South Africa's race relations

In 2015 the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) commissioned a national opinion survey of public attitudes to race, empowerment, and other policy issues. A comprehensive report on the results of this survey will be released later this year. However, given the acrimonious race debate that gripped the country at the start of 2016, we have decided to begin by unveiling the survey results that touch specifically on the issue of race relations in South Africa.

Much of the debate this year has been hostile and polarising. Social media, in particular, have spoken of an 'unbridgeable gap' that has developed between black and white South Africans. South Africans were said to have 'no interest in reconciliation, redress, and nation building'. The white community was alleged to be wracked with racism and filled with a deep desire to bring back apartheid. Black South Africans were said to be filled with hatred for whites and a strong desire for vengeance. Threats of racial violence were made. The perception created was of a country on the verge of a race war.

Perceptions matter because they help inform public opinion. As public opinion becomes more polarised, so negative perceptions may in turn deepen. The subjective and ever more extreme opinions of individual writers, activists, and politicians may then become accepted as fact. If this process continues unchecked, it may not take long before real damage to race relations is done.

In this report, we do not rely on the subjective opinions of individual commentators. Instead, we report on the results of a field survey which asked South Africans how they themselves feel about race relations. Our field survey canvassed the views of a balanced sample of 2 245 people from all nine provinces. It covered both rural and urban areas and all socio-economic strata. Of the respondents, 78.3% were black, 9% were coloured, 2.8% were Indian, and 9.9% were white. Approximately half the respondents were under the age of 34, while their educational profile mirrored that of the country. Approximately a third of those surveyed were not economically active, while a quarter were unemployed. Of those with jobs, 2.8% worked in the informal sector and 38.8% were employed in the formal sector.

The results of the survey, as you will see, should fill South Africans with hope. The views of the overwhelming majority of people are very different from the vitriol so often evident in the race debate this year. Far from being hostile towards one another, most South Africans, black and white, occupy a pragmatic middle ground on race relations. White South Africans understand and support the need for redress. Black South Africans do not believe that their white compatriots should be treated as second-class citizens. The overwhelming majority of both groups believe that they need each other for progress to be made.

It is important for South Africans across the colour line to gain in understanding of each other. They need to know what each group actually thinks; and to base their perceptions of what the future holds on fact, rather than damaging conjecture. The inequalities that still exist need urgently to be addressed by people working together to encourage investment, stimulate growth, improve education, and generate millions more jobs. As we try to shift the country in this direction, we hope that the actual opinions of South Africans will serve as a 'still small voice of calm' that helps to cut through the divisive rhetoric we have witnessed this year.

## South Africa's most serious problems

We began the survey questions by asking South Africans to identify what they themselves saw as the two most serious problems not yet resolved since 1994. Their answers are shown in **table one** below. The top two issues thus identified were unemployment and crime. In total, 55.9% of South Africans saw unemployment as the most pressing problem, while 28.8% cited crime. The table lists only those issues cited by at least 4% of respondents. Racism (seen as including issues such as xenophobia, illegal immigrants, 'reverse apartheid', and racial differences) was cited by just 4.7% of respondents. Keep in mind that these responses were not prompted and that respondents were free to list any issue that was important to them. (Proportions exceed 100% because more than one problem could be mentioned.)

**Table 1**

<b>Most serious unresolved problems</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Unemployment	55.9%	58.6%	57.1%	43.7%	37.9%
Crime	28.8%	26.0%	33.4%	51.7%	39.8%
Housing	19.7%	20.8%	21.0%	11.2%	12.5%
Service delivery poor or slow	14.7%	16.2%	11.2%	10.7%	7.5%
State corruption/incompetence/nepotism	14.0%	11.4%	16.9%	12.1%	32.2%
Education/teachers/fees/overcrowding	10.1%	9.8%	10.2%	13.3%	11.9%
Water supply	8.1%	10.0%	1.3%	3.7%	0.8%
Roads	5.0%	5.9%	0.9%	1.9%	2.7%
Racism/xenophobia/reverse apartheid	4.7%	3.9%	4.9%	7.9%	9.5%
Drugs/gangs/druglords	4.2%	4.0%	9.6%	2.3%	1.8%

## Have race relations improved?

We then asked people whether race relations had improved since 1994. From **table two** you will see that the majority of respondents (54%) thought that this was so. Just under a quarter of respondents (22.2%) said that race relations had stayed the same, while only one in five South Africans (20.4%) felt they had become worse. In total, some 76% of respondents thought that race relations had either improved or had stayed the same, while only 14.6% of blacks thought they had become worse.

Hence, the impression that has been created in the mainstream media and on social media – that race relations have worsened sharply – does not square with the views of South Africans themselves. The current race debate is also out of sync with a 2015 opinion survey conducted by another organisation, which found that a significant majority of South Africans remain confident of a happy future for all races. Moreover, though a further 2015 survey found that just 40% of South Africans feel race relations have improved, this study also reported that around 65% believe that progress has been made and should continue to be made.

**Table 2**

<b>Since 1994 race relations in SA have:</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Improved	54.0%	59.7%	34.1%	34.0%	33.5%
Stayed the same	22.2%	22.9%	21.1%	18.6%	18.8%
Become worse	20.4%	14.6%	40.5%	45.2%	40.6%
Don't know	3.4%	2.9%	4.4%	2.2%	7.1%

## How do South Africans want job appointments to be made?

Whether racial targets should be used in appointing people to jobs often generates heated debate and sometimes a sense of racial antagonism. The charge is sometimes made that black people want to rely on racial targets and lack sufficient regard for merit. Conversely, the charge is sometimes levelled that white people have no appreciation of the need for empowerment measures to help redress apartheid wrongs. **Tables three** and **four** show the results we obtained when we tested these assumptions.

As regards **table three**, the question asked was whether the best person should be given the job, regardless of race. An overwhelming majority of 87.1% of people agreed that merit should be the dominant factor in job appointments. No fewer than 84.7% of black people agreed with this view. The suggestion that black people want job appointments to be based on race rather than merit is clearly at odds with the results of our survey.

**Table 3**

<i>Do you believe that the best person should be given the job, regardless of race?</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>White</i>
Agree	87.1%	84.7%	95.3%	96.5%	95.9%
Disagree	12.8%	15.1%	4.7%	3.5%	3.8%

As you will see from **table four**, we then probed further by asking 'Who do you think should be appointed to jobs in South Africa?' and giving respondents a series of options to choose from. Only 4.7% of people supported the first option, that 'only black people should be appointed to jobs for a very long time ahead'. Only 5.8% of people supported our second option, that 'only black people should be appointed until those in employment are demographically representative'. The overwhelming majority view, shared by 70% of South Africans, was that appointments should be based on merit, but there should also be special training for previously disadvantaged people. This option was supported by 71.2% of black people, 66.8% of coloured people, and 84.2% of Indians. Significantly, it was also endorsed by 59.2% of white people.

**Table 4**

<i>Who should be appointed to jobs in South Africa?</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>White</i>
Only black people, for a very long time ahead	4.7%	5.5%	2.1%	0.0%	1.9%
Only black people, until those employed are demographically representative	5.8%	7.1%	1.0%	0.8%	1.6%
Appointments should be made on merit, but with special training for the previously disadvantaged	70.0%	71.2%	66.8%	84.2%	59.2%
All appointments should be based on merit alone, without any special training	19.4%	16.1%	30.2%	15.0%	37.0%

## How should sports teams be selected?

We then explored further by asking whether South African sports teams should be selected 'only on merit and ability and not by racial quotas'. In **table five** below, the responses showed that 77% of all South Africans support purely merit-based selections without reference to racial quotas. No fewer than 74.2% of black South Africans endorsed this view. Politicians might seek to compel quota-based selections, but this is not what most black people want.

However, looking more closely at the results, it is also interesting to see that 13% of coloured people, 15.1% of whites, and 25.5% of blacks seem open to the use of quotas. This shows that opinions on this emotive topic are mixed and cannot be corralled along racial lines. **Opinions are clearly split, but they are split within racial groups rather than between them.** This is one of the most important findings of our study. South Africans (naturally) do disagree with one another, but those disagreements are often found within racial groups rather than between them. Frequently, both black and white South Africans have similar perspectives. In the case of sports selections, similar proportions of whites and blacks favour the use of merit alone, while similar proportions are open to the idea of racial quotas. This important nuance is lost when public debate seeks to pit whites against blacks and vice versa.

**Table 5**

<b>Should South African sport teams be selected only on merit and ability and not by racial quotas?</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Yes	77.0%	74.2%	87.0%	94.9%	84.3%
No	22.7%	25.5%	13.0%	5.1%	15.1%

### **The real test – what do parents want for their children?**

What people want for their children is an emotive and deeply personal issue. It is thus a very good basis to test their real beliefs about race relations. We therefore asked parents whether they would support their children being taught by a school teacher or university lecturer of another race. The answers are set out in **tables six** and **seven** below.

As regards schools, 90.8% of South Africans said it did not matter what race their children's teachers were. For black people, the figure was 91.9%, for coloured people 90.6%, for Asian people 99.1%, and for white people 80.6%. Admittedly, this meant that the race of a teacher matters to 2 in 10 white South African parents (and to 1 in 10 coloured and black people). But that it does not matter to the other 9 out of 10 people is very significant. At the very least, this casts doubt on the suggestion that whites are hell-bent on returning to apartheid. The results for university lecturers closely mirror those for school teachers.

**Table 6**

<b>If you needed to send children to school, would you prefer that their teachers were:</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
The same race as you	9.1%	8.1%	9.4%	0.9%	19.1%
It does not matter as long as they teach well	90.8%	91.9%	90.6%	99.1%	80.6%

**Table 7**

<b>If you needed to send children to university, would you prefer that their lecturers were:</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
The same race as you	8.4%	7.6%	8.9%	0.9%	16.2%
It does not matter as long as they get good results	91.5%	92.3%	91.1%	99.1%	83.6%

## How do people experience racism?

We then asked people to tell us whether they experienced racism in their daily lives and, if so, in what way they encountered it. We did not prompt any answers but simply asked 'If you do notice racism in your daily life, in what ways do you notice it?' The results (in **table eight** below) were remarkable, for 78.5% of respondents said that they experienced no racism. The proportions of blacks (79.4%) and whites (75.3%) who gave this answer were roughly the same. The stand-out group was the Indian one, where more than half of respondents (55.7%) said they experienced racism in their daily lives.

This result is fundamentally at odds with the social media view that South Africa is so ridden with racism that it stands on the brink of a race war. Another recent study has suggested that one in ten people regularly experience racism. But even racial pessimists must concede that the views of ordinary South Africans differ greatly from the apocalyptic opinions often expressed on social and mainstream media this year.

**Table 8**

<i>If you do notice racism in your life, in what ways do you notice it?</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>White</i>
Experienced no racism	78.5%	79.4%	81.2%	55.7%	75.3%
Attitude towards people of different races	13.6%	13.1%	10.9%	18.0%	18.2%
Job discrimination	4.1%	4.1%	2.4%	17.3%	2.2%
Other	3.8%	3.4%	5.5%	9.0%	4.3%

## Do black people want to chase whites into the sea?

Some of the comments posted on social media suggest that black people hate white people and want to drive them out of the country or, at the very least, relegate them to the status of second-class citizens. Our survey asked South Africans if this was really how they felt. In **table nine** below you will see that 56.8% of South Africans disagreed with the view that 'white people must learn to take second place'. Among black people, 58.3% disagreed.

At the same time, roughly a third (30.2%) agreed that 'white people must take second place', which is not an insignificant percentage. However, as in the case of the 20% of whites who prefer white teachers for their children, the minority perspective is less important than the clear majority position. And that position, as this table shows, is that 58.3% of black people think there is an equal place for whites in South Africa.

**Table 9**

<i>South Africa today is a country today for black Africans, and white people must learn to take second place.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>White</i>
Agree	30.2%	28.5%	35.5%	53.0%	32.0%
Disagree	56.8%	58.3%	49.4%	44.7%	53.7%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	12.9%	12.9%	15.1%	2.2%	14.1%

## Racism and politicians

We also wanted to know what people made of all the talk of racism that dominates so many media headlines. In **table ten** you will see that 62% of South Africans believe that 'All this talk of racism and colonialism is an attempt by politicians to find excuses for their own failures'. It is a view shared across all race groups, although white, Indian, and coloured people are slightly more likely to lean that way than black people are.

**Table 10**

***All this talk of racism and colonialism is an attempt by politicians to find excuses for their own failures.***

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Agree	62.0%	58.8%	73.7%	80.2%	71.3%
Disagree	22.0%	25.1%	11.2%	12.7%	10.0%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	15.9%	16.0%	14.8%	7.1%	18.5%

### **The route to sound future race relations**

We also wanted to know what South Africans think needs to be done to promote sound race relations in the future. We thus asked if people thought that better education and more jobs, the building blocks for every successful society, would make the differences between the races steadily disappear. In **table eleven** below, we set out the answers. These show that 82.2% of South Africans see this as the way to make the differences between the race groups disappear over time. Only 7.2% of South Africans disagree. The proportion of blacks who agree (82.8%) is roughly the same as the proportion of whites that do (81.7%), again showing a coincidence of views on this important issue. Those who beat the racial drum commonly overlook the vital importance of education, jobs, and economic growth, but ordinary South Africans are well aware that these are the factors vital in addressing inequality.

**Table 11**

***With better education and more jobs, the present differences between the races will steadily disappear.***

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Agree	82.2%	82.8%	76.9%	87.3%	81.7%
Disagree	7.2%	7.1%	9.8%	4.9%	6.5%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	10.4%	9.9%	13.4%	7.8%	11.6%

### **Do black and white South Africans want to work together for progress?**

Lastly, we wanted to know whether South Africans understand and value their mutual inter-dependence and want full opportunities for all. As you will see from **table twelve**, 85.4% of all South Africans agree that ‘the different races need each other for progress and there should be full opportunity for people of all colours’. Again, this is a very significant majority. Only 5.7% of black people, 5.2% of coloured people, 3.1% of Asian people, and 4.9% of white people disagree.

**Table 12**

***The different races need each other for progress and there should be full opportunity for people of all colours.***

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
Agree	85.4%	85.1%	84.3%	90.5%	86.4%
Disagree	5.5%	5.7%	5.2%	3.1%	4.9%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	9.0%	9.0%	10.4%	6.5%	8.5%

## Our conclusions

Despite tough economic conditions and the very real inequalities that still bedevil South Africa, race relations remain generally sound. Given our history, the progress we have made on race relations since 1994 could rightly be seen as one of South Africa's more impressive success stories. Some people might say that 'black people hate whites' and 'want to do to them what Hitler did to the Jews', but this perspective is not what emerges from this study. Equally, the view that white people want to 'live without blacks' and 'think black people are like monkeys' is also not supported by this survey. Hurtful opinions of this kind are held by small minorities within the different race groups, but they are not representative of what South Africans think. The prominence they have been given in much of the recent race debate is misleading and paints a distorted picture of race relations in the country.

The quiet majority of South Africans respect each other and want to work together to build a better country. They also largely agree that 'full opportunities' are needed for everyone, backed by good education and very much more employment in a rapidly growing economy. There is, in fact, a considerable degree of consensus around this point.

That race relations remain generally sound is, of course, not a reason for complacency. Quite the opposite is true. In 2001, when the IRR last conducted a similar survey, we also found that race relations had generally improved since 1994 and that black and white South Africans were well aware that they needed each other to make progress. We also warned, however, that politicians and other commentators might seek to foment racial divisions for political or ideological gain. Moreover, the more the economy faltered and unemployment grew, the easier this would be to achieve.

In 2016, with the country hovering on the brink of recession and the wider unemployment rate standing at close on 40%, it is becoming increasingly difficult to expand opportunity and overcome economic inequality between the different racial groups. As we have already seen this year, politicians and other commentators can easily use those persistent inequalities to inflame tensions. They can also take the hurtful views of a small minority of individuals and project them as the pervasive views of entire racial groups. Unchecked conduct of this kind may in time worsen race relations, turning warnings of rising racial animosities into self-fulfilling prophecies.

This is no way to build a nation. It could in time become a recipe to destroy one. In addition, the damaging racial rhetoric that has so dominated the public debate this year does not reflect what ordinary people actually think. Yet that, of course, is what really counts. These survey results give the country reasons for hope and a strong foundation on which to build. People with vested interests in deepening racial divisions may denigrate or disregard them. They nevertheless provide good reason to halt the current cycle of racial recrimination – and instead unite South Africans behind effective policies to grow the economy and expand opportunity for all.

Frans Cronje

Chief Executive