



## We Must Acknowledge the “Wicked Problem” of Institutionalized Racism to Advance toward Equity

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Across the history of the United States, a mainstream narrative perpetuated by a confluence of politicians, academics, policy researchers, and the media have suggested that government services are designed, implemented, and delivered equitably and in a race-neutral manner. All Americans, according to this portrayal, should have equal access to those services regardless of their race. It is in this context that [policymakers and public managers often express surprise, dismay, nervousness, or confusion](#) around the prevalence of racial inequities that emerge from our public institutions—how can a government so race-neutral keep producing outcomes that so clearly elevate the health, wealth, and social status of white citizens over people of color?

To better tackle the issue of racial inequities in government services, policymakers, practitioners, and researchers must recognize the ubiquity of institutional racism and adopt a starting point acknowledging that racialized outcomes—that is, outcomes that vary by race—are an embedded characteristic of American public policies and programs. Starting from this baseline assumption means that policymaking and public reforms can treat racial equity as a centerpiece of their work instead of an afterthought.

### **Institutional Racism Shapes U.S. Administrative Power to Produce Racialized Outcomes**

Policy research and public administration theory needs to catch up to what decades of empirical research reveal: Racialized administrative power is the status quo in the United States. Essentially, the administrative power of the U.S. government—the way the government is staffed and managed, and the ways in which services are created, prioritized, and delivered—has deeply entrenched practices, norms, and institutional structures and hierarchies that create and maintain race-based outcomes.

We need only look to outcomes data from any U.S. public institution—education, social welfare, criminal justice, public health, environmental protection—to see the services delivered by the government yield outcomes that favor white people compared to people of color. From the gaps in [high school graduation rates](#) between white students and Black students (a 9% difference) or white students and Native/Indigenous students (15%) to the [toxic waste that is disproportionately sited near and within communities of color](#), U.S. public organizations keep producing racialized outcomes. Yet the assumption of race neutrality is deeply embedded within the field of public administration, and the idea that government practices and services are equitable is the foundation upon which many academics undertake their research. The stark reality is that there are few data points to back up these claims.

## Institutional Racism as a “Wicked Problem”

Researchers and policymakers often use the term “wicked problem” to describe the kinds of social problems that seem too big and complex to tackle yet too urgent and important to ignore, such as poverty and climate change. Wicked problems are daunting—they have porous boundaries, underlying causes that are hotly contested, and stubborn perseverance in the face of policy interventions. But conceptualizing issues in this way has the positive effects of tamping down tedious debate about their empirical existence, spurring creative interventions across sectors and levels of government, and encouraging those tasked with finding solutions to think far into the future. In the United States, the problem of institutional racism undoubtedly deserves attention as a wicked problem, too.

Acknowledging that institutional racism is a wicked problem would better cast debate about its existence as a distraction from the real work of finding solutions. Just as scientific evidence conclusively demonstrates that the climate is warming, scientific evidence conclusively demonstrates that Americans live in a country where outcomes produced by government policies and services vary by race; the debate about whether institutional racism exists obscures the point that policymakers and researchers could effectively focus their efforts on achieving racial equity by addressing racialized administrative power.

Just like addressing institutional racism, tackling climate change can feel insurmountable; but consider how local and state governments have identified strategies—from a city sequestering carbon by planting more trees to California banning combustible automobile engines by 2035—that make a dent in the problem even in the face of federal inaction. Institutional racism likewise can feel overwhelming, but failures to act nationally have not prevented local and state governments from implementing [reforms](#) to tackle the wickedness of racialized administrative power in their jurisdictions.

Finally, accepting that institutional racism is a wicked problem forces policymakers and researchers to grapple with an uncertain future that will stretch across generations, not a legislative cycle or biennial budget. Policymakers increasingly frame initiatives to address climate change as an effort to create a better world for their grandchildren or their grandchildren’s grandchildren. This generational timeline that stretches farther into the future than we can see is the same timeline for creating an equitable society in which race does not shape one’s opportunities and outcomes in the United States.

## What Does This Mean for Researchers, Policymakers, and Public Managers?

Conceptualizing institutional racism as a wicked problem in and of itself is not a solution. However, if doing so allows us to accept racialized administrative power as the baseline by which public organizations and agencies operate, research can explore the contexts, processes, factors, and policy interventions that may diminish (or unintentionally amplify) its effects. Racialized administrative power can become the one-step-down level that we acknowledge to be predictable, observable, and potentially remedied through concerted efforts and interventions. The historian Ibram X. Kendi has [argued forcefully](#) that the racialized reality of the United States means that a public policy will reinforce the racialized status quo unless it is explicitly anti-racist in its design and implementation. Thus, it is critical to recognize and dismantle the far-reaching racialized administrative power in the United States—otherwise, no progress can be made in advancing or supporting truly equitable policy.

Acknowledging the ubiquity of U.S. racialized administrative power means that public administrators and policymakers could proactively design their public policies and programs to anticipate and correct for its pervasive reach. Disaggregating policy outcome data by race and analyzing programs through a racial equity lens is a start, but policy and program design itself must address institutional racism head-on.

Policy research also has a role to play. Policy-informing academic disciplines from sociology and political science to economics are undergoing racial reckonings that critically examine how disciplinary theory and research methods perpetuate myths of race neutrality. Such awareness is important: Rather than assuming public organizations or institutional contexts are race-neutral, research and the hypotheses on which it is based can explicitly recognize that decades of empirical evidence document how racialized administrative power manifests in the United States. The legitimacy of policy research, not to mention its potential impact, depends on such an acknowledgment.

Only by acknowledging that institutional racism is a wicked problem can we move past distracting debates about its existence and move forward with finding solutions.

**Read more in Grant Blume, “As Expected”: Theoretical Implications for Racialized Administrative Power as the Status Quo.” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*33, no. 1 (January 2023): 30-42.**