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# A Workplace Divided

## A National Survey Exploring Workers' Perceptions of Discrimination and Unfair Treatment at Work and How Government and Employers Can Help Advance More Equitable Workplaces

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**HELDRICH CENTER**  
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Edward J. Bloustein School  
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## A National Survey Exploring Workers' Perceptions of Discrimination and Unfair Treatment at Work and How Government and Employers Can Help Advance More Equitable Workplaces

### Executive Summary

The [John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey explored workers' perceptions of and experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination at work, and opinions of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices in November and December 2022 in a landscape study using a comprehensive, national probability-based sample of **3,277 full- and part-time U.S. workers, including:**

- ▶ 605 Asian-American workers,
- ▶ 915 Black workers,
- ▶ 802 Latino workers, and
- ▶ 955 white workers.<sup>1</sup>

The study, funded by [WorkRise](#) at the Urban Institute, included collaborations with the [National Opinion Research Center](#) (NORC) at the University of Chicago and an expert advisory panel.<sup>2</sup> In preparing the survey, Heldrich Center researchers completed a comprehensive review of the literature on workplace discrimination, interviewed subject-matter experts, conducted a pilot survey fielded by NORC, and completed 18 individual interviews with workers to test question wording. Following the nationwide survey, Heldrich Center researchers conducted 20 in-depth, one-on-one interviews with workers to explore the nuances of the issues raised in the survey. Some of the principal study findings are listed below.

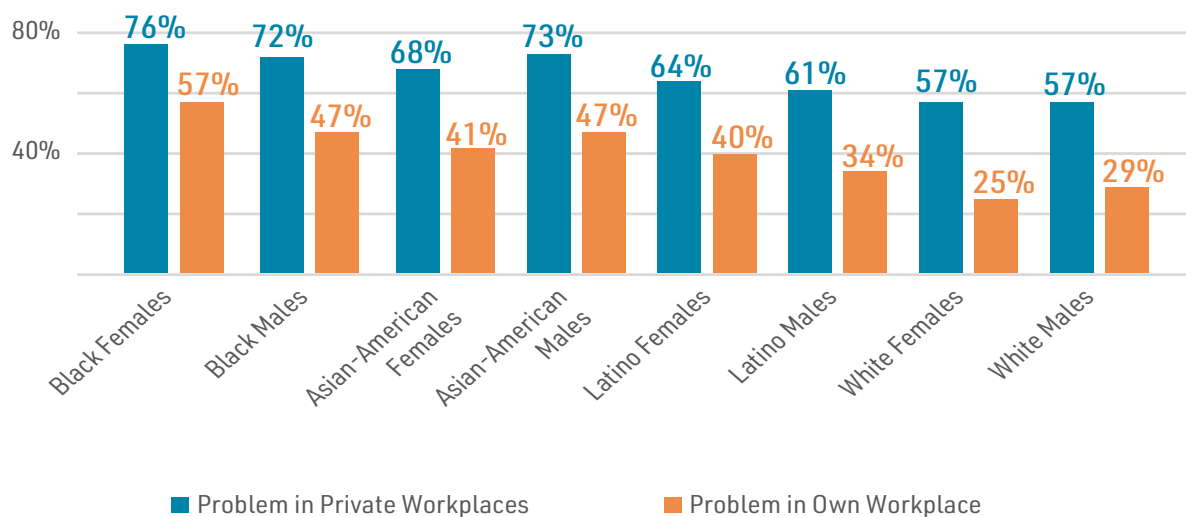
## Perceptions of Discrimination and Unfair Treatment at Work<sup>3</sup>

- Significant percentages of Asian-American, Black, and Latino workers say that discrimination based on race and ethnicity occurs in private-sector and government workplaces.
- Black workers are twice as likely to say that they think workplace discrimination is a major problem in private workplaces today, compared to white workers: one in two Black workers say discrimination because of race or ethnicity is a major problem in private companies (49%); one in five white workers say the same (22%).
- Black female workers are more likely than other races, ethnicities, and gender identities to report that discrimination at work is a problem, generally and in their own workplaces (Figure 1). Three in four Black females (76%) say discrimination is a major or minor problem in private workplaces; one in two (55%) say it is a major problem.

### Question:

*Do you think discrimination because of race or ethnicity is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem in the following workplaces today? Private companies/Your company/organization.*

**57% of Black female workers say racial and ethnic discrimination is a major or minor problem in their workplaces.**



**Figure 1: Percentage of Workers Who Say Racial and Ethnic Discrimination is Major/Minor Problem in Private Workplaces in General vs. Own Workplace, by Race and Ethnicity and Gender**

- Among respondents who think that racial and ethnic discrimination is a problem in workplaces today, 4 in 10 Asian-American workers (43%), white workers (41%), and Latino workers (38%) and 5 in 10 Black workers (53%) say unconscious bias contributes a lot to discrimination.
- Approximately one-third of Black workers, one-quarter of Latino workers, and one-quarter of Asian-American workers report that they have been treated poorly, discriminated against, or unfairly treated in their current job because of their race or ethnicity.
- Two-thirds of Black workers who say they have either been treated unfairly or discriminated against say they think the actions they experience are intentional (66%), compared to fewer (49%) Asian-American workers.<sup>4</sup>
- Overall, Black female workers are more likely than other workers to report that they have been denied a promotion; earned less than a co-worker doing the same job; treated as less competent; passed over for important projects; heard comments, insults, or slurs from managers or co-workers; were assigned unwanted shifts or tasks; received a threat of physical violence; were denied a raise; received fewer opportunities for education or training; and received less helpful advice.
- One in 10 workers also report that they have witnessed or heard about workplace discrimination that was not against them personally.
- One in 10 Black workers and 1 in 10 white workers say they have been treated unfairly/experienced what they consider to be discrimination at work because of their gender/gender identity or age.
- One in four Black workers and one in five Asian-American workers say they have thought about quitting a job because they personally experienced or witnessed what they consider to be discrimination because of race or ethnicity.

### **A worker's description of what she considers racial and ethnic discrimination witnessed in her own workplace**

"A co-worker was retained as a temp worker even after a full-time position opened. I discussed this with my supervisor at the time and he cited 'cultural issues' for keeping this worker on a subpar contract. This individual is a Black American, and while my team did eventually hire him full time, the perception was that despite all his work being vital, he was simply less valuable."

- White female working in private company having 500+ employees

## **Most Frequent Forms of Discrimination Reported by Workers**

- Workers of color say the following situations occur the most frequently in the workplace: being treated as less competent or valuable, earning less than a co-worker doing the same job, and being assigned unwanted/undesirable shifts or tasks.

- Eighteen percent of white workers say they agree a lot or a little with the statement that “some people get better treatment because of their race or ethnicity” in their current job. In contrast, 47% of Black workers, 37% of Asian-American workers, and 30% of Latino workers agree a lot or a little.
- Respondents are more likely to report that they have experienced unfair treatment or discrimination in a previous job than in their current job. Three in 10 Black workers say, in a **previous** job, they had someone treat them as if they were less competent or valuable than someone else; earned less than a co-worker doing the same job; were assigned undesirable or unwanted tasks or shifts; and received less helpful advice, feedback, or other performance evaluation opportunities (see Tables 1 and 2).

## Question:

*Here are a few things that some people have experienced in their workplace because of their race or ethnicity. Have the following ever happened to you in your current job, in a previous job, or hasn't this happened to you? (Excludes not applicable responses.)*

	Asian American	Black	Latino	White
Denied a promotion	17%	26%*	13%	8%*
Earned less than a co-worker doing the same job as you	18%	30%*	16%	14%
Denied a raise	18%	22%***	14%	8%*
Received less helpful advice, less feedback, or fewer opportunities for performance evaluation	16%	27%*	15%	9%*
Received fewer opportunities for education or training	12%	22%*	11%	6%*
Were passed over for the most important assignments or projects	16%**	24%*	11%	8%
Were assigned tasks or shifts that were undesirable or unwanted by others	20%	28%*	19%	12%*

**Table 1: Percentage of Workers Having Discrimination Experiences Related to Advancement or Mobility in Previous Job, by Race and Ethnicity**

\* statistically significant at  $p < .05$  compared to all other workers

\*\* statistically significant at  $p < .05$  compared to white workers

\*\*\* statistically significant at  $p < .05$  compared to Latino and white workers

## Question:

*Here are a few things that some people have experienced in their workplace because of their race or ethnicity. Have the following ever happened to you in your current job, in a previous job, or hasn't this happened to you? (Excludes not applicable responses.)*

	Asian American	Black	Latino	White
Had someone treat you as if you were less competent or valuable than someone else	21%	32%*	18%	13%*
Experienced slights about your language or appearance	18%	19%	14%	8%*
Heard or read comments, insults, or slurs (directed at you) by a manager or supervisor	12%	19%*	14%	8%*
Heard or read comments, insults, or slurs (directed at you) by a co-worker	13%	25%*	13%	9%*
Received a threat of physical violence <sup>5</sup>	6%	10%	6%	5%

**Table 2: Percentage of Workers Having Discrimination Experiences Related to Treatment in Previous Job, by Race or Ethnicity**

\* statistically significant at  $p < .05$  compared to all other workers

- Fifty-six percent of Black workers, 42% of Asian-American workers, 39% of Latino workers, and 28% of white workers say they have experienced at least one of the proposed situations in a **previous** job, while 38% of Black workers, 24% of Asian-American workers, 28% of Latino workers, and 15% of white workers experienced these situations in their **current** jobs.
- U.S. employees who work in larger companies – those with 250 or more employees – are more likely than those in smaller organizations to say that:
  - ▶ some people get higher pay because of their race or ethnicity,
  - ▶ some people get better treatment because of their race or ethnicity, and
  - ▶ there is discrimination or unfair treatment for others or themselves at work.
- Forty-eight percent of Asian-American workers and 44% of Black workers say they would be concerned about possible retaliation by a supervisor, manager, or co-worker after reporting a discrimination experience.

## Included and Welcomed at Work

- Overall, 8 in 10 U.S. workers say feeling included and/or welcomed in the workplace is a very or somewhat important aspect of their job.
- Three-quarters of all workers say they are very or somewhat satisfied with feeling included/welcomed in their current workplace.
- Majorities of workers, but fewer Black workers, say they agree that they feel included at work, regardless of their race or ethnicity.
- Thirty-one percent of Black workers and 34% of Asian-American workers say they strongly agree that they feel included at work, regardless of their race or ethnicity, compared to 46% of Latino workers and 52% of white workers.

## Impact of Workplace Discrimination

- Workers associate their discrimination experiences – or the possibility that they might experience discrimination in the future – with their ability to advance in the workplace. Asked if their race or ethnicity has affected their success at work – if it has made it harder, easier, or not made much difference – one in three Black female workers (36%) and Asian-American male workers (29%) say their race or ethnicity has made success more difficult, compared to 2% of white female workers and 5% of white male workers. There are no differences by income on this measure.

### On the relationship between discrimination against workers of color and advancing in the workplace

"It's not what you know, it's who you know. If you don't put yourself out there, they're not going to come to you. We have to take it into our own hands, if you're not close to those certain people."

- Black female warehouse worker

## Government and Employer Policies and Practices

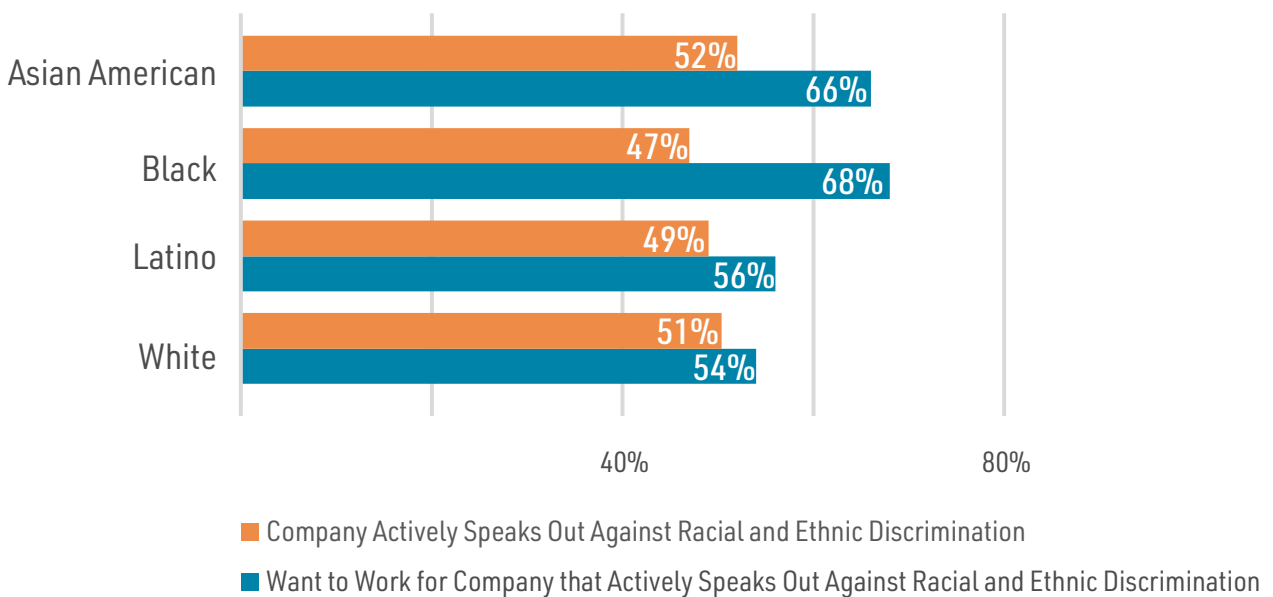
- Workers are uncertain about whether leaders of their business, government, or nonprofit organizations are addressing discrimination in their workplaces, but want something done about it.
- Nearly 6 in 10 (57%) report that their workplaces have non-discrimination policies; however, workers are uncertain about which policies and programs help, and which do not help.
- There is broad support for laws that protect workers from discrimination. Seventy-four percent of workers say it is necessary to have laws to protect people from discriminating in hiring because of race and ethnicity; 70% of workers say it is necessary to have laws to protect people from discriminating in promotions because of race or ethnicity.
- However, one in five workers say they are opposed to workplace programs that better assure people of color are treated equally in pursuit of job opportunities.

- A majority of workers say that diversity and equity are important, but don't necessarily distinguish between the two.
- Workers of color are more likely to say that diversity and equity are important, compared to white workers. A majority of all workers (6 in 10) say they think that the diversity of a business should reflect the diversity of the community where that business is located.
- Majorities of workers say they want to work for companies that actively speak out against racial and ethnic discrimination: 68% of Black workers, 66% of Asian-American workers, 56% of Latino workers, and 54% of white workers (Figure 2). However, fewer Black (47%) and Asian-American workers (52%) say they work in places where that is actually the case.

**Question:**

*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? My company/organization actively speaks out against racial and ethnic discrimination/I want to work for a company/organization that speaks out against racial and ethnic discrimination. (Excludes not applicable responses.)*

**68% of Black workers say they want to work for a company that speaks out against racial and ethnic discrimination;  
47% of Black workers say their company does actively speak out**



**Figure 2: Percentage of Workers Who Agree They Want to Work for Company That Actively Speaks Out Against Discrimination vs. Percentage of Workers Who Agree Own Company Does Speak Out Against Discrimination, by Race and Ethnicity**



- When asked about the role of unions, half of Black workers who say racial and ethnic equity is important in private workplaces or their own workplaces today indicate that workers need unions to help increase racial and ethnic equity in workplaces (51%), compared to 41% of Asian-American, 40% of Latino, and 29% of white workers.
- Three in 10 (30%) white workers who say racial and ethnic equity is important in private workplaces or in their own workplaces today also say they disagree that workers need unions, nearly four times as many as Black workers (8%).

## Issues for Future Research and Action

Workers in the United States acknowledge that there **is** a problem of racial and ethnic discrimination in workplaces today, regardless of their race or ethnicity. According to significant percentages of survey respondents, employers should address several challenges, including:

- Addressing the role that unconscious bias plays in perceived discrimination experiences at work;
- Investing in more robust reporting pathways for discrimination incidents;
- Improving recruiting practices that result in hiring more employees from local communities;
- Demonstrating that the organization values diversity and speaking out against racial and ethnic discrimination;
- Effectively communicating the value of diversity, equity, and non-discrimination in the workplace;
- Reimagining the role of human resources and diversity, equity, and inclusion executives, managers, and frontline staff; and
- Exploring best practices for labor unions, advocacy groups, and employers to work proactively and more collaboratively to develop more substantiable pathways toward addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in the workplace.

**The full project report and data set will be available via the [Heldrich Center](#) and [WorkRise](#) websites in July 2023.**

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## Authors



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## Notes

- 1 The study uses the [AmeriSpeak](#) panel (N=2,539) and additional non-probability sample respondents (N=738), calibrated using NORC's TrueNorth methodology. There was an insufficient sample available to reach the Native American/Indigenous population. The survey was fielded online and by phone in English and Spanish.
- 2 Various fielded surveys and scales by a variety of academic institutions and research organizations were reviewed, including but not limited to NORC, Pew Research Center, Harvard Chan School of Public Health/National Public Radio/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Associated Press, Gallup, Kaiser Family Foundation, CBS/New York Times, JUST Capital, AARP, Society for Human Resource Management, AllVoices, Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, YES Health Study, Chicago Community Adult Health Study, and the 1995 Detroit Area Study. In designing the survey, the research team assessed several issues and made informed decisions about the ordering of questions (for example, sensitive questions about reporting were asked at the survey's end); triangulating measures (asking about unfair treatment/discrimination experiences using multiple questions); asking about diversity, equity, and discrimination separately; providing definitions of key terms (equity, discrimination, prejudice, unconscious bias); and others.
- 3 Margins of error for survey samples are as follows:  
  
All workers: +/- 2.89%  
Asian-American workers: +/- 5.39%  
Black workers: +/- 4.35%  
Latino workers: +/- 5.23%  
White workers: +/- 4.22%  
  
Margins of error will be higher for questions where there is additional disaggregation (i.e., by income or gender identity) or for a filtered survey question.
- 4 Differences between Black and Latino workers are not statistically significant.
- 5 While the topline tables show statistically significant differences between the groups, these are not being reported given that the percentages are less than 10%.