

# Now: Black Lives Matter

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will study about the history of the struggle for civil rights. This struggle has been a struggle for inclusion, equity, and justice. It has been over 400 years since the beginning of the slave trade in the United States and while there has been a lot of progress in that struggle, especially since the legal end of slavery after the Civil War, there is still a long way to go as systemic racism is still a problem in the United States. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Civil Rights
2. The Election of 2008
3. The Black Lives Matter Movement

*"We have been holding a mirror up to the nation."*

Samuel Sinyangwe, 25-year-old Stanford Graduate



## BEFORE YOU START

Why is the role of technology significant in the fight for Civil Rights today?

## 1. Civil Rights

The road to **civil rights** for African Americans has been long and filled with obstacles. The Black experience in the United States began with slavery and oppression. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, African Americans continued to battle the racism and discrimination that had been embedded in American culture and government since before the United States was founded. Overcoming these challenges has not been a straightforward process. Many African Americans still face the effects of generations of systemic discrimination, economic disadvantages, and unfair treatment by the justice system.

We'll start this challenge's examination of African American civil rights by looking at two topics from the past 15 years: the election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States, and the founding and growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Civil Rights

The rights of citizens to freedom and equality under the law.

## 2. The Election Of 2008

Many people considered the election of Barack Obama as president in November 2008 to be a historic victory in a centuries-long struggle against racism in American society. The Obama campaign's communication strategies included using technology such as social media to spread a message of hope, unity, and progress. That message connected with voters and helped Obama become the first Black president of the United States.

The radio news story below—which is from June 2008, after Obama won the Democratic Party's nomination for president—includes interviews with several residents of Alexandria, Virginia. As you read or listen, think about this question: What can the interviewees' statements tell us about the variety of responses to Obama's campaign and nomination, even within one community?

This news story is a primary source that helps us understand what the 2008 election meant to these particular people at the time it was happening. For many at that time, Obama's nomination and election were reason to hope that a "post-racial America" might be possible—that a new era of equality was dawning, in which race would no longer be an obstacle to Americans' chances of success. This was an optimistic view. While it's important not to downplay the significance of President Obama's election, it also must be acknowledged that racism and discrimination still affect many areas of U.S. society today (Coates, 2015).

For instance, the lingering effects of racist housing policies from the early and mid-20th century mean that many cities—and not just cities in the South—are effectively still segregated (Badger, 2017). According to the Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, Black students are more likely to be disciplined in schools, and they face harsher penalties than white students do for the same offenses (Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). This phenomenon is known as the **school-to-prison pipeline**.

The United States Commission on Civil Rights found a similar pattern in its briefing report, *Police Use of Force: An Examination of Modern Policing Practices*, published in 2018. While noting that national data on policing is often difficult to collect, the report states that the "best available evidence reflects high rates of uses of force nationally, with increased likelihood of police use of force against people of color" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2018).



### TERM TO KNOW

#### School-to-Prison Pipeline

Unequal/unjust school discipline that increases the causes of future prison detentions.

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## 3. The Black Lives Matter Movement

Black Lives Matter is a social justice movement that works to highlight the ongoing effects of racism in the United States. It was founded by three African American women in response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman for second-degree murder in the shooting of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin. Here's a primary source excerpt from Patrisse Khan-Cullors, one of the cofounders of Black Lives Matter, who wrote about the organization's origins on its sixth anniversary (Black Lives Matter, 2020):

### Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Webpage

**Author:** Patrisse Khan-Cullors

**Date:** 2019

*I've always fought for my family. My community. For Black poor people....*

*That's why when I saw the phrase Black Lives Matter spelled out by Alicia Garza in a love letter towards Black people—I decided to put a hashtag on it. Alicia, Opal, and I created #BlackLivesMatter as an online community to help combat anti-Black racism across the globe. We firmly believed our movement, which would later become an organization, needed to be a contributing voice for Black folks and our allies to support changing the material conditions for Black people.*

The Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013 after the killing of Trayvon Martin. Since then, Black Lives Matter has used technology, particularly social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook, to mobilize activists in the wake of police-involved shootings like that of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City, and twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio in 2014. In 2015, there were at least three high-profile killings of unarmed black men killed by police captured on video: Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina, and Jamar Clark in Minneapolis.

In all of these cases, and many since, Black Lives Matter has used the media to organize protests and demand social change. A [2018 Pew Research analysis](#) found that #BlackLivesMatter had been used nearly 30 million times on Twitter since the movement's founding (Anderson, Toor, Rainie, & Smith, 2018). According to data gathered by the Washington Post, there have been over a hundred police killings of unarmed Black men and women in the United States since 2014.

Perhaps the most fundamental way Black Lives Matter has used technology, though, has been to simply capture the killings of unarmed Blacks by police on video. These killings are not new, but historically they were not captured on video or shared on social media. Sharing these videos on social media has helped others become more aware of the oppression and violence that Blacks and other minorities have had to live with throughout American history. The largest protests to date (as of July 2020) took place around the country after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

It is important to remember that these killings are not new in American history. The killing of George Floyd in May of 2020, however, seemed to create a new awareness in the minds of many White Americans.

While instances of police violence have generally been the catalysts for Black Lives Matter protests, many underlying areas of discrimination and oppression also exist. Historically, discrimination was legal. The United States had what we call **de jure discrimination**. These included redlining laws that limited where Black people could live, laws that prevented Blacks from serving on juries, laws that limited Black participation in the political process and segregated schools, segregated access to healthcare, and a lack of laws protecting people from racial discrimination at work. These laws, or lack of laws, created **systemic racism** and has left the United States with **de facto discrimination** -- or discrimination as a matter of fact.

It's important to note that **communication** and **technology** played a key role in both of the milestones we've been discussing. One of the strengths of both the Obama campaign and the Black Lives Matter movement has been an ability not just to communicate a clear message, but to harness social media and other technology to broaden the reach of that message.

For today's politicians and activists, it's important to stay agile and use new communication technologies as they develop.



## BIG IDEA

The election of Barack Obama and the growth of Black Lives Matter offer clear evidence of new and innovative tactics in African Americans' fight for civil rights and political representation. But we'll also see some familiar strategies—such as using communication to connect with people, or bringing large numbers of people together to make their voices heard—as we look further into the past.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### De Jure Discrimination

Discrimination by law.

### Systemic Racism/Discrimination

Racism built into a social/economic/political system and generally taken as “normal” practice.

### De Facto Discrimination

Discrimination as a matter of fact -- i.e. how things really are.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you began your exploration of the history of African American **civil rights** by learning about two more recent topics: **the election of 2008**, in which Barack Obama became the first Black president of the United States, and **the Black Lives Matter movement**. You also examined primary sources related to these two areas of focus, and considered how communication and technology played a role in each.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

## REFERENCES

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