Richard Davis: Racism will not just 'go away' — we've got to ask and act on tough questions

By Richard Davis, For the Deseret News
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Recently, I read a young woman’s online post that she didn’t care at all about what was going on in Ferguson, Missouri, and that she would be happy if it all just went away. I doubt she is alone in her views.

Undoubtedly, violence is not the answer to these problems. Nevertheless, there is a real frustration on the part of many African-Americans today, and not just those who live in Ferguson. A few statistics point out the stark race divide in the United States today. For example, according to U.S. Census data, while 10 percent of whites live in poverty, 27 percent of blacks do. Black children are more than twice as likely as white children to live in families below the poverty line. Blacks and Hispanics are significantly more likely than whites to drop out of high school.

It is easy for many white Americans to blame African-American culture and to suggest that racism is not the cause. However, black culture is not disconnected from white culture. For 200 years, whites in the U.S. enslaved blacks. Then for another 100 years, most blacks were unable to enjoy the same rights and privileges as whites — buy or rent a house in any part of town, vote, get an adequate education or seek whatever job they choose. Since then, white Americans’ attitudes and practices have evolved gradually. But we are far from being a society where race does not matter.

Yet, many whites, like the young woman above, think it doesn’t matter. But most blacks do. A recent CNN poll found 54 percent of non-whites felt Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson should have been charged with murder. Only 23 percent of whites felt that way. In the same poll, 22 percent of non-whites agreed that violent protests of the grand jury decision were justified, while only 10 percent of whites did so.

The perspectives of blacks and whites today differ not just on the events of Ferguson, but also on race relations generally. That same CNN poll found that one-third of non-whites believed the police in their area are prejudiced against blacks at least some of the time. Only 19 percent of whites felt that way. According to that CBS News poll, 71 percent of blacks believed the police are more likely to use deadly force against a black person than a white person. At the same time, only 31 percent of whites believed that. While 58 percent of whites concluded race didn’t matter in the use of deadly force, only one-fifth of blacks agreed.

Not surprisingly, blacks do not perceive the judicial system in the same way that whites do. According to the CBS News survey, 58 percent of whites had at least some confidence that
investigation of Michael Brown would be conducted fairly. However, 59 percent of blacks held the opposite view — not much or no such confidence.

On an even broader level, blacks also don’t share the optimism of whites about their opportunities in the United States. An earlier CBS News poll taken in June found that 63 percent of whites believe whites and blacks have about an equal chance of getting ahead in society today. But only 46 percent of blacks agreed with that view.

Blacks still believe there is significant racial discrimination today. In that June CBS News poll, 14 percent of whites agreed that there is “a lot” of racism against African-Americans today, while 41 percent of African-Americans, who are the objects of such racism, felt that way.

Race still matters. It shapes how blacks and whites experience the American dream as well as how each group perceives racism. What happened in Ferguson speaks to a much larger problem we still face as a nation and a people. How do we make the American dream real for all? How do we address the frustration so many African-Americans feel about the way they are treated in society? Wishing it would all just go away does not solve the problem; it will only make it worse.

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