



# What is Critical Race Theory?

*By National League of Cities Race, Equity & Leadership (REAL) Team*

**T**he term Critical Race Theory (CRT) has recently received significant media attention as communities across the country continue to advance conversations on race and racial equity. As of July 15, 2021, 26 states have introduced legislation or action to limit conversations on critical race theory, often as it relates to what can be taught in classrooms or the types of trainings that government organizations can offer. Many municipalities are eager to provide robust diversity, equity and inclusion trainings to staff and elected officials, but this onslaught of new restrictions poses a challenge.

For its opponents, CRT has been framed as a catch-all phrase for anything related to multiculturalism, anti-racism, and racial equity. However, the purpose of the legal and academic scholarship of CRT—primarily introduced to students at the graduate level and rarely taught in elementary and secondary schools—is to explain and investigate the root causes of how structural racism and racial disparities continue to exist in the U.S.

## What is Critical Race Theory?

At its core, Critical Race Theory interrogates the role race and racism have in society, with the principal idea that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but something that is deeply embedded in legal systems, organizational structures and policies. Critical Race Theory emerged out of the Critical Legal Studies movement of the 1970s to better examine the law and how its interpretation

affects Indigenous, Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander people in the United States, led by scholars like Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. This body of work examines how institutionalized racism and other systemic barriers to equity disproportionately affect people of color and indicates that racism is central to the social, economic and political structures of the U.S. as opposed to a mere aberration.

CRT has mainly been an academic framework over the last four decades, with ties to the work of sociologists and literary theorists who studied links between political power, social organization and language. It is important to note that CRT is not a catch-all for anti-racism work, but rather a high-level type of legal theory studied by academic scholars and students primarily in post-graduate coursework. While many of the frameworks from Critical Race Theory—like analyzing power structures and elevating personal storytelling—are used in anti-racism work, the two terms are not interchangeable.

Critical Race Theory invites academics and laypeople alike to critically analyze how historical contexts and present systems uphold racism, which is applicable across a wide variety of scholarly fields and real-life situations. It is less of a rigid ideology and more so a lens with which to assess the world around us. Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian and Pacific Islander experiences have often been excluded from historical perspectives. Without a collective memory of racism's impact on communities of color, disparities will continue to worsen as the same systems continue

to underserve and burden certain communities while benefiting others. In order to begin the journey of racial healing, a shared understanding of history and context is crucial.

## How does Critical Race Theory connect to the work that local governments are doing?

The racial divisions we see in cities today are not the result of random decision making, but explicit policies, processes and procedures utilized by local governments. In his book *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein documents how all levels of government instituted or adopted policies to separate racial groups. This included zoning laws, redlining, restrictive covenants and unequal policing.

Private housing developments built after World War II were required to include racial restrictions because of the underwriting policies at the Federal Housing Administration, [with maps that were drawn by local interest groups](#). Hazardous industrial sites were zoned near Black and Brown neighborhoods, wreaking havoc on these communities to this day. When Black and Brown families did try to move into white neighborhoods, police often stood by as violent mobs drove them from their homes and away from the community. Municipalities across the country have played an active role in creating the racial divisions we see in communities today, and can be just as instrumental in building thriving communities that address this history and offer opportunities and resources to all its residents.

Recent attacks on Critical Race Theory are concerning, as critics have incorrectly stretched the definition of the term to attack conversations on race and racism. Opponents of CRT have used the term to include anything that resembles multiculturalism, anti-racism, identity politics and racial justice education. The purpose of these attacks is to hinder or even ban conversations about race and racism in classrooms, workplaces and government for the sake of protecting the feelings of white people. School board and city council meetings around the country have become contentious and often violent, with local elected officials reporting increased on-the-job trauma.

## Moving Forward

History shows that when we work together across our differences, we accomplish great things for ourselves, our loved ones, and our neighbors. Having honest conversations on how past and present systems uphold racism and continue racial disparities is necessary to achieve a more just and equitable world.

Critical Race Theory, and anti-racism work more broadly, invites us to acknowledge these historical harms, listen to those that have been most acutely impacted, and work together to move forward. As writer James Baldwin once noted, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

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Local leaders can continue to push forward in their commitment to racial equity by:

1. Analyzing how historical and present policies, practices and procedures uphold racism and contribute to racial disparities;
2. Collecting disaggregated data to be able to pinpoint root causes of such racial disparities; and
3. Centering conversations to focus on the role that race and racism play in local communities.

The following cities have made commitments to working on racial equity within their organizations and have engaged the community in this important work:

**Baltimore, Maryland** has had an Equity in Planning Committee since 2015, and in 2018 passed additional pieces of legislation. The first requires city agencies to assess existing and proposed policies and practices for disparate outcomes based on race, gender, or income and to proactively develop policies, practices, and investments to prevent and redress those disparate outcomes. The second authorizes the establishment of a continuing, non-lapsing Equity Assistance Fund, to be used exclusively to assist efforts that reduce inequity based on race, gender, or economic status in Baltimore; authorizing the mayor and city council to dedicate revenue to the Equity Assistance Fund by ordinance.

### Resource Links:

[www.nlc.org/article/2019/01/21/how-baltimore-is-advancing-racial-equity-policy-practice-procedure](http://www.nlc.org/article/2019/01/21/how-baltimore-is-advancing-racial-equity-policy-practice-procedure)


<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/equity>

**Durham, North Carolina's** Racial Equity and Inclusion Division closely examines policy, practices, budget allocations, and programs that may perpetuate institutional racism and system inequities; develops and implements an Equity Plan for the city, as well as equity and inclusion trainings for city staff; assesses and monitors equity efforts; and reports on outcomes of the Equity Plan. The city also formed its first Racial Equity Task Force, which spent 21 months developing open and honest relationships within city departments and organized a detailed report and call to action.

### Resource Link:

<https://durhamnc.gov/4092/Racial-Equity-Inclusion-Division>

**Evanston, Illinois** in 2019 committed to end structural racism and achieve racial equity by passing a resolution which acknowledged its own history of racially motivated policies and practices; apologized for the damage this history caused, and declared that the city stands against white supremacy. The resolution also included language about land theft and genocide, and pledged to participate in Racial Equity training and join the Government Alliance for Racial Equity.



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**Resource Link:**

[www.cityofevanston.org/government/equity-empowerment](http://www.cityofevanston.org/government/equity-empowerment)

Portland, Oregon’s Office of Equity and Human Rights, formed in 2012, developed Racial Equity Plans for all 26 city bureaus. Each 5-year Plan is meant to operationalize the city-wide Racial Equity Goals and Strategies unanimously adopted by the city council in 2015 as binding city policy. Each bureau had a dedicated and diverse team, which started by conducted research and collected data, conducted trainings, and engaged with communities of color in Portland. All plans include mechanisms for accountability.

**Resource Link:**

[www.portland.gov/officeofequity/racial-equity-plans](http://www.portland.gov/officeofequity/racial-equity-plans)

Rochester, New York recently began a Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL) Initiative, with steps ranging from Define and Understand the Problem and Identify Different Solutions, to Develop and Put Plans into Action and finally Check the Work to ensure accountability. Each of these steps originated from the initial REAL Charter. Rochester has also begun to host racial healing circles, which have specifically included Indigenous residents who have been historically underserved.

**Resource Link:**

[www.cityofrochester.gov/REAL](http://www.cityofrochester.gov/REAL)

Tacoma, Washington created an Equity Empowerment Framework, a push for racial equity urged on by community members. The framework lays out five explicit principles:

1. The City of Tacoma Workforce Reflects the Community It Serves
2. Purposeful Community Outreach and Engagement
3. Equitable Service Delivery to Residents and Visitors
4. Commitment to Equity in Local Government Decision Making and
5. Support Human Rights and Opportunities for Everyone to Achieve their Full Potential.

Tacoma’s community engagement and outreach program committee, called Project PEACE (Partnering for Equity and Community Engagement) has members with unique identities, ranging from leaders of the Puyallup Tribal Council, Rainbow Center, and the Asian Pacific Cultural Center.

**Resource Link:**

[www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Tacoma20City20Profile20Racial20Equity20.pdf](http://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Tacoma20City20Profile20Racial20Equity20.pdf)

The National League of Cities is committed to ensuring that leaders have the tools necessary to center racial equity through policies, practices, norms and values. The NLC’s REAL program has developed a robust portfolio that includes training, technical assistance, and capacity building for city leaders. From training to action guides and case studies, the NLC REAL team offers multiple resources to strengthen local leaders’ ability to advance this important work.

Learn more about NLC REAL: <https://nlc.org/REAL> ■

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