

The affirmative action policies dating back to the 1960s were originally developed in the USA to correct decades of discrimination and to give disadvantaged minorities a well-needed boost. But today, many people think such actions are no longer required.

“It worked for me”

In *Notes of a Racial Caste Baby*, Bryan Fair combines American history and his own personal-life to offer a defence of affirmative action.

As a teacher of American constitutional law, I regularly discuss race and gender discrimination cases with my students. In one of my courses, I have the students interview a grandmother, mother, aunt, sister or female friend about gender discrimination in their jobs. For many of these students, gender discrimination meant little until it affected close family and friends...

Only by hearing one another's stories can we reach an agreement regarding remedial affirmative action. [...]

I am the eighth of ten children of a single mother born in a black ghetto in Columbus, Ohio, in 1960. My mother sometimes had two jobs, but still, her wages were low, she received no job benefits and none of our fathers helped her. We certainly did need welfare¹. I can't imagine what we would have done without it. Even with it, my family went weeks without regular meals at home. Sometimes, in order to get something to eat, I had to steal. Sometimes during the frigid, below-zero Ohio winters we had no gas heat. To stay warm, we huddled under blankets or slept in our clothes. A few times, my mother could not pay the electric bill either. I thought we were the poorest people in Columbus. We were not.

When I was seven, I started hustling jobs and for the next eleven years, after school and at weekends, I ran errands², shovelled snow, cut grass, cleared trash, cleaned bathrooms, cooked, stocked groceries, sold candy and cleaned animal cages. My survival depended on those jobs. They enabled me to buy food, a few clothes and school supplies and to help my mother pay bills.

I attended elementary school regularly and earned A's and B's in most classes. But when I participated in a busing program during junior high that moved black kids from the ghetto into predominantly white schools, the work seemed much harder and my grades fell. I could not read well and had to struggle to finish my homework.

When I started high school, one of my teachers told me that I didn't know very much. To help he gave me history and literature books to read. Without constantly looking up in the dictionary the many words whose pronunciation and meaning I didn't know, I couldn't make sense of them. I was scared, and angry, and I felt trapped.

Many Blacks in Columbus and elsewhere in America are born into those conditions I have described, and most remain there. I escaped. I am not poor or dependent on welfare. I am now a lawyer, a professor of constitutional law, a university administrator and a published author. I support myself and help support my mother. How did this happen?

One essential factor was remedial affirmative action. It helped me move from the ghetto to more rigorous schools and increasingly nurturing³ environments. So no one can tell me that affirmative action does not work. It worked for me as it has for many other Americans.

My life experiences have convinced me that remedial affirmative action and hard work, plus the support and direction of many people enabled me to escape from that Ohio ghetto. Without the educational opportunities I would have been imprisoned by circumstances and conditions beyond my control. [...]

Everywhere you turn in the United States, remedial affirmative action is under assault. “Innocent”, “angry” white men insist they are victims of “reverse discrimination”, unfairly losing their jobs and other opportunities because of minority and gender preferences.

Public discussion in the United States often portrays affirmative action as primarily those policies that help “unqualified” blacks or other racial minorities attend schools, gain employment or elect representatives of their choice. Little is said or written about the remedial policies that help white women overcome centuries of economic exclusion or policies that aid small businesses operated by socially or economically disadvantaged persons, including white men.

Bryan K. Fair,
Notes of a Racial Caste Baby (1999)

1. Government financial assistance provided to the poor to meet basic material needs

2. Deliver or collect things for people
3. Caring and encouraging