



# Critical Race Theory

This article discusses the origins of CRT, what it represents now and the current controversy and misunderstandings surrounding CRT.

There has been a lot of attention and controversy recently, especially in the United States, on critical race theory (CRT). While CRT has not become a political hot topic in Canada, there are a growing number of groups who oppose their definition of it and what they believe it to mean.

## What are the origins of CRT?

Critical race theory originated in the mid-1970s among legal scholars who were examining US laws and how they interconnect with race. It traces racism through the history of Slavery, the Civil Rights Movement up to current events occurring today.(1) It's based on the idea that racism is built into the legal system and policies and it critiques the social construction of race and the racial inequities that exist and persist because of these laws and policies.

In the 1980s CRT was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Derrick Bel, who asserted that despite civil rights legislation, the social and economic disparities between white people and African Americans had not changed.

Since then, various views have been presented by critical race theorists, but the basic idea still centers on the idea that the United States was built on theft of land and labour and that federal laws has preserved the unequal treatment of people based on their race. (2)

# Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical race theory was a term coined by legal scholars in the 1980s. It's based on the idea that racism is built into our legal systems (laws) and policies. CRT critiques the social construction of race and the racial inequities that exist and persist because of these laws and policies. CRT is based on the following six principles:

**1** Biologically, race is not real; there are no distinct genetic features that differentiate "races." Race is a social construct.

**2** People of colour experience racism on a regular basis.

**3** Advances (or setbacks) in law tend to favour white people.

**4** Minority groups experience negative stereotypes depending on the interests of white people.

**5** Race intersects with other identities (sexuality, gender, religion, class, ability, etc.). No individual has only one identity.

**6** People of colour are qualified to speak on behalf of other members of their group(s) regarding the effects of racism.



Some politicians, religious leaders and media are attacking CRT because they are re-defining it as a theory that seeks to attack white people, in reality, it seeks to attack structural racism.

## What are the current controversies with CRT?

CRT has recently been in the spotlight in the US as state legislatures attempt to ban its use in classrooms.

Some American politicians believe that:

- CRT is being taught in public schools in the US. While there's no evidence that this is the case, some of its central ideas, such as the consequences of Slavery are being taught in schools,
- CRT and its concepts are an effort to rewrite American history,
- CRT is painting all white people as racist and they should feel guilty because of their advantages.

Because CRT is being used incorrectly to describe racial concepts such as white privilege, systemic inequality and unconscious bias (which some politicians find objectionable), it's being blamed for creating division between people of colour and white people. In reality, "the attacks on critical race theory are based on made-up definitions and descriptors," states Ibram X. Kendi, and he goes on to say that "these critics are arguing against themselves" (3) and creating divisions.

Take the following claims on critical race theory for example; "Critical race theory says every white person is a racist. Critical race theory says America is fundamentally racist and irredeemably racist, and if someone has a different color skin, seeks to make us hate that person." (4) and "That the people of color have been oppressed by the white people, and that white people begin to be racist by the time they're 2 or 3 months old, and that therefore the people of color have to rise up and overtake their oppressors. And then, having gotten the whip handle - if I can use the term - then to instruct their white neighbors how to behave. Now, that's Critical Race Theory." (5) When such claims are made, it's no surprise that people are confused about CRT and are becoming divided on the issue.

In response to these misinformed concerns and misconstrued definitions, a number of US states are taking steps to limit how race and racism can be taught in public school by introducing legislation to ban or limit the teaching of critical race theory or similar concepts in schools. The state of Florida has gone so far as to say that teaching CRT and using any educational material related to the 1619 Project (a New York Times initiative published in 2019 (6)) violates state law. (7)

It's important to come back to the true definition of critical race theory and what its purpose is. As the deans of five University of California law schools stated, "CRT invites us to confront with unflinching honesty how race has operated in our history and our present, and to recognize the deep and ongoing operation of "structural racism," through which racial inequality is reproduced within our economic, political, and educational systems even without individual racist intent." (8)

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