

The Civil Rights Movement

America in the 1950s was an important period of social, political, and economic change. From the outside, suburban life was booming, and the big migration of people from large cities meant that everyone relied more on cars for transportation, which caused a giant, upward surge in both the auto industry and the economy. Things like shopping malls and drive-through restaurants were slowly changing what it meant to be “American.” But things weren’t so good for black Americans at this time. Though the end of the Civil War in 1865 had officially ended slavery, black Americans were still struggling for equal status. Their many decades of fighting for civil rights, desegregation, and equality would finally see significant progress in the 1950s.

It all started with an 1896 Supreme Court case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Basically, this case stated that as long as segregated areas were “equal” in quality for blacks and whites, segregation was allowed. This is where the term “separate but equal” stemmed from. In most cases, the quality of these segregated spaces was not equal. These restrictions, also called the “Jim Crow laws,” restricted everything from sharing buses to drinking fountains. The “separate but equal” mentality eventually trickled into public schools, and another Supreme Court case named *Brown v. The Board of Education* declared that segregating children to separate schools and classroom was unconstitutional, and that “separate but equal” was not equal at all.

But the *Brown v. Board of Education* case didn’t stop segregation. Many white, Southern parents disagreed with this case and decided to remove their children from school. Though the “separate but equal” mentality did violate the Fourteenth Amendment, which stated that all citizens had equal protection under the law, that didn’t change the public view on segregation.

Still, the Supreme Court wanted to test how the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling would affect schools. Nine black students, who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine, were put into Little Rock Central High School, which was formerly all white, in September of 1957. These students were met with resentment from their fellow classmates and members of the community, and eventually had to be escorted to class by Arkansas National Guardsmen for an entire year.

Despite the court decision, few black students were integrated into white schools. Progress on desegregation was being made, but it was being done slowly and faced a lot of resistance. Still, black Americans continued to fight for equality. In 1960, a group of black students refused to leave a Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina until they were served like the rest of the customers. This protest caused a ripple effect, and soon many other college towns in the South saw similar movements. Though a lot of these silent protesters were eventually arrested for trespassing, the Greensboro sit-ins created lasting change and forced Woolworth’s and other similar restaurants to change their stance on segregation.

Finally, in 1960, things started to change for students that were being segregated in schools. A six-year-old elementary school student named Ruby Bridges was enrolled into an all-white school, and officially became known as the first student to desegregate that school. She

became known as a symbol of the civil rights movement for her bravery. Desegregation was starting to become more mainstream, and groups like the Freedom Riders protested the use of segregated bus terminals by taking bus trips all over the South. These riders were arrested, but these events gave the civil rights movement national attention. 1963 was the year that over 250,000 civil rights activists marched on Washington, DC, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech to thousands. These protestors met to demand equal treatment and justice for all people, and the march on Washington was a huge influence on the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination in public areas and schools. This form of protest also informed the way gay and women's rights would be treated in the future.

The United States has a long-standing identity as being a multiracial, multicultural country. Still, certain groups are subject to racism and discrimination even today. Some steps have been made toward lessening racism, and the brave men and women of the civil rights movement helped pave the way for future progress.