Affirmative Action: Solution or Problem?

First, defenders of affirmative action see it as a sensible response to the United States' racial and ethnic history, especially for African-Americans who suffered through two centuries of slavery and a century of segregation under Jim Crow laws.

Second, given United States' racial history, the promise of a color-blind society strikes many analysts as hollow. Simply endorsing the principle of color blindness does not mean everyone will compete fairly because prejudice and discrimination are deep in the fabric of U.S. society.

Third, proponents maintain that affirmative action has worked. Where would minorities be if the government had not enacted this policy four decades ago? Major employers, such as large city fire and police departments, began hiring minorities and women for the first time because of affirmative action.

Affirmative action has always drawn criticism, and by the mid-1990s, courts began cutbacks in such policies. Critics of affirmative action first argue that it started out as a temporary remedy to ensure fair competition but became a system of group preferences and quotas. Within a decade, it had become "reverse discrimination," favoring people not because of their performance but because of their race, ethnicity, or sex.

Second, critics contend that affirmative action polarizes society. If racial preferences were wrong in the past, they are wrong now. Critics contend that giving entire categories of people special treatment inevitably compromises standards of excellence, calls into question the real accomplishments of minorities, and provokes a hostile response from Caucasian people.

A third argument against affirmative action is that it benefits those who need it least. Favoring minority-owned corporations or allocating places in law school helps already privileged people. Affirmative action has done little for the African-American underclass, which most needs the help.

**Question 1:** What is a minority, and how is minority status determined in a society?

**Answer 1:** A minority is any category of people—distinguished by physical or cultural difference—that a society sets apart and subordinates. Race, ethnicity, and gender are the bases for minority standing. The term *minority* seems to suggest that these categories of people constitute a small proportion of a society's population, but that is not necessarily true. In the United States, Latin-Americans—who are classified as minority members—constitute the
Affirmative Action: Solution or Problem?

majority population in three states and half of the country’s one hundred largest cities.

Question 2: What do the terms race and ethnicity mean?

Answer 2: A race is a socially constructed category composed of people who share biologically transmitted traits that members of a society consider important. Ethnicity is a shared cultural heritage. People define themselves—or others—as members of an ethnic category based on common ancestors, language, or religion that confer a distinctive social identity.

Question 3: Social scientists describe patterns of interaction between racial and ethnic categories in terms of three models: pluralism, assimilation, and genocide. What model does a color-blind society represent and why?

Answer 3: A color-blind society is best defined as a pluralistic model. Pluralism is a state in which racial and ethnic minorities are distinct but have social parity. In other words, everyone accepts the idea that society is multicultural, and even though categories of people are distinctive, they all have roughly the same social standing. Certainly, the notion of color blindness does not seem to suggest that racial and ethnic groups maintain their distinctiveness, but how the phrase is used at least points to the notion of a society that presents equal opportunities and social standings to all members of the society.

Question 4: What is discrimination, and how does it differ from prejudice?

Answer 4: Discrimination is treating various categories of people unequally. Prejudice consists of attitudes whereas discrimination is a matter of action. Like prejudice, discrimination can be either positive (providing special advantages) or negative (subjecting people to obstacles). Unfortunately, prejudice and discrimination often covary.

Question 5: When society’s institutions including schools, banks, law enforcement, and the workplace engage in racial and ethnic bias what sociological concept is in effect?

Answer 5: People typically think of prejudice and discrimination as the hateful ideas and actions of specific people, but when societies systematically enact racial, gender, or ethnic biases, then institutional prejudice and discrimination occur.