

LISTENING TOPICS

We have chosen topics we believe to be current and significant. We have attempted to describe them in a neutral statement and have offered some positions or thoughts on each topic. Our goal was to list some positions rather than every possible position, so if your position is not reflected, we invite you, please, to include it in your responses. We would also like to have your feedback on the phrasing of these topics and positions as it is our hope to word them in a way that invites discussion rather than provokes reactions.

Systemic Racism

Topic:

When we talk about racism, we often think of explicit actions. Perhaps we think of it as the act of an individual telling inappropriate jokes or using slurs and adhering to stereotypes. But less obvious, and more difficult to recognize, is “systemic racism” in which racism is embedded into the institutions and organizations of society resulting in laws, rules, procedures, stereotypes, customs, and social norms, etc. influenced by and perpetuating racism sometimes intentionally but often unintentionally.

Positions:

As many of these laws, rules, and procedures have changed some would say systemic racism is much less of a problem than it was before the Civil Rights movement. Others say that even though the laws have changed systemic racism continues to be a significant problem that discriminates against People of Color.

Questions/Reflection:

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding systemic racism.

Mass Incarceration

Topic:

More people per capita are incarcerated in the U.S. than in any other country. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, “2.3 million people are locked up in more than 6,000 correctional facilities operated by thousands of agencies.” According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2017, the annual cost of mass incarceration in the United States was \$81 billion.

The Northwestern Prison Education Program, an initiative of Northwestern University providing education to incarcerated students in Illinois, reports, “African Americans are incarcerated at more than 5 times the rate of whites, and while African Americans and Hispanics make up about 32% of the US population, they constitute 56% of the incarcerated population. Indeed, if African Americans and Hispanics were incarcerated at the same rate as whites, prison and jail populations would decline by almost 40%.”

According to the American Action Forum “This high incarceration rate is not because crime has increased; in fact, crime rates have declined since the 1990s. Rather, the arrest rate—particularly for drug crimes—increased dramatically, while sentences have gotten longer. These policy changes have disproportionately affected low-income and minority populations, who now make up roughly three-fifths and two-thirds of the prison population, respectively.” And, “The United States is currently imprisoning roughly 1 million people for low-level drug offenses, property crimes, and various offenses indirectly related to their poverty. Roughly half a million people are imprisoned because of their inability to pay for their release. An estimated 10 million people owe \$50 billion in legal fees, fines, and penalties.”

Positions:

Some people believe we should be spending more money on programs that reduce or help prevent criminal behavior, while others believe that we need to be building more prisons and jails. Also, some people believe overly strict drug enforcement policies end up incarcerating too many people. Some think the poor and People of Color do not have adequate legal representation and are unfairly incarcerated.

Questions/Reflections

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding mass incarceration.

Immigration

Topic:

Many of us can trace our ancestry to other countries of origin. However, with the rise of refugees fleeing from other countries and a large population of undocumented people living in the U.S. the issues of legal and illegal immigration continue to divide Americans.

According to the American Immigration Council, in 2019,

- 44.9 million immigrants (foreign-born individuals) comprised 14 percent of the national population
- 10.3 million undocumented immigrants comprised 23 percent of the immigrant population and 3 percent of the total U.S. population
- 28.5 million immigrant workers comprised 17 percent of the U.S. labor force

Positions:

While immigration has been at the forefront of a national political debate, the U.S. public holds a range of views about immigrants living in the country. Some people think the United States should have stricter regulations regarding who and how many people can immigrate to this country. Some believe that if individuals follow the prescribed rules and procedures for immigrating legally there is not an issue. There is much conversation regarding “open borders for trade and closed borders for migration.” Some people believe that those immigrating from other countries are then employed in jobs that could/would be filled by citizens leaving fewer employment opportunities for those who were born in this country. While others believe immigrants strengthen the country “because of their hard work and talents.”

Questions/Reflections:

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding Immigration.

Climate Change and Global Warming

Topic:

That global temperatures have been steadily rising since the early 20th century is well documented, most notably since the late 1970's. With these rising temperatures come a variety of climate changes seen throughout the world, such as rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and changes in growing seasons.

Positions:

Many people believe that “global warming” and “climate change” are a natural part of the lifespan of our planet and are inevitable and irreversible. Others believe that human behavior and industry have been a driving force in the warming of the planet and that people have the ability and obligation to change, halt, and/or reverse the effects of climate change.

Questions/Reflections:

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding Global Warming and Climate Change.

Policing

Topic:

As a country, we agree that we want to live in communities that are peaceful and safe. Ideally, this is most likely to happen when there is a cooperative relationship between the citizens and police. “To Protect and Serve” is the motto of many police forces across the nation, although the role officers fill in their communities has changed greatly in the last quarter-century as they are called to serve as social workers, conflict mediators, traffic directors, and mental health counselors in addition to fighting crime.

Positions:

Some people think the vast majority of Police and Police Department serve their communities well and that the media exaggerates any problems or concerns. While some people think marginalized communities are “over-policed” and that Racism exists within Police Departments.

Some people believe that the role of policing in our current society has become too militarized and heavy handed leading to the need for more oversight of police departments and are calling for “Police Reform.” Some people think the police provide a necessary peacekeeping force to guard against crime and ensure that criminals are brought to justice and others think that we are relying far too heavily on police to address problems that have nothing to do with what they are trained and hired to do.

Additionally, within this context there has been a call for “Defunding the Police.” Some people believe the call for "defunding the police" simply means reallocating money from policing to other agencies funded by local municipalities while others believe it is intended to dismantle police forces entirely.

Questions/Reflections:

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding Policing.

Guns

Topic:

Included in the Constitution of the United States, the Second Amendment reads, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.”

According to GunPolicy.org, the estimated total number of privately owned firearms (both licit and illicit) held by civilians in the United States is 265,000,000-393,347,000.

Positions:

Some people believe there should be more gun restrictions, some believe there should be less restrictions, and some fall somewhere in the middle.

Questions/Reflections:

Please share any thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions, or concerns you may have regarding Guns.