The Progressive Era was not so progressive for nonwhite and immigrant Americans. Most Progressives were white Anglo-Saxon Protestant reformers who were indifferent or hostile to minorities. Settlement houses and other civic groups played a big role in the Americanization efforts of many Progressives. Americanization occurred when Progressives encouraged everyone to follow white, middle-class ways of life. Many Progressives shared the same prejudices against nonwhites as other Americans. They agreed with so-called scientific theories that said that dark-skinned peoples had less intelligence than whites. They also supported segregation, or separation of the races, and laws to limit minority voting.

African American reformers responded in different ways to formal segregation and discrimination. For example, Booker T. Washington told blacks that the best way to win their rights was to be patient and to earn the respect of white Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, said that blacks should demand immediately all the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

W.E.B. Du Bois was a member of the Niagara Movement, a group that called for rapid progress and more education for blacks. After a race riot broke out in Illinois, its members joined with white reformers to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP planned to use the court system to fight for the civil rights of African Americans, including the right to vote. The efforts of the NAACP mostly helped middle-class blacks, but the Urban League focused on poorer urban workers. It helped families buy clothes and books and helped factory workers and maids find jobs.

African Americans were not alone in seeking their rights. Individuals and organizations of diverse ethnic groups spoke out against injustice and created self-help agencies. Jews in New York City formed the Anti-Defamation League to defend themselves against verbal attacks and false statements. Mexican Americans in several states formed mutualistas, groups that gave loans and provided legal assistance to the poor.