

The Pandemic of Racism in America

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The rage, desperation, and determination which continue to bring tens of thousands of Americans to the streets in protest against racism and injustice hopefully will be just the beginning. They are sick and tired of systemic racism against Black people, of bigotry at the top, crude discrimination, police brutality, a prejudiced criminal justice system, economic disparity, and society's robbing black people of experiencing real freedom and equality. Hypocritically, white people blame the victims of racism for their own plight, claiming that Black people would do better in life if they were only willing to work harder.

We are now reaping the harvest of the seeds of racism and discrimination—the devaluation of black life. The whole socio-economic and cultural system is lopsided, as it lacks the fundamentals of justice and equality. The pandemic provided the wakeup call that pointed out the ugly tradition of subjugation of the Black community, which sadly did not stop with the end of slavery, but continued in the wanton indifference to their pain and agony, our uncanny negligence, and our failure to understand what they are really experiencing.

Ingrained Racism

The fact that Black people were slaves, and the carefully cultivated myth that slaves were always obedient and happily served their white masters, left an indelible imprint on white people that has lasted generations. They maintain that African Americans were born to servitude and hence they do not qualify for equal treatment, equal opportunity, and equal status.

Films such as D.W. Griffith's immensely influential *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which helped to reestablish the Ku Klux Klan, also reinforced the racist stereotype that Black men are unintelligent and an inherent danger to the white community—specifically white women. When on May 25 (the same day George Floyd was killed) a white woman, Amy Cooper, called the cops on a Black man, Christian Cooper, who was birdwatching in Central Park, she was tapping into the long history of that racist trope. To put it plainly, Black lives are simply not valued the way white lives are, as white people consciously or subconsciously view Black man as both sub- and supra-human, threatening, and expendable.

Thus, due to this entrenched prejudice, any activity, however innocent, in which a Black man is engaged in invites suspicion, alarm, and often puts the life of Black men in danger – such as 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot and killed by white residents of the suburban Georgia neighborhood he was jogging in. The mayor of Minneapolis bluntly said “Being black in America should not be a death sentence.” Racism, to be sure, is so ingrained it flows in the veins of many Americans without notice.

The insidious, learned biases pitting white against Black Americans directly leads to the

treating of Black Americans as second-class citizens and suppression by white Americans—a necessary ingredient that satisfies their ego and elevates their self-worth. Although the majority of white Americans may not be white supremacists, they certainly hold onto their privileges in all walks of life as they view their relation with Black people (and other people of color) as a zero-sum game, as if a Black man’s gain invariably chips away at a white man’s privileges.

Wanton discrimination

Racial prejudice in America takes a heavy toll on African Americans, which translates to discrimination in all walks of life, including education, job opportunities, professional advancements, and medical treatment, especially maternal health. Black workers receive 22 percent less in salary than whites with the same education and experience; Black women receive even less—34.2 percent. According to a University of Chicago/Duke 2016 study, when factoring in all African American and white men (inclusive of those incarcerated or otherwise out of the workforce), the racial wage gap is the same as it was in the 1950s. Even where racial discrimination should not occur, in medical treatment, when Black patients access medical care, doctors regularly prescribe fewer pain medications and believe Black patients feel less pain than white patients, even among veterans seeking care.

Whereas Black men have served in the military and fought and died alongside white soldiers in every war since the Revolutionary War (when 5,000-8,000 Black soldiers fought against the British), they had to face the revulsion of discrimination and segregation while still serving in the military, hardly recognized for acts of bravery. Indeed, until 1948—after the end of WWII—the US military was entirely segregated. While the top brass of the military, who are mostly white, like to claim that military institutions are ‘colorblind’, the reality is that “racism and discrimination remain extensive problems even in the U.S. military”.

Police brutality

Although police brutality against Black men in particular, which instigated the current protests, is a known phenomenon, police killings of Black men continue unabated. It can and has taken different forms historically - including harassment and intimidation, assault and battery, torture and murder, and even complicity with the KKK. Often, police officers approach any situation connected to a Black man with apprehension and fear. White police officers see threats where they do not exist; they are too quick to draw and as quick to fire to kill.

Here are just a few glaring examples: a Black man taking a nap in a car in a parking lot was shot dead. Another pulled over in a traffic stop was shot and killed in front of his girlfriend and her daughter. A Black man sitting in his home eating ice cream was shot dead by his neighbor, an off-duty white police officer. A Black woman playing video games with her nephew was shot and killed through her window. A Black woman (and EMT) sleeping in her home was shot eight times when officers entered her apartment executing a no-knock warrant.

It is rare for a prosecutor to decide to charge a police officer, especially because they often know each other and have developed close working relationships. Even Internal Affairs divisions of police departments, which ostensibly exist to investigate and report misconduct among officers, have widely conducted sub-standard investigations and failed to identify

problem officers who commit wanton abuse.

This cultural pattern enables police officers like Derek Chauvin, Daniel Pantaleo, and Nathan Woodyard to commit the heinous crime of slowly squeezing the life out of George Floyd (MN), Eric Garner (NY), and Elijah McClain (CO). As troubling is the fact that police officers have been known to give false testimony in court, whether to avoid punishment for their own criminal and/or unconstitutional actions, to ensure a conviction, or for other reasons.

Disproportionate incarceration

Although the US judiciary is considered to be just and impartial, in most court hearings race is present albeit it is not spelled out. It is as though Black men inherently have no equal rights and to this day, 230 years since the constitution was written, injustices still exist in both federal and state courts.

Blacks are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites—while they are 13 percent of the total US population, they constitute 40 percent of the total male prison population. The mass incarceration of African Americans in this country has created what sociologist Becky Pettit, citing the novelist Ralph Ellison, calls “invisible men”—the millions of black men in the American penal system. Prison inmates are not included in most data-collecting national surveys, so these men are effectively invisible to social institutions, lawmakers, and most social science research. It is almost as if they do not exist, they do not count; their reality is ignored, neglected, and brushed aside.

A staggering 75 percent of young Black men will be imprisoned at some point in their lives. These statistics can only begin to convey the enormity of the injustice that is being compounded day after day. Pettit’s book reveals that “penal expansion has generated a class of citizens systematically excluded from accounts of the American populace. This exclusion raises doubt about the validity of even the most basic social facts and questions the utility of the data gathered for the design and evaluation of public policy and the data commonly used in social science research. As a consequence, we have lost sight of the full range of the American experience.”

Economic disparity

Economic disparity between white and Black Americans is glaring, and reverberates through generations of Black families. Economic exclusion is the source of inequality. It is caused by a confluence of factors, beginning with nearly 250 years of chattel slavery (during which Black families were torn apart, let alone able to accumulate wealth), to sharecropping and unrestrained lynchings, to 90 years of Jim Crow laws, to redlining neighborhoods on demographic lines. All of these factors are manifested today in hiring decisions, property valuation, mortgage applications, interest charges, and even how credit scores are tabulated. The average white family’s net worth is more than ten times greater than a Black family. Economic disparity, to be sure, is the “mother of all evil” in the lives of Black people.

A poor Black man cannot pay for decent housing, cannot pay for health care, and cannot afford to send his kids to higher education, which directly impacts his social standing and professional competency. Thus, he has to settle for menial jobs, low wages, and little or no prospect of ever climbing out of the vicious cycle. The saddest thing of all is that he is blamed for his own dilemma, as if the conditions and lack of opportunities in which he lives has nothing to do with his sorry state of affairs.

The bigotry of the leadership

During the past four years, racism in America has been on the rise and in no small measure Trump, the Racist-in-Chief, has made race a campaign issue from the very start. He began his political campaign by branding Hispanics as rapists; in his presidency he banned Muslims from entering the US, cruelly separated children from their parents at the borders, described white supremacists in Charlottesville as “very fine people”, and celebrated this 4th of July by defending Confederate statues.

Trump’s racism against Blacks in particular is nothing new. It was there in 1973 when Trump Management Inc. was sued by the Department of Justice for housing discrimination against African-American renters. We could see it in 1989, when he took out a full-page advertisement in four New York City newspapers calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty over the Central Park Five, who were wrongfully convicted and sent to prison. Trump refuses to apologize for that, even though, as Innocence Project founder Barry Scheck said, “...by calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty, it contributed to an atmosphere that deprived these men of a fair trial.” He also refused to apologize for his persistent perpetuation of the ‘birther’ lie that Obama was not born in the US.

Trump’s Independence Day speech at Mount Rushmore was laden with racially divisive and partisan rhetoric, but that makes no difference to many conservative Republican leaders and his misguided supporters who follow him blindly. They wrap themselves with the flag as a sign of American patriotism, when in fact their patriotism is defined by their racism and intolerance of people of color.

Although some Republican leaders disagree with him on race, they are fearful of his anger to say anything publicly, lest they risk losing their power or position. Sadly, their silence suggests consent, which only reinforces Trump’s racism. With Trump, as with much of the country, racism is deeply ingrained, something he refuses to admit.

Although racism did not start when Trump came to power – as it is imbued into America’s history and culture – and it will not end with his departure from office, his overt racism brought to focus racism in America. The persistent protests reveal the deep sense of frustration with a president who fans the flame of racism, who sees the country as his own enterprise, who does whatever he wants to serve his own interests. He is cruel, cunning, and careless about the pain and suffering of Black America; he cannot count on their political support and hence completely rejects their outcry.

Unlike any other protests in the past against racism, this year’s protests have had a greater impact in part due to the spread of the coronavirus and its disproportionate impact on Black people, who are being infected and dying at higher rates than whites. That, and in conjunction with a presidential election, provides a rare opportunity to start a process of mitigating racism in earnest. What will be necessary, however, is for the protests to persist through Election Day in the hopes that the Racist-in-Chief will be ousted. Only then we stand a better chance that a new day will dawn and a new administration will commit to relentlessly addressing the plight of Black people for the sake of all Americans, especially because the day when America will have a majority of people of color is fast approaching.

Although there are scores of measures that must be taken and many years and huge financial resources to make a discernible change for the better in the life of Black Americans, we have no choice but to start, regardless of how insurmountable the obstacles

and the culture of resistance to change. It will take the collective efforts, determination, and consistency of local, state, and federal authorities to begin this process if we ever want to reach a modicum of equality.

The work to change the culture of innate racism in America will be long and hard, but we must not shy away from it. As a small start, the immediate focus should be on educating students about Black history, changing the police culture and training, investing in housing in black neighborhoods, offering educational support for young Black boys and girls starting at elementary age, up to providing free education for them to attend college or professional schools, and providing job opportunities and equal pay to give them the chance to climb up over time the social ladder.

The continuing demonstrations throughout the country suggest not only the obvious—that Black lives matter—but that racism is consuming America from within, that injustice affects the perpetrators just as much as the victims, that enough is enough.

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