

Racial Disparities in the United States Prison System

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Historical Racism and Disproportionate Incarceration

Racism has been a part of American society since the revolution. It has affected every sphere of life of the people of color. People of color, especially black, have faced social and economic discrimination in the US. They are discriminated against in law enforcement institutes, which are supposed to be fair to everyone. However, black people have suffered stricter punishments compared to whites or other racial groups in the US. They have suffered at the hands of police outside of the prison and inside it. The police treat black people worse than any other group. They are incarcerated at higher rates than other groups. But the racial minorities suffer at the hands of law enforcement. Therefore, racism in prison shows the disparity in the justice system of the United States, which is politically, culturally and socially embedded in the society even though it is unethical and unjust to the people of color. Although some might argue it is because black [people commit crimes](#). The reality is that blacks get severe punishments for the same or similar crimes compared to whites.

The statistics show that people of color are incarcerated and punished severely at the hands of law enforcement. The rate of African American incarcerations in state prisons is 5.1 times compared to that of whites. In some states, it is 10 to 1, such as Iowa and New Jersey. In others, the rate of incarceration of blacks compared to whites is 20 to 1. Oklahoma has the highest rates of black incarceration, comprising 1 in 15 black adult males in prison. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that “35 percent of state prisoners are white” compared to 38 percent of black prisoners, and Hispanics comprise 21 percent (Nellis). Moreover, statistics show that the rate of incarceration for “black men has risen faster” than any other group since the 1980s (Waterman). According to Jess Mawhirt, black people living in “more segregated states have a higher probability of being in jail” compared to the people living in “less segregated states” (Mawhirt). He concludes that segregation is correlated with the mass incarceration of black people. However, the mass incarcerations of black men are rooted in American political, social and cultural institutions.

The mass incarceration of blacks in the US is rooted in the political institution from the beginning. It can be traced back to the time of slavery. It was since then that black people have faced discrimination. In the beginning, due to slavery, their rights are not protected. But with the 13th Amendment, the blacks were criminalized. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, but punishment for crimes was essential. Law and order were used to construct “black criminality” and harsh treatment of black people (Waterman). However, according to Loic Wacquant, the mass incarceration

of American Africans is the outcome of the “extra penological function” of the prison system due to the increased ghetto crimes (Wacquant). However, much of the research suggests that racial discrimination is rooted in the political system and institutions. It is a way to suppress the black people. The imprisonment of the people of black people “operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions to ensure the subordinate status” of the blacks (Alexander, 13). Therefore, arguing it is because of the crimes the rate of incarcerations of black people exists is invalid because whether it was the policy of “war on drugs” or tough on crimes, the focus was on the black people, and they were discriminated largely under these policies (Alexander; Forman Jr).

Law Enforcement Bias and Unequal Criminal Punishment

Moreover, the police and law enforcement agencies, such as the police justice department, are involved in discriminating against black people. The police violence against black people on the road is a recurring event in US history. Police killed 282 black people in 2017, which comprises 25 percent of the total killings, but the black population was 13 percent. Additionally, in 2015, “30 percent of black victims were unarmed.” Shockingly, the US police kill black people at “13 percent higher rates than the U.S murder rate” (“Police Killed 1,147 People in the U.S. in 2017.”). The police department, which is supposed to safeguard people, is killing black people as discrimination and stereotypes about black people are dominant in American society (Haney). Similarly, the justice department is discriminating against racial minorities while hearing and sentencing. The groups to get unfair sentences for criminal offenses are Hispanic and Blacks. The black and Hispanic defendants “receive more severe sentences” compared to white defendants (Doerner and Demuth). For instance, in 13 states, the rate of blacks serving life sentences is over 60 percent (Turner and Dakwar). Thus, the protectors and security providers are involved in the discrimination most of the time. They contribute essentially to maintaining the cultural and social norms by perpetrating injustice on a specified racial group and sparing others for their crimes.

This treatment of blacks and minorities is unjust and unethical, and it perpetuates and retains the system that is unjust for certain groups of people. It takes opportunities from black people and minorities, pushing them back into a cycle of constant suffering. Incarcerating people limits adults from “marriage and steady jobs.” The same research shows that ex-prisoners “earn lower wages and are less likely to be married and live with the mothers of their children” (Mawhirt, 167). Thus, develops a cycle of economic and academic backwardness of the racial group. Generations of people are affected because of discrimination and unjust treatment. The stereotyping against one group of the population leads to social and political segregation. The discriminatory laws and police treatment contribute to social inequality and human rights violations. Furthermore, the Legal system “serves to marginalize the victims” (Gottschalk, 102) which is unethical because their responsibility is to safeguard the rights of the people. Additionally, it takes away the family and relationships from the person’s life, and it becomes unethical when the perpetrator is unfairly punished or incarcerated.

Consequently, it is unfair and unethical to force a person to live a life that takes away socio-economic opportunities from a person's life.

Prison Conditions, Public Safety, and the Need for Justice Reform

Moreover, the inhuman treatment of the incarcerated people poses a security threat, psychological and physical, to the incarcerated and their families. The "prison environment adversely affects the health" due to the food, smoking and overall environment (National Academy of Sciences). The living conditions in the incarcerations contribute to the well-being of the people. This lack of proper facilities in the jails leads to many physical and psychological diseases. Additionally, due to the isolation and overcrowdedness in prison, the inmates have "high rates of chronic infectious disease." Furthermore, the isolation and strict enforcement, the level of "depression and psychiatric disorders are high" (Brinkley-Rubinstein). The health and well-being of the inmates are at risk due to long-term imprisonment. Lack of acceptance and social life when in jail and after coming out of imprisonment puts these people at risk of being psychologically and physically ill. The correctional facilities of the countries contribute to the deteriorating health conditions of the inmates.

As the population of the black population is high in jail, they are more likely to suffer from psychiatric and health problems. They are more likely to enter the vicious cycle of economic and financial problems. Hence, the incarceration has negative impacts on the black people and their well-being (Silton). It also affects the family members and the children whose parents are in jail. The inmates consider it difficult to build their relationship after coming out of jail. They suffer harsh treatment from society and are forced to accept a life that is not enriching. Incarceration limits the choices of people, making them less desirable in society.

To conclude, some people might believe that people who commit a crime must be punished, but in the US, it is complicated. The incarcerations create more problems for the people instead of helping them to be better people. They create problems for the inmates, psychological and physical, making them vulnerable to diseases as the prisons are overly crowded. The infections are normal for them. Moreover, lack of proper meals also contributes to the well-being of the person. Also, the isolation from family and friends and lack of social life contribute to psychological disorders. Furthermore, it creates social problems. It contributes to the escalation of social inequality by strengthening already prevalent racial stereotypes.

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