



# The Modern Regularity of Institutionalized Racism Towards Black Americans

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## Abstract

African Americans have faced persistent institutionalized barriers and systemic racism both historically and in the present day. One of the most glaring manifestations of this is the racial disproportionality observed in incarceration rates. This paper delves into specific domains, such as the justice and social welfare systems, where institutional discrimination is evident, contributing to the disenfranchisement of African Americans. It further addresses the gap in literature concerning the impacts of such racial disproportionality in incarceration, especially the systemic challenges faced post-incarceration. The objective of this research is to delineate the facets of institutionalized racism towards African Americans in the context of incarceration and to propose evidence-based clinical interventions for professionals working with this demographic.

Keywords: racism, incarceration, systemic racism, family, African American

## INTRODUCTION

Many racially and ethnically minoritized groups have attained drastic changes in equality, such as women's suffrage and Native American property reparations, but racial inequality continues to be an overwhelming issue in the United States (U.S.). The death of those such as George Floyd and Trayvon Martin would trigger national outcry, as many considered the issue of racism to be just as prevalent and dire as ever before. Furthermore, recent developments in the media, police brutality prevention and monitorization, and political discourse has further split the country in the racial debate, leading many to accuse various private and government institutions of racial discrimination. Institutionalized racism, although not directly lethal and clear as before, is still a rampant issue that economically immobilizes and socially afflicts African

American communities; especially with regard to the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010).

It is essential to observe how the U.S. enacted policies to address crime and public health issues such as mental illness, drug addiction, and crimes associated with homelessness (Ramaswamy & Freudenberg 2012; Schneider, 2018). The governments' response to these issues was to engage in its citizens' mass incarceration, which shaped the current correctional demographics (Ramaswamy & Freudenberg, 2012). Lobbyists gridlock legislation that would decrease prison populations by spending millions of dollars on behalf of private prisons and correctional officers' unions who profit from mass incarceration and building additional facilities (Schneider, 2018).

Over the past 50 years, racial minority populations have been overrepresented in the criminal justice system in the U.S. (Boen, 2020). In the 1980s, the U.S. began creating policies to address crime and public health issues such as mental illness, drug addiction, and homelessness-related crimes, creating mass incarceration. As a result, Black and Latinx members are more likely to face arrest, detainment, and receive longer sentences than White individuals, constructing social disruptions for communities of color contributing to an unprecedented number of children who are currently or have experienced parental incarceration disrupting the lives of individuals and family systems.

Racially minoritized individuals are disproportionately impacted by incarceration which coincides with obstacles

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they face inside as well as outside of prison such as family stress, family separation, medical issues, mental health issues, housing instability, and difficulty securing employment (Turney & Goodsell, 2018). Moreover, many individuals with a prison record have difficulty acquiring higher education and finding conventional employment, further widening racial disparities across social class, socioeconomic status, and health outcomes. These prevailing conditions, and the violation of human rights fraught in carceral settings, are risk factors for acquiring mental health concerns (World Health Organization, 2005). This paper will address the impacts of racially disproportionate incarceration on family, education, physical and mental health outcomes, housing concerns, and economic constraints.

### **Family Impacts**

Minority families are heavily impacted by the effects of incarceration, due to fathers being imprisoned at disproportionate rates, compared to their white counterparts (Boen, 2020; Turney & Goodsell, 2018). In the book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, former President Barack Obama's Father's Day speech from 2008 was discussed (Alexander, 2010). Former president Obama spoke about the lack of presence of Black fathers in the home, and urged those father to improve as parents. Alexander (2010) clarified that the speech topic is not a new one, and noted that many others have spoke on it. Further, she challenged that not a single person had asked, where are these missing fathers? Missing fathers and the vast amount of incarcerated men share a connection. There is a positive correlation between longer sentences and the rate of children being raised without their parents in the home (Chesa, 2011).

### **Educational Disparities**

African American adolescents experience disproportionate levels of discrimination, both at school and the community, as displayed through punishment (i.e. school suspensions, harsher criminal sentences, and police brutality) (Kohli et al., 2017). In fact, Black adolescents are almost three times as likely to experience multiple arrests, compared to their White counterparts (Kakade et al., 2012). During incarceration, these adolescents lose out on educational opportunities, and may develop a negative sense of self (Kakade et al., 2012). Black population continues to receive dissimilar quality of education and are left with a higher proportion of uneducated individuals. With one in one hundred American adults currently in the prison system, one in nine Black men are in jail, and over one third of young, Black male high school dropouts are imprisoned on any selected day (Ewert et al., 2014). In fact, between 1980 to 2010, White men experienced a decrease in high school dropout rates from 11.2% to 6.4%, whereas Black men experienced a decrease from 24.8% to 14.4% (Ewert et al., 2014). Despite educational expansion efforts, a noticeable gap between Black and White high school dropout rates still remains.

### **Healthcare Inequalities**

Health care settings exasperate racial disparities, as discrimination still exists towards racially minoritized patients, regardless of socioeconomic status (Colen et al., 2018). These disparities in community resources significantly impact the trajectory of ethnically and racially minoritized youth. Similar to Ewert's identification of how

Black individuals are harmed by systemic disadvantages within the educational and prison institutions, Collins and colleagues (2014) explore how those who are Black and uneducated are afflicted in ways beyond incarceration. For instance, Black people more likely to be incarcerated and hospitalized for avoidable circumstances, and less likely to be medically insured (Collins et al., 2014). It is clear that the lack of adequate education and access resources, post incarceration, are responsible for the immobilization and crumbling socioeconomic conditions of Black communities, as those with a criminal record are limited access to public benefits, which can include (Assari et al., 2017).

### *Mental Health*

Approximately, 18.6 percent of African American adults struggle with mental health concerns (Hollie & Coolhart, 2020). With about one third of African Americans expected to be incarcerated at some point in their life, it is important to note how that stigma can impact self-esteem and mental health (Assari et al., 2017). In fact, Schmidt and colleagues (2014) found that increased racial discrimination negatively correlated with psychological well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Additionally, suicidal ideation can be compounded by experiences of discrimination and stigma towards gender identity and racial make-up (Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Testa, et al., 2017). When African American individuals anticipate the discrimination, they are more likely to develop psychiatric disorders, such as major depressive disorder (Assari et al., 2017). Thus, it is important to address the increased mental health concerns of Black individuals who experience incarceration.

### *Substance Use*

The development of a substance use disorder can be influenced by various factors such as, self-esteem, discriminatory policies, family conflicts, racism, peer influences, and communities comprised of low socioeconomic status and limited access to recourses (Mukku et al., 2012). These influences often negative impact minority groups, specifically African Americans, at a disproportionate rate. Approximately, 50 percent of African Americans returning to their community's post-incarceration, will be re-incarcerated on drug-related charges due to selling drugs, neighborhood disorder, public alcohol consumption, or crime induced by consumption of a substance (Mukku et al., 2012).

Kogan and colleagues (2017) studied the impact of marijuana on Black communities of different economic positions. Marijuana use rates usually peak from the age of 18 to 25, but its impact is far more destructive in disadvantaged areas compared to the opulent counterparts (Kogan et al., 2017). Increased marijuana uses in challenged communities led to in increased amount of social disengagement from the average individual, further worsening the conditions of the area (Kogan et al., 2017). Ewert and colleagues (2014) highlights this disengagement through her detail on increased high school dropout and incarceration rates amongst Black individuals, linking the effects of financial immobility and criminal behavior as responsible for the worsening conditions of poorer communities. If one has a much higher likelihood to commit a criminal act in these less fortunate communities compared to others, substance abuse will only multiply these damages and deepen the economic and cultural hole that desperate individuals already struggle to escape.

### **Housing**

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines enforce a one-strike policy that keeps families separated because ex-convicts are banned from visiting or residing in public housing units (Schneider, 2018 & Walter et al., 2017). HUD acknowledges racial disparities that violate the Fair Housing Act, and persons may not qualify for HUD housing based on petty offenses such as littering, curfew violation, or jaywalking (Schneider, 2018). Preceding employment, the most considerable influence on recidivism is acquiring stable housing (Walter et al., 2017). Upon release from prison, if the person cannot secure housing, they are seven times more likely to reoffend (Schneider, 2018). Also, suppose a parent is unable to show proof of residence. They may not regain custody of their children from child welfare services, demonstrating the importance of finding employment and housing following release from incarceration (Ramaswamy & Freudenberg, 2012). Racially minoritized individuals face higher rates of housing disparities due to the disproportionate incarceration rates of marginalized groups, which adds stress to low-income communities (Schneider, 2018; Walter et al., 2017). Therefore, addressing the racially unequal opportunities for housing, can help mitigate negative experiences, post-incarceration.

### **Economic**

With 1 in 3 young Black men expected to be locked away in a prison system that only stabilizes bad behavior and fails to incentivize a better and fulfilling alternative, many Black men are left penniless, unhealthy, and with a criminal record from their toxic and inescapable environments. Thus, Blacks are cornered by the pressures socioculturally and financially imposed upon them.

Daniel Aaronson (2008), an advisor in the economic research department at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, looks at erratic trends in economic mobility by studying the relationship between the income of men and the income of previous parents, then measures the level of intergenerational growth from 1940 to now. Upon discovering that there was a major dip in economic mobility in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in lower-income communities, those eligible for GI Bill benefits were able to attain greater educational opportunities and ultimately, societal advancement. (Aaronson, 2008). Noting the gap in education is pertinent in understanding that economic mobility varies entirely on the given sociocultural and economic conditions of the person. Aaronson (2008) concludes children's productivity is impacted by external factors such as educational opportunities and peers, starting at birth.

Expansion efforts in the educational and healthcare scenes and attempts for institutions to be far more inclusive and understanding of each background, were a necessary step in the right direction for complete financial and sociocultural equality, but far more work is to be done. With prejudices still being imposed on Blacks by the thousands, it is obvious that institutionalized racism, although not as refined and blatant as previously seen, is still a very pertinent issue that afflicts Black people's financial and sociocultural capabilities, prohibiting their prosperity.

### **DISCUSSION**

The aforementioned areas of systemic racism, highly impacts family, education, physical and mental health

outcomes, housing concerns, and economic turmoil for African Americans that experience incarceration. Ewert and colleague's (2014) finding of the US imprisonment rate growing at an annual pace of 4.7 percent between the years 1975 and 2009, speaks to how common it is for an institution to prioritize an agenda or quota rather than national improvement on an individualized scale. Each form of systemic injustice, whether it be found in education, healthcare, or drug use patterns, is just as pertinent in the year 2020.

Despite the unconcealed discrepancies in education, healthcare, and prison experience between minority groups, especially including Black individuals, and White people, the sociocultural and economic mobility is extremely overestimated by those who do not believe in the concept of modern-day institutionalized racism. In fact, many individuals argue that the American Dream, being that opportunity is available to each no matter the background or mistakes made, is still very real and allows for full economic mobility across the board. However, research has documented that this is simply not true. Far more barriers are presented to minority groups than White groups, leaving minority populations financially or socially restricted, while simultaneously being overlooked (Colen et al., 2018; James, 2010; Ramaswamy & Freudenberg, 2012).

In conclusion, the ongoing debate on institutionalized racism goes far deeper than increased levels of empathy on the left and intense ignorance from the right. Gaps in educational attainment also leads to far more incompetency, and desperation continues to leave many Black individuals drowning in socioeconomic and financial pressures. Ultimately, despite those who deny institutionalized racism and conveniently manipulate the statistics to strengthen their parochial beliefs, there is much research on the disadvantages experienced by Black Americans, compared to the White individuals. In turn, these researchers apply their findings to how they evaluate current trends in economic and sociocultural mobility, modern institutionalized inclusivity efforts, and legislature. Education, healthcare, and legal rehabilitation are among many factors that impede on the capabilities of Black individuals and leave them at a far more deprived position than Whites.

### **Clinical Implications**

It is imperative that therapists integrate cultural awareness and cultural competence when counseling diverse populations of people in order to have a dynamic approach to a specific population's needs. Tadros et al. (2019) argued the importance of using cultural humility and culturally competent approaches in therapy with incarcerated individuals. Racially minoritized individuals have been shown in past research to experience microaggressions from therapists creating low satisfaction and a lack of trust with their counselor (Meyer & Zane, 2013; Tadros & Owens 2021, Tadros, Owens, et al., 2022; Tor et al., 2021). These negative experiences with counseling can have lasting effects on individuals such as feeling hopeless, depressed, and dismay of the counseling process (Houshmand et al., 2017; Tadros, Schleiden, et al., 2021). It is important that counselors understand the impacts of race-related psychological stress and to make sure their priority to the client is to do no harm.

One way to mitigate this is for clinicians to attend workshops addressing issues around ethnicity and racism. Topics of race and ethnicity may lead to feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame, which can cause clinicians to avoid issues with clients from different cultures. The feelings of shame

and guilt may arise due to a clinician's awareness of their social privileges (Naz et al., 2019). However, counselors need to address whatever negative feelings develop surrounding race, to grow and develop as culturally humble clinicians. Therapists can work to better understand the culture of an individual, the impact it has on their lives, and use these tools in a collaborative effort between the individual and the therapist (Marbley et al., 2011; Tadros, 2021).

### Future Directions

For the past 40 years, communities of color have felt the impacts of mass incarceration, which are so out of hand that it would take 100 years for incarceration rates to return to where they were in 1980 (Schneider, 2018). With historically high incarceration rates in the U.S., it is vital to consider how incarceration impacts incarcerated individuals' family and social structures. Part of deterring the racial inequalities experienced by African American populations in the U.S. is to confront our history and current policies that reinforce systemic barriers to minority populations. Finding ways to educate and advocate for more equitable policies, can ultimately help mitigate incarceration rates of Black individuals, and eliminate disenfranchisements that limit social mobility.

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