

The Racial Caste System of America

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Abstract

The United States of America asserts that it stands for liberty and justice for all. Most Americans are happy to believe in this mantra. After all, African Americans have made a lot of progress since the time of slavery such as gaining the right to vote and bringing the Jim Crow Laws to an end. However, ever since the War on Drugs was declared, racial minorities, especially African Americans, have been targeted by the criminal justice system. They are incarcerated due to drug offenses and are often labeled felons for life. This strips them of their rights and they can legally be discriminated against. This research paper explores the question of whether or not there really is racial justice and equality in America. Various articles and books are analyzed in order to determine if African Americans are, in fact, being discriminated against and to what extent.

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Introduction

*I swear to the Lord
I still can't see
Why Democracy means
Everybody but me.*

*Langston Hughes,
"The Black Man Speaks"
1943*

Imagine being asked to close your eyes and envision a typical drug dealer. What would you see? Most people see a black man dressed in dark clothes because that is what is considered a "typical drug dealer." This type of thinking is actually quite racist and is not at all what is expected from a nation that promotes equality and justice for all.

The United States of America is considered by many to be in an age of "colorblindness," where equal justice for all has finally been achieved and where racial discrimination is no longer an issue. African Americans gained the right to vote after the 15th Amendment was passed and The Jim Crow Laws that severely limited African American's rights were abolished in 1964. The United States even elected its first black president, Barack Obama, back in 2008. These supposed advances in racial equality have led most Americans to believe that African Americans have the same rights as everyone else and that they are treated just as fairly. However, all of these changes in racial equality have merely been symbolic and are just a façade to cover up the discrimination that is actually happening. What Americans do not know is that many African Americans are being discriminated against by being labeled as felons.

America no longer uses race as a way to justify racial discrimination, but instead uses the criminal justice system. Once convicted as a felon, African Americans are subject to all the old

forms of discrimination that were supposedly left behind when the Jim Crow Laws were abolished. They can face discrimination in housing and employment and are denied food stamps, educational opportunities, the right to vote, and are even excluded from jury service (Alexander, 2010). By restricting black's rights, those in power are able to not only keep their power but also prevent blacks from taking over a predominantly white society. This practice of using the criminal justice system to discriminate against African Americans is essentially a new and improved version of the Jim Crow Laws, except that it refrains from being explicitly racist. President Nixon described it as a way to "target black people but devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to" (Onesto, 2011). It has created a convoluted and corrupt caste system that African Americans cannot escape from. On the surface, it would appear that the United States is quite close to racial equality and justice but in reality, we are far from it.

The War on Drugs is currently being used as an excuse to incarcerate mass numbers of African Americans and other racial groups. They are stripped of their rights, which ultimately prevents them from rising up into positions of power. Of course, this is exactly what those in power want.

The War on Drugs was declared by Ronald Reagan in 1982. The media immediately began to pump out images of the stereotypical black drug dealer who sold crack to those who lived in the ghetto. Since the declaration of the drug war, the prison population has risen from around 300,000 to over 2 million, with the majority of the population being racial minorities with drug convictions. In fact, the United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, with about 750 people in prison for every 100,000 (Alexander, 2010). This clearly shows the connection between the War on Drugs and the increased prison population in America. Most of these drug charges are nonviolent and a felony seems to be a rather harsh punishment for such a

small crime. However, the point is that if African Americans are charged with a felony, they no longer have equal rights and are in the same position they were in during the time of slavery and during the height of Jim Crow.

Naturally, drugs are used by every race, but African Americans make up 80 to 90 percent of drug offenders who are sent to prison and the punishments for being caught with illegal drugs appears to vary greatly based on race and ethnicity. One study, for example, published in 2000 by the National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that white students use cocaine at seven times the rate of black students, use crack cocaine at eight times the rate of black students, and use heroin at seven times the rate of black students. That same survey revealed that nearly identical percentages of white and black high school seniors use marijuana. However, African Americans are often admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of whites (Alexander, 2010). Logically, one would expect that if whites were more likely to be involved in drug crime than blacks, more white men and women would be in prison. Instead, African Americans are receiving much harsher punishments for drug crimes than whites. This clearly demonstrates racial discrimination because African Americans are being put in prison for possessing and dealing drugs, while white people who are caught doing the same are able to get off with minor consequences such as parole or probation; a mere slap on the wrist compared to prison.

Those who are getting incarcerated are not violent criminals. In fact, they are generally incarcerated for non-violent drug crimes that other nations would view as hardly prison worthy. Yet, illegal drug use is the most common offense that African Americans and other races are doing time for (Street, 2010). The United States is wasting its money and resources in catching and housing all of these non-violent offenders. Meanwhile, those who are actually committing

worse and more violent crimes such as murder, grand theft, rape, and violent assault, are being put second to drug crimes. To add insult to injury, prison sentences for drug crimes are often even longer than the sentences of those who commit violent crimes (Alexander, 2010). The criminal justice system is supposed to protect the American people and uphold justice, but in this case it is merely promoting racial discrimination and putting non-violent people in prison while diverting resources away from more serious crimes.

Many people believe that African Americans must obviously be doing something wrong if so many of them are being incarcerated. If they do not want to go to prison, then they should stop taking and dealing drugs. Perhaps black culture is to blame? Black culture often glorifies drugs, violence, misogyny, and disrespect for authority through rap. African Americans, especially young African Americans, feel as if they do not need to be educated and are exempt from normal social behavior. They look up to well known, famous rappers who often rap about money, drugs, violence, and women. Blacks appear to be undermining their own progress and even seem to settle into their own racist stereotype (McWhorter, 2003). However, what McWhorter fails to realize that this behavior is the product of having been repressed and discriminated against since the time of slavery. African Americans have decided to act how they are being treated, like criminals. Their dislike for authority comes from how they have been treated throughout history and it is no surprise that they feel this way. If blacks were treated with respect and without discrimination, they would most likely move away from promoting drugs, violence, and disrespect for authority because they would not have to. However, if the United States continues to use the War on Drugs to incarcerate African Americans, they will continue to act how they are being treated.

African Americans do not always have to be doing something “wrong” to be targeted. They are often racially profiled because of the common black drug dealer stereotype that has been forced upon them by the media. Trayvon Martin, a young black teenager, was murdered by a 28 year old white man named George Zimmerman. Zimmerman claimed that Martin was suspicious simply because he had a hoodie up over his head. This has caused an uproar, with one side claiming the murder was a hate crime and the other side believing Zimmerman’s story that he was attacked by Martin and acted in self-defense (Buchanan, 2012). Buchanan stated: “Is this our idea of justice? No. But if the purpose here is to turn this into a national black-white face-off, instead of a mutual search for truth and justice, it is succeeding marvelously well.” Instead of trying to find a solution to the problem, the media is just pitting blacks and whites against each other. As long as they are fighting amongst themselves, they will continue to be ignorant to the real problem of legal racial discrimination that is promoted by the government.

With so many people being incarcerated, many prisons have reached their maximum capacity and are extremely overcrowded with racial minorities. Inhumane prison conditions have become more and more common due to the increase of inmates. In May of 2011, the Supreme Court ruled that prison conditions in California violate the Eighth Amendment’s ban of cruel and unusual punishment. Prisoners face brutalities such as rape, beatings from guards, solitary confinement, and horrific living conditions. Prisoners who are mentally ill and addicted to drugs are not provided with access to necessary care and are often literally left to die (Onesto, 2011). This kind of environment does not allow for inmates to recover from their drug addictions and might only succeed in making it worse. As soon as they get out of prison, they are likely to continue with their drug use and are even more likely to be caught again.

The problem here is that instead of rehabilitating those who are addicted to drugs, the government simply locks them away. If prisoners were rehabilitated they would be more likely to stay away from drugs and be able to live clean, crime free lives. In fact, the cost of rehab is only about 25% of the cost of keeping an inmate in prison. Although, some people argue that they do not want their tax dollars to go to helping and supporting drug addicts. Why should they when it is the drug addict's fault in the first place? However, the truth is that billions of taxes are spent every year on the War on Drugs (MacTaggart, 2008). The cost of supporting the drug war is much more than the cost of rehabilitating drug addicts, but it is no accident that the system has been set up this way. If African Americans and other racial minorities were to be rehabilitated, their rights would not be able to be legally restricted because they would not be able to be labeled as felons. Those who maintain power in the government are more concerned about keeping that power than they are about spending tax dollars wisely and having a country of healthy and happy citizens.

Being incarcerated and put in overcrowded prisons are not the only thing African Americans need to worry about. Once they are able to get out of prison, their felony record forces them into a second class status, making it almost impossible for them to get a job. In 1970, about 70 percent of African Americans who lived in major cities had blue-collar jobs, but in 1987, a few years after the War on Drug began, the employment of blacks dropped to a mere 28 percent (Alexander, 2010). After receiving a felony, racial discrimination follows African Americans for the rest of their lives. It makes it nearly impossible for them to support themselves, let alone raise a family. They are legally discriminated against and the felony can never be taken back.

Conclusion

African Americans cannot expect racial equality and justice in America. The criminal justice system has been specifically designed to discriminate against blacks and other racial minorities. Blacks are unfairly targeted in order to prevent them from gaining positions of power simply because those already in power do not want them to.

If no action is taken to stop discrimination, African Americans will continue to be devastated by the drug war and be deprived of their rights. The root of the problem here is the fact that not enough people are educated about this issue, including whites. White people are so content to believe that the United States is righteous and does not discriminate but that is only because it has been pounded into their heads by the media. The media leads Americans to believe that African Americans are actually being brought to justice when they are put in jail for drugs. Of course, this makes no sense because drug addiction is serious and should be treated with rehabilitation, not prison time.

The system has successfully divided blacks and whites and encourages them to engage in petty squabbles that prevent them from uniting and overcoming the problem of discrimination. If it remains like this and the people do not come together and address the issues of the current system, then the discrimination will never stop. As long as the people are divided, those who have the power to change the system will go blissfully ignored while the people fight amongst themselves. If the people do not unite to stop this racial discrimination, America will continue to incarcerate mass numbers of African Americans.

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