

“Institutionalized Racism in America”

By Carlos Nolasco

Since the origin of the country, the United States of America has rarely ever been united. From the civil war to the civil rights movement to Vietnam, there has always been something that divided Americans. Yet the constant factor in all divisions was discrimination. And due to that, America has poisoned its infrastructure with racist ideals and discriminatory views. This is a topic that should be seen as holding major significance within the country. There have been many attempts to bring light to this and focus on bettering how the country operates on a social scale, yet when something changes, if it does in fact change, it is only temporary. The institutions of law, education, health, etc, are all built on discrimination. The same institutions that were built with the intention of helping people are the same institutions that are ruining people. And more light needs to be shed on those topics so they can properly be combatted and reformed.

When looking at how the US has treated racism and how the country has endured it, there is nowhere better to look than the south. The southern part of the US has long been seen as a region where very conservative views are held and where racism has a very strong history. In recent times, however, the state of Mississippi has been adding to the history of racism with actions taken by its governor. In a time where most everyone should be able to live their lives without ever having to be reminded of the tragedies that occurred during the age of slavery and the confederacy. However, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves seemingly embraced that past. In an article titled “Mississippi A Poem, In Days, ” author Kiese Makeba Layman writes about an event in which Governor Tate, who was at that time in college, represented and embraced a

fraternity with racist values and actions. Layman wrote, “I have never written about the heartbreak of seeing the future governor of Mississippi in that group of white boys, proudly representing the Kappa Alpha fraternity and its confederate commitment to black suffering” (127). Allowing actions such as what Tate exhibited is unacceptable; however, allowing someone like that to become a Governor shows how little the country has progressed in terms of dealing with racism and how ingrained into society and its institutions that racism truly is.

Furthermore, when looking into events like the trial of Michael McMillian, which is a heavy focus in Bryan Stevenson’s book *Just Mercy*, the lack of equality is shown to the fullest extent. The trial of Michael McMillian was centered around the accusation that he murdered Ronda Morrison. It lasted for two days and he was given a death sentence. In an article written by Gemma Peplow of SkyNews states that “He was found guilty - based on the false testimony of a criminal, and despite accounts from several black witnesses who could vouch for his whereabouts at the time of the murder - and sentenced to death by electrocution.” No viable evidence, nor any strong testimonies, and he was still sentenced to death. If McMillian was a white man on trial, in a justice system that is structured to discipline those of color, the punishment would not have been so severe. Taking into account that this happened in Mississippi in 1988, and it’s even more likely that a white man would’ve been seen as innocent until proven guilty during that time. Looking back again at Stevenson’s *Just Mercy*, he includes words on how interracial relations were viewed, which is what McMillian was in. He wrote, “Fears of interracial sex and marriage have deep roots in the United States... In the aftermath of slavery, the creation of a system of racial hierarchy and segregation was largely designed to prevent intimate relationships like Walter [McMillian] and [his white girl friend] Karen’s relationships – that were, in fact, legally prohibited by ‘anti-miscegenation statutes’”(Stevenson

27). Michael McMillian was the target of racial prejudice that should no longer hold a place in our country. Yet, it does. No matter the crime committed, if there is one, a person of color will always be at a disadvantage due to the way the infrastructure of the country is.

The justice system is only one of the institutions in which shaped by racism. There are in fact many, many more in which racism is an unofficial founding value, and the education system is one of them. For years, the minority communities, especially the black community, have been handed the short end of the stick in education, whether that be as employees within the world of education or as students. In an article by *The Seattle Times* titled “To Understand Structural Racism, Look to our Schools,” journalist Hannah Furfaro goes on about the hurdles that are faced to achieve success in school. From lack of representation to lack of belief in them, too many barriers block the path of success for African Americans in education, and it is ingrained into how schools function. Furfaro elaborates on this concept within her article. She writes:

Discrimination and racial bias against Black students begins as early as preschool.

Several studies bear this out, including one from last year, in which researchers reported that teachers asked to rate students’ academic abilities scored Black children far below white peers with identical scores. Such implicit bias can have serious negative consequences: Teachers tasked with recommending students for gifted and talented programs, for example, might overlook Black students who would excel. (Furfaro)

Simply because of the color of their skin, a black student is more likely to not be recommended for programs that can help talented people succeed. That sentence should not have to be written. In theory, most people would most likely agree that good grades and willingness to learn will set a student up to do big things. However, that is not the case in the real world. A teacher providing recommendations to a white kid who is a lesser student over a black kid, who is a more talented

and gifted black student, is reason enough to fight for change and questions the authenticity of the entire education system.

Even with all that, there are more wrongdoings and discrimination to be found on the working side of education. The Furfuro article sheds light on this aspect as well. She writes that “within public school districts, recruitment and hiring practices tend to leave out Black educators or pay them less than their peers. Higher education has a long history of excluding Black people entirely. Racism and hate crimes persist on many college campuses” (Furfuro). The lack of Black educators is a worrisome topic. It lessens the desire for positions in education for young black students and it changes the entire atmosphere of the education world. In a study run in 2018, it was found that around 80% of public school teachers were white (Will), which is an absurd number. It is mind-boggling that school districts can get away with negligence towards the black community, but when looking at the justice system that African Americans would have to go through if they chose to combat it, it makes sense why they don't. The world of education is inherently white-washed, and the only way to fix the issues that present themselves in that world is to reshape the entire structure of education.

To think that institutionalized racism is only prone to affect education and the justice system would be foolish. The healthcare system is littered with bigotry and is set up in a way that would negatively affect those of color. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), “racism is a system that categorizes people based on race, color, ethnicity, and culture to differentially allocate societal goods and resources in a way that unfairly disadvantages some, while without merit, rewards others.” That definition is the exact story of the healthcare system for people of color in America. Looking more into the AAFP and its

policies, the organization states just how this racism shows itself in the healthcare system. They state:

the impact of racism within the U.S. health care delivery system, which has historically engaged in the systematic segregation and discrimination of patients based on race and ethnicity, has effects which persist to this day. Hospitals and clinics, which were once designated for racial and ethnic minorities, continue to experience significant financial constraints and are often under-resourced and improperly staffed. (AAFP)

Due to those factors, there is an abundance of partialities within the realm of healthcare that have to do with access to quality healthcare. Whenever any institution is financially constrained, hardships are to be endured. Be that as it may, when that institution is minority healthcare, the hardships are ten times worse. The lack of quality in the healthcare received leads to a lack of trust in the system and leads to major health disparities between the white community and the minority community. Furthering this idea is an article titled “Advocating for Black Lives—A Call to Dermatologists to Dismantle Institutionalized Racism and Address Racial Health Inequities.” The article is written by trainees in dermatology, Robert J. Smith and Brittney U. Oliver, and goes over ways that the medical world can attack these racist ideologies and concepts. They claim that methods such as “rectifying the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within medicine and dermatology, ... advocating for black patients, and counteracting implicit biases, which would be worthwhile ways to tackle the issues that systematic and institutionalized racism bring forth.

Staying within the healthcare field, yet focusing on more social aspects, there are more injustices. Even with policies that are brought on to help people of color, those policies are modeled in a way that does not help them at all. The National Institute for Children’s Health

Quality (NICHQ) provides insight on issues like these. They attack the validity of acts such as the 1935 Social Security Act, which included the welfare benefits of unemployment and social security we enjoy today. They claim that “in theory, the welfare system would help all children and families in need; instead, it predominantly helped *white* children and families because Black people, in large part, could not participate in its benefits” (NICHQ). Due to this, a form of distrust in the healthcare industry arose. Numerous times, false hope and help have been given towards the African American community, causing an inherent mistrust of these institutions driven by years of not being given the same quality of care and not knowing whether it would be worth the risk going to a hospital or clinic.

Education. Law. Healthcare: Those 3 institutions play a huge role in having a stable and fair life. Yet, as a colored person in America, you are already at a disadvantage the moment you are born. America, as a whole, needs to look within and find the means to combat that. Implementing better representation, creating anti-racist curriculum/training, and even creating policies that intend, and rightfully accomplish, to prohibit racist action/policy to be implemented in any institution within the country. Creating programs that help students of color build on their potential, instead of writing them off or treating them more harshly would be a big step towards fixing racial disparities in education. Opposing the racial institutions of the judiciary system can also be done. Not having an all-white jury when faced with a black defendant is one way, albeit a relatively small one, that would diminish the punishment and cruelty that African Americans especially and other people of color in America face. If these issues can be met with effective solutions, then, and only then, the United States of America can become the country it was envisioned to be.

Works Cited

- AAFP. "Institutional Racism in the Health Care System." *AAFP Home*,
www.aafp.org/about/policies/all/institutional-racism.html.
- Furfaro, Hannah. "To Understand Structural Racism, Look to Our Schools." *The Seattle Times*,
The Seattle Times Company, 14 July 2020, www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/to-understand-structural-racism-look-to-our-schools/.
- Laymon, Kiese Makeba, and Illustration by Diana Ejaita. "Mississippi: A Poem, in Days."
Vanity Fair, Sept. 2020, www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/covid-racism-collide-in-mississippi-poem.
- O'Dowd, Mary Frances. "Explainer: What Is Systemic Racism and Institutional Racism?" *The Conversation*, 23 June 2020, theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-systemic-racism-and-institutional-racism-131152.
- NICHQ. "The Impact of Institutional Racism on Maternal and Child Health." *NICHQ*, 15 Jan. 2021, www.nichq.org/insight/impact-institutional-racism-maternal-and-child-health.
- Peplow, Gemma. "Just Mercy: Sentenced to Death for a Murder He Didn't Commit - the True Story behind Gripping Drama." *Sky News*, 4 Oct. 2020, 5:41 UK,
news.sky.com/story/just-mercy-the-true-story-behind-powerful-death-row-drama-11913545.
- Robert J. Smith, MD, and MD Brittney U. Oliver. "A Call to Dermatologists to Dismantle Institutionalized Racism and Address Racial Health Inequities." *JAMA Dermatology*, JAMA Network, 1 Feb. 2021,
jamanetwork.com/journals/jamadermatology/fullarticle/2773122.

Rodems, Richard, and H. Luke Shaefer. “Left Out: Policy Diffusion and the Exclusion of Black Workers from Unemployment Insurance.” *Social Science History*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2016, pp. 385–404., doi:10.1017/ssh.2016.11.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy*. Spiegel and Grau, 2014.

Will, Madeline. “Still Mostly White and Female: New Federal Data on the Teaching Profession.” *Education Week*, Education Week, 19 Nov. 2020, www.edweek.org/leadership/still-mostly-white-and-female-new-federal-data-on-the-teaching-profession/2020/04.