

ALL Black Lives Matter.

In every circumstance. No matter what.



Systemic Racism in the United States *Comprehensive Report*

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Overview

Heartbreak. Outrage. Protests. Demands for change. This upset comes in the wake of severe incidents of police brutality, many of which were captured on camera. It is the culmination of decades of police violence and years of organizing and rallying around the mantra, *Black Lives Matter*. Yet, while awareness of police brutality and racism have surfaced in the public arena due to video footage and media coverage, the dehumanization of black lives is far from a new phenomenon.

Systemic racism is embedded into the very fabric of American society; no institution is left unscathed. In fact, our treatment of black lives exemplifies the adage, “the more things change, the more they remain the same.” Our country was built on the labor of African slaves, and the abolition of slavery merely changed the terminology of the systems oppressing of black lives. Systemic racism remains entrenched in our criminal justice system, communities, healthcare system, and schools, producing severe racial disparities across each sector.

In our criminal justice system, people of color are more likely to be incarcerated, sentenced to death, and killed by police. Our communities remain stubbornly segregated, preventing adequate access to grocery stores, parks, and healthcare. Black women are significantly more likely to abort their babies, which is largely a function of decades of eugenic policies and racial targeting. When mothers of color carry their pregnancies to term, they face disproportionately high rates of maternal and infant mortality. Across numerous other health metrics, including life expectancy, people of color fare worse than their white counterparts. Finally, our schools remain segregated, leading to massive funding disparities between mostly white and mostly nonwhite schools.

Some people contend that poverty, not racism, is the driving force of inequality across racial groups. While racism and poverty certainly overlap and are interconnected, poverty alone does *not* account for the racial discrimination and disproportionately negative outcomes that people of color experience in America. Even when socioeconomic status and other confounding variables are controlled for, racial disparities remain.

This paper provides a historical account of systemic racism, contextualizing contemporary racial disparities by diving into America’s dark past and illuminating the systems of oppression that are preventing black Americans from realizing the rights and quality of life they are afforded as human members of our society. By learning our history and developing deeper understandings of systemic racism, we will be better equipped to identify and address racism in our daily lives, serving as anti-racist allies in this nationwide quest for racial justice.

Important Terms

Disproportionate indicates that a racial group is overrepresented or underrepresented in a given measurement compared to its percentage of the total population.

Disparity is a large difference between two things. In the case of this report, “disparity/disparities” and “disparate outcomes” refer to inequitable outcomes on the basis of race.

Implicit Bias refers to how people have racial prejudices that are not conscious or overt, but are still acted upon unintentionally (Brownstein, 2019).

Individual Racism involves individuals’ personal presumptions on race that result from conscious and unconscious prejudice.

Systemic Racism is used to describe the organized rollout of policies and practices that are embedded in societal structures and institutions, which facilitate the promotion of some racial groups to the exclusion of others (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre, 2019).

White Privilege refers to the inherent advantages, or privileges, that white people possess simply by being white in a society that is racially unequal and unjust (Oxford Dictionary). Note that it does *not* undermine the life struggles white people can, and do, experience. Regardless of race, people can face many trials and tribulations throughout their lives. However, some struggles people face are *specifically* due to their race, and regardless of the obstacles white people endure, those due to *race* will not be among them...*that is white privilege.*

The U.S. Criminal Justice System

“By affording criminal suspects substantial constitutional rights in theory, the Supreme Court validates the results of the criminal justice system as fair. That formal fairness obscures the systemic concerns that ought to be raised by the fact that the prison population is overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately black” (Cole, 1999).

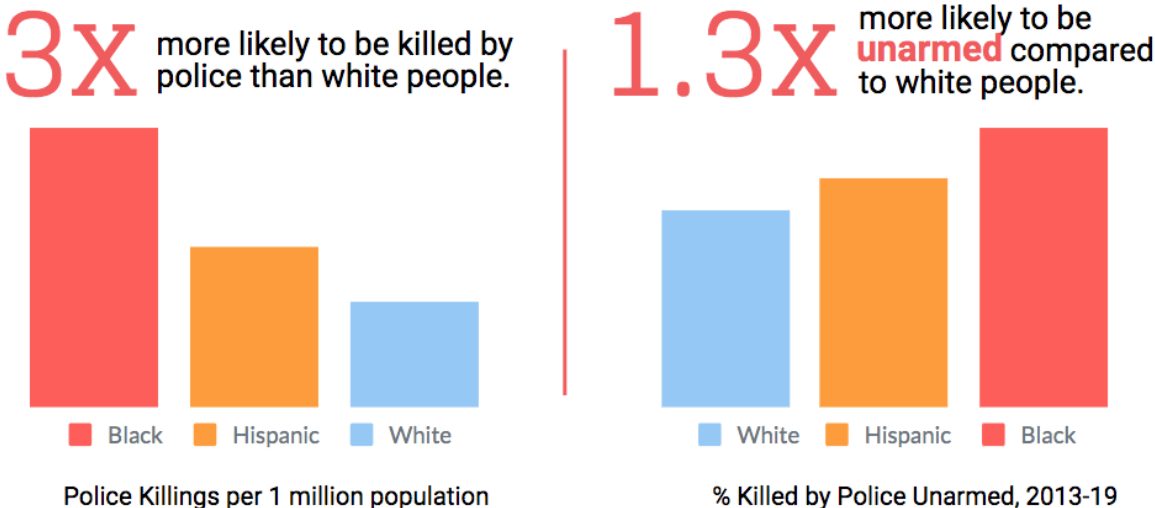
People of color have historically, and are currently, disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. Throughout history, the criminal justice system has taken on many forms, but all have served as a means of social control for people of color. Each time blacks were afforded rights, backlash from opponents sought new ways to restrict those rights. At its inception, the police were used to capture and return runaway slaves and control the masses of factory workers clamoring for labor rights. Following the abolition of slavery, jails and prisons served as the primary form of social control for black Americans and backlash to racial progress. Jails for the first time became overpopulated with blacks, and convicts were leased to white business owners in need of cheap labor. Blacks performed free, grueling labor in horrendous working conditions that rivaled slavery. Backlash to the passage of the 13th and 14th amendments led to the Jim Crow Era, which ushered in public spectacle lynchings and segregation that terrorized African Americans and stripped them of their newfound rights. Rather than protect and defend the black population, the police often participated, and even facilitated, the lynchings. When lynchings became disfavored in the media, governments turned to legalized lynchings in the form of capital punishment. Overwhelmingly, black defendants were, and still are, overrepresented among those that receive the death penalty, with the race of both the victim and the defendant contributing to whether the death penalty is pursued. White mobs were often successful in demanding government officials perform public executions, which amassed thousands of people, long after such executions were prohibited by law. Despite its lynching roots and blatant racial disparities, capital punishment remains legal in the United States and continues to target people of color, many of whom are still convicted and sentenced with all-white, or nearly all-white juries on the basis of circumstantial evidence.

Backlash to the Civil Rights Movement brought a new tactic of socially controlling and disenfranchising blacks. This time, the backlash to racial justice manifested under the guise of the War on Crime and the War on Drugs. Latent with racially discriminatory rhetoric that was once only prevalent in segregationist circles, calls for law and order soon infiltrated and dominated mainstream political rhetoric among Republicans and Democrats alike. The consequences of these politically-driven initiatives led to the entrapment of millions of people in the U.S. criminal justice system, more than any other country in the world. Overwhelmingly and disproportionately, those incarcerated were people of color. The rates of incarceration of people of color were incongruent to their rates of offenses and proportions of the nation’s population. Communities of color were

deliberately targeted and people of color faced harsher punishments than white offenders who committed identical offenses. Even upon release, formerly incarcerated individuals face social restrictions and disenfranchisement, preventing them from freely and fully participating in society.

The U.S. is still grappling with the ramifications of these policies today. These historical and political contexts lay the framework for the police brutality and desperate outcries from communities of color seen today, with blacks 3 times as likely to be killed by police than whites, and 1.3 times as likely to be unarmed when killed. Police brutality is not a new phenomenon, nor is it the sole contributor to the institutional racism infecting the criminal justice system. To effectively address these racial injustices, a massive overhaul and reformatting of the criminal justice system is needed, in which individuals, police, government officials, and policymakers alike work together toward establishing a society that upholds the value of all its citizens' lives - not only in theory, but also in practice.

Black people are most likely to be killed by police



These statistics are drawn from Mapping Police Violence (2020).

Wealth Generation

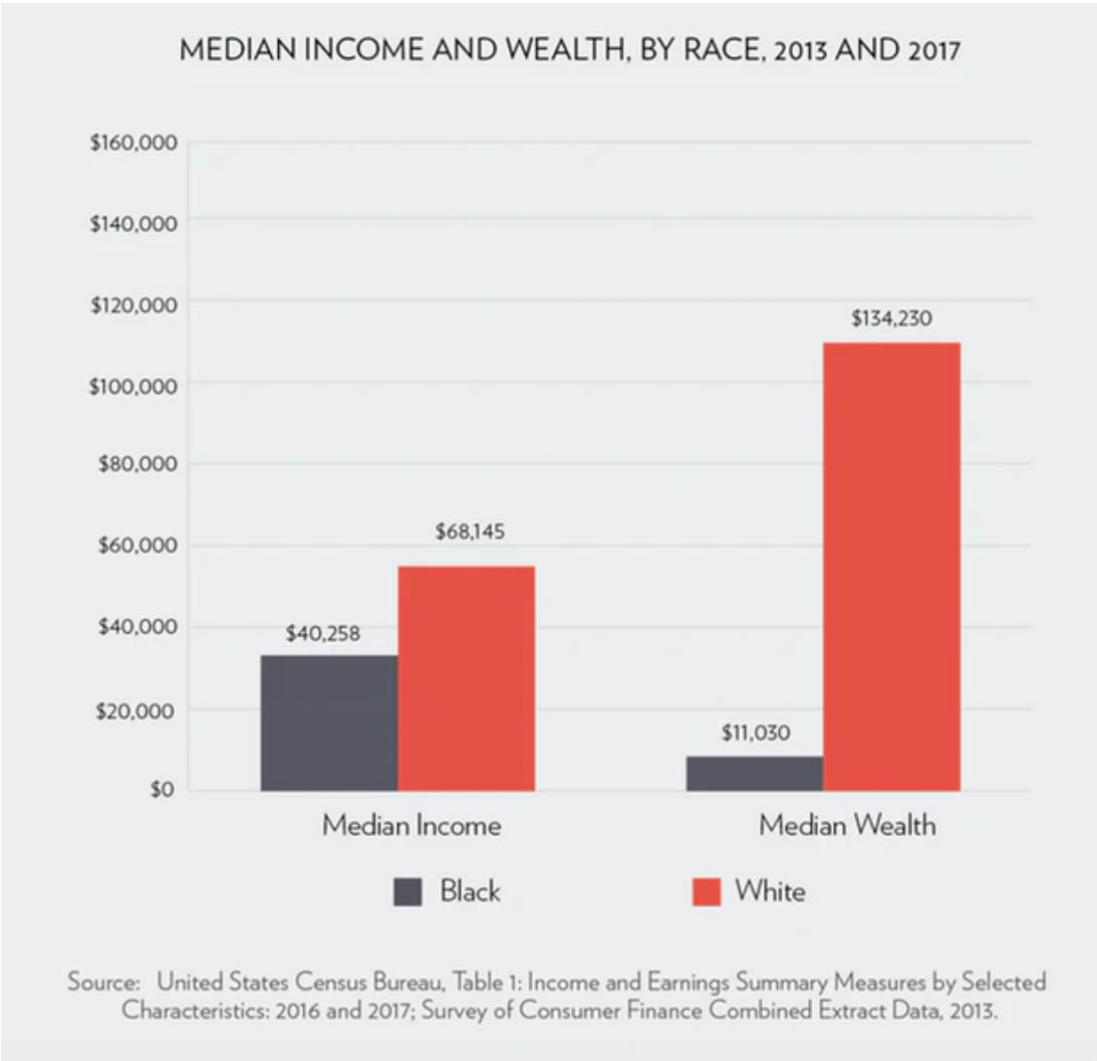
“It was never the case that a white asset-based middle class simply emerged. Rather, it was government policy, and to some extent literal government giveaways, that provided whites the finance, education, land and infrastructure to accumulate and pass down wealth” (Hamilton & Logan, 2019).

After the abolition of slavery, African Americans had to start from ground zero on their quest to accumulate wealth in America. Blacks were further riddled with hurdles strategically and systematically designed to prevent them from achieving wealth. The Black Codes, implemented shortly after the end of slavery, forced freedmen back into dependence on white farmers as sharecroppers, often to their former masters. After the 14th amendment ended the Black Codes, they were almost immediately replaced with Jim Crow policies that legally excluded blacks from mainstream social, political, and economic institutions and opportunities. When blacks did manage to foster some semblance of wealth, it was often destroyed or stolen by racially motivated and infuriated white mobs. Due to these policies and attacks, Southern blacks were only able to muster one tenth of the wealth of white landowners in the first 52 years after slavery.

Governmental policies continued to target black communities and prevent their accumulation of wealth throughout the 20th century. The federal government subsidized the accumulation of white Americans’ wealth, while overtly excluding people of color. Redlining practices deemed communities of color as hazardous, financial risks, so initiatives to ameliorate the economic hardships of the Great Depression, including the Home Owners Loan Act and the National Housing Act, overwhelmingly benefited white Americans while almost completely excluding blacks. Such policies contributed to intergenerational wealth accumulation for whites, whereas blacks were left in marginalized, segregated, communities facing high poverty rates that are still experienced today. White households today have 10 times more wealth than black households, and blacks are twice as likely to have their home loan applications rejected, data that can be largely credited to the racist housing and mortgage policies of the 20th century. Moreover, residential segregation continues to block upward mobility for blacks, even when education and socioeconomic status are controlled for. Even college educated, middle-class blacks are less likely to own homes and more likely to live in impoverished communities relative to whites who didn’t graduate high school and are low-income. Blacks continue to experience salary inequities, and neighborhoods are more segregated today than they were decades ago.

Major policy intervention is needed to repair these injustices and afford people of color opportunities to accumulate generational wealth. Policymakers need to revisit the Fair Housing Act, providing mortgage assistance to those previously barred from participation due to racist

redlining policies, in addition to other policies that promote and enforce integration of residential communities.



A visual display of income and wealth disparities across race in 2013 and 2017 (Quick & Kahlenberg, 2019).

Eugenics, Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion

“Birth Control...is really the greatest and most truly eugenic method, and its adoption as part of the program of Eugenics would immediately give concrete and realistic power to that science...Birth Control has been accepted by the most clear thinking and far seeing of the Eugenicists themselves as the most constructive and necessary of the means to racial health” (Sanger, 1922).

Women of color are over five times as likely to abort their pregnancies than other racial groups. However, simply making this statement is insufficient, as it fails to acknowledge abortion’s historical roots in the Eugenics Movement, as well as the underlying, systemic reasons women of color abort. The Eugenics Movement sought to rid the population of undesirable traits, thought to be carried by certain groups of people, through selective breeding. Eugenics promoted forced sterilizations of these groups of people, which included minorities, criminals, and people with disabilities. Margaret Sanger, who would one day found what is now Planned Parenthood, was a eugenicist herself. She advocated for the use of birth control as a way to advance the Eugenics agenda, calling for mandated sterilizations for those who resisted Eugenicists’ “help” voluntarily. Sanger’s positions were not anomalies for the time. However, her legacy of Planned Parenthood has left a lasting impact on American society, particularly on women of color. These two tools of eugenics, birth control and sterilizations, became woven into the fabric of “family planning” policies that are now branded, and widely accepted, as feminist and supportive of the black community.

A glimpse into this past, however, reveals the true nature of these policies and the devastating impact they have had on women of color. Mandated sterilization programs, riddled with eugenic rhetoric, were strategically tied to population health, leading to its dominance in American society for most of the 20th century. Hundreds of thousands of women, who were disproportionately poor and women of color, were misinformed, coerced, and forced into sterilizations that were funded by the federal government. Forced sterilizations only subsided when voluntary sterilizations became more popular and abortion was legalized.

Today, Planned Parenthood proudly touts of its patient population, which is disproportionately represented by black and low-income individuals. While it is doubtful Planned Parenthood’s current intentions perfectly mirror those of its eugenic past, the fact remains that it continues to have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. In fact, evidence of systemic racism within Planned Parenthood was released in June 2020, by employees from Planned Parenthood of Greater New York (PPGNY). The letter exposes PPGNY leadership, detailing numerous occasions in which they were made aware of the systemic racism thriving within their walls, from pay inequity to lack of upward mobility opportunities, yet refused to act or implement changes. According to the employees, Planned Parenthood’s incompetency went further than mere

complacency. PPGNY leadership also used a façade of diversity and racial justice politics to garner public support, all while manipulating and silencing their staff members of color. Given how poorly Planned Parenthood treats people of color within their organization, it is no surprise they continue to have a negative impact on communities of color at large.

Additionally, girls of color are disproportionately trafficked, and many victims are subjected to coerced abortions within the U.S. healthcare system, continuing to be exploited right under the noses of health professionals. Educational and training efforts need to be increased to equip healthcare providers with the knowledge and skills they need to identify and safely intercept victims of trafficking when they enter healthcare facilities.

55.2 percent of the respondents reported at least one abortion, while 29.9 percent reported multiple abortions. The interviewer noted that miscarriage may have been used as a euphemism for abortion in some cases, suggesting the numbers are even higher than was reported. The majority of these abortions were “at least partially forced upon them” (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014). One survivor recounted that “in most of [my six abortions] I was under serious pressure from my pimps to abort the babies” (Lederer & Wetzel, 2014).

A comprehensive approach is needed to address the underlying reasons women of color choose to abort, so women are empowered with **real** options. Funding for Planned Parenthood and programs that subsidize abortion should be reallocated to comprehensive women’s healthcare centers, efforts to disrupt human trafficking rings, affordable housing and childcare initiatives, family leave policies, and powerful non-discrimination legislation that thoroughly protects pregnant women from educational and occupational discrimination on the basis of pregnancy. No woman should feel as though she needs to “choose” abortion because she otherwise won’t be able to support her own needs and ambitions, or those of her family members.

The U.S. Healthcare System

“Doctors rated black patients as less intelligent, less educated, more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, more likely to fail to comply with medical advice, more likely to lack social support, and less likely to participate in cardiac rehabilitation than white patients, even after patients’ income, education, and personality characteristics were taken into account” (Institute of Medicine, 2002).

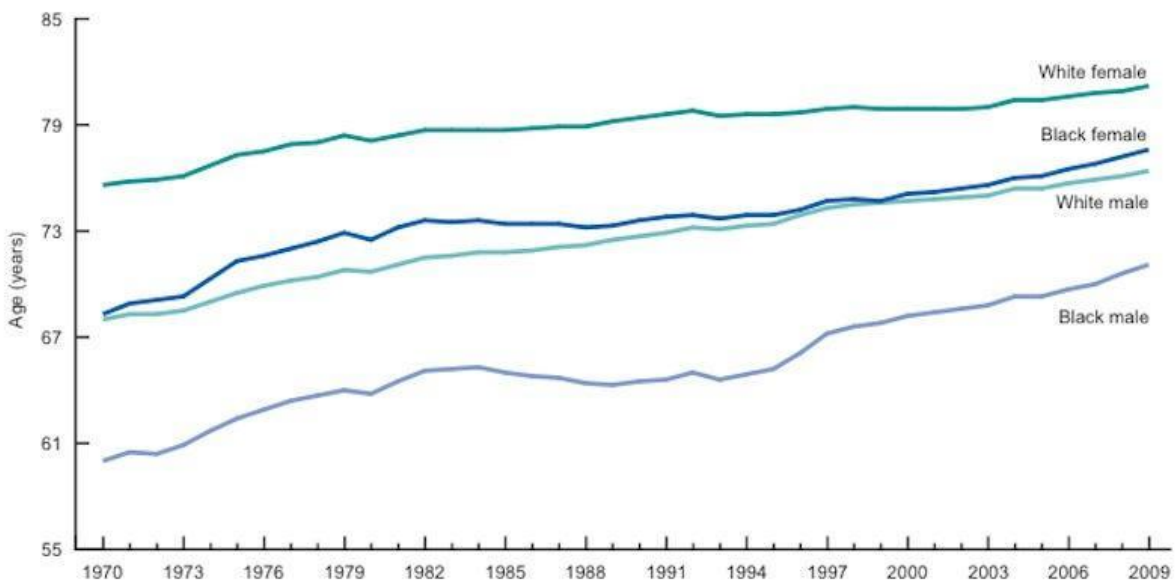
After considering the extent to which systemic racism has permeated the lives of people of color in the U.S. thus far, it is no surprise that racism is intertwined with the U.S. healthcare system as well. Lower quality healthcare is provided to black people, largely due to implicit biases about people of color that improperly inform providers’ healthcare decisions. This leads to inaccurate diagnoses, undesirable treatments, and a sense of mistrust among patients of color. This mistrust can lead to some patients refusing needed care, exacerbating negative health outcomes.

Racism in healthcare extends beyond the administration of care. Systematically experiencing racism elevates stress levels, leading to chronic, toxic stress that is immensely detrimental to health outcomes. Chronic stress contributes to the disproportionate rates at which black individuals experience hypertension, inflammation, anemia, gestational diabetes, and maternal and infant mortality rates. This stress is so severe that the black infant mortality rate increases with education level.

Today, black infants are more than twice as likely to die as opposed to white babies. This racial health gap is even greater than it was in 1850, fifteen years prior to the abolition of slavery. Likewise, black women are three to four times as likely to die from complications relating to their pregnancy than white women. These disparities persist even when controlling for education levels and socioeconomic status.

Residential segregation also contributes to disproportionately negative health outcomes for black Americans. Segregated, predominantly black communities often have limited access to healthcare, and many residents are uninsured or underinsured. Segregated communities are more likely to be located in “food deserts” with no nearby supermarkets stocked with healthy foods. On the other hand, there are plentiful supplies of fast food chains, which fuel unhealthy eating habits and negative health outcomes. Moreover, these neighborhoods tend to lack the infrastructure necessary to adequately support recreational activity in the community, such as sidewalks or parks. These factors contribute to the prevalence of obesity and other chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, and HIV/AIDS, as well as the overall racial disparity in life expectancy that persists to this day.

To address these flaws, educational and training initiatives within healthcare must explicitly call attention to unintended racial biases in the dispersion of medical care to people of color. Additionally, discretion among health officials, which fuels the discriminatory administration of care, must be minimized, and continued data collection is needed to track, monitor, and adjust efforts to equalize healthcare administration across racial groups. Moreover, healthcare officials must take a community health approach, actively working with government officials and community leaders to address other forms of systemic racism in the community that continue to generate disparate racial health outcomes.



Although life expectancy has been increasing for both whites and blacks since 1970, the racial gap in life expectancy persists (CDC/NCHS & National Vital Statistics Team via Friedman, 2014).

The U.S. Education System

“More than half of the nation’s schoolchildren are in racially concentrated school districts, where over 75 percent of students are either white or nonwhite” and the conflation between racial and economic segregation intensifies educational gaps between affluent and low-income students (Mervosh, 2019).

Educational equity is far from being achieved in the United States. Despite *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring segregation in schools unconstitutional, schools remain segregated, with rates of segregation actually increasing over the last several decades. Segregation in schools grows out of residential segregation and the contributions of local property taxes in school funding. Busing efforts to enforce the Supreme Court’s integration decision were vehemently opposed by whites who believed integration would negatively impact their children’s academic outcomes. Judicial courts succumbed to these pressures, and busing orders were soon lifted, once again allowing for segregation to pervade schools. Similar to residential gerrymandering, school district gerrymandering perpetuates segregation, concentrating low-income and nonwhite students in poorly funded, disadvantaged schools that lack the funding of their white, affluent counterparts.



*Advocates for states’ rights and segregated schools at a desegregation protest in 1960
(Department of Education via Licea & Edelman, 2018)*

There is a \$23 billion discrepancy in funding between white and nonwhite school districts, contributing to massive shortages in high quality resources and services in nonwhite schools. These disparities manifest in achievement gaps and disparate outcomes for students of color relative to white students. Racial disparities in educational outcomes emerge in early childhood and persist through students’ educational careers.

The presence of police and highly punitive, “zero tolerance” policies exacerbate these disparities as they disproportionately remove students of color from classrooms and subject them to excessive use of force and entanglement in the juvenile system. These involvements increase the odds students drop out of high school and become involved in the criminal justice system. Teacher bias further adds to students of color’s inequitable experience in the American education system. Teachers are overwhelmingly white and female, even when student populations are diverse or predominantly nonwhite. White teachers tend to have lower expectations of students of color, which is reflective in how teachers treat these students in the classroom. Students are aware of these stereotypes and low expectations, which often leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy where students buy in to these negative perceptions and abandon their educational aspirations, which only reinforce their teachers’ presumptions.

Residential segregation contextualizes these educational inequities. Thus, desegregation is the single most important step that can be taken to address systemic racism in the American education system. Integrated schools are associated with significantly higher academic outcomes for students of color, which may even be able to effectively ameliorate racial achievement gaps. There should also be an upheaval of local control over school financing to mitigate school wealth gaps and abolish the practice of district gerrymandering. Finally, school districts must invest in hiring more teachers of color, provide culturally relevant teaching materials, replace punitive discipline with restorative justice, and administer professional development aimed at helping teachers recognize and address their implicit biases in the classroom.

“The rise in school-based arrests, the quickest route from the classroom to the jailhouse, most directly exemplifies the criminalization of school children” (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d.).



Officer Ben Fields throws a high school girl’s desk back, picks her up, and drags her to the front of the classroom where she is arrested for refusing to leave her desk (Bowie, 2015; Blad, 2016).

Conclusion

Although extensive, this report does not exhaust the ways in which systemic racism permeates American society. Over the years, legal, social, political, and economic systems have gone to great lengths to guarantee control over people of color, excluding them from mainstream society and restricting the rights they were entitled to. In every sector of society, people of color experience disproportionately negative outcomes that are not indicative of their own shortcomings, but deliberate, expansive efforts seeking to preserve white supremacy.

To this day, racism is publicly sanctioned, as evidenced by the inherently racist policies and societal structures the U.S. government continues to uphold, which often lead to lethal outcomes. Hence, systemic racism is a violation of the consistent life ethic.

The fact that our government does not openly embrace racism and creates legislation that is racially neutral in theory is insufficient in purporting racism is not publicly sanctioned lethal violence. As what is “politically correct” to say changes over time, politicians twist and reframe their rhetoric to mirror cultural standards while preserving their true ideological goals. Thus, racially motivated legislation is often cloaked in racially neutral language, and subtly racist policies are strategically woven into the fabric of society creating massive racial disparities. Since in theory equal rights are afforded to people of color, it is often difficult to clearly pinpoint and prove racial discrimination, stagnating progress toward racial justice.

The vast majority of cases and examples of systemic racism examined in this report were promoted or supported by the government. Most others involved the government turning a blind eye to the blatantly racist and harmful practices that were occurring. Federal, state, and local governments must accept responsibility and make a commitment to collaborate with community leaders and policymakers to flush archaic policies latent with racism out of our society.

In order to cleanse our society of entrenched racism and liberate black communities, we must fully desegregate our schools and communities. Borne out of desire to preserve and promote white supremacy, segregation continues to be a driving force of racial disparities across all sectors of American society. Segregation limits the economic, social, health, and educational opportunities of black Americans, while streamlining efforts to marginalize, police, and surveil these populations.

Ultimately, “the ingenuity of this racist tool [segregation] is that its evil use creates its own justification—that is, once employed, it creates perspectives and data that seem to support its further use” (Quick & Kahlenberg, 2019).

The burden of segregation produces concentrated poverty and crime, which proponents of segregation exploit, blaming people of color for the disparities and proposing efforts to marginalize and police their communities further. Therefore, achieving total integration is absolutely essential in uprooting systemic racism and achieving racial justice.

Simultaneously, drastic measures must be taken to reallocate government funds. There should be major divestment in the police, with funds being redirected to healthcare, education, professional development, and restorative and rehabilitative justice.

Until these actions are taken, with progress being monitored through continued data collection and analysis, the United States will continue to have a racial class system in which people of color are, in practice, second-class citizens.

Moreover, we must take time to reflect on our own implicit racial biases, that, although fostered from our socialization in a systematically racist society, reinforce racial disparities. Without understanding white privilege and our own racialized experiences in American society, we will be unable to be true racial justice allies or change makers. However, by reflecting on our experiences and biases, learning from our black brothers and sisters, elevating their voices, and demanding meaningful change from our politicians and policymakers, we *can* be the change we wish to see in the world. We *can* be better, and we *must* be better.

All black lives matter. All the time. Everywhere. No matter what. Racial justice will not be realized until these truths are completely reflected throughout society. We must continue to fight until all human beings are deeply respected and valued.

To that end, it is about time we declare a new American political war:

The War on Systemic Racism.