

Oppression of African Americans is Not a “Liberal Invention”

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Over the last few years the killing of unarmed African Americans including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott and Freddie Gray by agents of the state have generated massive protests against a political system that [almost never](#) punishes police violence. Activist groups like Black Lives Matter have emerged as voices on the front lines from Ferguson to Baltimore. Their message is simple: American society and the political system it has created do not value black lives the same as white lives.

They draw powerful connections between the state-sanctioned use of force, a discriminatory criminal justice system, mass incarceration, and economic inequality for racial minorities. But their indictment of the system is predictably met with hostility by conservatives in denial that white supremacy exists, much less dominates American politics.

Right-wing authoritarians believe the real problem is liberals blowing a small number of sensationalist incidents out of proportion. They claim liberals take isolated cases of blacks being killed during police encounters and misconstrue them as discrimination, or liberals argue that unemployed or incarcerated blacks created their own fate through their personal choices.

Most conservatives cling defensively to the notion that the system is fair, and people who claim otherwise are guilty of selection bias. They see authorities as noble and worthy of respect. Any evidence to the contrary can be written off as a few cases of bad apples.

In reality, there is overwhelming empirical evidence that white supremacy plays a dominant role in American society. Mark Twain had a point when he said, “there’s three types of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.” Taken individually, you could cherry-pick any piece of data to make a point. But when you analyze the picture holistically, the result is an unequivocal pattern.

Multiple indicators – police shootings, incarceration rates, public health indicators, wealth indices and drug use rates – demonstrate that African Americans are disadvantaged in the United States. And not just disadvantaged narrowly. The numbers confirm what any reasonable person should be able to ascertain themselves through anecdotal evidence if they have a television and an internet connection. Numerous studies have found that blacks are killed by police at a highly disproportionate rate relative to their percentage of the population. A [Vox analysis](#) of FBI Data from 2012 determined black people represented 31% of police shooting victims, while representing just 13% of the population as a whole. That is to say, African Americans were killed 2.5 times more frequently than they would be if police killings occurred equally across racial lines. Whites accounted for 52% of victims shot dead

by police, while representing 63% of the entire population.

A [ProPublica analysis](#) found that statistics were even more stark for teenagers. Black teens were 21 times more likely to be killed than white teens from 2010-2012. The authors determined that more than 1 white teen would have to have been killed by police *per week* over that three-year period for both groups to have an equal likelihood.

A [Guardian analysis](#) of data accumulated for the first five months of 2015 was nearly identical to the Vox analysis. The Guardian found 29% of those killed by police were black, versus 50% who were white.

Additionally, the [Guardian](#) found that twice as many blacks as whites killed by the police were likely to be unarmed (32% to 15%). The paper quoted the executive director of human rights organization Amnesty International USA, Steven Hawkins, as calling the statistics “startling .. the disparity speaks to something that needs to be examined, to get to the bottom of why you’re twice as likely to be shot if you’re an unarmed black male.”

As a whole, the United States incarcerates more of its population than anywhere else in the world. While the U.S. represents only 5% of the world’s population, it has [25% of the world’s prison population](#). There are more Americans in jail or under corrections supervision than were in [Stalin’s gulags](#). But these numbers alone don’t convey the racial discrimination of the American prison state.

A [Pew Research Center](#) analysis reported that black men are six times more likely than white men to be imprisoned. The study demonstrates that the incarceration rate for blacks has worsened since before Civil Rights legislation was enacted in 1964. “In 1960, the white male incarceration rate was 262 per 100,000 white U.S. residents, and the black male rate was 1,313, meaning that black men were five times as likely as white men to be incarcerated,” according to the Pew analysis.

There is no other country on the planet that locks up a racial minority group at remotely near the rate the United States does with African Americans. Even under the notorious racism of the apartheid regime in South Africa, blacks were not imprisoned nearly as much as in the United States.

The incarceration rate was nearly six times higher for black males in the United States than for black males in South Africa during apartheid (4,848 per 100,000 in 2001 vs. 851 per 100,000 in 1993), according to a study published by the [Western Prison Project and the Prison Policy Initiative](#).

The driver behind what has popularly become known as mass incarceration is the hyper-criminalization of drug use. This has been exposed by Michelle Alexander, in her landmark book [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#) as a vast system of social control and institutional discrimination, which has evolved from the Jim Crow South to accomplish many of the same oppressive ends under the guise of legal justice.

Jamie Fellner, Senior Counsel with the U.S. Program at Human Rights Watch, wrote in her report [Race, Drugs, and Law Enforcement in the United States](#) that the “costs and benefits of this national ‘war on drugs’ remain debated. What is not debatable, however, is that this ostensibly race-neutral effort has been waged primarily against black Americans” who are “disproportionately arrested, convicted, and incarcerated on drug charges” relative to their

percentage of the population. Fellner called into question U.S. compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, a treaty which the U.S. has ratified.

While Americans hold wide prejudices that African Americans take and sell drugs more often than whites, the data have consistently shown this is simply [not true](#). Studies demonstrate that [blacks are less likely to use and abuse drugs](#) than whites, and that they are [less likely to deal drugs than whites](#).

Marijuana arrests account for a huge portion of the arrests carried out as part of the war on drugs that has led to the explosion in the prison population. When you isolate [marijuana use by race](#), there are no statistically significant differences between whites and blacks. Both groups use them roughly at the same rate. The same is true among [youths](#). But the rate of arrests is unmistakably unequal across the nation.

“Racial disparities in marijuana possession arrests are widespread and exist in every region in the country,” the ACLU wrote in their report [The War on Marijuana in Black and White](#). They noted that in more than one-third of states, the rate of arrests of blacks was more than four times higher than that of whites for marijuana possession.

Life expectancy is one of the most important indicators of public health. The life expectancy of blacks (74.5 years) is more than four years less than that of whites (78.8 years), according to a [Center for Disease Control and Prevention study](#) published last year. This is actually a “historically record-low level” of difference in life expectancy, although it is still outrageously high for a developed nation with the wealth of the United States.

The numbers for wealth inequality are just as stark. The gap between median white net worth (\$141,900) is 13 times greater than that of black net worth (\$11,000), according to the [Pew Research Center](#). They report that in the wake of the “Great Recession” that began in 2008 the difference has been exacerbated.

Every other significant economic [indicator](#) – income, home ownership, unemployment – confirms the enormous chasm between whites and blacks.

No amount of conservative denial can erase these facts. Of course, if you remove the context and look at individual stories in a vacuum you can distort the extent of the oppression. There are more than 40 million African Americans in the U.S. and so far this year there have been somewhere between 100 and 200 killings of blacks by police.

Naturally, not every black person is being killed. But the rate people are being killed is much too high compared to other ethnic groups inside the country and to other countries overall. This is not a problem the media has created, or that progressives have blown out of proportion. Any honest contextual analysis would have to acknowledge the inequality and discrimination that manifests itself in the actions of police, the courts, the economy and the health system. It points to one undeniable conclusion: blacks in the U.S. are oppressed. This is a direct result of deliberate policies formulated and carried out through the institutions of the state, not through the free market or personal choice.

The most important accomplishment of Black Lives Matter has been to make these issues visible to so many people across the country. Unfortunately, many who benefit from white supremacy are determined to keep it invisible. As the national conversation shifts to

confront systemic racism and discrimination, conservative confirmation bias is difficult to overcome. But in the end the facts speak for themselves. The more they lead to real social change, the stronger the conservative backlash will be at those who bear the message. Fortunately, the movements that have developed have shown every indication they are up for the challenge and are in the struggle for the long haul.

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