

Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyterian Mission Racial Equity & Women's Intercultural Ministries

Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community Antiracism Study Guide

Enduring Legacy of Racism in the USA

Introduction

While significant strides towards racial equality were made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, the legacy of racism continues in the United States and has, in many ways, worsened in recent decades. Some historical societal structures that granted white people privileges and hindered people of color have diminished over time. Others, however, have had snowball effects that are difficult to stop and sometimes hard to recognize.

One of the toughest tasks in struggling for justice is to have the strength to look injustice squarely in the face.

Economics

The fact that wealth can be passed down from parent to child means that the economic situation of our ancestors has a significant influence on our own. While this is most apparent in the very rich, even modest economic stability can benefit future generations. When parents are able to help with a sudden expense, such as a car repair, this can make the difference between keeping or losing a job. When parents or grandparents contribute towards a down payment for a first home, this has lifelong effects, as home ownership has been a primary form of investment in the United States. This means that the economic wrongs done to Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and others continue to have ongoing effects. There is enormous economic inequality along racial lines in the United States today, often referred to as the racial wealth gap. One study reports that in 1963, the average wealth of white families was \$117,000 more than the average wealth of nonwhite families. In 2015, the average wealth of white families is \$500,000 higher than both black and Hispanic families (Urban Institute 2015). If we look at median, rather than average, the problem persists. In 2013 the median wealth of white households was 13 times higher than that of black households and 10 times higher than that of Hispanic households (Kochhar and Fry 2014).

Education

The Supreme Court ruled against segregation in 1954. Many communities, primarily in the South, resisted integration in the early years. However, by "1972, due to a strong federal enforcement, only about 25 percent of black students in the South attended schools" that were strongly segregated, meaning "in which at least 9 out of 10 students

were racial minorities” (Hannah-Jones 2014). However, in the 1990s the Supreme Court greatly diminished efforts at desegregation and segregation is increasing. Today “some 43 percent of Latino and 38 percent of black students are in ‘intensely segregated’ schools” (Zalan 2014). A 2014 report notes that “Latino students have become more segregated every year since they began collecting data in the late 1960s” (ibid.). Such segregation is profoundly linked to inequality. A recent report from the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights “found that racial minorities are more likely than white students to be suspended from school, to have less access to rigorous math and science classes, and to be taught by lower-paid teachers with less experience” (Rich 2014).

Policing

After the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought a renewed focus on how police interact with different racial and ethnic groups. The reality of racial profiling--when particular groups are suspected of criminal activity based on race alone--was brought to national attention in the 1990s. Communities across the country had enacted “stop-and-frisk” or “broken-windows” policing policies that resulted in African Americans and Latinos/Latinas being disproportionately stopped and questioned by police. Racial profiling of Arab Americans increased after September 11, 2001. People of color are disproportionately subjected to traffic stops, searches, and arrests for traffic violations. These strategies have proven counterproductive in reducing crime and have caused deep rifts between community members and police (Badger 2014).

Police misconduct, excessive force, and death within police custody also appear to be disproportionately concentrated on people of color. Although the United States does not yet keep track of these incidents, estimates publicly available put the number of people killed by police in the United States in 2014 at 1,149 (“The Counted” 2015). African-Americans and Latino/Latinas are significantly more likely to experience violence at the hands of police than white people. Native Americans are killed by law enforcement at a higher rate than any other racial group (Vicens 2015).

Mass Incarceration

The 1980s and 1990s saw a shift towards “tough on crime” politics, which led to policies such as harsh minimum sentences, “three strikes and you’re out” laws, and the war on drugs (ACLU). These policies increased the number of people incarcerated in the United States. The privatization of the justice system, including the development of for-profit prisons, exacerbated this problem by creating financial incentives for imprisoning people. While the United States is home to only 5% of the world’s population, we house 25% of the world’s prisoners (ibid.)

The harm of mass incarceration falls primarily on people of color. For example, “despite the fact that white and black people use drugs at similar rates, black people are jailed on drug charges 10 times more often than white people” (ibid.). The consequences of this disparity in incarceration rates are enormous. “Incarceration pushes you out of the job market. Incarceration disqualifies you from feeding your family with food stamps. Incarceration allows for housing discrimination based on a criminal-background check. Incarceration increases your risk of homelessness. Incarceration increases your chances of being incarcerated again” (Coates 2015). In many states convicted felons cannot vote after release from prison, so racially biased incarceration also removes large numbers of people of color from participation in the democratic process. Mass incarceration has sustained racial inequality in the United States and severely impedes movement towards racial justice (ibid.).