

Systemic Poverty, Not Systemic Racism: An Ethnography, Analysis & Critique

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This paper describes the lives of two light-skinned brothers raised in a Black neighborhood in 1960s-70s Chicago, highlighting the impact of social and economic factors on individual trajectories. The research then segues into the concept of “systemic poverty” recognizing that 10-20% of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are in poverty creating concerns of disparities in education, health, housing, hiring practices, possible voter suppression, wealth gaps, media representation, environmental, employment, and criminal justice. Using grounded theory, the research develops a model based on the causes and effects of systemic poverty, critiques the logical flaws of systemic racism, and calls for greater recognition and support for poor Americans of all races, as well as a national conversation on poverty and inequality that includes all marginalized communities.

Keywords: affirmative action, education, health, housing, wealth, environmental, employment, crime, systemic racism, systemic poverty

INTRODUCTION

The first part of this paper is about two brothers who grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. They were raised by their mother, who had limited education and struggled to provide for them. Both brothers were multiracial and faced discrimination due to their light skin color. Despite attending underfunded schools and living in poverty, they received an education and learned basic skills. However, their experiences differed greatly as they entered high school, with one brother excelling academically and enlisting in the military while the other brother became involved in gangs, drugs, and criminal activity, eventually succumbing to a drug overdose before his 30th birthday.

The ethnography highlights the unequal outcomes that can occur even among siblings raised in the same household and the importance of acknowledging the impact of social and economic factors on individual trajectories. Part 2 of the paper is focused on individual agency and poverty. Individuals can make choices to educate themselves, find employment and improve their lot in life. Using the military as a steppingstone out of poverty is commonplace and the author contends that individual agency was the primary difference in outcomes for the siblings in this ethnography (Kim, 2015).

The author concludes that the plight of poor White Americans is often ignored or dismissed because of a long-standing cultural narrative that portrays White Americans as inherently privileged and immune to the challenges faced by other racial groups. The ‘systemic racism’ narrative not only ignores the real struggles of impoverished Americans of all hues but also perpetuates racial divisions and inequality in society.

Part 1: An Ethnography of Two Brothers

This is a true story about two brothers. Their mother, a woman with limited education, gave birth to both children in wedlock but divorced shortly after the younger son's birth. The birth father was predominantly of Northern European descent, while the birth mother had a mix of Spanish, Columbian, Mexican, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, and African (Esan tribe of Nigeria) heritage. As a result, the brothers were multi-racial, and they jokingly referred to themselves as "mutts" before it became socially unacceptable to make light of racial and ethnic identities.

The brothers were raised in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s, where they were part of a small Hispanic minority in school. The 1960s was a tumultuous period in American history, marked by significant events such as President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 when one of the brothers was in second grade, the death of Malcolm X in 1965, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, and Robert Kennedy's assassination on June 6, 1968. Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War riots were commonplace, and even young children were not spared from the violence. In this impoverished neighborhood, both brothers had been beaten up several times due to their skin color.

Both brothers grew up in the same household, attended the same grammar and high schools, and were raised by the same parent. Their experiences, both in and out of school, were heavily influenced by their mother's struggles to provide for them on meager wages and without child support. Although their mother's love for them was unwavering, providing necessities such as food and clothing was a daily challenge. The brothers were frequently victims of violence at the hands of neighborhood gangs, requiring their mother to take time off work to tend to their physical and emotional wounds. And due to poverty, the brothers did not develop the same physical strength, size, or abilities as their peers before, during, and after puberty.

Despite attending an underfunded school in a neighborhood that is classified as a redlined district, both siblings received an education that taught them how to read, write, and perform mathematical operations. Their academic progress was consistent throughout their grade school years, but their safety was never guaranteed while walking to and from school due to the presence of neighborhood gangs. Access to healthcare became a critical concern when the older brother sustained severe injuries, including the need for stitches and medical rehabilitation therapy, which he did not receive due to a beating. Later, the younger brother was also brutally beaten by a group of five people who hurled racial slurs at him and kicked his ribs. Both hate crimes occurred in the aftermath of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

As the brothers entered high school, the older sibling became more engrossed in academic subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics, while the younger brother gravitated towards sports. The younger brother's English and math skills lagged his peers. The high school was quite large, with approximately 6,000 students attending in shifts, making it easy for a student to feel lost. The older brother volunteered for the morning shift, while the younger brother preferred the late shift to sleep in. The older brother was assaulted in the locker room while changing clothes for gym class and was sexually harassed by a gang of teenagers. He did not report the incident to the police due to the stigma surrounding males who report alleged sexual harassment, rape, or sodomy – as the victim was often blamed. Instead, he switched from gym class to Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) to avoid the bullies and predators in the school gym.

The younger son was not yet in high school but was forewarned to avoid gym class. The high school consisted of predators and prey that would make the script of "Lord of the Flies" appear to be a Disney cartoon. Within the high school were hallways that were "no-go" zones for non-Blacks, and even the Chicago police who were stationed inside the school did not venture into those corridors. One cop was no match for an entire gang. The high school was predominantly Black, teachers were typically recent college graduates who were Black, and the principal was a Black man with a Ph.D. Despite the predominantly Black staff and faculty, the teenage gangs, funded by drugs, ran the school.

The older brother completed high school with a 4.0 GPA and promptly enlisted in the military to flee this dystopian ghetto. Casualties of the Vietnam War were frequently featured on the nightly news, but Vietnam seemed less dangerous than the south side of Chicago. Meanwhile, the younger brother enrolled in high school and became embroiled in gangs, drugs, and criminal activity. He abandoned his studies after

turning sixteen and never obtained a GED. Upon attempting to enlist, the younger brother was barred from the military due to hard drug use.

Both brothers grew up in the same household, attended the same schools, and were raised by the same parent. However, their lives took vastly different paths. One brother served for 26 years in the military, visited 35 countries, and obtained a bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, and much later a Doctorate in Management. He was educated and achieved financial stability before getting married and having children. Meanwhile, the younger brother fathered children out-of-wedlock, failed to provide child support, and perpetuated the cycle of poverty. He amassed multiple felonies for drug and property offenses and finally succumbed to a drug overdose just after his 30th birthday. Dr. Thomas Sowell astutely observed, "If there is not equality of outcomes among people born to the same parents and raised under the same roof, why should equality of outcomes be expected, or assumed, when conditions are not nearly so comparable?" (Sowell, 2019, page 7).

Part 2: Why Social Justice Warriors Get It Wrong

Within the United States, between 80 to 90% of Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians are above the poverty line and they live well in the United States. Americans of all hues can choose a house, a school, a college, and a career. These Americans do not have significant economic, environmental, or health issues. But depending on the year, between 10 to 20% of Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and Asians are in poverty and have concerns with disparities in education, health, housing, hiring practices, possible voter suppression, wealth gaps, media representation, environment, employment, and criminal justice. This is the concept of systemic poverty theories.

Politicians, academics, and social justice warriors (SJW) have launched nonstop diatribes about 'systemic racism' allegedly because of 'white supremacy' in the United States. This ethnography and exploratory research counter this hyperbole. This research summarizes a detailed literature review and a critique of the political hyperbole that dominates government, media, and academic institutions. The primary reason that SJWs have it wrong is their over-emphasis on monolithic blocks by race and ethnicity, without a focus or understanding of individual agency and the differences between correlation and causation. So, for the purposes of this paper, we start with two critical definitions:

- Correlation refers to a relationship between two variables where changes in one variable are associated with changes in the other variable.
- Causality refers to a relationship where one variable directly causes a change in another variable, and causality implies a causal mechanism or a cause-and-effect relationship between two variables.

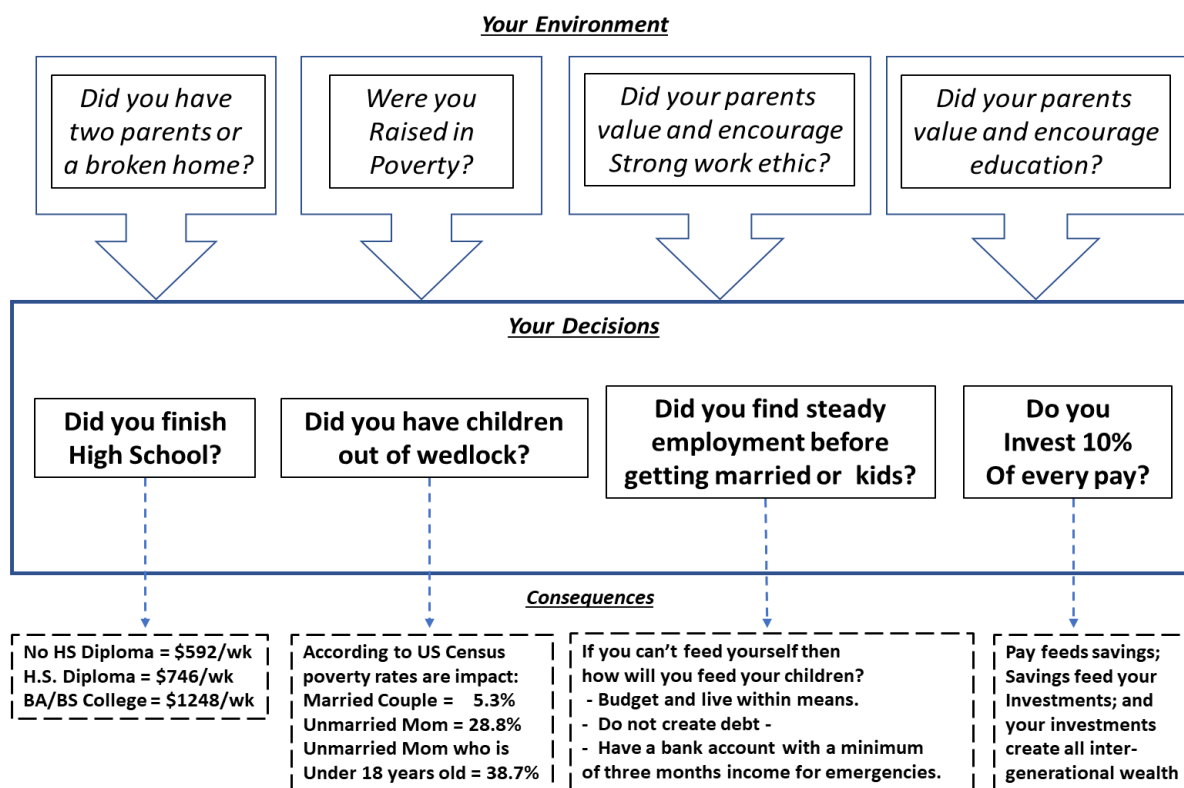
Individual Agency

The concept of individual agency recognizes that individuals have free will and can use their own judgment to make choices based on their values, beliefs, and goals; it is the capacity to act and make choices and exercise control over their own life. On the one hand, the individual agency can play a role in perpetuating statistical disparities if individuals make choices that are influenced by their own implicit biases or the biases of the society or neighborhood in which they live. Within the "two brothers" neighborhood, Black employers favored Black job candidates over equally qualified candidates of other races and ethnicities; even though unemployment was high for teens of all races and ethnicities. High crime rates by gangs on the south side of Chicago created a steep drop in residential and business property prices, thereby lowering property taxes, which perpetuated disparities in education and economic opportunity.

As demonstrated by the older brother, one's individual agency can also be a means of overcoming poverty and other disparities. Individuals can make choices to educate themselves, find employment (albeit through the Army), and improve their lot in life. Using the military as a stepping stone out of poverty is commonplace and in the 1970s through today there were no discriminatory laws or policies, that had a significant impact on outcomes for different racial groups. The author contends that individual agency was the primary difference in outcomes between the older and younger brother in this ethnography.

Some Academics and politicians contend that ‘systemic racism’ exists in the USA due to statistical disparities in areas such as income, education, and criminal justice outcomes suggest its presence. The author argues that such disparities can be explained by factors other than racism, such as differences in cultural values or individual choices/individual agency. In addition, the major issues allegedly affecting Blacks in the USA, adversely impact any person of any hue who is in poverty: out-of-wedlock births, poverty, high school dropouts, employment disparities, educational disparities, housing disparities, criminal justice disparities, healthcare disparities, environmental/pollution disparities, wealth gap, in addition to alcohol, drugs, and associated health risks.

**FIGURE 1
INDIVIDUAL AGENCY FLOWCHART**



Baker, Baker, B. (2022). White Trash Autoethnography: An Analysis of CRT Fact and Logic Flaws. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability, and Ethics* 19(1).

It is important to note that the reasons for these top disparities often involve complex and interconnected factors, and not all of them can be attributed solely to poverty, race, or individual agency. However, some possible elements include:

1. Employment discrimination: Discriminatory hiring practices and workplace policies can limit opportunities for impoverished people of all hues & perpetuate economic disparities (Pager, 2003).
2. Disparities in education: Lack of access to quality education can be due to factors such as underfunded schools in certain neighborhoods, inadequate resources for low-income families, and limited opportunities for academic enrichment. These disparities can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and limit opportunities for upward mobility (Ladson-Billings, 2006).
3. Housing discrimination: Discriminatory housing practices, including redlining and discriminatory lending practices, have limited opportunities for impoverished people of all hues

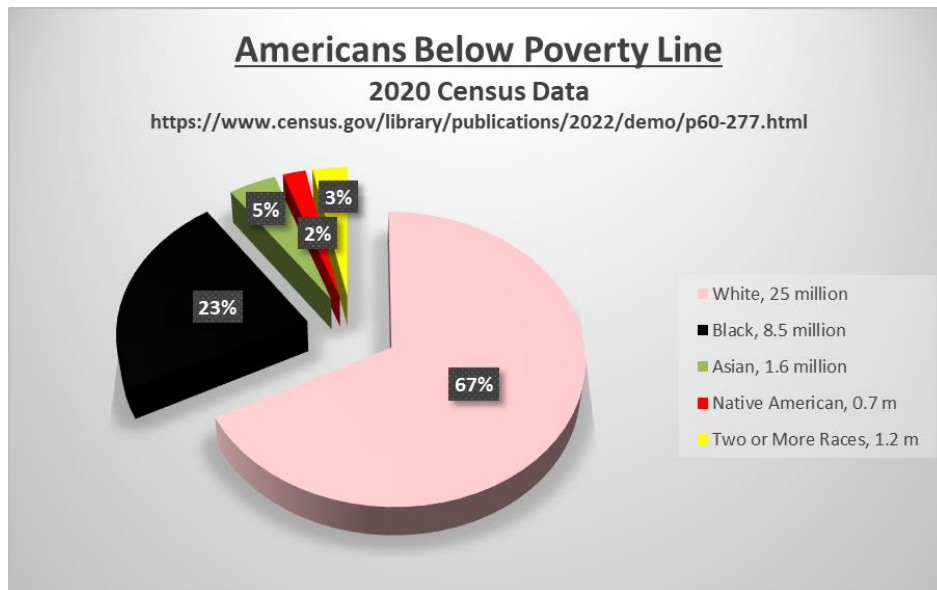
to access quality housing and accumulate wealth through homeownership (Massey, et.al., 1993).

4. Health disparities: Access to healthcare and health outcomes can be influenced by factors such as income, occupation, and neighborhood. Impoverished people of all hues may be more likely to live in areas with limited access to healthcare facilities or healthy food options, leading to higher rates of chronic diseases and other health issues (Williams, et.al., 2000).
5. Criminal justice system: Biases within the criminal justice system may lead to disparities in policing, arrests, sentencing, and incarceration rates (Smith & Visser, 2017).
6. Wealth gap: Historical policies such as redlining and discriminatory lending practices have prevented impoverished people of all hues from accumulating wealth and building assets, perpetuating the wealth gap. This can lead to limited access to resources and opportunities for economic advancement (Oliver, et.al., 2006).
7. Environmental disparity: Communities of color are often disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards and pollution, leading to negative health outcomes (Bullard, 1993).
8. Media representation: Media representation of impoverished people of all hues can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and limit opportunities for positive representation and visibility (Entman, et.al., 2000).
9. Voter suppression: Restrictions on voting rights, including voter ID laws and gerrymandering, can limit the political power and influence of impoverished people of all hues (Ansolabehere & Hersh, 2012).
10. Affirmative action: the unintended consequences of an unconstitutional program (Eastland, 1996).

There are various reasons for these disparities that do not necessarily involve racism, such as historical inequalities, economic policies, lack of access to education and healthcare, cultural differences, and other systemic factors. For example, marginalized communities of all hues may have had limited access to quality education, which can impact future opportunities and outcomes. In addition, economic policies such as redlining and discriminatory lending practices have contributed to disparities in wealth and homeownership. Lack of access to healthcare and healthy food options can also lead to health disparities. Cultural differences can also play a role, as certain groups may face stigmatization or discrimination based on their cultural practices or beliefs.

There are more White people in poverty in the United States in absolute numbers, but Black people are statistically more likely to be in poverty compared to Whites – this is what is meant by racial disparity. However, it is important to take a holistic approach and consider all the various factors that contribute to disparities, rather than attributing them solely to racism. So, before we dissect the subsets of systemic racism, let's look at the actual number of people in poverty, as shown in this figure. Based on US Census Data, there are 25 million Whites (67%), 8.5 million Blacks (23%), 1.6 million Asians (5%), 1.2 million people of mixed races (3%), and 791, 000 Native Americans (2%) in poverty. So, contrary to common myth, most poor people in the United States are White, not Black (Creamer, et al., 2022).

FIGURE 2
AMERICANS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE



DISSECTING ELEMENTS OF “SYSTEMIC POVERTY”

Out-of-Wedlock Births

McLanahan, et.al. (2008) analysis of census data the percentages of children born out of wedlock are as follows: 69% for non-Hispanic Blacks, 53% for Hispanics, 29% for non-Hispanic Whites, and 17% for Asians or Pacific Islanders. Their analysis of out-of-wedlock births reveals that non-marital childbearing is a major contributor to poverty, particularly among minority groups. The authors found that the poverty rate among female-headed households with children is five times higher than the poverty rate among married-couple families. Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) the poverty rate for married couples was 5.3%, but the poverty rate for families headed by a female householder with no spouse present was 28.8%; whereas families headed by a female householder with no spouse present and with own children under 18 years old, the poverty rate was even higher at 37.8%. This study finds that unmarried mothers and their children are more likely to be living in poverty compared to married couples. Hence, policies aimed at reducing poverty should address the issue of non-marital childbearing/out-of-wedlock births, and promoting marriage may be an effective strategy for reducing poverty among vulnerable populations.

Poverty

Manning (2015) notes that cohabitation has become increasingly popular as a pathway to marriage and has become more diverse in terms of age, education, and race/ethnicity. She highlighted that cohabitation has become less of a transitional stage and more of a long-term living arrangement for some couples. She emphasized the need for further research, the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of cohabiting relationships, and the implications of these changes for family structure, as well as the need for policies that support the well-being of all families, regardless of their structure. Similarly, Smock et al. (2010) summarized research on various pathways to parenthood, such as marriage, cohabitation, single parenthood, and step-parenthood. They emphasize the impact of family structure instability on child well-being and how disadvantaged children are more likely to experience family instability. Cohabitation has a greater impact on the poor than on the wealthy.

Musick, et.al. (2015) analyzed data from the National Survey of Family Growth and identified that many disadvantaged women have children in nonmarital relationships that are strained by poor economic

conditions, a lack of trust, infidelity, and substance use problems. They determined that marriage is associated with greater stability and cohabitation with less, although estimates of cohabitation are sensitive to controls and periods. In 1995, the odds of separation among those cohabiting versus married at union start were 52 % higher – instability of marriage creates ripple effects on children.

McLanahan (2004) argues that while children of highly educated mothers are gaining resources, those born to the least educated are losing resources due to changes in family structure, including cohabitation and divorce. The resulting increase in single-parent households puts children at risk for negative outcomes such as lower academic achievement, behavioral problems, and poverty. McLanahan highlighted the importance of policies that support families and children, reduce poverty, and increase access to education and healthcare to close the gap between rich and poor children and ensure stable and nurturing family environments.

Similarly, Ventura (2009) examined trends in nonmarital childbearing in the United States, drawing on data from the National Vital Statistics System. The research found that nonmarital births are at higher risk of having adverse birth outcomes such as low birthweight, preterm birth, and infant mortality than are children born to married women. In addition, children born to single mothers typically have more limited social and financial resources. Furthermore, Duncan, et.al. (2013) provide an overview of the key findings from several longitudinal studies that have demonstrated the positive effects of high-quality preschool programs on children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, and health outcomes. These programs can have long-term benefits, such as improving school readiness, reducing grade retention and special education placements, and increasing high school graduation rates – yet those in poverty might have no access.

Duncan (2013), McLanahan (2004), Manning (2015), Musick & Micheltmore (2015), Smock & Greenland (2010), and Ventura (2009) all discuss the correlations between out-of-wedlock births, poverty, and other social and economic factors. Overall, children born out-of-wedlock are more likely to experience poverty when the mother is poor.

High School Dropouts

Guzzo (2014) examined the relationship between out-of-wedlock birth and high school dropout among girls and explored the potential causal mechanisms linking these two phenomena, arguing that out-of-wedlock births can increase the risk of high school dropout by creating additional challenges and responsibilities for young mothers, including economic hardship, limited access to childcare and education, and social stigma. Drawing on a range of studies and data sources, this is a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which out-of-wedlock birth and high school dropout are linked providing valuable insights into the causal relationship between out-of-wedlock birth rates and high school dropout rates among girls and underscores the importance of addressing these issues through comprehensive and evidence-based interventions to mitigate increased stress and trauma, social isolation, and economic hardship.

Rumberger (2011) discussed the reasons why students drop out of high school, with a focus on the role of poverty in this process. He argues that poverty is one of the main factors that contribute to high school dropout rates, as students from low-income families face a range of challenges that make it difficult for them to stay in school, such as lack of academic preparation, inadequate school resources, and family stressors. The author also emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of poverty, such as income inequality and inadequate social policies, to reduce dropout rates and promote educational equity. Furthermore, he suggests a range of interventions that can be implemented to support students from low-income families, such as improving academic preparation, providing access to high-quality educational resources, and offering targeted support for at-risk students. Overall, Rumberger’s work highlights the critical role of poverty in shaping educational outcomes and underscores the need for comprehensive and equitable solutions to address this issue.

Employment Disparities

Pager (2003) argued that racial disparities in the criminal justice system led to a disproportionate number of Black and Latinx individuals having criminal records, which can prevent them from obtaining employment. The author claims that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in employment

opportunities for individuals with criminal records. Historically, Black people have faced significant barriers to employment due to discrimination, which had contributed to previous wealth and income gaps between Black and White Americans. But, impoverished people of every hue can face significant employment challenges, as most Black people who are upper middle class do not face such challenges.

Wilson, J.W. (1996) and Wilson, J.W. (2012) focused on the effects of joblessness on urban poverty, particularly in African American communities. Wilson (1996) argues that as manufacturing jobs disappeared in urban areas, many African Americans became trapped in a cycle of poverty and joblessness. Wilson (2012) further expands on this, examining the “concentration effects” of poverty and the difficulties that arise when high-poverty communities are geographically isolated and lack access to job opportunities. Wilson suggests that policies aimed at reducing poverty and inequality should focus more on class-based approaches and less on race-specific solutions. While poverty and race may intersect and contribute to barriers to employment and economic mobility, it is possible for individuals of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds to face significant employment challenges. Similarly, while Black individuals in the upper middle class or upper class might experience bias, they may also have greater access to education and other resources that help mitigate challenges. It is important to recognize that experiences of discrimination and disadvantage can be shaped by multiple factors, including poverty, and that these factors can intersect in complex ways to produce unique experiences and challenges for individuals and communities. For instance, “there was no significant difference between the unemployment rates of Black and White teenagers in 1948. The unemployment rate for Black 16-year-old and 17-year-old males was 9.4 percent. For their White counterparts, the unemployment rate was 10.2 percent” (Sowell, 2019, p.53).

Wilson (1996) discussed the ways in which changes in the economy and labor market have contributed to joblessness and poverty in urban communities. He argues that while race and poverty are important factors that shape employment opportunities and barriers, it is also important to recognize that individuals of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds may face significant employment challenges in the context of changing labor markets and economic conditions.

Some research has shown that people with “black-sounding” names are less likely to be called back for job interviews than those with “white-sounding” names, indicating possible discrimination in the hiring process (Bertrand, 2004; Pager, 2008), but there is also research that suggests a more complex picture. For example, Gupta, et.al. (2016) determined that discrimination in hiring based on name perception is not limited to individuals of a particular race or ethnicity, since it can affect anyone with a name that is perceived as different or non-traditional. In addition, Stoll, et.al. (2004) found that while there was evidence of racial bias in hiring for low-wage jobs, this bias was less pronounced for higher-wage jobs. Similarly, a study by Quillian et al. (2017) found that while there was evidence of racial bias in the labor market, this bias was more prevalent in certain industries and regions than in others. But there are also studies that suggest that hiring bias can also exist against people who come from low-income or poor backgrounds. For example, Pager, et.al. (2009) found that job applicants who reported experience with poverty or welfare were significantly less likely to receive callbacks from potential employers than applicants with identical resumes but no mention of poverty or welfare experience. The authors suggest that employers may view experience with poverty or welfare as a sign of lower productivity or commitment, leading to discrimination against these applicants. Ruffle and Shtudiner (2015) found that job applicants who included their home addresses on their resumes were more likely to receive callbacks if they lived in wealthier neighborhoods than if they lived in poorer neighborhoods. The authors suggest that this bias may reflect employers’ assumptions about the characteristics and work ethic of people who come from poorer neighborhoods. Therefore, additional longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the extent and mechanisms of bias against people who come from low-income backgrounds, these studies suggest that discrimination based on socioeconomic status, not just race or ethnicity, plays a major role in hiring outcomes.

Educational Disparities

Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses disparities in educational outcomes for students of color including access to educational resources, teacher expectations and biases, and cultural relevance of educational materials, asserting that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in education. However, not all

African American students attend underfunded schools, nor are all underfunded schools attended by African American students. Statistically, African American students are more likely than White students to attend schools that are underfunded, overcrowded, and have fewer resources, which can have a significant impact on their educational outcomes.

Numerically, Whites in poverty outnumber Blacks 3 to 1, so poverty affects all races and ethnicities and can also contribute to the underfunding of schools. There are more White students in underfunded schools than there are Black students in underfunded schools because White people make up a larger percentage of the impoverished population. This is an example of systemic inequality based on poverty, not race – and one’s individual agency counts, “despite an abundance of literature blaming disparate educational outcomes on the schools, the society, or others, in keeping with the prevailing social vision, statistics on the average number of hours per week spent studying by high school students from different ethnic backgrounds show Asian American students spending more hours studying than either White or Black American students” (Sowell, 2019, p.129).

There is a cancer within African-American urban culture, that did not exist prior to the 1960s. An empirical study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that having a higher percentage of Black schoolmates had a strong *negative* effect on the educational achievements of Black students — especially high-ability Black students. “Ghetto Blacks who seek educational achievement in America are likewise often seen by some classmates as race traitors who are ‘acting White,’ and are often meted out similar ostracism, verbal abuse and/or physical violence” (Sowell, 2019, pp. 167-8). This is a cultural issue that can only be solved by the Black community, not more government handouts. It is important for communities to take ownership of their own solutions and work towards empowering individuals and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for achieving success. By working together and promoting a culture of academic excellence and support, we can help break down the barriers that prevent impoverished students of all hues from achieving their full potential.

Students of all races and ethnicities in underfunded schools face similar challenges, such as inadequate resources and educational opportunities. A White student attending an underfunded school faces more challenges than a Black student who is upper middle class or upper class. Socioeconomic status has a significant impact on a person’s access to resources and opportunities, which affects educational attainment and overall success in life. So, it is important to address these issues for *all* students, regardless of their race or ethnicity, to provide an equal opportunity for education.

Housing Disparities

Katznelson’s (2005) research reveals that FDR’s New Deal policies and the Federal Housing Administration’s redlining practices, which aimed to provide homeownership opportunities to White Americans, excluded impoverished White, Black, and other communities from access to credit and homeownership. This contributed to the creation of segregated neighborhoods based on income or class rather than race, perpetuating economic disparities across all communities. Therefore, it is important to recognize the intersectionality of different forms of discrimination in housing and community development. While redlining and discriminatory housing policies contributed to racial disparities in homeownership and wealth accumulation, they also impacted marginalized communities of all hues. The Fair Housing Act (1968) was enacted to prohibit discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status, or disability. This legislation aimed to eliminate the discriminatory policies that created segregated neighborhoods and limited access to housing and economic opportunities. The Fair Housing Act serves as a reminder of the significance of historical discriminatory policies in perpetuating economic disparities and the ongoing need to promote equity in housing and community development.

Massey and Denton (1993) argue that historical and ongoing discrimination and inequality, as well as policies like redlining, discriminatory lending practices, and zoning, have led to racial segregation in housing. They contend that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in housing, not just individual preferences, or market forces. However, all people in poverty can face significant housing challenges, such as inadequate or unsafe housing, high housing costs relative to income, and homelessness.

These challenges can have serious consequences for their health and well-being. There are numerous empirical studies that show the significant impact of housing inequality on low-income individuals and communities, including those of different races. For instance, Shelton and Taylor (2007) found that neighborhood poverty was a significant predictor of housing discrimination, with higher rates of discrimination observed in areas with greater levels of poverty. They suggest that this may be due to the increased vulnerability of low-income households to housing discrimination and the limited housing options available to them. The authors argue that addressing poverty and improving the availability of affordable housing is crucial to reducing disparities in housing discrimination, rather than solely focusing on race and ethnicity.

Hardy and Logan (2019) conducted a study on the disparities in homeownership and housing wealth in the United States from 1970 to 2015. Using a poverty lens, they found that low-income households, regardless of race, were less likely to own homes and had lower levels of housing wealth than higher-income households. They found that while the overall rate of homeownership has remained relatively stable since 1970, there have been significant shifts in the racial and ethnic composition of homeowners, with the proportion of White homeowners declining and the proportion of Black and Hispanic homeowners increasing!

The 2018 report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that there is a shortage of 7.2 million affordable and available rental homes for extremely low-income renter households in the United States, regardless of race or ethnicity (NLIHC, 2018). Of interest, a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) study was based on research that followed more than 4,600 very low-income families in five U.S. cities over a 10- to 15-year period to examine the short- and long-term effects of moving to low-poverty neighborhoods. Their conclusion was “no discernible benefit to economic self-sufficiency, employment outcomes, and risky and criminal behavior for adults and children was observed as a result of moving. Similarly, moving had few positive effects on educational achievement for youth” (Sowell, 2019, p.81).

Criminal Justice Disparities

Smith & Visser (2017) contend that ‘systemic racism’ plays a significant role in producing racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system including biased policing practices, selective enforcement of laws, and racially disparate sentencing practices; they believe that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of racial and ethnic disparities in the criminal justice system. However, Stretesky, et.al., (2004) found that areas with higher levels of poverty tend to have higher levels of violent crime, thereby suggesting that addressing poverty could help reduce violent crime. Similarly, Cross (2023) determined that Black-on-Black violence is not historically unique, as working-class ethnic groups in the past also turned to crime and violence to navigate poverty. A simplistic focus on race obscures the parallels between current inner-city violence and that employed by White ethnic groups in the past. The root cause of violence in both cases is sudden, massive economic disruption resulting in unimaginable social pain and nihilism, which makes violence seem rational and necessary. The hypothesis is that if we solve poverty, we will reduce violent crime.

Although Black Americans are disproportionately represented in the US prison population, this cannot be solely attributed to race or ethnicity. It is possible that a demographic group such as impoverished people of all hues, who commit a higher percentage of a certain crime would have a higher incarceration rate for that crime. This could be due to socioeconomic status, access to legal resources, and bias in the criminal justice system. Studies have shown that people from low-income communities are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated for drug offenses, despite similar rates of drug use among different socioeconomic groups. This could be because individuals in poverty may have less access to legal representation and resources, making them more vulnerable to being charged and convicted of drug offenses. There have been several studies that have found a link between poverty and drug-related arrests and incarceration such as:

- A study published in the *Journal Pediatrics* found that while drug use rates were similar among different socioeconomic groups, adolescents living in poverty were more likely to be arrested for drug offenses. The researchers suggested that poverty-related stressors, such as family

instability and exposure to violence, may contribute to greater involvement in drug-related activities and subsequently, greater risk of arrest and incarceration (Borowsky, et.al., 2001).

- A report by the Drug Policy Alliance found that in the United States, people from low-income communities and communities of color are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated for drug offenses, despite similar rates of drug use among different groups. The report suggested that this could be due to a variety of factors, including biased policing practices and disproportionate targeting of low-income communities for drug enforcement (DPA, 2018).
- A study published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* found that people living in poverty were more likely to receive harsher sentences for drug offenses compared to their wealthier counterparts, even when controlling for other factors like the type of drug involved and criminal history. The researchers suggested that this could be due to factors like lack of access to legal representation and racial bias in the criminal justice system (Owens, 2013).

Overall, these studies suggest that poverty, drug-related arrests, and incarceration are closely linked and that there may be systemic factors at play that contribute to these disparities. In addition, the most violent people in the United States are small albeit significant numbers of the Black race. Baker (2022) found that the biggest killers of Whites are Whites, and the biggest killers of Blacks are Blacks. However, when we divide the number of deaths by the population and compare these per capita figures, then we can see that a Black victim is five times more likely of being killed by a Black perp, than a White victim being killed by a White perp (e.g., 2594/62 divided by 2574/12.5). But societal factors such as poverty, lack of access to education and job opportunities, and systemic discrimination can also contribute to higher rates of criminal activity and incarceration. It is important to consider all these factors when examining the causes of incarceration rates, not just race.

A 2019 study entitled “*Risk of being killed by police use of Force in the United States by Age, Race-ethnicity, and Sex*” was conducted by researchers from Rutgers University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan. The study found that Black men are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police use of force than White men (Edwards, et.al, 2019); however, Menifield, et.al., (2019) research found that White police officers kill Black and other minority suspects at lower rates than we would expect if killings were randomly distributed among officers of all races. The fact that a majority of police officer killings are committed by White officers is a function of the predominance of White officers in police departments nationally. In other words, White officers do not kill Black suspects at a higher rate compared with non-white officers. The longitudinal analysis of DOJ/FBI (2019) homicide data from the past decade shows that:

- White murders by White Perps are consistent at 11 to 12 victims per million.
- Black murders by Black Perps are consistent at 52 to 63 victims per million.
- Black murders due to Black Perps are approximately 500% higher than White deaths by White Perps.
- White murders by Black Perps average 1200% higher than Black deaths by White Perps.

Pallone (2000) reported that Blacks were over-represented among offenders in each category of aggressive crime: in homicide at a level 315% greater than their representation in the general population, in sexual assault at a level 404% as great, in aggravated assault at 274% greater than their representation in the general population. In addition, violent incidents committed against Asian victims by Black offenders (27%) were 2.25 times higher than the representation of Black persons in the population (12%). Violent incidents committed against Asian victims by White offenders (24%) were 0.38 times less than the representation of White persons in the population (Baker, 2022).

This inner-city aggression has not changed much in the past two decades. Violent victimization includes rape or sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault. Assessing interracial violence per capita, research determines that Black-on-Black violent incidents are 120% higher than White-on-White violent incidents; and Black-on-White violent incidents are 3449% higher than White-on-Black violent incidents. Whites are not the only people to feel the brunt of disproportionate levels of Black violence; for instance, a police officer is 18.5 times more likely to be killed by a Black male than an unarmed Black male is to be killed by a police officer (MacDonald, 2020). The Criminal Justice Legal Foundation’s Legal

Director assessed that “The greater arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates for Black people in the United States are a matter of great concern, but clearly the principal cause is a difference in crime commission rates, not law enforcement bias” (Rushford, 2021).

Finally, Western (2002) examined the impact of incarceration on wage mobility and inequality in the United States. He uses longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to investigate the wage trajectories of young men before and after they are incarcerated. The author found that the experience of incarceration results in a sharp decline in wages and a decrease in wage growth after release. Furthermore, the earnings gap between those who have been incarcerated and those who have not widens over time, leading to increased inequality. These effects are most pronounced for those who are incarcerated for longer periods of time and those who have lower levels of education. Western, et.al. (2010) found that young men in poor communities were going to prison and returning home less employable and more detached from their families; so, institutions charged with public safety have become vitally implicated in the unemployment and the fragile family structure characteristic of high-crime communities. For poorly educated young men of all hues in high-incarceration communities, a prison record now carries very little stigma; and incentives to commit to the labor market and family life have been seriously weakened.

Healthcare Disparities

Williams, et.al. (2000) argue that racial disparities in healthcare are not simply the result of differences in individual behaviors or genetics, but rather are the product of historical and ongoing patterns of discrimination and inequality. They discuss how racism affects access to healthcare, quality of care, and health outcomes, and assert that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in healthcare.

Socioeconomic status is known to be a major determinant of health outcomes, and individuals from lower-income households often face greater health challenges and disparities than those from higher-income households, regardless of race or ethnicity. There are multiple empirical studies that suggest that individuals living in poverty, regardless of race, may face greater challenges in accessing healthcare than individuals who are upper middle class (CDC, 2017; Smith, et.al, 2018). For instance, Tach, et.al., (2015) explored how the urban poor navigate their food environments and cope with economic constraints through constrained, convenient, and symbolic consumption. They found that residents of poor neighborhoods have less access to healthy, affordable food than their counterparts in more advantaged neighborhoods, and these disparities translate into population-level health disparities by socioeconomic status.

In addition, Cuevas, Dawson, and Williams (2016) examine the relationship between race, skin color, and health outcomes among Latino populations in the United States. They argue that while Latinos are often grouped into a single racial category, there are significant differences in health outcomes among different subgroups based on socioeconomic status. The authors suggest that a “poverty lens” is necessary to fully understand the relationship between race, skin color, and health among Latinos, as poverty and discrimination can impact health outcomes regardless of racial categorization. There are several primary reasons for disparities in healthcare that do not include race. These include:

- Socioeconomic status: People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often have limited access to healthcare due to lack of health insurance, transportation, and other factors.
- Geographic location: People living in rural or remote areas may have limited access to healthcare services due to a shortage of healthcare providers and facilities.
- Language barriers: People who speak languages other than the dominant language in their country may have difficulty communicating with healthcare providers and accessing healthcare services.
- Health literacy: People who have low health literacy may have difficulty understanding health information, navigating the healthcare system, and making informed decisions about their health.
- Age: Older adults may have more complex healthcare needs and require more frequent healthcare services, which can lead to disparities in healthcare access and outcomes.

- Gender: Women may face disparities in healthcare due to differences in access to reproductive healthcare, screening and prevention services, and treatment for conditions that disproportionately affect women.
- Disability: People with disabilities may face barriers to accessing healthcare due to physical and/or communication barriers, discrimination, and lack of accommodations.

Sabik, et.al., (2015) explored the role of individual and contextual factors, such as education, income, and regional healthcare supply, in shaping the relationship between healthcare access and employment, finding that access to healthcare is associated with a higher likelihood of employment and a lower likelihood of work limitations. Specifically, older adults who have health insurance, a regular source of care, and no difficulty obtaining needed care are more likely to be employed and less likely to experience work limitations than those who lack these forms of access.

Williams (2016) examined the relationship between poverty and health disparities in the United States and highlighted how poverty contributes to persistent health inequalities across different races and ethnicities. Williams argues that poverty-related stress, such as limited access to healthy food and housing insecurity, can negatively impact an individual's physical and mental well-being. Another study published in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that individuals living in poverty were less likely to receive recommended preventive health services compared to individuals with higher income levels (Smith, et.al, 2018). Additionally, a 2017 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that adults living below the poverty level were more likely to have unmet healthcare needs and experience delays in receiving medical care compared to those with higher income levels (CDC, 2017). These studies suggest that poverty is a significant factor in accessing healthcare, not merely race.

Environmental and Pollution Disparities

Bullard (1993) argued that communities of color are disproportionately burdened by environmental pollution and other environmental hazards; he discusses how policies such as zoning, land use, and environmental regulation have contributed to and perpetuate disparities, asserting that 'systemic racism' is a primary driver in environmental justice. However, environmental hazards such as poor air quality, contaminated water, and toxic waste sites are often concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. This is due to a variety of factors such as discriminatory zoning policies, the placement of polluting industries in low-income areas, and the lack of political power among low-income residents to advocate for their rights to clean and healthy environments. Since poor Whites outnumber poor Blacks, they are more likely to be exposed to environmental hazards. So, it is important to note that people of all races and ethnicities who live in poverty are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards. Ash, et.al, (2011) used data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Environmental Protection Agency and found that workers in industries with high exposure to environmental hazards are more likely to experience job insecurity. Furthermore, they find that job insecurity increases the likelihood of negative health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, and exacerbates the negative health effects of environmental hazards.

Mohai, et.al., (2009) defined environmental justice as the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The article discusses the ways in which minority and low-income communities have historically borne a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards, and how the environmental justice movement has sought to address these inequalities through activism, policy advocacy, and research. They also examined the lack of political power and resources among affected communities and the complex legal and regulatory frameworks that can hinder efforts to achieve environmental justice, as well as the importance of interdisciplinary approaches that integrate social, economic, and environmental factors in addressing environmental injustices.

Mohai, et.al., (2015). discussed the disproportionate exposure of low-income communities and communities of color to environmental hazards, such as poor air quality, contaminated water, and toxic waste sites. They also discussed the implications of these disparities for public health and the need for policies to address them. A recent example of economic disparities entails an impoverished town in Palestine, Ohio, which experienced a recent train derailment that resulted in toxic air pollution. The derailment involved hazardous materials or chemicals that were released into the air, posing a health risk

to nearby communities. Dance (2023) discussed the environmental and health impacts of the derailment, as well as any response or cleanup efforts that are underway; it also refers to the larger issue of transportation safety and the risks associated with transporting hazardous materials through poor communities.

Wealth Gap

Oliver and Shapiro (2006) asserted that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in the wealth gap. They argue that the wealth gap between Black and White Americans is not simply the result of individual differences in savings or investment behavior, but rather is the product of historical discrimination and inequality. They claim past policies such as redlining, discriminatory lending practices, and discriminatory employment practices contributed to the wealth gap. Similarly, Kochhar, Fry, and Rohal’s (2019) report examines the racial wealth gap in the United States, providing a comprehensive analysis of the wealth gap between White, Black, and Hispanic households. The report found that the racial wealth gap is substantial and persistent, with the median White family having ten times the wealth of the median African American family and eight times the wealth of the median Hispanic family. But Asian-Americans have the highest income and wealth in the United States, but we cannot assume that Asians have “privilege” that whites do not solely based on the fact that Asians as a group make higher incomes than whites as a group in the United States. Therefore, it is not accurate or helpful to make blanket assumptions about privilege based solely on income, wealth, and race.

Kochhar et.al. (2019) explored the other factors that contribute to the wealth gap, including income inequality, differences in homeownership rates, as well as access to education and job opportunities. The negatives mentioned, such as living in areas with poor air quality, contaminated water, and toxic waste sites, as well as facing discrimination in the labor market and having limited access to education or healthcare, adversely impact poor people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. So, there are reasons for disparities in wealth gaps that span across all races and ethnicities, including:

- Income: Differences in income can affect wealth accumulation, with those earning higher incomes having greater opportunities to save and invest in assets that appreciate in value.
- Education: Higher levels of education can lead to higher-paying jobs and greater earning potential, which can contribute to greater wealth accumulation over time.
- Family structure: Individuals who are married or have children may face higher expenses, such as childcare costs and medical expenses, which can limit their ability to accumulate wealth.
- Employment status: Access to stable and well-paying jobs can significantly impact an individual’s ability to accumulate wealth.
- Inheritance: Inherited wealth can significantly impact an individual’s ability to accumulate wealth, with those receiving gifts or inheritance from family members having greater opportunities to invest in assets that appreciate in value.
- Debt: High levels of debt, such as student loans or credit card debt, can limit an individual’s ability to accumulate wealth by reducing their ability to save and invest.
- Health: Health problems can lead to increased medical expenses and loss of income, which can limit an individual’s ability to accumulate wealth over time.

Desmarais and Richmond-Garza (2016) found that poverty restricts access to quality education and higher-paying jobs, thereby limiting wealth accumulation. Debt and health problems further reduce investment opportunities. They called for policies targeting the root causes of poverty to promote economic equality.

Incarceration, Alcohol, Drugs, and Associated Health Risks

Sussman, et.al. (2015) discussed the relationship between incarceration, depression, and alcohol abuse. The study utilized data from a sample of adults who received substance abuse treatment services in Los Angeles County, California. The results show that the experience of incarceration is associated with increased risk of depression and alcohol abuse. The study also found that the effect of incarceration on depression and alcohol abuse varies by gender and race/ethnicity. Specifically, women and African

Americans were found to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of incarceration on mental health outcomes.

Horyniak, et.al. (2013) conducted a study on the relationship between drug use and employment status among people who inject drugs in Melbourne, Australia. They found that drug use is associated with lower levels of employment and that many people who inject drugs are unemployed or underemployed. The authors suggest that barriers to finding and maintaining employment among people who inject drugs may include reduced motivation, impaired cognitive function, and increased risk of criminal justice involvement. Similarly, Harzke, et.al., (2016) examined the employment status of people who inject drugs in the United States and found that drug use was associated with higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. Other studies have also found similar associations between drug use and employment status among people who inject drugs in the USA.

Media Representation

Entman and Rojecki (2000) argued that media representations of Black people are often stereotypical and negative and that these representations are not the result of individual prejudice or bias; instead, they believe that historical patterns of discrimination and inequality had contributed to these negative media representations. They assert that ‘systemic racism’ is a primary driver of disparities in media representation. In contrast to the race-only narrative, media representation can have a significant impact on poor people, both positive and negative. Here are a few ways in which media representation can impact poor people (Harlan, et.al, 1999; Johnson, et.al., 2007):

- Stigmatization: Poor people are often stigmatized in the media as being lazy, uneducated, and unmotivated. This kind of negative representation can reinforce stereotypes and make it harder for poor people to access resources and opportunities.
- Misrepresentation: Poor people are often depicted in the media as one-dimensional characters who are defined solely by their poverty. This can obscure the complexity and diversity of poor people’s experiences and perpetuate harmful myths about poverty.
- Lack of representation: Poor people are often underrepresented in the media, particularly in mainstream media outlets. This can lead to a lack of understanding about the challenges that poor people face and can make it harder for them to have their voices heard.
- Empowerment: On the positive side, media representation can also empower poor people by providing a platform for them to share their stories and experiences. This can help to humanize poverty and challenge stereotypes.

Harlan, et.al, (1999) and Johnson et.al., (2007) argue that media stigmatization reinforces negative stereotypes and hinders efforts to address poverty; they also highlight the need for more accurate and nuanced portrayals of poverty in the media to challenge these stereotypes and promote greater understanding and empathy towards those who are struggling financially. Overall, media representation has the power to shape public perceptions about poverty and can have real-world consequences for how poor people are treated and valued in society. It is important for media outlets to be mindful of the impact of their representations and to strive for fair and accurate portrayals of poverty and poor people. A recent example is the slow and inadequate federal response to the previously mentioned train wreck in East Palestine, Ohio simply because they are poor (Skolnick, 2023).

Voter Suppression

Ansolabehere & Hersh (2012) review the unequal access to voting rights for communities of color in the past, and how contemporary policies and practices may limit access to the ballot for these groups, thereby contending that ‘systemic racism’ was a primary driver of disparities in voter suppression. They describe the phenomenon known as survey misreporting, e.g., voter turnout among communities of color in surveys, which in turn could lead to policies and practices that suppress the vote among these groups.

Jim Crow was a historical system of racial segregation and discrimination that existed in the United States from the late 1800s to the mid-1960s; these were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in public places such as schools, housing, and transportation, as well as in voting, employment, and other

areas of life. One of the most effective methods of enforcing Jim Crow laws was through voter suppression. African Americans were denied the right to vote through various means, including literacy tests, poll taxes, and violent intimidation. These tactics were used by Democrats in the former Confederate States to prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote, which in turn allowed White politicians to maintain power and control over political and social institutions.

Similarly, literacy tests were designed to be impossible to pass for most African Americans. Poll taxes required voters to pay a fee to vote, which many African Americans could not afford. Violent intimidation included threats and physical violence against African Americans who attempted to register to vote or vote. These tactics were used to effectively disenfranchise African American voters and prevent them from having a voice in the political process. It was not until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that these practices were effectively banned throughout the former Confederate States, and African Americans were able to exercise their right to vote without fear of discrimination or intimidation (Davidson & Grofman, 1994).

Today, voter suppression refers to any action or practice that aims to prevent or make it more difficult for eligible voters to participate in the electoral process. This can include tactics such as strict voter ID laws, voter roll purges, and polling place closures or reductions. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were significant federal laws that aimed to eliminate discrimination and barriers to voting for all marginalized groups and addressed the various forms of voter suppression, such as literacy tests and poll taxes that disproportionately affected groups, including low-income individuals (Bauer, 2013). In stark contrast to the voter suppression narrative, voter turnout rates in 2020 were higher than in the 2016 election for non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian, and Hispanic race, and origin groups; in addition, 68% of women eligible to vote reported voting — higher than the 65% turnout for men (Fabian, 2021).

Although some politicians claim voter suppression includes attempts to ensure every voter had identification, others would disagree. For instance, during an interview with CBS News, Stacey Abrams, a prominent Black politician, and voting rights activist, expressed her view that it is insulting to suggest that Black people are incapable of obtaining identification cards to vote. Abrams said, “It is not only insulting, it is just patently untrue. The notion that people of color, that poor people, that elderly people can’t find their way to an ID is simply wrong” (CBS, 2021).

Affirmative Action

Affirmative action policies were designed to promote equal opportunities for historically marginalized groups, including people of color, women, and individuals with disabilities, in areas such as education and employment. These policies aim to counteract the effects of past and present discrimination and ensure a level playing field for all individuals. Affirmative action programs do not necessarily involve quotas; but there are certain situations where quotas may be implemented, such as in court-ordered remedies for past discrimination or voluntary affirmative action plans. In most cases, affirmative action might not involve quotas but rather aims to ensure equal opportunities for underrepresented groups in education or employment.

Anderson, et.al. (2018) conducted a series of experiments to examine how people respond to different types of affirmative action policies, including quotas. They found that when quotas are used to achieve diversity goals, they can increase support for affirmative action among members of minority groups, but simultaneously decrease support among members of majority groups. Some individuals may support affirmative action because they believe it is necessary to address past discrimination against certain groups, such as Black Americans or other historically marginalized groups. These supporters may believe that affirmative action is a way to level the playing field and give disadvantaged groups a fair chance to compete for educational or employment opportunities (Bobo, 2003; Dovidio, 2018; Gurin, 2016; Holzer, 2000; Krysan, 2019).

On the other hand, some researchers oppose affirmative action policies because they believe that they are based solely on race or ethnicity, rather than on individual need or merit. They may argue that affirmative action unfairly gives advantages to certain groups, including Black Americans in the top

economic quintile, over other groups that may also be disadvantaged, such as White Americans in the lowest economic quintile (MacDonald, 2008; MacDonald, 2018; Sowell, 2004; Sowell, 2005; Baker, 2023). Sowell (2004) argues that affirmative action policies can have unintended consequences, such as reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating group-based resentments. He also argues that affirmative action policies can be ineffective at achieving their intended goals of promoting equality and that they may even harm the very groups they are meant to help. Sowell suggests that alternative approaches, such as improving education and job training programs, may be more effective at promoting social and economic mobility. While affirmative action has been a controversial topic since its inception, here are some of the current criticisms and opposition:

- Reverse Discrimination: Critics argue that affirmative action policies discriminate against individuals from non-minority groups, leading to reverse discrimination. They argue that individuals should be judged based on their merits and not their race, gender, or ethnicity.
- Stigmatization: Some opponents of affirmative action argue that the policy can stigmatize the beneficiaries, leading to the belief that they are not qualified or deserving of the position they have achieved. This can also create resentment among individuals who feel that their own achievements have been overlooked in favor of affirmative action beneficiaries.
- Lack of diversity: Some critics argue that affirmative action policies do not actually increase diversity but instead create a “token” representation of underrepresented groups. They suggest that more effective ways to increase diversity should be explored, such as recruitment programs or partnerships with organizations that serve underrepresented communities.
- Unintended consequences: Some critics argue that affirmative action policies can have unintended consequences, such as creating a mismatch between the qualifications of the beneficiaries and the requirements of the position. This can lead to reduced performance or lower retention rates, which could harm the individuals being helped by the policy.
- Legal challenges: Affirmative action policies have faced legal challenges over the years, with opponents arguing that they violate the equal protection clause of the Constitution. While the Supreme Court has upheld affirmative action policies in some cases, challenges continue to be brought to the courts.

Overall, while affirmative action policies aimed to address inequalities and promote diversity, there are criticisms and opposition to the policy from those who believe that it is not the most effective or fair way to achieve these goals.

- One study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 2014 found that White participants who believed that they had lost out on a job opportunity to a less-qualified minority candidate were more likely to perceive discrimination and experience negative emotions than those who did not believe they had lost out to a minority candidate (Richeson, et.al., 2014).
- Another study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* in 2015 found that White participants who were primed to think about affirmative action were more likely to perceive discrimination against Whites and less likely to perceive discrimination against minorities in a hypothetical hiring scenario, compared to participants who were not primed to think about affirmative action (Kaiser, 2015).
- A meta-analysis of studies on affirmative action published in the *American Psychologist* found that affirmative action programs had a positive impact on reducing employment and educational disparities for underrepresented groups, but had an opposite impact on Whites (Sackett, et.al, 2004).

Affirmative action was initially created through an executive order by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, and subsequent executive orders and court rulings have further developed the policy. It was not passed by Congress as mandated by the US Constitution. Furthermore, in his dissenting opinion in the 1978 Supreme Court case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, and Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist argued that university admissions systems were “a thinly veiled and unconstitutional

quota system.” Hence, affirmative action policies violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibit employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Baker, 2023a).

GROUNDING THEORY OBSERVATIONS & CAUSAL MODELING

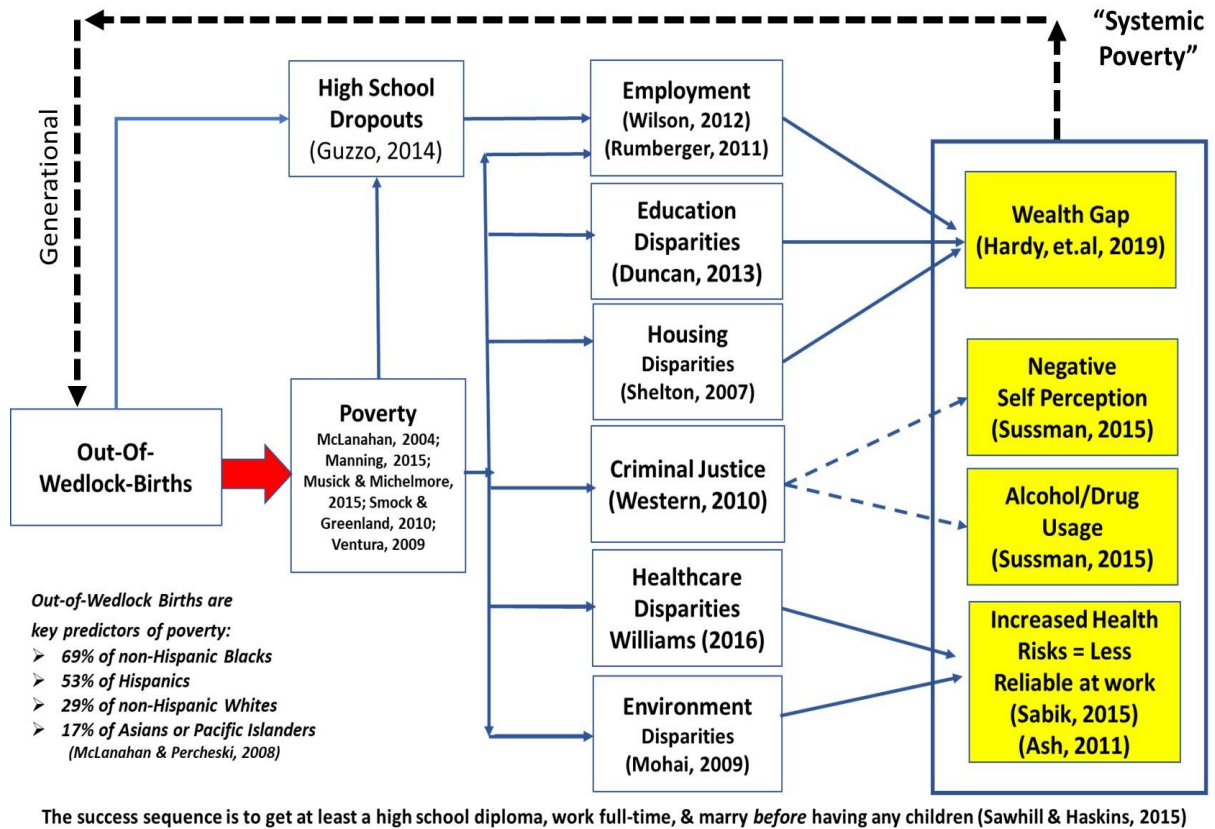
The author researched each key element of what might be considered ‘systemic racism’ however, poverty was the one recurring theme, not race or ethnicity. A critical observation is that impoverished people of all races and ethnicities are more likely to experience high rates of poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, and suicide (Darity, et.al., 2012; Platt, et.al., 2016; Ursano, 2014). The factors that contribute to poverty are complex and multifaceted, and they can vary depending on the individual’s circumstances. As described, some contributing factors to ‘systemic poverty’ include out-of-wedlock births and consequently limited access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities. Additionally, systemic poverty can lead to increased crime as well as feelings of hopelessness and despair, which can contribute to drug addiction as well as suicidal thoughts.

Within the United States, poverty is a significant factor that can contribute to disparities in areas such as education, healthcare, housing, and criminal justice for people of all hues. In contrast, the term ‘systemic racism’ refers to patterns of racial discrimination and inequality that are built into the structures and institutions of society, rather than the actions of individual people. While the term is widely used in social justice discourse, there are criticisms and opposition to its use, including:

- A lack of evidence: One common criticism of the term ‘systemic racism’ is that it is often used without clear evidence or data to support measurable *racism*. Critics argue that this can undermine the credibility of social justice causes and make it difficult to engage in productive dialogue or policy change.
- Oversimplification: Some opponents of the term argue that it can be oversimplified or reductionist, as it implies that all racial inequality can be attributed to systemic factors, rather than the actions of individual people or other factors. They argue that this approach can be counterproductive, as it may overlook important nuances and complexities in social justice issues.
- Divisiveness: Another criticism of the term ‘systemic racism’ is that it can be seen as divisive or polarizing, as it implies that certain groups are either inherently racist or victimized, based on factors such as race and ethnicity. Critics argue that this approach can be harmful, as it may reinforce a sense of victimization or blame among certain groups, rather than promoting collaboration and understanding.
- Lack of agency: Finally, some critics argue that the term ‘systemic racism’ can be disempowering or fatalistic, as it implies that individuals have little agency or control over their own lives and outcomes. They argue that this approach can be harmful, as it may discourage individuals from attempting to take actions to improve their own situations or address social justice issues.

Systemic poverty, not ‘systemic racism’ is the primary challenge for the United States in 2023 (Desmarais, et.al., 2016). Nibert (1996) suggested that “majority/minority” be replaced with “privileged/oppressed,” and if we use a poverty lens then 80-90% of Americans of all hues can be considered privileged, whereas 25 million Whites (67%), 8.5 million Blacks (23%), 1.6 million Asians (5%), 1.2 million people of mixed races (3%), and 791 thousand Native Americans (2%) in poverty could be considered oppressed. Figure 3 portrays the cause-and-effect components of systemic poverty. The single greatest cause of disparities is out-of-wedlock births, not one’s color, which demonstrates predominantly economic and cultural challenges that are common to all races in poverty.

FIGURE 3
THE CYCLE OF POVERTY IMPACTS EVERY RACE & ETHNICITY



There is a domino effect of systemic or generational poverty among the lowest socio-economic groups in the United States as illustrated by this grounded-theory model for the “cycle of poverty.” The key catalyst of “systemic poverty” is the increasing number of out-of-wedlock births. The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Brookings Institute linked poverty with out-of-wedlock births, and both organizations showed the relationship between following a ‘success sequence’ and economic outcomes (Sawhill, 2014; Sawhill & Haskins, 2015). This paints a grim picture for increases in poverty in the USA since 69% of non-Hispanic Blacks, 53% of Hispanics, 29% of non-Hispanic Whites, and 17% of Asians or Pacific Islanders have out-of-wedlock (OOW) births among unmarried mothers in 2019. According to the National Center for Health Statistics OOW is a key predictor of poverty (Martin, et.al, 2021). Research has also consistently shown that children living in single-parent homes are at a greater risk of living in poverty compared to those living in two-parent homes (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Desmarais and Richmond-Garza (2016) found that poverty restricts access to quality education and higher-paying jobs, limiting wealth accumulation. Debt and health problems further reduce investment opportunities. They called for policies targeting the root causes of poverty to promote economic equality.

Social justice proponents are unable to list specific plans, policies, procedures, regulations, and laws that support their accusations of racism, so they usually resort to anecdotal stories, perceptions, and disparities as evidence for their inflated accusations (e.g., Jim Crow laws and redlining no longer exist). So, future research in Critical White Studies (CWS) should focus on addressing the prevalence of anti-White propaganda in politics, the media, and academia. It is increasingly common to blame Whites for perceived or imagined wrongdoings while attributing every instance of inequality or disparity to ‘systemic racism’ and fictitious White supremacy (Baker, 2023b). This groupthink paradigm has led to cries of racism that are becoming ignored similar to *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* parable. It is essential to investigate and develop

strategies to combat this anti-White, hate-based propaganda, which undermines national unity and the goal of creating a more just and equitable society for *all* people.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the ‘systemic poverty’ that people of every hue in America face, there are numerous examples of Black individuals achieving significant financial success (Bell, 2023); this challenges the dominant groupthink narrative that race is the primary factor determining economic outcomes for African Americans (William, 1978). In 2023, there are 1.76 million Black millionaires, 1.76 million Asian millionaires, and 1.54 million Hispanic millionaires in the USA, which refutes the ‘systemic racism’ narrative (Baker, 2023a; Bell, 2023; McCain, 2023). Minority successes can be attributed to many factors, including entrepreneurship, education, and individual agency. One’s socioeconomic status plays a significant role in access to educational and job opportunities, but it is also important to acknowledge the resilience and hard work of individuals of all hues who achieve socioeconomic success despite facing disparities caused by systemic poverty. Senior leaders in politics, business, and academia should not promote an oppressor versus oppressed narrative – instead, they should advocate a national narrative of resilience, hard work, and achievement while providing resources and support to help impoverished individuals of all hues overcome barriers and reach their goals. In so doing, we may yet achieve Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision of a more just and equitable society that includes all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

This research concludes that ‘systemic poverty’ (a.k.a. generational poverty), rather than the overtly bigoted notion of systemic racism, should be the primary focus of both academics and politicians in addressing inequality issues that cut across all races and ethnicities within the United States. By eliminating race-based programs and prioritizing needs-based programs, it is possible to lift people of all backgrounds and hues out of the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Ultimately, the goal should be to create a more just and equitable society that recognizes and responds to the diverse needs and experiences of all members of our nation. By promoting constructive dialogue and engagement across racial and ethnic lines, while simultaneously repudiating violent crime, we can work towards a shared vision of a better future for all Americans.

EPILOGUE

On his deathbed, the younger brother claimed that “*society did this to me*” – the older brother disagreed. Like millions of other people trapped at the bottom, bad decisions create a cycle of dependency on government handouts rather than a focus on individual agency, initiative, and motivation. Decisions made by the younger brother included dropping out of high school, alcohol and drug use, gangs, crimes, and out-of-wedlock births. Systemic poverty has a significant impact on individuals and communities, leading to a cycle that is difficult to break. But, the decision to leave a life of crime, drugs, and poverty must come from within the individual, not another expensive albeit ineffective government program.

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