

Yonette m. Anderson  
Systemic Racism



Yonette M. Anderson  
Professor Nathaniel Perez  
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### Systemic Racism

When most people think about racism, they do not initially contemplate the systems and structures that are associated with racism. The concept of racism is often related to overt expressions of hatred, prejudices, and discriminatory slurs rather than the underlying systems and structures that facilitate it. However, racism is not always immediately visible or conscious, as it can be deeply ingrained in societal structures and institutions. This type of racism is systemic, persistent, and not confined to isolated incidents of bias or discrimination. Instead, it permeates the very institutions and systems of society. When legal authority and institutional control uphold a group's prejudice, it is termed systemic racism. "This authority and control transform individual prejudice into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the society's default and is reproduced automatically. Racism is a system."<sup>1</sup> (Diangelo 21).

Understanding and addressing systemic racism is essential for creating a more just and equitable society. It also requires the willingness to examine and challenge longstanding assumptions and practices and work towards developing policies and systems that promote equality and inclusion for all people, regardless of race. Systemic racism affects everything from access to education, healthcare, and employment to criminal justice, housing, and political representation. In addition, it impacts immigration, environmental justice, economic disparities,

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<sup>1</sup> Diangelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Beacon: Boston Press, 2018), 21

social services, sports, and media representation. Systemic racism operates on consciousness and levels, often perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes, biases, and prejudices. It can be perpetuated even without overly racist intentions or actions.

The criminal justice and educational systems are examples of systemic racism characterized by discriminatory policies. Mass incarceration refers to the unequal imprisonment of people of color in the United States. "Criminal justice reform is a pressing issue because of the stigma attached to incarceration. It is easy to assume that if people are guilty of a crime, they deserve whatever punishments they receive behind bars. But it is important to remember that ending up in prison is sometimes flawed and unfair."<sup>2</sup> (Tisby 174-175).

Despite representing only thirty-nine percent of the country's population, people of color account for over sixty percent of incarcerated people. This issue is multifaceted and stems from a legacy of racial discrimination and inequality. "No other country in the world imprisons a large percentage of ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid."<sup>3</sup> (Alexander 8).

School-to-prison is another phenomenon where school policies and practices contribute to the disproportionate punishment and criminalization of students of color, ultimately leading them from the classroom to the criminal justice system. Various factors fuel this pipeline, including discriminatory disciplinary practices, over-policing of schools, and the criminalization of minor offenses. Studies have demonstrated that students of color are more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested for the same behaviors as their white counterparts. Furthermore, police officers are increasingly stationed in schools, leading to more significant

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<sup>2</sup> Tisby, Jemar. *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey towards Racial Justice*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 174-175.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010) 8.

interaction with law enforcement for minor offenses that school administrators would typically address. "This pipeline reflects the prioritization of incarceration over education. The school-to-prison pipeline traces the well-worn path of predominantly impoverished urban youth of color from decrepit, underfunded antiquated schools to luxurious, earmarked, state-of-the-art prisons."<sup>4</sup> (Gilliard 81.)

Systemic racism affects people of color in the realm of health equity. "Health equity means everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. Achieving this requires removing obstacles to health – such as poverty and discrimination and their consequences, which include powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs with fair pay; quality education, housing, and health care; and safe environment."<sup>5</sup> (Behavioral Policy Institute) The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the significant health disparities experienced by this population, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latino individuals. The pandemic has disproportionately affected them with higher infection rates, hospitalization, and mortality. This disparity is partly due to the greater prevalence of underlying health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension, among people of color. Structural racism and unequal access to healthcare have contributed to the higher incidence of these conditions among this population. Additionally, many people of color work in essential jobs that require close interaction with the public, which increases their risk of exposure to the virus. They may also live in crowded housing conditions with limited access to healthcare and experience systemic discrimination in healthcare, all of which contribute to a higher infection and mortality rate from Covid-19.

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<sup>4</sup> Gilliard, Dominique Dubois. *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018) 81.

<sup>5</sup> Behavioral Policy Institute. "What is Health Equity?" December 2018, <https://behavioralpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/What-is-Health-Equity>.

In the past three decades, the percentage of overweight or obese individuals grew thirty percent among all adults, to seventy-three percent from fifty-six percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to the author of "The 1619 Project," "One of the great ironies of sugar's history in the United States is that the brutal work of the enslaved created an industry whose success in producing unhealthy food for mass consumption has taken its greatest toll on Black communities today."<sup>6</sup> (Hannah-Jones 74).

There is a lot at stake in addressing systemic racism. At its core, systemic racism threatens the fundamental human right to equality and justice. The persistence of systemic racism can be devastating, especially for marginalized communities, and can result in several adverse outcomes, as discussed in this narrative. Furthermore, it can potentially limit economic growth and opportunities, decrease social cohesion and erode trust in institutions. Ultimately, it may lead to political instability, social unrest, and even violence.

At the core of systemic racism lies a persistent perpetuation of divergent treatment and inequalities based on race. It divides white individuals and communities from people of color, resulting in a power imbalance deeply ingrained in many societies. The disparity created by systemic racism is deeply rooted in the fabric of society and tends to persist across generations, making it a complex and challenging issue to address. An effective response requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach encompassing policy, law, culture, and personal behavior changes. Stereotypes that associate people of color with criminality or laziness, for example, have a powerful impact on how individuals are perceived and treated. Therefore, addressing and challenging these views and harmful stereotypes is crucial to create more significant equity.

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah-Jones, Nikole. *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, The New York Times Magazine. New York: Random House, 2021, 74.

Given the immense pain and trauma inflicted by the legacy of racial justice, the pursuit of racial reconciliation is essential to advancing ongoing racial justice. Through this process, we can strive to establish a pathway toward healing and justice for all individuals and communities impacted by racial inequality. This requires confronting and addressing the systemic racism and inequities that have shaped our societies, allowing us to move towards a path of recovery and growth. As Natasha Morrison stated, "Historical truth plays an important role in understanding how we arrive at our current racial tension."<sup>7</sup> (Morrison 7). She further cited, "Truth frees us to grow. It frees us to see. It frees us to be aware. Frees us from the bondage of racial sin. Frees us to have courage for difficult conversations."<sup>8</sup> (Morrison 32). Ultimately, racial reconciliation is necessary for the thriving and flourishing of all individuals and communities. It involves constructing connections and bridges across racial divides, cultivating a shared understanding and respect, and collaborating toward a unified vision of a fair and just society.

Racial reconciliation is neglected due to many factors, including individual, societal, and systemic barriers. Political will and leadership often fall short in prioritizing, and investing in such efforts, potentially stemming from a lack of comprehension of the underlying causes. Nonetheless, racial reconciliation is a vital component of realizing genuine racial justice.

Racial reconciliation is not just about overcoming the past but also about creating a better future. It involves working toward a complete systemic change to ensure equal opportunity and access to resources for all individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity. Natasha Morrison sheds light on the process of racial reconciliation when she expressed "The aim of reconciliation, whether marital or racial, is the restoration of relationship."<sup>9</sup> (Morrison 177). According to

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<sup>7</sup> Morrison, Natasha. *Be The Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart Racial Reconciliation* WaterBrook, 2019. P. 7

<sup>8</sup> (Ibid. 32).

<sup>9</sup> Morrison, Natasha. *Be The Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart Racial Reconciliation* WaterBrook, 2019. P.177

Morrison, racial reconciliation encompasses a comprehensive journey that includes spiritual, personal, and societal changes aimed at promoting greater unity, equity, and justice.

Racial reconciliation poses a significant challenge because it confronts centuries of systemic racism, discrimination, and inequity. Genuine healing and forgiveness require the removal of the band-aid from past wounds, but the scars run deep. The historical legacy of slavery, colonization, and segregation has created systemic barriers deeply entrenched in society and still affects people of color today. Additionally, building trust between racial and ethnic groups is difficult, given a history of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Many resist change due to fear, lack of understanding, or the belief that the status quo is adequate. Achieving racial harmony and justice requires a sustained commitment to learning, empathy, and action. Though a challenging and complex process, it is vital to fix a broken society.

Racial reconciliation is difficult because it involves confronting and undoing centuries of systemic racism, discrimination, and inequity. It requires earnestly working towards genuine healing and forgiveness. It is a challenge because the wounds of the past are deep as the historical legacy of slavery, colonization, and segregation has created deeply seated systemic barriers that continue to affect people of color today. Furthermore, building trust between different racial and ethnic groups can be challenging especially when there is a history of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Change can be difficult, and many people oppose efforts to address racism and inequity. This can be a result of trepidation, a lack of understanding, or a belief that the status quo is working. Ultimately, racial reconciliation requires a sustained commitment to understanding, empathy, and action. While it is a challenging and complex process, it is essential to creating harmony and justice for all society.

Achieving racial reconciliation can be most effectively accomplished through different authentic avenues such as education and awareness, earnest listening and open dialogue, systemic and structural change advocacy, activism, reparation, and restitution. However, I believe racial reconciliation cannot be accomplished without repentance and forgiveness. Jemar Tisby mentioned:

The impetus for public justice in the Christian life comes from the ethical demands of love. The most eloquent words and greatest talents of preaching or teaching about justice amount to a discordant cacophony if those utterances are not undergirded by love. The deepest knowledge of theology, policies, history, and science mean nothing if love is not the ligament binding that information together. Even the most admirable sacrifices, like giving away all your money to the poor or spending your life suffering for the sake of others, are only a form of pseudo-saviorism if those efforts are not infused with love. You cannot pursue justice without love.<sup>10</sup> (Tisby 145).

Undoubtedly, achieving racial reconciliation is a multifaceted and ever-evolving undertaking that demands unwavering dedication, persistent endeavor, and an eagerness to acquire new insights and knowledge. Nonetheless, it is imperative that we transcend our prejudices and approach this issue with an unprejudiced mindset in order to catalyze transformation. “Martin Luther King Jr. called for us to be lovestruck with each other, not colorblind towards each other. To be love struck is to care, to have deep compassion, and to be concerned for each and every individual, including the poor and vulnerable.”<sup>11</sup>(xlix). Hence, it is our collective responsibility to embrace racial reconciliation as a driving force as we move ahead and fulfill our role in dismantling systemic racism in our societies and beyond.

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<sup>10</sup> Tisby, Jemar. *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey towards Racial justice*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 145.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010) xlix.

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