



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Racial Equity & Women's Health Ministries

FACING RACISM:

A Vision of the Intercultural Community

Antiracism Study Guides



Week 5. Enduring Legacy of Racism in the US

Introduction

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

One of the toughest tasks in struggling for justice is to have the strength to look injustice squarely in the face. Although it is painful, acknowledging the ongoing realities of structural racism in the U.S. is a necessary step in moving towards the Beloved Community, the New Creation.

Economics

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

Education

The Supreme Court ruled against segregation in 1954. Many communities, primarily in the South, resisted integration in the early years. However, by "1972, due to a strong federal enforcement, only about 25 percent of black students in the South attended

schools” that were strongly segregated, meaning “in which at least 9 out of 10 students were racial minorities” (Hannah-Jones 2014). However, in the 1990s the Supreme Court greatly diminished efforts at desegregation and segregation is increasing. Today “some 43 percent of Latino and 38 percent of black students are in ‘intensely segregated’ schools” (Zalan 2014). A 2014 report notes that “Latino students have become more segregated every year since they began collecting data in the late 1960s” (ibid.). Such segregation is profoundly linked to inequality. A recent report from the Department of Education Office for Civil Rights “found that racial minorities are more likely than white students to be suspended from school, to have less access to rigorous math and science classes, and to be taught by lower-paid teachers with less experience” (Rich 2014).

Policing

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

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

Mass Incarceration

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

people. While the United States is home to only 5% of the world's population, we house 25% of the world's prisoners (ibid.)

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

Immigrants are often "detained" in centers not unlike prisons. A number of laws, including the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) of 1996, have encouraged long-term detainment of unauthorized immigrants for even minor offenses. The United States now has "the largest immigration detention system in the world," filled with "undocumented immigrants, unaccompanied minors, and asylum seekers" (Global Detention Project 2009). The detention centers in the United States, many of which have also been privatized for profit, have been widely criticized for human rights abuses and inadequate care.

Immigration

Throughout the history of the U.S., immigration has been a racially charged issue. At different points in U.S. history, immigration policies have been used to exclude people of certain racial groups and encourage people of specific national origins. While the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the most restrictive and racially oriented immigration policies, immigration into the United States is still limited and regulated based on country of origin. This legislation also introduced a preference for highly skilled people and those with relations in the U.S. This has skewed immigration towards people who are well-educated and elite within their own countries, a marked departure from prior generations of immigrants to the U.S.

Wait times to enter the country vary based on the country of origin; those who seek a family visa as siblings of U.S. citizens from Mexico, India, and the Philippines, for instance, have wait times of over 20 years. Over 4.4 million people are waiting for visas. People from Europe experience a much shorter wait (VISANOW, Inc. 2015).

For those immigrants coming from Latin America, entry into the U.S. has become very dangerous. Immigration policies and processes as they currently stand leave little room to fill low-wage labor needs during economic upswings through legal immigration. The supply of low-wage jobs (and active recruitment south of the border by U.S. meat-packing and processing companies and U.S.-based agriculture) draws a stream of migrants looking for work, many of whom lack the proper permits. The building of the wall between the U.S. and Mexico forces unauthorized immigrants to use longer, more dangerous routes through the desert. Immigrants coming from southern Asia are seeking to enter the U.S. through Latin America, as well.

The language around immigration is highly charged and racialized, creating an atmosphere in which people from certain racial groups (particularly Hispanic/Latinos/Latinas and Asian) are seen by law enforcement and immigration enforcement as potentially undocumented, regardless of how long their families have been in the U.S. People from these immigrant groups are disproportionately impacted by negative cultural bias, regulations and changing laws around immigrants and the rights of immigrants to access services and housing. Despite evidence to the contrary, immigrants (especially those from Latin America and Asia) are accused of taking advantage of the U.S. instead of being important contributors.

Discussion Questions

1. Does any of this information surprise you? Why or why not?
2. How has the enduring legacy of racism affected you and your family? What does it mean if the answer to that question is not readily apparent?
3. How does racism play a role in the structures of our community, including business, education, and policing?
4. Do you see the realities of mass incarceration and immigration in our community? How?
5. How might our church take one small step towards justice in one of these areas?

Resources

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