

**The Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies**  
**Volume 4 | 2025-2026**

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## **Letter from the Chair of SFSU'S Criminal Justice Studies Department**

Welcome to the fourth volume of the *Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies* (ARCJS). ARCJS is a student-led, peer-reviewed journal publishing critical analyses of law, crime, and justice systems and their connections to broader social, political, and economic structures. Housed in the Department of Criminal Justice Studies at San Francisco State University, ARCJS demonstrates our commitment to building a collaborative and inclusive scholarly community, as reflected in the partnership with John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

This is my first year as Chair, and engaging with the work in this volume has been one of the most interesting and rewarding experiences so far. Before stepping into this role, I already knew ARCJS well from sharing an office with one of its faculty advisors, Dr. Albert de la Tierra. I saw up close how much time goes into bringing each volume to life. There were countless Zoom meetings, detailed feedback on drafts, and many conversations with students as they worked through their ideas. The journal simply would not come together without that level of commitment.

The work featured in this volume reflects the depth of student scholarship and its potential to reimagine more just and thoughtful approaches to justice. I have learned so much from reading these insightful contributions. The volume brings together a diverse range of work, from historical analyses and poems to rigorous methodological approaches and narratives grounded in lived experience. As someone born and raised in Sweden, a country long known for more welfarist approaches to crime, I found the historical analyses in this volume particularly compelling. As Swedish penal policy shifts toward more punitive approaches, including longer sentences and expanded reliance on incarceration, this work illuminates how Sweden may be repeating shifts previously seen in the United States. This underscores the need to critically engage with and learn from the past.

This volume is a testament to the strength, creativity, and critical insight of our students. I would like to thank everyone who made this volume possible. I look forward to seeing how ARCJS continues to grow and amplify student voices in the years ahead.

Carina Gallo, Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair, Department of Criminal Justice Studies  
San Francisco State University

## Letters from the Editors-in-Chiefs

Dear Reader,

I would first like to congratulate all the authors for their hard work and for being part of Volume 4 of the Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies (ARCJS). The insight that you brought from your lived and academic experience is something to be proud of. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Albert de la Tierra, Dr. Marisa Tramontano, and the editors at John Jay College of Criminal Justice for their hard work and collaboration on this journal. Lastly, I would like to thank the peer reviewers Michael DaSilva, Tim Ward, Desirre Prado, Donovan Castellero, Daniella Krynsky, and Jasmine Kimbrough, who dedicated their time to reviewing the papers and provided exceptional feedback.

Academic settings historically were not often welcoming to those of us who dare use our authentic voices. Many times, people who don't speak and write in a manner that fits a colonizing lens do not participate in—much less produce—research; which is especially concerning when most of the research is about them and their interaction with the criminal justice system. This leaves individuals who are not always impacted by this system with the loudest voice.

Accounts of police brutality and over-policing were often left out of major newspapers and even academic journals simply because the accounts of events were not told in a “scholarly” way, or did not fit the narrative of Eurocentric research models. This has created a divide in how the criminal justice system is researched. That is, reformist and conservative ideologies that view the criminal justice system as a mechanism of public safety dominate the discourse while radical ideologies that recognize the criminal justice system to be state violence are marginalized.

Today, uncritical acceptance of the legitimacy of police and prisons enables federal brutality and human rights violations of vulnerable populations. Under the current administration, ICE agents have been deployed to cities and have arrested anyone who “looks” undocumented, without probable cause. In California, propositions like 36 were passed, while Proposition 6 was opposed. The idea that more incarceration is the answer to public safety (Prop 36) was upheld and that removing slavery from California's constitution (Prop 6) was rejected by California's voters shows that we need more impacted voices in these spaces. Under my leadership, ARCJS welcomes authors from historically excluded populations and encourages analyses that aim to comprehend the root causes of criminalized social problems.

The ARCJS is a critical criminology journal that encourages students to use their own voice to articulate the issues and impacts that they see within this system. They analyze topics from juvenile justice, policing, and mental health in the criminal justice system and question if this system is truly about public safety within their communities or a continuation of systemic white supremacy in our society. I hope you enjoy reading these articles as much as I did.

Sincerely,  
Gabriel Singer  
Editor in Chief ARCJS, San Francisco State University

It is a great honor to bring to you this year's volume of *The Annual Review of Criminal Justice Studies*. Students from both John Jay and San Francisco State poured their hearts and souls to give pieces that spoke to the issues they saw in the world. Many of these pieces are particularly special as they are personal accounts and experiences of the very systems that other students are critiquing. It has been a great honor to see how everyone has grown since the beginning of this project. I want to give a special thanks to Gabe, Editor in Chief on the San Francisco side, for his amazing communication and his artistic contributions to this project. There was never a moment where I couldn't just reach out to him to discuss anything that was bothering me. To Gabe, I thank you for all your hard work and effort in the making of this journal. To Dr. Albert de la Tierra, Dr. Marisa Tramontano, thank you for seeing greatness in me and giving me the space to be great. This has been a wonderful experience.

Before we begin, I'd like to give reverence to all the ancestors that paved the way for me to be here. To my grandparents who came to this country and planted seeds of hope. I was that seed and I am now a mighty sunflower, I am the incarnate of joy. Ancestral veneration is at the core of my beliefs. I believe that one day I too will be an ancestor and bear witness to the accomplishments of those who are here and to those who have yet to come. This is not exclusive to my blood, it is extended to those who have held me during this time. To be a part of this project has been both a blessing and a great test of strength. From management, to cover making, to working on the layout, I have learned a great deal about myself. Even more so, I've strengthened my relationship with spirit and have learned much from the elders who also held me during this process.

To be love is my philosophy on life. Love is not simply expressed via words or actions, it is an experience. All I am is love and as such I am an experience. This journal was birthed of love and it too has been an experience. This experience could not have been made possible without the keen eye of my wonderful assistant Aleeyah Hassan. From late night text, to me overthinking, to me bothering her about things I forgot along the way, Aleeyah has truly been my rock in this process. There is no one more qualified, dedicated, and determined like Aleeyah and for that I am so grateful for her presence in this project. To my amazing team, Rheanna Doogar, Florian Griese, Danielle Key, Hansly Garden Mauricio, Haya Shahzad, Izzy Taveras, Josie-Grace Valerius, I am incredibly grateful for all of them and amazed by how far many of them have come. The team this year was mainly composed of authors and editors from last edition and to watch them grow has made this project even more enjoyable. A special thanks to Haya, Hansly, and Izzy for always keeping the project lively and for all the hard work you've put into the journal. Haya, thank you for placing your legacy in my hands, I pray that I have lived up to your expectations of me. This project also bore new fruit for me. To Shania, thank you for all the little convos and the energy you always brought to space. Thank you for this new found friendship, your future is beyond bright and I'm excited to see all that you accomplish. Finally I was not able to do so without the next generation of ancestors. To my friend group, to the ones who have never left my side, I am eternally grateful for your blessings upon me. To my dear friends and future ancestors Izzy, Fiona, Rajaa, Tristan, Savanna, thank you for always reminding me exactly who I am and what I am capable of. To my Mom, thank you for always lending me an ear and watching as my ideas unfold into reality.

Thus, after a long year, It is our pleasure to introduce to you the work of our amazing authors. From deconstructing violence against women, to discussions around the prison system, to powerful manifestos, our authors have worked tirelessly to produce for you all these amazing works. We aim to challenge the general idea of "Criminal Justice". We ask you, "Criminal to whom?" and "To what standard?" "What is justice?", "Justice for whom?", and "Where can we find justice?" In a world full of uncertainty, these authors have made one thing certain, we will not be quiet. We will continue to fight for another tomorrow. A tomorrow where we don't have to dream of another "first" minority in a position of power. A tomorrow where freedom is not something to be questioned, it is granted for us all. A tomorrow

where a culture of hate and violence is changed with one of love and compassion. Until tomorrow comes, we fight for now. My vision for this journal was a field of sunflowers. They represent joy. For what greater act of resistance is to be joyful in these uncertain times. I bring you ARCJS Volume 4, a bundle of sunflowers.

Sincerely,  
Jayden Richiez  
Editor in Chief ARCJS, John Jay College of Criminal Justice

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# 1. On Violence



*Art By: Shania McCombs*



**The Enabler of Violence  
Against Women: A Troubled  
Legacy**

KimNgan Diep

## **Introduction**

One in five U.S. women have been raped in their life, one in ten raped by their intimate partners, and 81% of women “reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault” (National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.). Additional data indicate that victimization is especially high among ages 18-34, that the majority of perpetrators are acquaintances, if not intimate partners, and that IPV survivors face 77-81% re-victimization by the same perpetrator (National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.).

This paper seeks to answer the question of how the U.S.’s patriarchal values have led to contemporary forms of structural (through the propagation of social normalization and neglect) and institutional (by law enforcement) violence perpetrated against women, along with the consequences of such realities. In doing so, this paper is structured into four parts, analyzing the historical implications of patriarchal social ordering on contemporary systemic violence against women (VAW). The first part illustrates the current myths and stereotypes around domestic VAW. Part two contextualizes the historical social sentiment that validates contemporary structural and institutional violence discussed in parts three and four. Ultimately, this paper argues that the United States, operating under the legacy of neglect and normalization of violence against women, is culpable as a secondary driver of harm by perpetrating structural violence against female survivors of harm while also exacerbating the severity of institutional consequences.

## ***Violence Against Women***

Violence against women (VAW) is a broad term encapsulating any acts of gender-based violence resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological harm against a female. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a specific form of VAW occurring between romantic relationships. And the battered woman syndrome (BWS) is a “post-traumatic stress disorder caused by repeated and long-term abuse” that have “been used to explain why women stay in abusive relationships” (Maymon, 2022, pp.100-1), and is meant to support “self-defense claims made by battered women charged with homicide of their abusers” (Roberts, 2023, p.132). These three concepts are violence rooted in social control, power disparities, and gender norms.

By articulating the concepts of disproportionate harm against females, attention is consequently directed to the issue of minimal post-harm support across three key social pillars of justice:

- 1) Law enforcement (leading to underreporting due to expectations of secondary harm),
- 2) The criminal legal system (victims are probed for credibility, forced to relive harm), and
- 3) Their community (displaying further social normalization of violence, desensitization, and minimization of VAW).

## **Historical Backdrop**

To understand contemporary realities faced by survivors of harm, scholars emphasize the need to discern underlying myths surrounding the issue of VAW. Both Roberts (2023), who asserts that myths “hinder both an accurate knowledge of the [realities]... of women battering and effective intervention” (p.4), and Maymon (2022) argues that even with increasing understandings of BWS and awareness “of the legal and psychological issues applicable..., gender biases and stereotypes continue to taint courts’ treatment of female defendants” (p.101).

In doing so, Roberts (2023) opens this book by discussing nine myths, ranging from justifications for violence, victim reasoning, and minimization of cases of “women battering” (pp.4-9), underscoring how biases taint judgment and hinder justice.

## ***Myths: The Erasure & Neglect of Female Victims***

As such, understanding contemporary treatment of female survivors requires an understanding of the historical context that gave rise to and facilitated the dissemination of such myths. Historically, IPV was considered a family issue to be dealt with behind closed doors, without interference from law enforcement. The rationale derives from “societal expectations” governing the “roles of husbands and wives”, to which husbands were “the head of the home, with wives expected to submit to their leadership” (“Drunkard”, 2006, para.1-2). Under these grounds, physical violence was seen as a “necessary evil... enforcing each

sex's divinely ordained role" (para.2)– a quote that also denotes religious authority. Essentially, domestic violence was accepted as a one-sided divine right to uphold male hegemonic sovereignty over their 'property', thereby placing husbands outside of the law and wives outside of protection.

In practice, institutions support this sentiment through: police reluctance to respond to domestic violence calls, legitimizing male abusers by virtue "that 'a man's home is his castle'", courts' minimization of dangers, and discouragement of filing cases (Roberts, 2023, p.87). Such treatment of the battered women phenomenon served to ignore and downplay the female experiences, both in the past and present.

### ***Theories of Male-Inflicted Violence Against Women***

In understanding the sociological theories of such uni-gendered historical and contemporary realities, I posit the social dominance theory (SDT), which sees societies organizing themselves into hierarchies of unequal benefits, wherein individuals develop legitimizing myths– stereotypes, ideologies, and practices that justify those inequalities (Jamshed et al., 2022). Thus, SDT can be viewed alongside a patriarchal lens of gender-based violence wherein justified power imbalance ideologies are disseminated through gendered myths, resulting in the undermining of female voices, as part of a broader system of state and cultural oppression.

This section highlights the historical context behind a contemporary issue, insinuating that these forms of VAW are still being perpetrated. The remaining sections will describe the realities of post-harm experiences of survivors.

### ***The Gendered Aspect of Violence: Structural Violence***

As previously stated, one of the socially perceived arenas of justice is law enforcement, yet, within the VAW crisis, law enforcement is the primary perpetrator of secondary victimization, thus becoming another institution of harm.

### ***Socio-Structural Model of IPV***

The socio-structural model of IPV is a feminist lens, asserting that IPV is a problem "deeply rooted in the historical imbalance of power between men and women" (Roberts, 2023, p.72). Ultimately, violence is used as a "form of social control over women", and "lawmakers, judges, and enforcement personnel" are social actors implicitly and explicitly permitting the persistence of such sentiment (pp.72-3). Therefore, this model, combined with the social dominance theory, is this paper's framework explaining how systemic violence occurs and operates under the cover of normalcy and social neglect at the hands of certain actors.

### ***Structured Violence***

Structured violence, regarding VAW, is the systematic and institutional practices that disproportionately harm women due to gendered power imbalance. As discussed, the historic sentiment behind IPV lies in the idea that "violence in the family is a hidden problem" (Roberts, 2023, p.68). Such a notion becomes the underlying framework in the current U.S. state of structured violence when "the institution of marriage", acting as a privacy shield, "ha[ve] been viewed as a license to abuse" (p.68).

As explained by Jamshed et al. (2022), "structural interventions tend to discredit and dismiss many victims of domestic violence" (p. 48), negating progressive protection laws like the Violence Against Women Act. This refers to practices like inadequate legal protections, lenient sentencing for male offenders, violence minimization, case dismissals, victim discrediting, and victim blaming; practices which are all forms of secondary victimization– a subset of structured violence describing the re-traumatization of victims through institutional practices that inflict and expose survivors to continued harm.

Another form of secondary victimization is sexual double standards, which is a "legitimizing myth" endorsing "gendered expectations" characterized as "slut shaming, sexual coercion, and sexism and

gender inequality” (Jamshed et al., 2022, p.46). Jamshed et al. examined the relationship between sexual double standards and VAW, finding “social dominance predicts the justifications of violence via endorsement of sexual double standards” (p.57). This finding suggests that cultures with historically created gender hierarchical myths are the strongest indicators of VAW justification, thus creating an institution of structured violence on the basis of gender disparities.

State institutions (law enforcement and legal professionals) are thus enablers of structured violence when secondary victimization tactics are employed. Lorenz et al. (2019) found that decisions to report sexual assault are weighted by survivors and support providers (those who provide informal support post-assault) who take into consideration the “perceived strength of their case, perceptions of police, and the possibility of institutional bias” (para.1). Thus, not only does this structured violence result in a continual suffering experienced by survivors, but it also produces inaccurate data (which has important implications for perceived severity of VAW and policy effectiveness) fueled by a social distrust of law enforcement and the justice system due to expectations of secondary victimization.

## **Exacerbating Implications**

### ***The Community: A Lack of Informal Support***

According to Roberts (2023), “institutional and community decisions” formally and informally act as obstacles, “compromising women’s safety, human rights, and fundamental freedoms”, through individual responses by family, friends, neighbors, and professionals (“case-by-case decisions”) and “categorical decisions”, in which limited resource availability restrict the ability of women to escape abuses (pp.14-15).

This is demonstrated by Bent-Goodley et al.’s (2023) study, focusing on the Black communities’ perception of IPV. The study found that (a) those abused suffer a stigma that “something is wrong with [that] person or they are doing something wrong” (“Findings” section, para.3), and (b) that witnesses should “mind their own business” because IPV is “a private issue” (“Findings” section, para.4). These perceptions, combined with the view that police are escalators of conflict– due to distrust based on racism, prior discrimination, and unreliability based on “poor police response” (“Findings” section, para.10-12)– explain why police are called only in situations when participants felt there were no other *informal* options.

Therefore, if victims of violence cannot go to law enforcement nor their own communities without facing some type of secondary victimization, then the current social and institutional state of the U.S. is actively and passively inflicting continued suffering onto an already disproportionately victimized group.

### ***Legal Implications: Women Who Kill Their Abusers?***

Another consequence of structured violence deals with women who kill their male partners. The 1989 National Coalition Against Domestic Violence found that females who kill their partners are sentenced to 15 years compared to males’ two to six years average (Maymon, 2022, p.105).

*Roberts (2023) explains that because potential jurors have been found to lack accurate knowledge about the dynamics of battering; subscribe to myths and stereotypes of battered women; sanction the use of violence against women; and blame the victim, it has been argued that viable self-defense claims on behalf of battered women are compromised. (pp.132-3)*

This exemplifies how structured violence is employed here to disproportionately sentence women harshly while simultaneously ignoring women’s suffering (through dismissals of battering defenses), in addition to failing to protect battered women by allowing men to serve short sentences for violence.

## **Conclusion**



Females in the U.S. report disproportionately high rates of violence, with violence committed by intimate male partners accounting for the majority of these cases. This is further exacerbated by structural violence within current U.S. legal and social institutions, which suffers from the legacy of its hierarchically-produced legitimizing myths, facilitating a space of neglect, devaluation, and violence normalization that re-victimizes an already disproportionately terrorized population. Ultimately, victims’ sufferings do not end after the initial acts of violence as they continue to be abandoned by the law, by their state, and by their community. Although there has been growth in recognition for battered women, the

sentiment surrounding IPV and the practices by law enforcement, judges, and the community continues to display a desensitization of violence committed against women.

As this paper argues on the historical implications of patriarchy on contemporary forms of structural violence against female survivors, solutions to combat VAW should focus on the foundational gendered aspect of structural violence— directly combating this history of voiceless neglect with female empowerment. Through female empowerment, especially in leadership, the social culture of the U.S. shifts to reflect greater prioritization towards issues faced by women, subsequently increasing public trust (which can be measured in greater police reports) and greater resource allocation to sufficiently help survivors.

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**Curiosity Killed the Cat:  
Violence Against Felines and  
The Feminine in Horror**

Anna Morin

## **Doesn't Get Stranger Than This: Introduction**

As I write this, the finale of the Netflix show *Stranger Things* has come and gone. The sci-fi/thriller show began streaming in 2016, spawning various novels, lines of merchandise, and even a Broadway show. I was lucky enough to see the Broadway show with my dad on the second night of its opening.

The show was fantastic. The acting, the special effects, the story, everything was incredibly entertaining. The show followed a high school boy discovering he had telekinetic abilities, and how the interdimensional creature that gave him those abilities was slowly corrupting him. About halfway through the show, the audience witnesses the point of no return for the main character. While walking home from school, the boy comes across a cat. Experimenting with his telekinetic abilities, the boy lifts the cat into the air and breaks all its bones in a horrendously visceral display of violence and power. I cannot stress enough that the special effects that allowed this to be performed were very impressive. This act marks the start of the main character's descent into evil. From then on, other characters reference various missing pets (such as a dog and a bird) over the course of the rest of the show, but the only other animal we see the main character kill on stage is a lab rat. Two other characters investigating the missing pets later find the dead cat's body in a shallow grave, and the stage lights flash and images of maggot-ridden guts briefly appear in the background of the stage to shock the audience.

When the show ended, my dad and I went to stand in line for the merchandise table. I hoped I could get a t-shirt or maybe one of the monster plushies I could see on the shelves. However, as we neared the front of the line, I saw something that shocked me: a plushie of the cat that was killed during the show. It had been a cute orange tabby cat, but the plushie additionally featured the cat's eyes crossed out and its tongue hanging out.

It was dead.

It was our turn at the merchandise table, and there weren't a lot of options left. I asked for a shirt and a keychain. My dad asked to see the cat plushie. As it was handed to him, he cringed and nervously laughed. When I raised my brow at him, he silently handed the toy to me. When I took it, I could feel there was a plastic skeleton inside the cat. "It's flexible!" the girl manning the merch table told us. Sure enough, I bent one of the cat's limbs upward and it stayed in place. I shuddered and handed the plush back to the girl. We paid for my t-shirt and keychain and went home.

When I got home, I took out my items and admired them. I took the keychain out of its package and got a closer look. There was a charm with the name of the show, a charm of a jar of spiders... And a charm of a cat, split in two, the two halves held together by a thin chain. Immediately, I took that charm off the keyring with disgust and tossed it in my desk drawer. My own three cats, Skipper, Gonta, and Arlene, sat around and watched me with curiosity.

From that day, I wondered why anyone would want merchandise of a dead, mangled cat. Why would anyone even make merchandise of a dead cat in the first place? However, the realization finally dawned on me. If that cat had traded places with the dog that had been killed off-stage, people would be *upset*. Nobody would have dared to make merchandise of a dead, mangled dog in the first place.

I should note that I am quite biased about this subject. I love horror movies, but I love cats much more. I live with my three cats, each rescued from the life of a stray, and they are the loves of my life. Back in my home state, my parents have eight other cats whom I grew up with and love dearly. My parents also have had dogs all my life. I tolerate dogs (for the most part), they just tend to have too much energy for my taste. However, I suspect one of the reasons I so fiercely love cats is because of how unloved they truly can be. They are misunderstood animals. Dogs are praised for their loyalty and companionship, but cats are "aloof" and "independent". Dogs are "man's best friend", but cats aren't graced with such a title.

When a cat is killed in horror media (*Stranger Things* being just one example) it is done flippantly, not dissimilar to how horror media treats women. Women in horror movies are often boiled down to plot devices and tropes, much like how cats are boiled down to jump-scares and shock value. Both cats and women are disposable "objects" to serve the main plot. How cats and women are treated in the horror media we enjoy is a product of real-life misogynistic beliefs and gendered stereotypes.

### ***“Man’s” Best Friend: Gendering Pet Ownership***

When considering the gender spectrum, “male” and “female” tend to be seen as opposites. The masculine end of the binary is traditionally associated with strength, aggressiveness, protectiveness, and natural leadership. The feminine end of the binary is traditionally associated with softness, nurturing, grace, and emotional complexity. In the modern age, many of these gender norms are regularly challenged, but one stereotype seems to stand firm: dogs are normatively perceived as masculine and cats are normatively perceived as feminine.

Much like the traditional man, dogs are expected to be strong, aggressive, and protective. By contrast, like the traditional woman, cats are expected to be soft, graceful, and emotionally complex. This is a trend that goes back to the late 1800s where it was found that English speakers referred to dogs with masculine pronouns and cats with feminine pronouns regardless of the animals’ actual sex. The study’s authors noted that this attribution seemed to align with the cultural perceptions of human gendered personality features (Mitchell & Ellis, 2013). These gendered attributions are still ever-present in modern culture. Participants of a study were asked to watch a video of two men, “Ike” and “Chris”, playing a board game. It was ensured that the two men fully epitomized the “male” spectrum (Ike was more “masculine” while Chris was more “feminine”). Participants in the study were then told that the two men shared a common trait, with one of the following descriptors: “each man considers himself a cat person/considers himself a dog person/is gay/is heterosexual/had been adopted as an infant”. Participants were then asked to rate the two men on 24 adjectives (such as “aggressive”, “sensitive”, “masculine”, “feminine”, “likable”, “emotional”, etc.) using a 6-point interval scale. Results of this study found that participants rated both men as less masculine when they were labeled as cat people than when labeled as dog people. Ike additionally received a lower feminine rating when labeled as a dog person than when labeled as heterosexual (Mitchell & Ellis, 2013). Gender-related stereotypes between cat and dog ownership can change how a person’s masculinity or femininity is perceived by those around them, with dogs being associated with masculine traits and cats being associated with feminine traits.

In fact, the gender ideologies that humans impose on each other are also imposed on their pets, with pets serving as props to enhance gender expression. In 26 semi-structured interviews, participant Kristen, a woman and a dog owner, says she “used to have something against dogs” and that she “always associated cats as more of a ‘female’ animal and dogs as more of a happy-go-lucky ‘male’ kind of animal.” Participant Bruce, a man and a dog owner, says that he grew up with both cats and dogs but had no plans to get a cat. When asked why, Bruce said “I just don’t want one – they’re too feminine, you know?” These dog owners often remarked on how their dogs were used as displays to confirm their own gender identities. The male participants of the interviews tended to value their dogs’ energy and participation in joint activities, while the female participants of the interviews tended to value their dogs’ companionship and affection (Ramirez, 2006). These contrasting values found in dog-human relationships mirror the gender differences that are often seen in human-human relationships, with men valuing shared activities with their friends and women valuing emotional depth with their friends. Pets become a way for humans to fulfill these values in a way that enhances and enforces their own gender identities.

Dogs tend to have the evolutionary advantage when it comes to bonding with humans. The ancestors of the domesticated dog had a pre-existing social nature which humans then intensely selectively bred. Cats did not undergo selective breeding at a similar intensity, but domestication did allow for cats to social bond with humans. However, cats are small animals that are subject to predation by larger animals and therefore are more likely to default to “fight or flight” behaviors than a dog. These agonistic behaviors may be one of the reasons why humans struggle to form bonds with cats, with more people in the United States identifying as “dog people” (63.3%) than “cat people” (36.7%) (Tu et al., 2024). Trends arise when pet owners who own both cats and dogs are asked to describe the personality of their pets. When a questionnaire was administered to 1270 owners of multiple pet species, five common personality traits emerged: sociability, reactivity, protectiveness, neuroticism, and fearfulness. Dogs scored higher in sociability, protectiveness, and reactivity compared to cats. Cats scored higher in neuroticism compared to dogs. However, stereotypical perceptions of pet species may notably affect the judgement of pet personality. Owners more often described their cats as independent compared to their dogs. Dog adopters

also tend to have higher expectations of social behavior from their human-pet relationship compared to cat adopters (Menchetti et al., 2018).

Dogs are expected to be social, energetic, and protective companion animals, aligning with the gender norms that are expected in men. In contrast, cats are often perceived as less friendly and more “feminine” by both men and women. Cats are aloof, neurotic, and independent, which align with more “feminine” human traits. Isn’t it interesting that these perceived “feminine” traits that are seen in cats tend to be more negative when compared to “masculine”, “dog-like” traits?

### ***Black Cats Crossing Your Path: Historical and Cultural Roots of Stigma***

Cats didn’t always carry such negative associations. In fact, in many other cultures and mythologies, cats are revered. The Egyptian goddess of fertility and protection, Bast, is depicted as a woman with a cat’s head, and her temples became sanctuaries for the beloved cats that ancient Egyptians held in such high esteem. The Egyptian sun god, Ra, was also believed to be able to take on the form of a cat. In Norse mythology, the goddess of love and war, Freya, rides a chariot drawn by cats. In Chinese folktales, cats were seen as mysterious creatures with magical powers like fortune telling and healing (Nikolajeva, 2009).

The negative associations with cats began in the Middle Ages, where Europeans began to associate cats with witchcraft. As the Christian church began to lose influence during the thirteenth century, a scapegoat was needed, and that came in the form of witches. Because of their connection to “pagan” beliefs and their mysterious natures, it became feared that cats were companions of the Devil, and thus cats became associated with witches. Owning a cat, especially a black cat, was evidence enough that a woman was a witch. It was even believed that any cat could be a witch in disguise. To protect themselves from sorcery, Europeans in the Middle Ages would cut off a cat’s tail, cut off their ears, smash their legs, or burn off their fur. Any woman seen with similar injuries the next day must have been a witch and would be ruthlessly persecuted. In 1233, Pope Gregory IX officially proclaimed the link between cats and the Devil and gave divine sanction to massacre cats and their female owners (Lawrence, 2003).

As a result of the religious persecution of cats, torturing the animals became normalized and encouraged in early modern Europe. On St. John’s Day, cats would be slowly roasted to death in wicker baskets suspended over bonfires, prolonging their torture to ensure that the Devil suffered alongside them. In 1582, cats were chained to ships filled with fireworks, and crowds cheered as the agonized cat sounds mixed with the sounds of exploding gun powder. Killing cats would also be turned into games such as archery practice, “whipping the cat”, and “cat-throwing”. In the late 1730s, workers in a print shop massacred cats in response to poor working treatment, maiming the cats and performing mock trials where the “guilty” cats would be hung on improvised gallows. The workers thought this event was hilarious, miming the scene several times a day following the massacre as a recurring joke (Lawrence, 2003).

Of course, in the modern era, animal abuse is punishable and socially frowned upon. However, some medieval beliefs still have a hold on modern culture. For example, black cats suffer from “black cat bias”, a phenomenon where cats with black fur are viewed more negatively, adopted less often, and euthanized more often than cats of other fur colors. 101 participants in a study were shown 20 randomized pictures of cats with neutral expressions and poses. 10 of the photos featured black cats and 10 featured various other non-black cats. For each cat picture, participants would rate the cat on measures of friendliness, aggressiveness, willingness to adopt, and how well they believed they could read the cat’s emotions. Participants also completed measures of religiosity, superstitious beliefs, and prejudicial racial attitudes. Results of the study found that participants rated black cats as less friendly and more aggressive than their non-black counterparts. It was also found that superstitious beliefs predicted black cat bias. Participants also were found to believe they would be less able to read the emotions of black cats compared to non-black cats, thus making them less likely to want to adopt a black cat (Jones & Hart, 2020). While we may not be outright publicly persecuting cats for religious reasons anymore, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs are still making people leery of cats.

Ancient beliefs celebrated the connections between cats and women, revering female deities that had deep connections to the animals. However, medieval Europe flipped these beliefs into being “evil” and

“pagan”, killing cats and women for their mere association with one another. We have thankfully, for the most part, moved past this cruel abuse, but cats (and women) still struggle to earn respect.

### ***Not Exactly Nine Lives: Criminological Hypotheses on Animal Abuse***

In popular culture (for example, the “Stranger Things” Broadway show), serial killers and slashers (typically male) are shown to start experimenting with killing small animals such as cats, birds, mice, and similarly “vulnerable” animals. Their curiosity may be piqued by an animal they found already dead, and then they may take the next step and start killing the animals themselves. As they become more comfortable and perhaps bored of killing animals, they will escalate to harming humans. Chances are, the humans they begin to target are female, the “vulnerable” sex. The reason for this trend in horror media is because it reflects real patterns seen in crime and violence, often referred to as the “graduation hypothesis”. Much of what is known about the graduation hypothesis comes from the late 1970s when professional behavioral specialists began to interview real high-profile murderers and serial killers such as Edmund Kemper, Jeffrey Dahmer, Henry Lee Lucas, Carroll Cole, and Arthur Shawcross. However, empirically, the graduation hypothesis is still under heavy scrutiny due to the lack of consistent results across various studies and meta-analyses, meaning that the ability of animal cruelty to directly predict violent crime is questionable (Walters, 2013).

Even if the graduation hypothesis is forever trapped in theory limbo, animal cruelty can still be a precursor to violence against humans. A sample of 261 male medium- and maximum- security inmates in a southern U.S. state were asked about childhood and adolescent animal cruelty. The questionnaire given to each of the inmates asked a total of 39 questions about past animal abuse, their motivations for committing the abuse, and if they had been convicted of a violent crime (rape, assault, murder). Of the 261 inmates surveyed, 112 had previously engaged in animal cruelty. 48% of the 112 reported that they committed the abuse out of anger, 38% reported committing the abuse for fun, 22% committed abuse out of dislike for the animal, and a little over 15% reported that they were imitating abuse (inmates could select more than one motivation, hence the total being over 100%). Analysis additionally found that those who committed childhood or adolescent animal abuse out of anger or for fun were more likely to repeat the behavior. Further analysis found that the “for fun” motivation was the only statistically salient variable in the model, meaning that inmates who had committed childhood and adolescent animal cruelty for fun were more likely to have been engaged in and been convicted of acts of interpersonal violence (Hensley & Tallichet, 2008).

Another study on the motivations of animal cruelty was performed with 130 undergraduate students at a university in the central north of England. Participants were asked to fill out an adapted version of the Boat Inventory on Animal-Related Experiences (BIARE) which asked questions relating to the intentional harm or killing of an animal, the species of animal involved, their motivation for harming or killing the animal, and the method used. Participants were also asked to fill out the Impulsive Behavior scale (UPPS-P) which assess five facets of impulsivity (sensation seeking, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance, negative urgency, positive urgency). It was found that 55% of the sample reported intentionally harming or killing an animal at least once (excluding incidents where animals were hunted for food/sport or were humanely euthanized). 86% of those who reported engaging with animal cruelty abused at least one dog. 81% of reported abusers engaged in cruelty against a spider, 35% against a cat, 33% against a bird, 28% against mice, 10% against lizards, 8% against rabbits, and 6% against horses (all reported animals were domestic or companion animals, cases of pest control were excluded). 63% of those who engaged in animal cruelty reported being motivated by prejudice for the particular species they abused. 54% of abusers reported being motivated by amusement, 46% by control, 39% by retaliation against the animal. Other reported motivations included retaliation against a person (11%), displacement of aggression (8%), sadism (6%), expression of aggression through an animal (4%), and enhancement of one’s own aggression (3%). The most commonly reported method of animal cruelty was beating and/or kicking the animal (97% of reported abusers), followed by squashing the animal (78%), throwing an object at the animal (40%), shooting (38%), drowning (29%), burning (28%), trapping (6%), deliberately not feeding (3%), stabbing (3%), and strangling (1%). Analysis further found that those who reported “amusement” as their main motivator scored higher for sensation seeking, lack of premeditation, positive urgency (being in a good mood), and negative urgency (being in a bad/upset mood) than those who did not report amusement

as a motivator (Newberry, 2018). Implications of these studies on animal cruelty and motivation find that “amusement” and “for fun” seem to be motivations that may have some sort of connection to repeating violent acts or escalating acts of cruelty.

Not only is finding the potential predictive connections between animal abuse and violent crime difficult, even just defining “animal cruelty” is hard because of how various cultures across the world view animals. In western cultures, domestic animals are often considered companions or even members of the family, while some eastern cultures may view them more practically as working animals. Overall, the views of animal care and treatment can be vastly different between societies. For example, due to the mismanagement of stray animal control programs, Romania has an estimated population of 6.1 million dogs, both homeless and “owned”. An eradication law was then introduced which involves the capture and inhumane killing of dogs. Dog catching and disposal has proven to be a lucrative business in Romania, so much so that permanent solutions to controlling the dog population are of little concern. Dogs, often regarded as “pests” in Romania, are often killed publicly by means of poisoning, beating, and being purposefully hit with vehicles. When a family in Romania does own a dog, they often only serve as guard dogs, are fed sparingly, and are kept tethered outside the house. Because of this “socially accepted” animal abuse, it becomes difficult to discern if acts of animal cruelty point towards the possibility of an individual escalating to interpersonal violence. However, in a study by Plant et al. (2016) that focused on comparing children in Romania against children in Germany (where animal abuse is not socially acceptable), it was found that children who witnessed animal cruelty, no matter the culture surrounding the social acceptability of animal abuse, were more likely to then abuse animals themselves. Also, regardless of the culture around animal abuse, it was found that children with higher affective empathy were less likely to commit animal abuse. It was specifically noted that girls were found to be higher in affective empathy than boys. When then comparing children from rural Romania against children from urban Romania, rural children were more likely to abuse animals and were more likely to be exposed to domestic violence, which in turn was associated with more animal abuse (Plant et al., 2019).

In fact, domestic abuse and animal abuse are closely linked to one another. As previously mentioned, domestic animals in most western cultures are considered members of the family, meaning they can also suffer at the hands of a domestic abuser. The abuse of family pets is often reported by victims of domestic violence and is listed as a form of intimidation on the “power and control wheel” diagram of abuse tactics. To assess the effects of animal abuse in domestic abuse situations, 101 battered women (who owned pets) seeking safety in five Utah domestic violence shelters were recruited to participate in interviews (forming the S group), as well as 120 women (who owned pets) in the community who reported no relationship violence (forming the NS group) (Ascione et al., 2007). 52.5% of the women in the S group reported receiving threats to hurt or kill their pet from their domestic partner compared to the 12.5% of women in the NS group. Their pet actually being hurt or killed was reported by 54% of the S group, but only 5% in the NS group. For women in the S group who reported actual animal abuse, severity ranged from injury, pain, torture, permanent loss of function, or death in 72.7% of cases. 86.4% of the women in the S group who reported their pets being threatened or hurt said they were “very close” to their pets, distinct from the possible responses of “liked but not close” or “not close at all”. 22.8% of the women in the S group reported that concern for their pet’s welfare kept them from entering a shelter sooner than they did, which was especially noted with women who didn’t have children. Some women in the S group who did have children allowed their children to be interviewed as well. It was found that these children were often exposed to and distressed by the animal abuse. S group children who had witnessed animal abuse were more likely to have behavioral issues compared to the NS group children, with some of the S group children having a history of animal abuse as well. Nevertheless, half of the children who reported witnessing animal abuse also reported intervening to protect their pet (Ascione et al., 2007).

Something should be pointed out about many of these studies. The point of this essay is about violence against *cats*, yet most of the reviewed studies are either strictly about dogs, don’t specify pet species, or show that dogs are abused at a higher rate than cats. There are several potential reasons for this discrepancy. First, more U.S. households own dogs (42.6%) than cats (32.6%) (U.S. Pet Ownership, 2025) which can imply that dogs have a higher frequency of abuse because of sheer numbers. Second, dogs are much more visible pets. Dogs are often walked in public, seen in yards, and heard by neighbors, so this can

equate to abuse being more likely to be noticed and reported. On the other hand, cats are typically quiet, kept indoors, or otherwise hide while outside, often going unnoticed by potential observers. Because of this, it is entirely possible that abuse against cats is underreported. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2025, journalists Tony Smith and Angus Crawford published the following BBC article: “BBC finds electrocuted, drowned and starved cats in online torture groups”. These online torture groups share and sell online videos of cats and kittens being tortured for entertainment. The animal rights activist group, Feline Guardians, says that in the span of a year, a new video was uploaded approximately every 14 hours. 24 different cat torture groups have been documented as active in this past year, the largest group having more than 1000 members. The most active torturer is believed to have filmed the killings of more than 200 cats. The BBC saw evidence that suggested that adults, teenagers, and children were taking part in these groups, sharing posts about various ways to kill cats and how much they enjoy doing so. Johanna Baxter MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Cats, says that these groups are a concerning trend, especially among young men, adding that “Animal abuse often acts as a gateway, making future acts of violence easier to rationalize and commit” (Smith & Crawford, 2025). These torture groups are simply one of the few that are known of, with possibly many more committing these cruel acts against cats that go unreported and unnoticed.

Cats tend to be underreported in many aspects, including veterinary research. A New York Times article titled “Why Scientists Love to Study Dogs (and Often Ignore Cats)” by James Gorman (2018) explains that there is little scientific research on cats while there are multitudes of studies on dogs. Gorman interviews various professionals such as a geneticist, a veterinarian, a researcher at the National Institutes of Health, and a bioarchaeologist, and they all state similar conclusions; research on cats is lagging because of behavioral biases against them, and because dogs have been domesticated for longer and have more genetic diversity. Despite this great genetic diversity, however, many of the interviewed professionals also state that in some respects, cats would be better to study than dogs (for example, many cancers in cats are better models of human cancer than cancers in dogs are) (Gorman, 2018). In case “underrepresentation in research” sounds familiar, it’s because it is. Women are historically underrepresented in medical studies and clinical trials, which greatly limits biological understandings of the female body in health-related fields. While female representation in medical research has increased in the past several decades (largely due to laws and policies being put in place), there are still several areas of research that underrepresent and underserve women (especially women of color) (Bierer et al., 2022). Yet another way cats and women are alike.

While animal abuse cannot accurately predict if someone will commit a violent crime, those who have committed violent crimes are more likely to have abused animals in the past. Animal abuse can serve as a basis for many researchers who study antisocial behavior and the potential of the “graduation hypothesis”. While more research is needed on the direct connections between animal abuse and violent crimes (and just on cats and women in general), it is clear that a link exists between harming vulnerable animals and harming vulnerable humans. This link becomes especially clear when we enjoy horror media as many of the common tropes we see in these films are directly inspired by this real criminological data.

### ***God Forbid a Woman Do Anything: The Moral Panic of Femininity in Horror***

Why do people even enjoy horror movies in the first place? Of all film genres, horror has the least industry reputation. Only one horror movie has ever won an Oscar for Best Picture (*The Silence of the Lambs*, 1992) and the number of nominated horror films can be counted on both hands. When a horror movie does receive an award, they are typically reserved for technical achievements such as best art direction (such as *Phantom of the Opera*, 1943), best visual effects (*Alien*, 1979), or best make-up (*The Fly*, 1986). However, these movies do occasionally have great successes. In 2017, nine horror films earned more than \$100 million, showing that while horror may be the runt of the film industry, it still has a considerably enthusiastic fanbase. While the literature on the exact nature of *why* people like horror films is extremely limited and perhaps even now outdated, there are some noticeable patterns: low empathy and fearfulness are (inconsistently) associated with more enjoyment in watching horror, empathetic concern and personal distress are negatively correlated with enjoyment of horror involving torture, and there is a (inconsistent) positive relationship between sensation seeking and horror enjoyment. There are also notable sex differences in horror movie enjoyment: males prefer to watch horror more than females, females report

experiencing more fear and anxiety while watching horror than males generally do, and this sex difference may be attributable to females typically having higher disgust sensitivity but also higher empathetic concern than males (Martin, 2019). It should be reiterated, though, that much of this information comes from literature published before the 1990s. The psychology of media preferences is a largely unexplored area of study.

Perhaps one of the reasons people love horror media so much is because it tends to be formulaic. Even if a horror movie is brand new, chances are a regular horror movie-goer has a clear idea of what they're getting into. The plots of horror movies are often predictable and the storytelling devices are recycled. In fact, an entire horror movie was created just to parody many of the popular horror franchises, monster motifs, and character clichés (*The Cabin in the Woods*, 2011). Some sub-genres of horror are especially predictable, such as slasher films. The thirty top-grossing slasher films from the 1980s-2000s were subjected to a media content analysis by Ménard et al. (2019) to examine factors associated with the deaths or survival of individual characters in order to see if the claims of "repetitive" tropes had any validity. Characters were analyzed using demographics such as their sex, ethnicity, age, gender roles, sexual activity, "fight or flight" behaviors, prosocial or antisocial behaviors, and survival status. Results of the analysis found that characters were more likely to survive the horror scenario if they wore neutral/conservative clothing (as opposed to revealing clothing), if they fought back against the antagonist (as opposed to fleeing/hiding), and engaged in a variety of pro-social behaviors (as opposed to those who participated in theft, drug use, etc.). Additionally, 94% of characters who engaged in explicit sexual behaviors died during the course of the sample movies while 64% of those who engaged in comparatively mild forms of sexual behaviors died. The repetition of the "Final Girl" trope (where the last surviving female character confronts and is "victorious" against the antagonist) was also found to have validity. Final Girls are more likely to be attractive, are less likely to engage in significant onscreen sexual behavior, demonstrate more prosocial behaviors and more survival-oriented behaviors against the antagonist, and are more likely to demonstrate an androgynous gender role (as opposed to strictly feminine or masculine) (Ménard et al., 2019). Most characters in slasher films serve as foils for the Final Girl, sending a message to the audience via their deaths about what constitutes being "worthy" of survival in a slasher horror scenario. As long as one is moral and just (and an attractive woman who isn't *too* feminine, who covers up, and doesn't have too much sex), survival in a horror movie is nearly guaranteed.

Since horror movies are made with the male audience in mind, the trope of the Final Girl is a bit curious. With many of the other male victims being killed off, oftentimes the only masculine character the male audience can connect to is the antagonist themselves, the sadistic and horrifying slasher and/or monster. However, as per the formula, the Final Girl is always victorious, defeating the antagonist in the climactic moments of the film. In that heroic moment, the audience cheers for the Final Girl, despite the masculine character they were left to identify with being bested. The reason why a male audience is able to identify with the Final Girl is because of a transference of gender roles and expectations (Clover, 1987). As previously mentioned, Final Girls tend to be "androgynous" rather than feminine despite being attractive women. A Final Girl who is "too feminine" will alienate and perhaps even disgust the male audience, which is why these characters are often quickly established to have masculine interests (Clear Rivers from *Final Destination* is tough, angsty, and welds metal sculptures in her garage), sexual reluctance (Laurie Strode in *Halloween* is established to have a sparse dating history and implied to be a virgin due to her shy personality, starkly contrasting her sexually active friends), and a determined, investigative attitude (Vanita "Stretch" Brock from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* actively seeks out the murderous Sawyer family to expose their crimes). However, while "masculine" in these aspects, the Final Girl is still feminine enough to cry, cower, scream, and tremble in fear, all behaviors typically taboo in men. The male audience can then experience their fear in an "appropriate" way for their gender by transferring their fearfulness onto the Final Girl, all while still being able to relate to her. The intent of the audience identifying with the masculine killer and then transferring to identifying with the Final Girl can perhaps best be seen between *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2* (1986). At the end of the 1974 film, Leatherface can be seen wildly swinging his chainsaw in the middle of the street as he watches the Final Girl of the film, Sally, escape him. At the end of the 1986 film, the Final Girl, Stretch, attacks Chop Top (Leatherface's brother) with a chainsaw she grabbed from a shrine and knocks him off the tower

they were fighting upon. Stretch is then seen swinging the chainsaw in a wild, victorious dance, paralleling Leatherface's frustrated flailing from the first film. The Final Girl, one of the few characters in horror movies that are given any depth, must be feminine enough to suffer and be victimized, but not so feminine that they can't be relatable to the male audience.

Some media analysts take it one step further, arguing that the essence of many horror films is feminine. In *American Psycho* (2000), the killer Norman Bates is driven to murder women by his "mother-half", a result of his unhealthy relationship with his late mother. In *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986), the monster is a matriarchal creature giving birth to her kind, resulting in the violent deaths of humans. In *Carrie* (1976), the titular character has her first period but is reprimanded by her abusive mother who tells her that menstruating is caused by sin, locking her in a closet and forcing her to pray for forgiveness. Time and time again in horror films, the feminine is exaggerated and grossly caricatured to disgust and terrify the audience, mirroring many Freudian theories of the mystery of female sexuality and natural female inferiority (Creed, 2020). Whether a woman is the protagonist of the horror film or an antagonist, her femininity is going to be criticized and molded to appeal to a masculine audience.

Women and cats are treated similarly in horror films, their connection to the feminine being punished. A movie showcasing this connection very directly is the 1942 horror film *Cat People*. In it, a woman named Irena Dubrovna meets a man named Oliver Reed. After Oliver sees a statue of a medieval warrior impaling a large cat with his sword in her home, Irena tells him of a Serbian village where the Christian residents turned to witchcraft and became cat-people. The villagers were then all killed by King John of Serbia, except for one who escaped to the mountains. Irena later confesses that she believes she is a descendant of the escaped villager, and that she will turn into a black panther if she is ever intimate. Oliver is dismissive of this and asks Irena to marry him. The marriage is never consummated because of Irena's fear of turning into a panther, and Oliver slowly begins to drift from her and becomes romantically interested in his assistant, Alice. Irena discovers this and, out of desperation, tells Oliver that she will finally have sex with him, but he says that it is too late and he is going to divorce her and marry Alice instead. Oliver and Alice, from then on, feel as though they are being stalked by an animal. Irena attempts to confide in her psychiatrist, but the psychiatrist kisses her. With her sexual agency violated, Irena transforms into a panther and is stabbed by the psychiatrist, but she kills him and escapes before Oliver and Alice arrive. Irena flees to the Central Park Zoo, where she tries to hide in a cage with another black panther. However, the real panther escapes the cage, killing Irena as it flees, and the panther is then hit and killed by a vehicle. Oliver and Alice arrive to find Irena's dead body in its panther form. Oliver says "She never lied to us", and walks away with Alice, marking the end of the film with a somber reminder that Irena was truthful but punished with death regardless.

### **Cats & Dogs (Not the 2001 Warner Bros. Film): Contextualizing Cats and Dogs in Horror**

Below are briefly summarized horror movies that feature the death of a cat, the death of a dog, or both (limited to twelve total movies). Summaries will specifically be focused on the scenes with the animal deaths rather than the entire movie. The films in this sample were pulled from various online forums about horror movies with animal deaths, as well as the movie review website "Does The Dog Die" (interesting website name, I should point out). It should be noted that no real animals were harmed in any of these films.

#### **Cats**

*Re-Animator* (1985): While experimenting with a reanimation reagent in the basement of his roommate, Dan's, house, Herbert West brings Dan's dead cat, Rufus, back to life. However, the cat becomes vicious and attacks West, prompting Dan to wake up and investigate the horrible screeching. Dan enters the basement, not quite understanding what is happening, and grabs the screaming cat and throws it against a wall, killing it. The camera focuses on the cat's bloody body lying on the floor. Dan and West then discuss West's reagent, where Dan believes West must be lying about being able to bring the dead back to life. To prove it to him, West injects Rufus' dead body again. The cat, with organs hanging out and a broken back, yowls in agony and writhes as it again comes back to life.

*Pet Sematary (1989)*: The Creed family cat, Church, was hit off-screen by a truck. Louis Creed's neighbor, Jud, later finds Church's body. The camera focuses on the cat's body on the side of the road, eyes glazed over and fur matted. Jud tells Louis and the two of them place Church's body in a trash bag. Jud, feeling bad for Louis' daughter (who had a very close connection to the cat), brings Louis to a hidden Mi'kmaq burial ground beyond a pet cemetery in the woods and instructs Louis to bury Church there. The next day, Church returns to the Creed house, reanimated. However, now he stinks, his eyes glow, his fur is bloody and matted, and he lashes out violently against Louis. Later on in the movie, Church is encountered again by Louis, but now Louis wields a syringe filled with morphine. He lures Church closer with raw meat, then grabs him and injects him. The camera focuses on Church as he slowly falls over, dead again.

*Drag Me to Hell (2009)*: Christine is being tortured by an evil spirit after being cursed. She visits a fortune teller who suggests that she should make an appeasatory sacrifice. After being attacked in her home by the spirit, Christine reluctantly takes a kitchen knife and finds her cat. The stabbing of the cat is not explicitly shown on screen, but the audience can hear the cat yelp and can see blood being splashed onto Christine. The cat's dead body is then very briefly shown, sporting stab wounds on its side, as it is dropped into a shallow grave and quickly buried by Christine. Later in the film, during a séance meant to trap the evil spirit, a possessed man vomits the dead cat into Christine's lap.

*The Autopsy of Jane Doe (2016)*: While coroner Tommy and his son/assistant, Austin, perform an autopsy, strange figures appear to be standing out in the hallway. Austin goes to investigate, following strange sounds into a storage room. When he checks the air duct, he finds their cat, Stanley (who stays at the morgue with them) mortally wounded. Austin pulls Stanley from the vent and passes him to Tommy, where it is seen that Stanley's intestines are exposed. Stanley is barely alive, whimpering in Tommy's arms. Tommy mercifully kills Stanley by snapping his neck. He then wraps Stanley in a sheet and carries him to the incinerator, burning the cat's body. Tommy is quiet and upset as he watches the incinerator, asking Austin for a moment alone.

*Smile (2022)*: Rose buys a toy train for her nephew, Jackson's, seventh birthday. Jackson begins to tear into his presents in front of everyone in attendance at his birthday party, and happily opens the present from his aunt. When he opens the box that should be holding the train, his face drops. He then lifts Mustache, Rose's cat (who had mysteriously gone missing prior), out of the box by his collar. Mustache hangs limply, the cat's back to the audience. Everyone begins to scream and panic, but Rose begins to sob and rushes forward to hold the cat. In her arms, the audience can better see that Mustache's fur is bloody, and Rose begins to have a breakdown as everyone in attendance watches her in horror.

### **Both**

*The Collector (2009)*: Arkin has broken into a house only to find it has already been broken into by a serial killer who has set traps throughout the house. In a bedroom, a sticky acid-like substance has been spread on the floor. Arkin's shoes get stuck to the floor, as well as the family cat. The cat yowls as it attempts to unstick itself, the slimy substance stuck in its fur and burning it. Arkin slips out of his shoes and hops onto the safety of the bed, but the cat's yowling has alerted the Collector. Arkin grabs the cat and lifts, and we see bloody fur get ripped away from the cat. Arkin tosses the cat over his shoulder and it lands on an open windowsill. However, the windowsill was rigged with another trap, and a guillotine slides down from the window and cuts the cat in half. The back half of the cat falls away, leaving a large blood stain behind. Arkin hides under the bed's pillows as the killer enters. Upon only seeing the cat's back half, the Collector walks away.

Later in the film, as Arkin attempts to break out of the house with the remaining young girl, the Collector lets his dog (who was previously chained outside the house) loose to catch them. As the dog runs up the stairs towards them, Arkin quickly lights toilet paper on fire in a metal trash can. As the dog runs into the room, Arkin quickly slams the trash can over the dog's head and forcefully shuts the door on its neck. The scene cuts to Arkin approaching the Collector, throwing the dog's limp body at him (with the trash can still on its head). The Collector, who had been holding a shotgun and waiting, shoots through the dog and a fight ensues.

*Evil Dead (2013)*: David, his girlfriend, a couple friends, and David's estranged half-sister Mia all arrive at David's family's holiday home, a cabin in the woods. David brings his dog, Grandpa, with him. Later, after

a demon has possessed Mia, David find Grandpa hidden in a shed. David pulls Grandpa's limp body out by his collar and holds his body in his arms, trying to talk to him. When David pulls his hand away from Grandpa's head, it's covered in blood. David then notices a bloody hammer lying on the floor nearby. For a quick moment, the scene cuts to a flashback where Mia is screaming and hitting something off-screen repeatedly with the hammer. During this flashback, Grandpa is not actually seen, but the audience can put together that Mia beat him with the hammer.

Throughout the film, whenever characters enter the back room in the cabin's cellar, several dead cats can be seen suspended from the ceiling by wire and rope. The remains are clearly old and are being eaten by flies. When the room is revealed, the camera focuses on the mummified faces of some of the cats, showing their empty eye sockets and rotting skin. It is implied that they were part of some kind of ritual.

### **Dogs**

*Jaws (1975)*: On Fourth of July weekend, several beachgoers gather on the coast. Among them is a boy playing with his dog, Griffin, along the water. After being shown various other people playing in the water, the audience then sees the same boy from before calling for his dog, unsure of where he is. While the boy is shouting for him, the audience is shown the stick the dog was playing with earlier, floating in the water with no dog in sight. Immediately afterwards, the iconic soundtrack begins and someone in the water is attacked, implying that the dog was an off-screen victim of the shark.

*Halloween (1978)*: While Laurie Strode handles a babysitting job, her friend Annie stays at Lindsey Wallace's house across the street. Michael Myers begins to stalk Annie from outside, but is interrupted by Lindsey's dog, Lester, who is outside and barking aggressively. The shot cuts to Lindsey inside, complaining about the barking. However, the audience then hears the dog's barks turn into a whimper, and the shot cuts back to outside. Myers is holding Lester in the air, strangling him. While Myers and the dog are mostly obscured in darkness, the audience can see Lester's back legs go limp with one last whine.

*The Thing (1982)*: A research team takes in a strange sled dog, kenneling it with their other sled dogs. However, after being left alone, the other dogs begin to growl at the strange dog. The strange dog then begins to shake, and its face splits apart to reveal that it is an alien creature. Tentacle-like appendages and insect-like legs begin to sprout from the Thing's back and the trapped dogs begin to whine and howl in fear. The Thing shoots a substance at a dog trying to escape. One of the researchers finally arrives to investigate the commotion. When he opens the kennel door, two frightened dogs push past him and run away. The fire alarm is then pulled, and other researchers arrive with guns. The researchers shine their flashlights into the kennel to see a fleshy dog-like creature screeching at them. The Thing is assimilating the dog previously sprayed with acid (now furless and writhing) into its body, as well as another dog that is being choked and stabbed by the Thing's tentacles. The dog that is being strangled howls in pain and then is shot, which upsets one of the researchers. The Thing begins to grow extra appendages, but before it can finish, it is set on fire by a researcher who arrives with a flamethrower.

*I Am Legend (2007)*: Neville, a survivor of a virus outbreak, gets caught in a trap and is attacked by infected dogs. Neville's dog and only companion, Sam, protects him while he frees himself, but is bitten by one of the infected dogs in the process. Back in Neville's lab, he injects Sam with what he believes to be a cure. Neville holds Sam in his arms as she whines. Neville quietly sings to her as he pets her. As he does, he pulls away a fistful of Sam's fur, realizing the cure didn't work. He checks her eyes and gums, seeing signs of the infection in her as she begins to growl and snap at him. Neville averts his eyes as he tightens his grip around Sam, strangling her. Only Neville's face is visible during the strangling, but the audience can see him struggling and can hear Sam choking until she then stops. Neville then becomes tearful and trembles, releasing Sam from his grip as her body rolls to the side away from him.

*The Babadook (2014)*: Amelia, a widow, becomes possessed by an evil entity called the Babadook and slowly begins to unravel. Her dog, Bugsy, begins to incessantly bark, driving Amelia to anger. She chases Bugsy, grabs him, and begins to strangle him. Bugsy being strangled is not shown on screen, but the viewer can see Amelia's twisted face and can hear Bugsy whining and growling. For a brief moment, the viewer is shown Bugsy's back legs as he struggles against Amelia, but with an angry shout, Amelia breaks Bugsy's neck. The viewer then sees her drop Bugsy's dead body to the floor.

### **Cat Got Your Tongue: Discussion and Conclusion**

From the sample of movies previously summarized, a few observations arise. First, two of the seven cats are brought back to life, only to be killed again later on in their respective films. In a third film, a cat's dead body was shown to the protagonist after it had already been buried. Because of this, it seems that dead (or un-dead) cats are often used to "taunt" the protagonist, mocking them for their misdeeds (Louis' neglect of Church and Gage, West's twisted experiments, and Christine's denying a woman an extension on her mortgage). As well as that, the movie can get extra mileage out of the animal's death if it can die multiple times.

Second, cats tend to be killed in much more bloody, gruesome ways than their dog counterparts. Cats in this sample are burned by acid and then sliced in half, gutted, hit by vehicles, drugged, sacrificed, or stabbed. Dogs in this sample are strangled, have their necks broken, are assimilated into an alien, beaten over the head, or eaten by a shark. Grandpa's death was the only truly bloody death out of the dogs, where the cats in *Evil Dead* may be the only cats of the sample that weren't bloody. This is similar to how women in horror films are more likely to be tortured rather than killed immediately like their male counterparts.

Third, dog deaths are much more likely to be shown off-screen or strategically angled away from the viewer. While the audience watches cats getting their necks snapped, getting injected with morphine, thrown against walls, or sliced in half by a guillotine in full view, dogs are given the extra respect to not be shown in the moment of their deaths (with exception of the dogs from *The Thing* or the dog from *The Collector*, both of which are notably films in which the dog or dog-like creature is an antagonist).

Fourth, in the films where women are the pet's owner, they are shown to be hysterical or even driven to desperation or insanity (*Smile*, *Drag Me to Hell*, *The Babadook*). However, the male pet owners are "appropriately" upset or able to react reasonably (*Pet Semetary*, *The Autopsy of Jane Doe*, *I Am Legend*, *Evil Dead*). This contrast mirrors the stereotypes of women being the "emotional" sex while men are the "logical" sex.



The observations align with much of the media analysis that has been discussed throughout this paper. Cats, an extension of the feminine, are much more likely to be severely punished in horror films, while dogs, an extension of the masculine, are much more likely to be respected in death. Dogs may be an extension of the antagonist (the Thing and the Collector's dog), the masculine character that the largely male audience is meant to identify with throughout most of the film, while cats are an extension of feminine terror (Mustache's death distances Rose from her family and Church's reanimation was a result of Louis not wanting to upset his daughter). Dogs can die as heroes or protectors (Sam and Lester both try to save their owners), but cats are merely props to shock the audience and have no consequence to the plot of the film (Stanley and the various unnamed cats in *Evil Dead* were ultimately unnecessary deaths and the plots of their respective movies would have been unchanged if their deaths were removed), mirroring masculine and feminine gender roles of heroism and victimization. The death of a dog is meant to upset the audience (Grandpa, Griffin, Bugsy) while the death of a cat is meant to shock the audience (Rufus, Mustache, Christine's unnamed cat), humanizing the "masculine" animal while objectifying the "feminine" animal. The gendered stereotypes we see in the human characters of horror films are extended to the animals of horror films.

Violence against the feminine has been a trend in horror media for decades, exciting and disgusting audiences. It has been normalized and has become an expected part of enjoying horror movies. Horror films will take a long time to escape their clichés, especially as violence against women and cats persists in the real world, and new clichés will likely be created along the way. However, there is hope that the misogynistic and patriarchal trend may be fading. Many modern horror films feature female leads that subvert the Final Girl expectation (*Us*, *Hereditary*, *Annihilation*, *Midsommar*), and many modern horror films are also more willing to show emotionally complex and vulnerable male characters (*Get Out*, *Nope*, *The Black Phone*). Animals are also getting more positive attention in horror films, as seen by Indy, the dog starring in *Good Boy*, and Frodo, the cat in *A Quiet Place: Day One*. As culture and social norms change, the media that we consume will change with them. We can hope that the change will be for the better, for both humans and animals.

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**Sexual Violence and the Shield  
Of Authority: Examining Police  
Sexual Violence in the United  
States**

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## **Abstract**

Police sexual violence is an under-researched topic that demands more scholarly attention. The existing research suggests that the scope of the problem is much larger than expected. Restrictions of scientific knowledge production are caused by the lack of available police data regarding police sexual violence, since police departments put a lot of effort into controlling the narrative around them. Additionally, police sexual violence cases are handled by the police themselves, thus most victims do not expect that they can successfully report their victimization. Sexual victimization varies by victim. Minors, sex workers, spouses and children, people of color, women and men, queer people, police officers and personnel are all victimized in different ways and contexts. The social relations that make this scope of police sexual violence possible are also various, ranging from hegemonic masculinity and cultural disregard for people suspected of violating the law to widespread substance abuse among police officers, all in the context of the capitalist mode of production of US society. As with most problems of policing, the solution is not reform but thorough societal change.

## **Introduction**

When it comes to misconduct and crimes committed by police officers, most people, including politicians and journalists, tend to look the other way. If newspapers happen to report on an unlawful killing by a police officer, they use passive phrasing like “officer-involved shooting”. However, police killings are not the only topic ignored by policymakers, journalists, and the public. This paper analyses police sexual violence, an often-overlooked issue of police criminality. Police sexual violence ranges from inappropriate strip searches to officer involvement in sex trafficking, sexual violence, and rape. This paper will analyze and summarize previous research on police sexual misconduct, supporting academic findings with real-life examples from law enforcement officers in the United States.

## **Defining Police Sexual Violence**

The term police sexual misconduct (PSM) refers to all sexual acts deemed inappropriate, committed by a police officer on or off duty. That includes watching porn on the phone, masturbating in the police car, having sex with another police officer, and inappropriate flirting with a victim, witness, or suspect. PSM also includes consensual sex between two or more on-duty police officers or sex that is initiated by “police groupies” who seek attention and sexual relationships with officers (Stinson et al., 2014; Stinson et al., 2015b). While not all PSM is harmful to the people involved, and not all PSM does even involve a second person, police sexual violence (PSV) includes all acts with sexual components based on coercion, threat, or use of force committed by a police officer. It includes a wide range of actions from verbal harassment of a person because of their sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation to unwanted touching, groping, assault, or rape (Purvis & Blanco, 2020).

A person in police custody generally cannot consent to sexual activity because they are already in a non-consensual situation in which they do not wield any power. Police officers cannot assess if the person is open to sexual behavior because they submit to police power or not. Nevertheless, police claim that some suspects try to get out of a situation involving law enforcement by engaging in sex with the officer; however, since this involves the threat of punishment, these sexual encounters cannot be seen as consensual, thus not merely as police sexual misconduct. As Purvis and Blanco (2020) state:

*In some circumstances [...] a person might give expressed consent while subjectively feeling that they did not want to engage in sexual activity, but because of fear or threats or coercion felt that they had no choice but to allow sexual contact to proceed.*

Therefore, within the context of a police officer wielding their power over a member of the public, consent is impossible.

## **Methods**

The basis of this paper is relevant articles in the field of PSV research. Looking up papers on PSV on academic search engines like OneSearch or Google Scholar posed a problem: search engines look for articles that contain the given words, yet they do not look for the meaning these words may have together. Thus, looking up “police sex crimes” or “police as sexual perpetrators” does not result in a variety of PSV

research studies but in studies that, for example, analyze reporting patterns of sexual violence by strangers to police or books that offer a general overview of police work with victims of sexual violence. The solution to this problem was the use of large language models (LLM) ChatGPT and DeepSeek. LLMs have the advantage that they interpret the meaning of the words in combination; thus, they “know” that they were not looking for articles that contain the words “police”, “sexual violence” etc., but that the articles were supposed to deal with the phenomenon of police sexual violence.

The first wave of academic articles the LLMs found was skim-read to scan the articles for their utility for this project. The second wave of articles were taken from the reference section of the first wave of articles. The reference section of the second wave was then again searched for relevant articles that met the criteria and had not been found during the first two waves already. The following findings represent the summarized research of all relevant articles.

### ***Critically Assessing the Available Data***

Most police departments do not report violations by their officers, and those that do often do not report extensively. For example, by 2018, only 1,600 out of 18,000 law enforcement agencies, about 9%, in the US had agreed to submit data to an FBI database (Stinson, 2020). Criminologists who research police sexual misconduct and sexual violence face the same, if not higher, obstacles in regard to data collection. Thus, the data we are working with is abysmally underreported and only represents the tip of the iceberg of police sexual misconduct.

Former police officer and now critical criminologist Phillip Stinson, specialized in police sexual misconduct, suggests that less than 10% of cases of PSV are reported (2015b). This is for a variety of reasons. Sexual assault is very intimate and personal by nature, and victims are generally unlikely to make a report. Often victims have trouble seeing themselves as victims of sexual assault, or they blame themselves for the attack. In cases where the perpetrator is a police officer, victims are even less likely to come forward and report the assault because they feel humiliated or are afraid of retaliation (Stinson et al. 2014). Many victims of PSV are sex workers, economically disenfranchised women, or people of color (POC). Victims already have a negative perception of the police, reducing the chance of reporting. Additionally, many reported cases of PSV are either ignored by the authorities or do not even make it into the system at all (Stinson, 2014). In fact, in many cases, police officers harass victims who made a report or who plan to make a report against another officer (Walker & Irlbeck, 2003).

Police officers are at least three times more likely to commit an act of sexual assault than the general population. (67.8/100,000 compared to only 28.7 /100,000) (Gonzales et al., 2016). About 25% of all women who participated in a drug court reported having been sexually assaulted by a police officer (ibid.). A six-year study using data from 2009 to 2014 found that 1.000 officers lost their jobs during that time for PSV (Purvis & Blanco, 2020). In total, the United States employs about 2.2 million public law enforcement officers in more than 18,000 state and federal agencies (Policy Circle, n.d.). About 0.64% of the US population are law enforcement officers (2.2 million /341.8 million), yet they are responsible for at least 2% of all sexual assault cases (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Finally, police intern voices suggest that about 5% of all police officers will commit at least one sex crime, if not more, during their service. If true, this adds up to about 50,000 sworn law enforcement officers who committed or will commit an act of sexual violence (Maher, 2021).

Adding on, according to previous research, between 20% to 40% of police officers admitted in self-report studies to have engaged in domestic violence in the year previous to each study (Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). A study by Stinson & Liederbach on officer-involved domestic violence (OIDV) showed 16% of crimes related to PSV. As mentioned above, the total number of law enforcement officers in the US is about 2.2 million. This indicates that up to 880,000 police families are exposed to OIDV annually. Furthermore, 16% of these are up to 140,000 who are experiencing at least some kind of PSV. Furthermore, about 46.5% of PSV cases happen in the South as compared to circa 20% in the Northeast, 20% in the West, and only 14% in the Midwest (Stinson et al., 2014; Stinson et al., 2015b). Police officers who engage in PSV tend to be pattern-prone perpetrators who offend repeatedly (Stinson et al., 2014; Stinson et al., 2015b). More than half of the victims are under the age of 18 (Stinson et al, 2015b; Maher, 2021). Officers with less than ten years of service are most likely to engage in acts of PSV, followed by officers with 18 or

more years of service (Stinson et al., 2015b). Generally, police officers who graduated from large classes and who serve in municipal departments compared to rural departments are most likely to commit acts of PSV (Stinson et al., 2015b; Gonzalez et al., 2016).

Perpetrators of sexual violence often victimize several people over time if not caught, with an average of five victims per perpetrator (Purvis and Blanco, 2020). Considering the 50,000 police officers who commit at least one act of sexual violence during their career, the number of sex crimes committed by police officers in the US is over 250,000. The duration of average service years of a police officer is 15-20 years. This indicates that at least 12,500 to 16,500 people are sexually assaulted by police officers each year (250,000/15 – 250,000/20).

### **The Victims**

Police usually do not victimize at random. Their victimization pattern deeply intersects with most victims being from vulnerable populations such as, POCs, women, queer people, sex workers, and people suspected or convicted of a crime. Police officers victimize these demographics most often since they're perceived as less credible, making it harder for the victims to come forward and less likely for the officer to be reprimanded. While the following categories all describe a distinct type of PSV victim, these categories overlap a lot in reality. Black, Hispanic, and Asian women are more likely to be victimized by police officers than White sex workers, queer people, women drivers are. One exception to this is victims of PSV in the context of OIDV. The majority of police officers in the US are straight, White men, and since about 93.4 % of married White men are married to a White woman, most victims of officer-involved domestic violence are also White women (Statimetric, 2022; Data US, n.d.). Additionally, police officers are highly unlikely to victimize members of the higher class: nearly all their victims are members of the working class. This is not surprising, given the role of police as protectors of private property. The experiences of all victims of PSV differ, significantly shaped by the dominating social structures within the capitalist superstructure, like patriarchy, racial oppression, or heteronormativity.

### **Minors**

The available data suggests that a little more than half of the victims of police officers' sexual violence are minors, usually between 11 and 17 years old (Stinson et al., 2015b; Maher, 2021). A high number of these cases happen off duty. For example, many people trust police officers to babysit their children without a second thought because of the perceived trustworthiness that comes with the badge. One example is James Weems Jr., a retired Baltimore police officer, who worked for a daycare owned by his wife, a bus driver, sexually abused several of the children (Lockman, 2025). Since police officers are generally deemed trustworthy, when a child accuses an officer of improper behavior, parents/adults often do not believe the child (Stinson et al., 2014).

Another source of underage victims, about 40%, stems from ride-alongs in police cars in the context of law enforcement career exploration programs. Police officers take students on a ride-along, park the car at a spot they deem secure and coerce the student to engage in sexual activities with them. (Walker & Irlbeck, 2003; Stinson et al., 2015b). However, the incidences do not always happen during these ride-alongs; sometimes, those are only used to initiate contact with the victims. One example comes from Louisville officers Kenneth Betts and Brandon Wood who sexually abused a 17-year-old girl that took part in the Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD) Explorer Program. Additionally, the LMPD has been accused of hiding more than 730,000 records related to sexual abuse of minors by police officers (Uyeda, 2020). A further threat is posed by School Resource Officers (SROs), or School Safety Agents (SSAs). Being the highest authority in school, and often alone on a shift, several SROs have sexually assaulted high school students (Vitale, 2024). If we consider the 10% reporting rate experts of PSV expect, we get to at least 2,000 cases in 17 years, from 2005 to 2022, that is about 118 SROs annually who engage in sexual violence against students. However, the number of victims needs to be assumed even higher than that since police officers who engage in PSV tend to have multiple victims. Additionally, with the rise of the internet, police officers increasingly victimize children virtually by using social media and messenger apps.

### ***Sex Workers***

About 38% of all sex workers have been exposed to police sexual violence (Murphy-Stanley, 2022). In many cases, police officers demand sex or sexual acts from sex workers to avoid arrest. Police officers often pose as buyers of sex in order to prove that the targeted person is offering full-service sex work. However, instead of arresting them when they have the necessary information, they still have sex with them before they let them know that they are police officers and arrest them (Maher, 2021; Murphy-Stanley, 2022). Additionally, in recent years, police officers have been charged with and convicted of coercing women to work as full-service sex workers for them and of leading sex trafficking rings (Vitale, 2017). Oftentimes, these cases are unreported since they involve a large number of officers, if not all officers of a police department. An exception to this was the 2018 indictment of seven NYPD officers in New York. For many years, the officers ran a ‘prostitution ring’ in Nassau County, Queens, and Brooklyn, and used their access to police information to protect the organization (New York City Police Department 2018, September).

### ***Driving While Female***

The term *driving while female* (DWF) was coined by the criminologists Samuel Walker and Dawn Irlbeck to describe sexual acts of police officers during traffic stops. About one in five cases of PSV includes a driving while female situation (Walker & Irlbeck, 2003). Police officers often stop girls or women they deem attractive, trying to get their contact information like a phone number or social media account. In some cases, officers go much further and sexually harass or even rape their victims. One example of such a case is Jarrod Gailen Webster from the Killen Police Department in Alabama. On November 12, 2023, Webster conducted a traffic stop during which he handcuffed and raped the driver. Officers who sexually abuse women during traffic stops purposefully do not inform their dispatcher about the stop to deny that it even happened if the victim files a complaint (Stinson, 2020). According to Phillip Stinson (2020), these acts are not isolated incidents but “...are crimes committed by serial sexual predators who happen to be employed as police officers.” Considering that most people in the US start driving by the age of 16, driving while female incidents partly explain why more than half the victims of sexual violence committed by police officers are under the age of 18.

### ***Black, Indigenous, and People of Color***

While about 67% of the US population identifies as White, only 18% of people who became victims of sexual violence are White, showing how sexual violence disproportionately targets communities of color. Black people generally face abuse by police at much higher rates than any other demographic, thus it is not surprising that the data suggests that impoverished Black women are the most likely to fall victim to sexual violence by police officers, closely followed by Hispanics, Indigenous people, Asians and immigrants. Some police officers use their access to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) to find their victims: They often chose poor women of color with criminal records because they know this demographic is least likely to be believed if they come forward and speak about their victimization (Stinson, 2020; Maher, 2021). Black women and Latinas have also historically been stereotyped as being sexually promiscuous, making it more likely for prosecutors and the public to believe that the sex was consensual, and less likely for the officer to face repercussions (Purvis & Blanko, 2020). Because the victims also know that there is no chance that they will be treated fairly and get justice, most of them never come forward. As the case of Abner Louima shows men of color are also exposed to PSV. Louima, a Haitian man, had been arrested by two NYPD officers in 1998 and violently raped by the officers with a broom stick (Purvis & Blanko, 2020).

### ***Queer People***

Another demographic repeatedly victimized by police officers are queer people. Historically, gays and lesbians have been the most targeted queer demographic; however, in recent decades, transgender and gender non-conforming people have been more likely to become victims of police sexual violence. A study surveying queer people in the US by the Williams Institute from 2020 showed that 3% of respondents have experienced sexual harassment by the police. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Services Administration (2022), there are about 12 million queer people in the United States. A 3% rate of sexual harassment suggests that 360,000 queer people have experienced sexual harassment by the police. This shows that sexual harassment by police is not an uncommon experience for queer people. As always, this harassment is strongly intersectional: Black transgender women are most likely to be victimized by police officers (Williams Institute, 2020). One example of explicitly queerphobic sexual abuse of a queer person by a police officer is the unfortunate story of Charles Norwood who, in 2010, was repeatedly arrested for a minor violations and placed in a cell by Officer Steward who demanded sexual acts from Norwood. (The Chicago Reporter, n.d.).

### ***Domestic Partners of Police Officers***

The problem with OIDV in the United States has long been established (FBI Academy Behavioral Science Unit & Sheelan, 2000; Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). Yet, despite a substantial and still-growing body of research on the topic, its true extent can only be speculated upon. Johnson (1991) states that "...40 percent of the officers stated that in the last six months prior to the survey they had gotten out of control and behaved violently against their spouse and children." A study by Nedig et al. (1992) partly corroborates these findings and reports 24-40% rates of OIDV by police officers (Stinson & Liederbach, 2013). Both studies suggest that police officers are 4 times more likely to engage in acts of domestic violence, including sexual violence.

### ***Others***

There are many other demographics that are sexually victimized by the police. The types of victims mentioned in the paragraphs above are not an exhaustive list of victim types of PSV, but represent the most common demographic of victims. For instance, a survey of New York City youth (minors and young people 18 years or older) reported that two out of five (about 40%) of young women have been sexually harassed by a police officer at least once (Katovich & Park, 2018). This shows that minors are not the only young people repeatedly victimized by police. Another source of sexual misconduct is the rank system of law enforcement. Some officers of higher ranks abuse their power to coerce lower-ranked officers to engage in sexual activities, as the case of Jeffrey Maddrey shows. Maddrey, Chief of the NYPD, forced several subordinate female officers to have sex with him. He also helped another officer to retaliate against a female officer who filed a sexual harassment complaint against him (Meko et al., 2024).

### **Why are Police Officers committing Sexual Violence at such a high Rate?**

There are several phenomena that favor PSV, such as police culture, capitalism, and lack of accountability.

#### **Police Culture**

##### ***General Disregard for People's Rights***

A problem within the police is the disregard for human beings who are *accused* of having committed a crime. Many police officers who engage in illegal violence or sexual violence often deny their victim's humanity since they are seen as being on the wrong side of the thin blue line. As a result, police officers see their violence as deterrent, just retaliation or punishment (Stinson, 2020). Officers often see their acts of sexual violence against sex workers and previously convicted women not only as an act without a victim but also as moral an act of moral punishment. And police officers are trained, in the academies and with their partners on the beat, to not trust people who are not police officers themselves (Maher, 2021; Simon, 2024). This distrust of non-police together with disdain for suspects and people known to the police is a fertile ground for police misconduct including PSV.

##### ***The Blue Wall of Silence***

The so-called *blue wall of silence* is a second contributing factor to the proliferation of police misconduct like PSV. Police officers generally do not report other police officers' misconduct and criminality, nor do they tell the truth if they are questioned or interrogated regarding police misconduct (Hoberman, 2017; Maher, 2021). However, the blue wall of silence is not always only socially enforced but

sometimes also with violence like the cases of Frank Serpico and Adrian Schoolcraft show. Serpico was a whistleblower who informed the public about the wide spread corruption within the NYPD and was not supported by his NYPD colleagues present at the scene after he got shot in the head and nearly died. Additionally, Schoolcraft, another whistleblower, who recorded orders by superiors to fulfill illegal arrest quotas, was forced into a psych ward while the NYPD leadership tried to get him labeled as psychotic, in order to discredit him and his information (Rayman, 2013).

### ***Masculinity***

The culture of police is deeply influenced by hegemonic masculinity, which describes the dominant vision of how to be a man. According to Purvis and Blanco (2020), “[b]ecause masculinity is [...] intersectional, hegemonic masculinity [...] describes the upper middle class White male professional who represents the ideal version of masculinity because of the important relationship between masculinity and breadwinning”. This obviously leaves out the majority of men who have to find ways to prove their masculinity and that is usually done by physical, hypermasculine acts (Purvis & Blanco, 2020).

Due to their position within the criminal legal system, police officers can engage in violent behavior with little scrutiny or rejection since society accepts violent behavior to be part of the police profession. Thus, police officers’ hypermasculine behavior is morally sanctioned. Additionally, policing is seen as a blue-collar job; police officers are likely to feel the need to prove their masculinity by hypermasculine behavior in order to assert their status as a man (Purvis & Blanco, 2020). This hypermasculine culture within police departments comes with problematic attitudes, including the view of women, queer people and sex workers as being lesser. As the research by Samantha Simons (2024) shows, the presence of women within the structure of modern-day police is often used to degrade male officers. When female officers outperform male officers, higher-ups usually use this to insult the men. Generally, female cadets and the spectre of femininity serves as the background against which police cadets are evaluated. (ibid.). The message purveyed is clear: women are weaker, thus lesser than men.

Social values based on exclusion and competition like masculinities are an expression of what Karl Marx called *Entfremdung*, or *alienation*. The German term refers to the act of becoming estranged. In the Marxian sense, we become estranged from our environment, other humans, and ourselves. In order to substitute for this alienation, we create other types of bonds, based on identities like nationality, political opinion or, like in this case, gender (Tucker, Marx, & Engels, 1978). While policing is necessary to protect capitalist property relations, it also mirrors its philosophy: the strongest people have the power to determine what happens in each situation. While capitalists’ power is derived from their relationship to the means of production, the power of masculinity is derived from the use of force.

### ***Substance Abuse***

Another problem is substance abuse by officers. Experts estimate that about 10% of police officers are abusing steroids, with large departments, like the NYPD, having rates of steroid abusing officers estimated to be as high as 25% (Hoberman, 2017). High levels of alcohol abuse among police officers are not a rare occasion either. A study by the Butler Center for Research found that 37.6% of urban police officers in the United States engage in problematic drinking behavior (Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, 2015). The widespread abuse of steroids and alcohol among law enforcement officers is an important cause of the high rates of police sexual misconduct and abuse.

### ***Lack of Accountability***

Police officers rarely face repercussions for any acts of assault, sexual or non-sexual, and are widely regarded among criminologists and other experts to be exempt from law enforcement, since police officers usually do not arrest other police officers. (Stinson et al, 2015b). Contrary to popular believe body cams, harsher punishment for police misconduct and education on civil and criminal liability do not prevent police officers from engaging in sexual assault, or violent behavior in general (Gonzales et al., 2016). One reason for this is that even ‘harsher’ punishment usually only translates to the reduction of vacation days or short-term administrative leave by full payment. Additionally, many police officers accused of sex crimes

escape the loss of their badge by simply moving to another law enforcement agency (Ibid.). About 20% of police officers convicted of a violent crime simply get rehired at another police department (Stinson, 2020).

Furthermore, Patrolmen's Benevolence Associations (PBA) try everything to keep cases of police sexual misconduct out of public awareness. According to the ACLU the PBA "... seeks to keep such allegations of sexual abuse [...] out of the public eye, in part by arguing that police sexual misconduct is not an "abuse of authority"" (Katovich & Park, 2018).

### ***Capitalism***

The police are part of the executive arm of the state which is itself an agent of class war, always benefiting the dominant class and its interests. In a capitalist society that is the capitalist class (Karl Marx, 1867/1976). This material relationship is conditional for the operation of the police, the focus it lays and the decision its leaders are making. Historically, the state emerged in human society at the intersection of those who own property and those who do not. It was constructed to prevent those who lack property from rising up and overthrowing the ruling class of society. Thus, the police are foremost there to prevent revolution, not to fight crime (Neocleous, 2025). Furthermore, capitalism is a system that needs the working class to be divided and also to veil the class nature of its economic mode of exploitation. This is achieved through racism, misogyny, queerphobia and xenophobia. How and in what way those are expressed differs strongly between society, time and country. The workers fight over issues of culture, immigration, gender, ethnicity etc. consequently, they do not realize that the source of their suffering is not a difference of skin tone, gender, religion or country of origin but the exploitation through the capitalist class. Thus, capitalism needs both, a police force it can trust and misogynist (and other) narratives dividing the people in order to preserve class relations to secure exploitation. Implementing measures to prevent police sexual violence would be interpreted as an attack by the ruling class on police officers and as a sign of distrust, thus alienate police officers from the ruling class. The ruling class need to know the police are on their side, and they need to keep the working class divided to prevent revolution, that is, actual change. In conclusion, capitalist class exploitation keeps politicians from taking meaningful action against police sexual violence.

### ***Police Do Not Prevent or Investigate Sexual Violence***

Contrary to popular opinion, police do extraordinarily little to prevent acts of sexual violence. Only one third of sexual assaults are reported, with some estimates stating that only 20% are reported. But even if they are reported to the police they are often not investigated (Maher, 2021). Police claim a nationwide clearance rate of sexual assault cases of 32% which is already disturbingly low if we consider that 80-90% of all victims know their perpetrator (Awad and Saunders, 1991; Maher, 2021). The use of the term clearance rate is also misleading, as that means an *arrest* has been made, not that they arrested the right person nor that the person also got convicted. The actual clearance rate, meaning someone got convicted, is deemed by experts to be only about 16% (Maher, 2021). This 16% is as small as 5.3-3.2% if we consider that most sexual assaults are never even reported. Given that this is an estimated average, we must also consider that some municipalities have even lower rates. Considering the high number of acts of sexual violence committed by the police, of which we only have underreported data, we can at least assume that the police and the criminal legal system only do little to prevent sexual violence or to bring justice to the victims. Generally, policing has been shown to not be an effective means in reducing crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2005).

### ***Reform or Revolution?***

Each time problems with law enforcement are publicly discussed, some advocates demand reforming the institution of police and policy makers are often willing to give us watered down reforms. However, those are either small in their impact, had no impact at all or made things even worse. The now infamous chokehold which an officer applied when he killed Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014 was itself the result of a reform to reduce the high rates of police shootings. The police officer who killed George Floyd was not only taking part in his department's bias training, but he was the instructor. Police bodycams were another call to reform to prevent police misconduct. Created by the company Axon (formerly Taser), and instilled by them into reform movements, body cams are now used to support the position of police

officers. The problem with body cams is that their footage is only accessible by Axon and the police, not by the public or prosecutors. It is often edited and otherwise altered in order to strengthen the position of the police narrative when confronted with accusations of police misconduct. In many cases the footage is simply not made available at all.

Police departments promise to implement zero tolerance policies, more accountability and more severe punishment every time police abuse or misconduct makes the headlines, yet officers are still rarely disciplined. For example, the problem with officers' abuse of steroids has been known at least since the '80s but no department in the US is testing its officers for steroids (Hoberman, 2017). Furthermore, more funding for better training is rarely used for its intended purpose but is usually spent on supplies, higher wages, new gear and vehicles for the departments. Despite all these reforms, the rate of people killed by police has increased by about 35% since 2020: from about 1,000 per year to more than 1,350 people killed in 2024. Violent crime did not significantly increase during that time, neither did non-violent crime (Campaign Zero, 2025).

The best way to reduce police sexual violence is to reduce police officers' interactions with the public. This can be done by reducing the tasks assigned to police. There are a variety of approaches to the tasks police officers are assigned that strongly correlate with PSV, such as school safety and the apprehension of sex workers. These abolitionist approaches are not only effective but also noncorrosive, nonviolent, and respect the people and help to build stronger communities.

A great example of how to reduce the occurrence rate of police sexual violence is the decriminalization of sex work. If sex work is not prosecuted police officers have less power to abuse sex workers. As mentioned above, PSV is a common problem for sex workers, but the decriminalization of sex work would have additional benefits. Due to a legal mishap, Rhode Island legalized indoor prostitution from 2003 to 2009<sup>1</sup>. A study analyzing data from that time period suggests a decline of sexual violence in general by 30% and a decline of STDs by 40% (Cunningham & Shah, 2014). The data also shows that other crimes did not decrease during that time; the rates of robbery, murder, assault etc. stayed the same. This happened despite the police having more resources available to deal with these types of crime, since they didn't police sex workers anymore (ibid.). Thus, this study shows that increased police resources are not equivalent to a reduction in crime.

Another source of PSV is police involvement in schools, either as SROs or in the above-mentioned ride-alongs. The idea of school policing imagines that police officers prevent school shootings and crimes on school grounds. Both narratives have been disproved repeatedly. For example, Tom Mowen, a researcher with focus on school resource officers said: "For someone to suggest that SROs prevent school shootings is absolutely unfounded in [sic] terms of science. There's no support for that statement at all" (Schlemer, 2019). However, what school policing does is to criminalize children and teenagers for age-typical behavior and minor transgressions. From a pedagogical perspective, conflicts on school grounds offer a valuable opportunity to teach students how to manage intense emotions, insults, status claims, and related dynamics. The police do not offer such an emotional-growth-based approach to conflict. They offer a criminal record and future difficulties to secure a job; thus, police intervention in high schools is itself often criminogenic. School policing brings the devastating, racialized effects of modern policing from the streets into the schools. It is highly racialized and targets students of color much more than other demographics. For example, in Milwaukee, Leaders Igniting for Transformation compiled a report that found that "the 50% of Black students made up 84 percent of all police referrals" (Vitale, 2024). School policing has become one of the most damaging experiments in US educational history. Removing SRO programs will not only reduce PSV rates but also reduce the harassment of students, especially students of color, by the criminal legal system.

In the end, no approach that seeks to reduce police misconduct and policing itself, no matter how radical or abolitionist it may be, can truly end police violence. Police are the executive force of the state, a construct that historically emerged to protect the interests of property-owning classes from those who do not own property. The dialectical relationship between the capitalists and the workers requires the capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> Prostitution was actually legalized by a law from 1980. However, nobody knew that until the 2003 court case.

state to employ a police force whose purpose is ultimately to protect the capitalists' property and to prevent revolution. Only when we overcome this class society, that is, when we abolish capitalism, can we work on a way of dealing with people's harmful behavior that is truly meaningful and effective. This makes a socialist system, meaning a system in which the means of production are mutually owned by the people, not a small sect of property-owning capitalists, necessary to put an end to sexual abuse by law enforcement. Nevertheless, a socialist restructuring of society alone will not be sufficient. Projects, movements, and organizations driven and led by the people targeting racism, queerphobia, the patriarchy etc., will be most important too.

### **Conclusion**



Police sexual violence is an overlooked problem within policing in the United States. Police officers victimize tens of thousands, mostly young, women every year. This is because law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, judges, and politicians are not interested in preventing, reducing, or prosecuting police misconduct. Additionally, since the media presents most cases of police misconduct, no matter if sexual or non-sexual, as an exception, despite them being systemic problems, the general public is not aware about its scale. Since predatory officers know that poor women of color, formerly convicted women, trans people, and sex workers are not seen as credible in our society, they mostly victimize these populations. The problem of PSV will not disappear as long as the system remains the same. As the experience of the last decades clearly shows, there is no reform, no zero-tolerance approach, that will significantly reduce the problem. It is but a byproduct of a misogynist society that throws law enforcement and punishment on every problem that arises. The problem of PSV cannot be dealt with by simple police reforms but by significantly restructuring society and by implementing alternative approaches to crime, including the reduction of the use of police.

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**Immigration Raids and Family  
Separations in the U.S. Border**

Aqsa Ahmed

Immigration raids and family separation have become common tools for the U.S. government to enforce immigration laws. These actions treat immigration like a crime, even though being undocumented is not a criminal offense. Immigration law is technically a civil system, which means it is meant to regulate who can enter or remain in the country rather than punish people for crimes. However, over time, immigration enforcement has become increasingly criminalized, especially after the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These institutions expanded the government's ability to detain, police, and deport immigrants in ways that resemble the criminal justice system. As a result, many immigrant families now experience enforcement practices that feel similar to criminal punishment, even though immigration violations are civil matters. Yet raids, detention, and family separation force many immigrant families to live in constant fear and uncertainty. Children are often the most harmed. When parents are taken away, children experience trauma, anxiety, and long-lasting emotional damage. The Society for Research in Child Development states that family separation policies have “serious and lasting consequences for children’s mental health and development” (SRCD, 2019). This shows that immigration enforcement is not only a legal issue but also a serious mental health and public health issue because the trauma caused by separation can harm children’s emotional well-being, development, and long-term stability. This paper explores how treating immigration as a crime harms children, divides families, and creates fear in immigrant communities of color. It introduces the concept of crimmigration, which explains how immigration enforcement has increasingly merged with criminal law. By examining raids, detention, family separation, and community impacts, this paper argues that humane, community-based alternatives are needed to protect families and improve public safety.

Immigration law in the United States is legally a civil system, not a criminal one. This means that being undocumented is not considered a crime. Civil immigration law focuses on regulating entry and status, not punishment. However, immigration enforcement has begun to look and feel like the criminal justice system. Legal scholar Juliet Stumpf introduced the concept of crimmigration in 2006, describing it as the merging of criminal and immigration law. This merging allows the government to use criminal-style punishments, like detention and policing, even though immigration cases are technically civil. Stumpf later notes that immigration enforcement has grown more severe and more accepted over time. She writes that the system “treats migration as a threat to be controlled rather than a social reality to be managed humanely” (Stumpf, 2023). Therefore, immigrants are treated like criminals even when they have not committed a crime. When immigration is treated like a crime, enforcement focuses on punishment rather than protection. This creates a system where families are targeted, children are traumatized, and communities live in fear.

Immigration raids are carried out by federal agencies like ICE and the U.S. Border Patrol. These raids can happen suddenly at workplaces, homes, or public places. They are often unannounced and can involve armed officers. Worksite raids target businesses suspected of hiring undocumented workers. Officers enter the workplace, check IDs, and arrest people who do not have legal immigration status. Many of those arrested are parents who have no time to arrange care for their children. Research shows that for every two people detained in worksite raids, roughly one child is affected by the arrest, meaning children are often left without immediate care or support (Urban Institute, 2020). Family separation also happens at the border. When families cross the U.S.–Mexico border without authorization, Border Patrol may separate adults from children. Family separation also occurs at the border when families cross the U.S.–Mexico border without authorization, where Border Patrol may separate adults from children without clear procedures to ensure families remain together or are reunified before deportation. Since raids and border enforcement can happen suddenly, families do not have time to prepare. Parents may not have time to tell children what is happening or to find a safe caregiver, creating chaos and trauma.

Children are among the most harmed by immigration raids and family separation. Separation from parents causes severe emotional and psychological distress. Children often experience anxiety, depression, nightmares, and symptoms of PTSD. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) calls family separation a “toxic stressor” that disrupts healthy brain development (SRCD, 2019 ). So, separation is not only emotional, but it also affects physical brain development.

Children's education also suffers; when a parent is detained or deported, children may miss school, move frequently, or lose access to educational support. Studies show that fear of raids leads parents to keep children home from school, which hurts academic performance and social development (Gándara & Ee, 2021). Plus, health outcomes also worsen, as separated children are more likely to suffer from sleep disorders, headaches, and developmental delays. A systematic review of unaccompanied immigrant children found that trauma often continues even after reunification due to a lack of mental health services and stable support systems (Lovato et al, 2025). Overall, children experience long-term harm because separation causes trauma, instability, and loss of support systems.

Immigration raids and detention deeply destabilize families. When a parent is detained, families often lose their primary source of income. This leads to housing instability, food insecurity, and debt. The Urban Institute (2020) reports that families affected by immigration enforcement experience sudden economic hardship that can last years, even if the detained family member returns. Parents report intense fear, guilt, and helplessness while children struggle with abandonment and insecurity. Families also face legal barriers, including high bond costs and limited access to legal representation. Immigration bond payments can range from about \$1,500 to over \$10,000, which is far beyond what many low-income immigrant families can afford. For example, reports describe families who must borrow money from relatives, take on debt, or sell personal belongings in order to pay for a parent's release from detention (Freedom for Immigrants, 2023). In households where families already earn low wages, these costs can be impossible to manage, leaving parents detained for months while their children struggle at home. The Migration Policy Institute (2020) explains that these pressures strain family relationships and increase long-term emotional damage, especially in mixed-status households where children are U.S. citizens but parents are not. The result is a cycle of instability: children struggle in school, families lose income, and communities become isolated. This makes it harder for families to recover even after reunification.

Criminalized immigration enforcement affects entire communities, not just individual families. Immigrant communities of color experience increased surveillance, racial profiling, and fear of public spaces. Studies show that increased immigration enforcement reduces trust in law enforcement, making communities less likely to report crimes or cooperate with police (TRAC, 2021), undermining public safety. When people avoid contacting police due to immigration concerns, crimes go unreported, and victims go unprotected. A study in the *Journal of Urban Economics* (Martinez et al., 2022) found that aggressive immigration enforcement correlates with decreased crime reporting in Latino communities, even for serious offenses. Consequently, criminalization weakens community safety rather than improving it.

Sanctuary cities offer a different approach by limiting cooperation between local police and federal immigration enforcement. Research consistently finds that sanctuary cities do not experience higher crime rates. In fact, a major study found that sanctuary jurisdictions have lower crime rates and stronger economic outcomes than non-sanctuary cities (Martinez et al., 2022). By separating local policing from immigration enforcement, sanctuary policies increase trust between immigrant communities and public institutions. This encourages crime reporting, community cooperation, and access to services. Sanctuary cities show that public safety improves when communities are not treated like criminals.

Despite their severity, raids, detention, and family separation do not reduce migration. Research shows that people migrate primarily due to violence, poverty, political instability, and climate conditions, but not enforcement policies alone (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). Criminalization does not address the real reasons people leave their homes. Instead, criminalization creates long-term harm by traumatizing children, destabilizing families, and increasing inequality. These policies are also costly and inefficient. Immigration detention is expensive, especially when facilities are privately operated. Studies show that private detention centers profit from higher detention rates and often lobby for stricter enforcement policies, creating incentives that prioritize profit over human well-being (Ackerman & Furman, 2013). Overall, these policies fail because they punish vulnerable people without solving the root causes of migration.

Research shows that humane alternatives work better. Programs that provide community-based support help families stay together while their immigration cases move through the legal system, guiding them through paperwork, court requirements, and other resources, all while maintaining high participation in hearings. The American Immigration Council notes that these programs are cheaper than detention and

result in better outcomes for families (American Immigration Council, 2020). Family unity policies, legal representation, and access to social services reduce trauma and improve long-term stability. Humane border processing that prioritizes child welfare and due process aligns with international human rights standards and supports safer, more organized migration management.

Treating immigration as a crime through raids, detention, and family separation causes lasting harm to children, families, and immigrant communities of color. Grounded in a long history of racialized enforcement, these policies fail to reduce migration and instead create trauma, fear, and instability. Through the lens of crimmigration, this paper shows how civil immigration law has been transformed into a system of punishment. The evidence is clear: humane, community-based approaches are not only more ethical, but more effective. Ending family separation and shifting away from criminalization is essential for justice, public safety, and human dignity.



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A close-up, artistic portrait of a Black woman's face. The image is dominated by warm, earthy tones of brown and tan. Her eyes are a striking, light brown color, looking directly at the viewer with a calm, steady gaze. Her hair is dark and styled in a natural, curly texture. The lighting is soft, highlighting the contours of her face and the texture of her skin. The overall mood is intimate and powerful.

## 2. Against the Black Body

*Image by: Shania McCombs*



**US Fascism and the  
Criminalization of Black Womxn**

Danielle Key

## **Introduction**

White middle-class people in the United States (U.S.) have been saying for some time now that because Donald Trump is a president who holds fascist politics, the U.S. is fascist. This implies that the U.S. was a democracy until Trump got into office. However, the United States has never been a democracy; it has always been fascist. The country was built through settler colonialism, genocide, and chattel slavery. Enslaved African people generated the economic foundation of the nation, while Indigenous land was violently stolen to sustain its expansion. From its inception, the state relied on surveillance, punishment, and gendered racial violence to maintain social order. Black womxn<sup>2</sup>—positioned at the intersection of anti-Blackness, misogyny, transmisogyny, and economic exploitation—have been uniquely targeted within this system. Their bodies, identities, and survival strategies have consistently been framed as threats requiring control, discipline, and punishment.

This paper argues that the United States has been perceived as a democracy and not as fascist for so long because white people only think a country is fascist if a government uses state violence and extreme nationalism against other white people. This ignored how governments harm Black and other non-white people. In this paper, I first give a brief historical background of the criminalization of black womxn and fascism. In the second section, I explain the literature on this topic. Third, I will show the theoretical frameworks used for this study. In the fourth section, I explain my methodology for the critical qualitative case study that I conducted. In the fifth section, I explain my findings from my analysis. Lastly, I discuss why the findings show that the criminal legal system must be dismantled.

## **Historical Background**

### ***The Criminalization of Black Womxn***

To understand the criminalization of Black womxn as case studies, we have to know the historical context because the criminalization of Black womxn in the United States is deeply rooted in the legal, economic, and ideological foundations of slavery. From the colonial period forward, Black womxn were excluded from legal personhood while being subjected to intense regulation, surveillance, and punishment. Enslaved Black womxn were legally defined as chattel and property, rendering violence against them permissible while criminalizing their resistance to exploitation and abuse (Gross, 2015; Gross & Hicks, 2016). Colonial laws such as *partus sequitur ventrem*, which determined a child's legal status through the mother, institutionalized the reproductive exploitation of Black womxn and incentivized sexual violence by enslavers.

At the same time, enslaved Black womxn were harshly punished for acts interpreted as defiance, including self-defense against sexual assault, resistance to labor exploitation, or harm against enslavers and overseers. Historical court records demonstrate that Black womxn were prosecuted for serious and capital crimes, often in response to extreme violence, yet were denied the legal protections afforded to white womxn (McNair, 2009). The legal system thus functioned as a tool of domination that criminalized survival while protecting white patriarchal authority.

Following emancipation, the criminalization of Black womxn intensified under Jim Crow through racialized gender ideologies that framed Black womxn as inherently immoral, aggressive, and dangerous. Stereotypes such as the “Jezebel” and later the “angry Black woman” justified disproportionate policing, harsher sentencing, and the denial of victim status for Black womxn (Gross & Hicks, 2016). Black womxn who defended themselves against sexual or domestic violence were frequently punished more severely than white womxn who committed comparable acts, reinforcing what Gross (2015) describes as an exclusionary politics of protection—where Black womxn were subject to punishment without access to legal protection.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these logics persisted through the expansion of the carceral state. While mass incarceration is often framed as primarily affecting Black men, scholarship demonstrates that Black womxn—particularly poor, queer, disabled, and young Black womxn—have

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I will be spelling women the Black feminist way, which is “womxn.” The purpose of the spelling is that the “womxn” includes transgender and queer women in the definition of women.

experienced significant growth in incarceration and state surveillance (Gross & Hicks, 2016). Policies associated with the War on Drugs, “law and order” politics, and zero-tolerance school discipline disproportionately criminalized Black womxn’s responses to trauma, poverty, and structural neglect. Research on Black girls highlights how these dynamics begin early in life. Black girls are disproportionately funneled into the juvenile legal system through what scholars describe as the “sex abuse-to-prison pipeline,” where experiences of sexual violence, running away, and survival behaviors are reframed as delinquency (Davis, 2020). Rather than receiving care or protection, Black girls are punished for their victimization, reinforcing intergenerational patterns of criminalization.

Across historical periods, the criminalization of Black womxn has been inseparable from state-sanctioned violence. Law enforcement, courts, schools, and social service systems operate together to regulate Black womxn’s bodies through punishment, neglect, and coercion. This history reveals that Black womxn’s criminalization is not incidental but structural—embedded in the foundations of American law, citizenship, and governance.

### ***Criminalization Theory***

Criminalization refers to the process through which the state defines certain people, identities, and survival behaviors as “criminal.” This process does not respond to harm; it produces it. Through criminalization, the state transforms victims into offenders, reframes structural violence as individual deviance, and legitimizes punishment as a solution to social, economic, and political problems. Criminalization operates as a gendered-racist social control. It targets Black communities, particularly Black womxn, by policing poverty, self-defense, resistance, and survival. Within a fascist state, criminalization becomes a moral project: marking certain lives as disposable while presenting punishment as necessary, natural, and just.

However, criminalization theory and research usually focus on the criminalization of Black men and white womxn. Intersectional analyses of criminalization are extremely necessary because people with multiple oppressed identities have different lived experiences with criminalization than people with privileged identities. Therefore, focusing on the criminalization of Black men ignores the criminalization of Black womxn.

### **Fascism**

We are told that fascism emerged in the early twentieth century as a political response to economic instability, social crisis, and challenges to hierarchical power structures. Fascism is often associated with European regimes such as Mussolini’s Italy and Nazi Germany, but fascism is more accurately understood as a political logic characterized by authoritarianism, extreme nationalism, the suppression of dissent, and the normalization of state violence (History Rise, n.d.). Rather than addressing structural inequality, fascism reframes social problems as moral failures caused by internal enemies.

According to white historians, fascist movements developed in the aftermath of World War I, amid fears of socialist and anti-capitalist organizing. Fascist leaders promised national renewal through discipline, unity, and obedience to the state, rejecting democracy, pluralism, and egalitarianism as sources of weakness (History Rise, n.d.). Violence was not a deviation from fascism but a central governing tool, used to enforce conformity and eliminate opposition. White historians believe that Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler are key leaders of fascism. However, this is a very whitewashed way of looking at fascism. White historians—and the people who believe that fascism is currently coming to the United States—are basically saying that fascism is when white people systematically use state violence, propaganda, authoritarianism, and extreme nationalism to control and harm other white middle-class people.

The Black Radical Tradition has been talking about how the U.S. is fascist for a very long time. In the 1960s and 70s, Black radicals were arguing that the way fascism is used marginalizes Black people’s experiences with oppression. Black radicals were using fascism as an analytical tool to examine their own experiences. Black radical organizations—such as the Black Panther Party—would organize to fight fascism in the United States. Black radical activists recognized fascist tendencies in everyday state practices, including police violence, political repression, and the criminalization of Black survival and dissent (Duke University Press, 2017). However, the Black Radical Tradition tended to center Black men’s

experiences with oppression in the U.S. Black womxn's lived experiences were usually not centered when fascism was being applied to the oppression of Black people in the U.S.

### ***Jason Stanley's Ten Tactics of Fascism Theory***

Jason Stanley, a political theorist at the University of Toronto, coined a theory that identifies ten tactics fascist politics uses. According to Stanley, the individual tactics are not fascist. Fascism happens when all ten tactics are being used (Big Think, 2021; Stanley, 2018). Hierarchy is a tactic that fascist politics use. Hierarchy is the foundation of fascism. Fascist politics justify why some people are at the top and why others are at the bottom. The dominant groups have higher hierarchical status and are seen as 'pure' and 'traditional', while people in non-dominant groups have lower hierarchical status and are seen as deviant, outcasts, and inherent problems of the nation. Since the United States was built, white people—especially white men—have always had the highest hierarchical status.

Victimhood is another tactic that fascist politics use. After creating a hierarchy, fascist politics makes the people at the top of the hierarchical ladder terrified of equality with the people who have a lower status. In the United States, since white people hold the highest status, they are often the most afraid of real equality—especially when it comes to real equality with Black communities.

Fascist politics is all about the people in power not telling the people of the nation the truth, or rather, unreality. The United States has always used this tactic. Slave owners told lies about the nature and humanity of Black people so they could keep owning people for free labor. More recently, the War on Drugs was able to happen because Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan lied to the entire country. They told the country that a drug epidemic was going on and that it was dangerous. They did this so they could criminalize people for using drugs.

Fascist politics uses a mythic past tactic, which claims that in the past the dominant group ruled over everyone in the nation and that right now that is being threatened. All fascist nations have a "pure" mythic past. The U.S. has always used this tactic. The U.S.'s mythic past is that White Europeans peacefully came to this land in search of freedom and were originally nice to the Indigenous people who were already living, but then the Indigenous people were a threat to the White Europeans, so the Europeans had to slaughter the Indigenous people. In reality, White European colonizers came here to be able to live white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchal lives. Since the Indigenous people were culturally, socially, and physically different and since the Indigenous people often resisted the colonizers' social order, the colonizers killed the Indigenous people.

Anti-intellectualism is another tactic of fascism. In fascist politics, the people in power are the only ones who can say what is true and what is false. According to fascist politics, science is only useful if it serves and benefits the people in power. This is because research and expertise that expose reality challenge the authority of the people in power. The U.S. has used this tactic because whenever people want critical race theory, radical feminist theories, and different perspectives of history to be incorporated in education, it threatens the false narratives that the people in power want us to believe. This is due to the U.S.'s educational system being built on white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy.

Law and order through fascism does not mean equality or justice. Law and order mean that people in the dominant group are law-abiding by nature, and those outside the dominant group must accept a subservient role and be law-abiding. In fascist politics, the people in power cannot violate law and order because it is only meant to control the people in the non-dominant groups. In the U.S., Black womxn have been criminalized for self-defense since chattel slavery. However, the judges, prosecutors, and police officers do not get held accountable for punishing and further traumatizing them. The U.S.'s criminal legal system is built to allow law enforcement to criminalize and harm with no consequences for the harm they cause.

Propaganda is a tactic that fascist politics uses. Fascist propaganda is based on a friend/enemy distinction. The enemy threatens the very existence of the dominant group and its traditions. Fascist propaganda is structured so that the enemy is fundamentally opposed to the nation. The United States fascist propaganda labels non-white, non-rich, non-heterosexual people as the enemy and the "others." During chattel slavery, U.S. fascist propaganda portrayed Black people as inherently inferior beings that needed to be controlled. During the War on Drugs era, U.S. fascist propaganda portrayed Black people as

dangerous drug addicts who just care about getting high and causing harm to people. During the 9/11 era, U.S. fascist propaganda portrayed Brown people as violent people who want to bomb, rob, and harm white Americans.

Another fascist tactic is *Arbeit Macht Frei* (“Work shall make you free”). According to this tactic, members of the non-dominant group are seen as inherently lazy people who must be put to work. Since those in power see non-dominant groups as lazy, putting them to work gives them a work ethic. In fascist politics, to be valued is to be capable of “hard work.” The U.S. has always used this tactic. White people justified chattel slavery because they convinced themselves that Black people were innately inferior beings, beast-like creatures, that are lazy and stupid and have souls that must be saved by putting them to work.

Sodom and Gomorrah is another fascist tactic that is used. Fascist politics have a rural/urban divide. Urban areas are seen as dangerous, dirty, and “filled with criminals and lazy people.” In fascist politics, rural areas are where the elites congregate and where “real” work is getting done. During the War on Drugs era, Ronald Reagan said that crack cocaine was an “inner city epidemic.” Urban Black communities were portrayed as out of control. Ronald Reagan also created the Welfare Queen stereotype, which portrayed urban Black womxn as lazy people who use the government's money instead of doing hard work.

Lastly, fascism uses sexual anxiety as a tactic. In fascist politics, white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy is at the foundation. Anything that threatens the traditional patriarchal norms undermines fascism's definition of strength (Stanley, 2018). Fascist politics creates panic around anything and anyone that deviates from the traditional white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchal norms—such as the traditional family. When the White colonizers came to this land, one of the first things they did was enforce patriarchal norms onto Indigenous people. Those same colonizers used legal power and stereotypes—like the Black Jezebel—to hypersexualize Black womxn’s bodies. During Reconstruction times, white Americans used the sexual anxiety tactic, also on Black men’s bodies, by portraying them as rapists.

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

### ***The Black Radical Tradition (BRT)***

The Black Radical Tradition (BRT) provides the foundational lens for understanding resistance to this fascist order. The BRT is a lineage of Black political thought and struggle that rejects the legitimacy of racist state power and refuses reformist solutions rooted in capitalism, policing, and prisons. Rather than seeking inclusion within existing structures, the BRT exposes those structures as inherently violent and colonial.

Black struggle, within this tradition, does not merely respond to oppression—it reveals the state’s true foundations. Policing, prisons, and criminal law emerge not as neutral institutions but as tools developed to manage Black life, suppress resistance, and preserve racial capitalism. The BRT therefore frames abolition not as an abstract ideal but as a historically grounded political necessity.

### ***Black Feminist Abolition (BFA)***

Black Feminist Abolition (BFA) emerges from the Black Radical Tradition while centering Black feminism as its analytic core. BFA emphasizes how race, gender, class, sexuality, and state violence intersect to shape Black womxn’s lived experiences with the criminal legal system. It rejects single-axis analyses that isolate race or gender and instead insists that oppression operates through overlapping systems. BFA is also about creating care-based systems while dismantling the oppressive systems. Since prisons and police do not keep Black womxn safe, we must build systems that keep us safe with love and care. This framework foregrounds how Black womxn are simultaneously criminalized, victimized, and erased—particularly in cases involving survival, self-defense, poverty, caregiving, and interpersonal violence. Black Feminist Abolition exposes how carceral responses reproduce harm rather than resolve it, especially for those already positioned at the margins. Importantly, BFA also centers Black womxn’s knowledge, survival strategies, and resistance as sources of theory, not just data.

## Literature Review

There is a lot of BFA scholarship that captures the lived experiences that Black womxn have with the United States' criminal legal system. Beth Richie (2012) offers a foundational intersectional analysis of how Black womxn experience violent victimization throughout their lives, through an analytical tool she created called *the Violent Matrix* (Table 1).

The Violent Matrix captures the different types of violence (i.e., physical assault, sexual assault, and social disenfranchisement). Social disenfranchisement is when society puts Black womxn in vulnerable situations. Central to social disenfranchisement is "social inequality, systemic abuse, and state violence" (Richie, 2022, p.91). The Violent Matrix also shows the different contexts (i.e, households, the community, and the social sphere) that Black womxn experience violent victimization in. The social sphere encompasses the criminal legal system, institutions, and the social conditions that cause harm to Black womxn (Richie, 2012; Richie, 2022). The Violent Matrix shows that Black womxn's experiences with violence tend to be different than white womxn's experiences because Black womxn experience harm and then are further harmed by the criminal legal system by being criminalized.

BFA scholarship has also examined how Black womxn have historically been excluded from being protected in the United States. Mariame Kaba (2021) explains that this is because Black womxn do not fit the perfect-victim narrative of the criminal legal system. According to Kaba, the perfect-victim narrative is made for white womxn. It portrayed all victims as being "innocent" and "respectable" people who do not fit

Table 1  
The Violence Matrix

| The Violence Matrix | Physical Assault  | Sexual Assault  | Social Disenfranchisement   |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Intimate Households | 1. Direct physical assaults by intimate partners or household members, victim retaliation | 2. Sexual aggression by intimate partners or household members                        | 3. Emotional abuse and manipulation by intimate partners or household members, forced use of drugs and alcohol, isolation, economic abuse   |
| Community           | 4. Assaults by neighbors, lack of bystander intervention, availability of weapons         | 5. Sexual harassment, acquaintance rape, gang rape, trafficking into the sex industry | 6. Degrading comments, hostile neighborhood conditions, hostile or unresponsive school and work environments, residential segregation, lack of social capital, threat of violence   |
| Social Sphere       | 7. Stranger assault, state violence (such as police), lack of gun control policies        | 8. Stranger rape, coerced sterilization, unwanted exposure to pornography             | 9. Negative media images, denial of significance of victimization, degrading encounters with religious institutions and public agencies, victim blaming, lack of affordable housing, lack of employment and health care, mistrust of public agencies, poverty |

back, use drugs, or have prior contact with the criminal legal system. Black womxn are not seen as perfect victims because the narrative portrays white womxn as the only victims. Furthermore, Gross (2015) argues that Black womxn have been excluded from "the politics of protection." Since the U.S. has controlled Black womanhood since its founding, Black womxn are not included in the politics of protection. Black womxn are seen as inferior people who make irrational decisions that they should be punished for. Kaba (2021), therefore, argues that the criminal legal system must be dismantled, since it will never be able to see Black womxn as humans that must be protected from harm.

BFA argues that there is a through-line from chattel slavery to mass incarceration. In other words,

chattel slavery, lynching, the War on Drugs, and mass incarceration are directly linked to each other. Angela Y. Davis (2003) calls the institutions of lynching, segregation, and the criminal legal system post-slavery institutions. This means that not only did these institutions come after chattel slavery was abolished, but these institutions also use the same oppressive structures that chattel slavery used. Black people were able to be lynched, segregated, and imprisoned because of racism, classism, sexism, etc., just like chattel slavery. Therefore, the 13th Amendment did not solve the big issue, and neither did prisons and police.

Collectively, these scholars establish that the criminal legal system criminalizes Black womxn through intersecting systems of racism, patriarchy, and state violence. However, a critical gap remains in explicitly theorizing how American fascism—characterized by authoritarianism, state violence, surveillance, punishment, and the suppression of marginalized groups—produces and legitimizes this criminalization. The existing literature identifies the *outcomes* of state violence but does not fully name the *political condition* that enables it. This study fills that gap by arguing that the criminalization of Black womxn must be understood as a direct consequence of the United States' fascist orientation. By naming fascism as the governing logic that renders Black womxn disposable, this research extends Black feminist abolitionist scholarship beyond critiques of carceral logic and reform, offering a political analysis that explains *why* Black womxn are systematically criminalized. In doing so, this study contributes to abolitionist feminism by linking the everyday violence of the criminal legal system to the broader authoritarian structures that sustain it.

### ***Data & Methodology***

This study employs a qualitative research design using a case study methodology to examine the role of white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy in the criminalization of Black womxn and their lived experiences within the prison-industrial complex (PIC). A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on meaning, power, structural violence, and lived experience rather than measurement or prediction. The case study method enables an in-depth examination of specific historical and contemporary cases to analyze how criminalization operates over time and across social contexts.

Cases were purposely selected to capture both historical continuity and variation in the criminalization of Black womxn across time and gender identity. The study includes historical cases (Celia; Frances Thompson), recent historical cases (Angela Y. Davis; Marsha P. Johnson), and contemporary cases (Cyntoia Brown; CeCe McDonald). This selection supports a longitudinal examination of how systems of punishment, surveillance, and social control adapt across historical periods while maintaining racialized and gendered logics.

The study examines six cases that reflect distinct historical periods and forms of criminalization.

1. Celia (1835–1855), an enslaved Black woman executed after killing her enslaver, a case that reflects the criminalization of self-defense under slavery.
2. Frances Thompson (1840–1876), a Black transgender woman who testified about sexual violence during the Memphis Massacre and was later criminalized in ways that undermined her credibility and survival.
3. Angela Y. Davis (1944–present), a Black radical scholar and organizer who faced criminal charges and state pursuit in connection with political conflict and activism.
4. Marsha P. Johnson (1945–1992), a Black transgender activist repeatedly targeted by police, whose death was treated with institutional dismissal.
5. Cyntoia Brown (1988–present), a Black girl who survived trafficking and was criminalized after killing a man who purchased her for sex.
6. CeCe McDonald (1989–present), a Black transgender woman who was incarcerated after defending herself during a racist and transphobic attack.

Data for this study are drawn from non-academic secondary sources, including newspaper articles, online magazine articles, books, and publicly available historical records. These sources were intentionally selected to center narratives and experiences that are frequently excluded from traditional academic and legal archives. Emphasizing non-academic sources foregrounds lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge and aligns with Black feminist and abolitionist methodological commitments that challenge

epistemic hierarchies and institutional gatekeeping.

Data analysis combines chronological and thematic approaches. First, cases are examined in chronological order to trace the historical development of criminalization from slavery through the contemporary prison-industrial complex. This approach highlights how legal, political, and social institutions reproduce racialized and gendered violence over time despite changes in form and context.

Second, a thematic analysis is conducted across all cases to identify recurring patterns related to criminalization, state violence, punishment, gender regulation, and resistance. Themes are developed inductively from the data and interpreted through the study's theoretical frameworks, including Black feminist abolition, the Black radical tradition, fascism, and criminalization theory. This analytic strategy supports cross-case comparison while remaining attentive to historical specificity.

To examine the role of gender identity in criminalization, cases are grouped into cisgender and transgender Black womxn. Cisgender cases include Celia, Angela Y. Davis, and Cyntoia Brown, while transgender cases include Frances Thompson, Marsha P. Johnson, and CeCe McDonald. This comparative framework is used to examine how transmisogyny intensifies criminalization within the PIC while remaining structurally linked to the broader criminalization of Black womxn.

### ***Analysis***

Across the reviewed cases, a consistent pattern emerges in which Black womxn are criminalized not primarily for individual acts, but for existing at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and resistance within a white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchal system. Whether situated in slavery, the mid-twentieth century, or the contemporary prison-industrial complex (PIC), the cases demonstrate how criminalization functions as a tool of social control rather than justice.

### ***Chronological Analysis***

In the historical cases (i.e., Celia and Frances Thompson), criminalization is directly tied to slavery and its immediate afterlives. Celia was born into chattel slavery around 1835. There is not a lot of information on her early years, but during the summer of 1850, she was enslaved by Robert Newsom. She was 14-years-old when he purchased her. He started raping her on the way to their farm, and he raped her for the next five years. Between 1851 and 1855, Celia gave birth to two babies, and her enslaver was the father of the second. On June 23, 1855, she killed Newsom, and she quickly confessed and explained that she was protecting herself against being raped. She was executed by the criminal legal system on December 21, 1855. Similarly, Frances Thompson's survival following racial and sexual violence during the Memphis riots is met not with protection but with arrest and imprisonment due to her gender identity. Frances Thompson was born into chattel slavery around 1840. She was recognized as a girl from a very young age; her enslavers recognized her as such and allowed her to wear feminine clothing. She identified as disabled because she had cancer in her foot, which made it hard for her to walk and do other everyday things. Frances and her 16-year-old roommate, Lucy Smith, were victims of the Memphis Massacre of 1866. Seven white men came into their home and raped both of them. Both Frances and Lucy testified before Congress, explaining what happened to them during the Massacre. Frances is the first transgender person in United States history to testify before Congress. Ten years later, on July 10, 1876, she was arrested for "cross-dressing" and was sentenced to 100 days on a chain gang.

The recent historical cases (i.e., Angela Y. Davis and Marsha P. Johnson) show that even though chattel slavery was abolished in 1865, it did not dismantle oppression at all. The post-Reconstruction era and the civil rights era in the United States were just as oppressive as it was during chattel slavery, but in different ways. Angela Davis was born in 1944. She grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, which was a middle-class Black neighborhood. Her neighborhood was often referred to as "Dynamite Hill" because the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) would constantly bomb houses in her neighborhood. These childhood experiences showed her that protecting herself as a Black woman in this country is very important, so she owned guns during her adult life. In the late 1960s, she joined the Black Panthers and the Che-Lumuba Club, an all-black branch of the Communist Party. In 1970, when Angela was 26 years old, she was charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy after her gun was involved in a courtroom murder. Even though she had no idea that her guns were being used and had no involvement in the incident, she was arrested and

tried as an accomplice to murder. Marsha P. Johnson was born in 1945 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She started to wear female-like clothing around the age of five years old, but she stopped after getting made fun of and after being raped by a 13-year-old boy. Once she graduated from high school, she moved to New York with \$15 and a bag of clothes. When she moved, she started wearing feminine clothing for the rest of her life. She made money through sex work, for which she was arrested a ton of times. In an interview, she states that she stopped counting how many times she was arrested after the one hundredth time. Marsha and her best friend Sylvia Rivera were at the forefront of the Stonewall uprising. Even though she fought really hard for gay rights, the gay rights movement was extremely transphobic. They did not care that a Black transgender woman put her life on the line for their freedom during Stonewall.

The criminalization that was experienced in the contemporary cases (i.e., Cyntoia Brown and Cece McDonald) shows how Black womxn in the twenty-first century are still criminalized for protecting themselves from dangerous situations. Cyntoia Brown was born on January 29, 1988, in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Her biological mother put her up for adoption when she was a baby because she was struggling to raise an infant. Cyntoia dropped out of elementary school and experienced many encounters with the juvenile court system. When she was 16 years old, she started running away from her adoptive home. She would stay at friends' houses until she met a 24-year-old man nicknamed "Kut Throat." They started dating, but he would be physically and sexually abusive, and he eventually forced her into prostitution. On August 6, 2004, a 43-year-old man picked up 16-year-old Cyntoia for sex. He was violent with her at his house, and when she got scared that he was going to shoot her, she reached into her purse and shot him first. Cyntoia was arrested, tried as an adult, and sentenced to life in prison. Cece McDonald was born on May 26, 1989, in Chicago, Illinois. She came out as transgender as a young teenager. She experienced physical abuse from her family members and her classmates because they could not accept her gender identity and sexuality. After being physically assaulted by her uncle, she ran away from home at 14 years old. She experienced homelessness until she was 22 years old. Around 2011, she went to Minneapolis Community and Technical College to study fashion and to move to Minneapolis so she could experience less homophobia and transphobia. However, that year she defended herself and her friends from a group of racist and transphobic white people who were physically and verbally harassing them. Cece was arrested and took a plea deal of 41 months in a men's prison.

## **Thematic Analysis**

### ***Criminalization of Self-Defense Throughout History***

Since fascism and fascist theory usually only analyze European countries, it does not capture the fact that the United States of America has always criminalized Black womxn for defending their bodies against sexual violence. Celia, Cyntoia Brown, and Cece McDonald are examples of this, even though they happened in completely different time periods. In all of their cases, they were in danger, with no one protecting them except themselves, and were criminalized for it. Cece McDonald was criminalized for protecting herself and her friends against racist and transphobic people. Instead of caring that Cece—a black transgender woman—was trying to get away from the violent group of white people that had already thrown a glass at her and sliced her cheek, the criminal legal system punished her and forced her to spend her time in a men's prison.

In Celia and Cyntoia's cases, the criminal legal system did not believe that either of them had the right to defend their bodies from sexual violence. Instead of being seen as a survivor of sexual violence, they were arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. Celia was executed by hanging in 1855 for killing her enslaver at the age of 19 years old. When she confessed to killing him, she explained that she wanted to hurt him to make him stop raping her. Weeks before she killed him, Celia begged Newsom's daughters to talk to him and make him stop raping her, but they did nothing for her. She also begged Newsom herself, and he did not listen. On the night of June 23, 1855, Newsom came to her cabin and made advances toward her, and she grabbed a long stick and hit him over the head twice, killing him. Celia quickly confessed to killing him, but she explained that she did not mean to kill him; she just wanted to hurt him to stop him from raping her. During her trial, the judge rejected all 9 of the jury instructions the defense proposed. One of the proposals was that the jury find Celia not guilty if the jury believed that she killed her enslaver to try to stop his sexual advances. The judge instructed the jury that "the defendant had no right to kill [Newsom]

because he came into her cabin and was talking to her about having intercourse with her or anything else” (Linder, n.d.). Celia was quickly convicted of first-degree murder and was sentenced to death by hanging. She gave birth to a stillborn child while she was in jail awaiting her execution. Cyntoia Brown was sentenced to life in prison in 2006 for killing an older man who bought her for sex at sixteen years old. She was picked up by a 43-year-old man for sex. He took her to his house and showed her his gun collection. When they went to his bed, he started to be rough with her genitals, and when he went to reach under his bed, Cyntoia got scared that he was grabbing a gun, and she reached into her purse and shot him. The prosecution portrayed her as a poor Black teen girl who wanted to rob an older man. In reality, she was a Black teen girl who was forced into sex work by her abusive boyfriend. The prosecution was questioning Cyntoia on why she got in the car with him in the first place, instead of questioning why a 43-year-old man is engaging in sexual acts with a teenager.

Celia and Cyntoia had similar experiences with the United States’ criminal legal system. They were both 15 and 16 years old when they were criminalized. They were also criminalized for situations that society put them in. Celia was born a Black woman in 1835, and Black womxn during that time were enslaved. Society labeled Black people as enslaved, and society is the one who made it legal for Black enslaved womxn to be raped, but they criminalize Celia for it. Cyntoia grew up poor. She was in and out of juvenile centers for being on the street. She met her boyfriend—who forced her into sex work—because she had no one in life, and the criminal legal system criminalized her for that.

### ***Black Feminist Abolition: Beth E. Richie’s Violence Matrix***

Criminalization must be examined through an intersectional Black feminist framework. Intersectionality argues that Black women face multiple forms of oppression all at once, which makes their lived experiences different than Black men’s and white womxn’s. Beth E. Richie’s *The Violence Matrix* is an intersectional way of examining Black womxn’s experiences with violent victimization. It captures the fact that Black womxn tend to experience multiple forms of violence in different contexts throughout their lives.

### ***Sexual Assault and The Community***

Frances Thompson is an example of a Black woman experiencing sexual assault in their community. Frances’s experience with the Memphis Massacre of 1866 is an example of sexual assault (i.e., types of violent victimization) happening in the community (context of the violence). On May 1, 1866, the Memphis Massacre of 1866 began. It is rumored that the city police sparked a fight with Black federal soldiers, and the fight quickly turned into a massacre (Davis, 2024). Every black church and schoolhouse was destroyed, and hundreds of homes and businesses were robbed and burned. 46 Black people and 2 white people were killed, 285 people were injured, and at least 5 black womxn were raped. Frances and her roommate named Lucy Smith, were two of the five womxn who were raped. Frances and Lucy testified before Congress and described their experiences during the Massacre. They explained that during the massacre, 7 men came into their home—2 of the men were police officers—and demanded that they cook them dinner. Frances and Lucy cooked them dinner, and the men ate their dinner. After they ate, they demanded that Frances and Lucy must have sex with them. Frances told them no, and they pulled their pistols out and threatened to shoot them and burn the house down. They then raped Frances and Lucy. The men were at their house for nearly four hours before they robbed it. Before leaving their house, the men told Frances and Lucy that they were going to kill all the Black people in the town. Frances was a Black transgender woman who was raped by racist and sexist white men in her own home.

### ***Physical Assault and the Community, Social Disenfranchisement and The Social Sphere***

The Violence Matrix also captures Cece’s experiences with violent victimization and being criminalized. On June 5, 2011, Cece and four of her friends were walking to the grocery store. On their walk, they passed a bar, and a small group of white people was standing outside that bar. That group of white people starts to harass Cece and her friends by saying racist, homophobic, and transphobic things to them. They threw a glass cup at Cece, which cut her cheek. After that, a fight broke out, and Cece was followed by one of the white men in the group, Dean Schmitz. Scared for her life, she pulled out scissors

from her purse and stabbed him.

The social sphere harmed Cece because the criminal legal system criminalized her for protecting herself and her friends. When the police came, she explained that she stabbed him in self-defense, but they arrested her right away anyway. She took a plea deal for 41 months in a men's prison. She experienced social disenfranchisement because the United States's racist, homophobic, and transphobic conditions are what put her in that unsafe situation. Cece was physically assaulted by racist and transphobic white people who were verbally harassing her. Society put Cece in the situation of being around oppressive, violent people. Then, the social sphere criminalized her for defending herself against oppressive people that society created.

### ***Additional Layers of Intersectionality***

Intersectionality is also important because when comparing cisgender and transgender cases, the analysis reveals that transmisogyny and transphobia intensify criminalization, but do not operate separately from racialized patriarchy. Transgender Black womxn experience heightened vulnerability to policing, incarceration, and legal erasure, as seen in the cases of Frances Thompson, Marsha P. Johnson, and Cece McDonald. However, the core mechanism remains the same across all cases: the state defines Black womxn as inherently suspect, undeserving of protection, and in need of control.

Frances Thompson was criminalized for "cross-dressing," which is a criminal charge that only transgender and gender-nonconforming people experience. In other words, she was criminalized for not identifying with the sex she was assigned at birth. It is unclear how exactly the police became aware that Frances was assigned male at birth, but after they arrested her, they forced her to sit through four different physicians doing medical examinations to see her genitals. This is the state invading Frances' privacy and controlling her body. Frances was understandably angry about the process, so she told the officers that after her sentence was complete, she would leave Memphis. In reaction to her comment about leaving, the police took her to a photostudio and made her take photos in both female-like clothing and male-like clothing (Figure 1; Davis, 2024). They took these pictures to hang up on their wall for infamous "criminals" and to send them to other precincts. The court fined Frances \$50 for the "cross-dressing" charge, but because she could not pay, she was sentenced to 100 days in the chain gang. While she was in the chain gang, crowds of people would come to see her, ask her questions, and make rude comments. Newspapers also used her "cross-dressing" charge to say that she lied about being raped during the Memphis Massacre.

Marsha P. Johnson was criminalized many times for sex work and for her gender and sexual expressions. According to Marsha, she stopped counting how many times she had been arrested after the 100th time. When Marsha moved to New York City after she graduated from high school, she lived in poverty. She slept at friends' houses, since she did not have a house or apartment of her own. She went into sex work so she could make money. In other words, she went to sex work to survive in this society, and understood that she would be arrested and thrown in jail for days. This had happened to her so many times throughout her life. She was at the forefront of the Stonewall Uprising because she was not afraid of the



Press images of Thompson misspell her first name.

police. As a Black transgender woman, she felt like she had nothing to lose, so she fought back against the police with no hesitation. The police were very rough with her since they saw her as completely disposable, since she was Black, transgender, and a woman.

Cece McDonald was criminalized for defending herself and her friends against a group of racist and transphobic white people. She only stabbed the man after her face was sliced by the glass that was brown at her, Dean—a white, racist, and transphobic man—was following her. She knew he did not care for her safety, so she defended herself. Not only did the criminal legal system criminalize her, but the system also forced her into a men's prison. The criminal legal system does not care about gender identity. Whatever sex a person is assigned at birth is how they will be treated and perceived by the criminal legal system.

### ***Discussion***

The findings of this study demonstrate that the criminalization of Black womxn is not a historical anomaly, a series of isolated injustices, or the result of individual failures within the criminal legal system. Rather, the cases analyzed here reveal a continuous and intentional pattern of control that spans from chattel slavery to the contemporary prison-industrial complex. Across time, Black womxn have been criminalized for defending their bodies, asserting autonomy, resisting state violence, and surviving under conditions of racialized and gendered oppression. These patterns support the central argument of this paper: the criminalization of Black womxn is a core function of the United States' fascist social structure. Examining these cases together reveals that the criminal legal system does not respond to harm but actively produces it. In each instance, the state reframes Black womxn's victimization as criminal behavior, transforming acts of self-defense, political resistance, and survival into punishable offenses. This process is evident in the execution of Celia for resisting sexual violence under slavery, the imprisonment and discrediting of Frances Thompson following racial terror, the targeting of Angela Y. Davis for her political organizing, the abandonment and criminal suspicion surrounding Marsha P. Johnson's death, and the incarceration of Cyntoia Brown and CeCe McDonald for defending themselves against gendered and racialized violence. Together, these cases illustrate that criminalization operates as a technology of domination rather than justice.

The comparative analysis of cisgender and transgender Black womxn further demonstrates that while transmisogyny intensifies vulnerability to policing, incarceration, and legal erasure, it does not constitute a separate system of oppression. Instead, transmisogyny operates alongside racism and patriarchy within the same fascist framework that renders all Black womxn disposable. The cases of Frances Thompson, Marsha P. Johnson, and CeCe McDonald reveal how gender nonconformity heightens

surveillance and punishment, yet their treatment remains structurally connected to the broader criminalization of Black womxn as a group. This finding reinforces Black feminist abolitionist claims that liberation cannot be achieved through single-axis analyses or reforms that fail to address the totality and root of state violence—white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy.

Situating these findings within a fascist framework clarifies why these patterns persist despite shifts in legal systems, political rhetoric, and formal rights. Fascism, understood as a governing logic rooted in authoritarianism, racial hierarchy, gender regulation, and the normalization of state violence, provides the political conditions necessary for the continued punishment of Black survival. The emphasis on “law and order,” the construction of internal enemies, and the framing of punishment as protection all function to legitimize violence against Black womxn while presenting the state as neutral and necessary. These practices reflect the consistent operation of a fascist social order that relies on criminalization to maintain control.

These findings challenge reformist approaches to justice. The U.S. was built on white supremacist capitalist cis-heteropatriarchy, which means that Black womxn are supposed to be oppressed in this country. The criminal legal system is not supposed to protect and criminalize Black womxn. We cannot seek justice from an oppressive system. If people cared about real justice, they would want patriarchy, racism, capitalism, colonialism, and all oppressive systems dismantled. Since the criminal legal system’s primary function is to control, punish, and harm marginalized communities—particularly Black womxn—then reforms that policing and prisons cannot produce justice. The consistency of criminalization across historical periods demonstrates that the system is functioning as designed, not malfunctioning. As such, abolition emerges not as an abstract or utopian ideal but as the only viable response to a system rooted in fascist governance. Without abolition, the conditions that render Black womxn criminal will remain intact, and the cycle of punishment will continue under the guise of justice.

By centering Black womxn’s lived experiences as sites of knowledge, this study contributes to abolitionist scholarship by foregrounding survival and resistance as analytical tools rather than pathologies to be managed. The use of qualitative case studies grounded in historical and contemporary narratives challenges dominant criminological approaches that prioritize state archives and legal frameworks while silencing those most impacted by violence. This approach aligns with Black feminist abolitionist commitments to epistemic justice and to recognizing marginalized communities as theorists of their own lives. I am also contributing to literature on fascist theory, since fascist theory does not include the oppression that Black people—especially Black womxn—have always faced in the U.S.

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**Diagnosis and Criminalization of  
African Americans with Serious  
Mental Illness: Deconstructing  
Solutions**

Fiona E. Engstad

**SAY THEIR NAMES**

This work is dedicated in memory of

Jamarion Robinson (1990 - 2016), Porter Burks (2002 - 2022), Miles Hall (1996 - 2019), Dontre Hamilton (1983 - 2014), Terrence Coleman (1985 - 2016), Lavall Hall (1990 - 2015), Ezell Ford (1988 - 2014), Marvin Scott III (1994 - 2021), Jordan Neely (1992 - 2023), Felix David (1965 - 2015), Darren Rainey (1962 - 2012), Karl Taylor (1960 - 2015), Mubarak Soulemane (2000 - 2019), Micahel Noel (1983 - 2015), Anthony Hill (1988 - 2015), Jason Harrison (1979 - 2014), Alfred Olango (1978 - 2016), Walter Wallace Jr. (1993 - 2017), Larry Price Jr. (1970 - 2021), Lashawn Thompson (1987 - 2022), Terill Thomas (1974 - 2016), Marcus-David Peters (1991 - 2018), Keith Lamont Scott (1973 - 2016)

and all African Americans with mental health illness whose lives were lost due to America's failure to serve and protect her people.

May your stories inspire change.

## **Introduction**

Darren Rainey, an African American man with schizophrenia, was forcibly placed in a tiny shower in the Dade Correctional Unit, Florida, in 2012. The temperature could only be controlled from the outside by correctional officers who increased it to 180 degrees Fahrenheit and locked him inside. Inmates reported hearing Rainey screaming to be let out, which correctional officers ignored. After two hours of torture, he would be found dead on the shower floor (Laughland, 2016). Unfortunately, Darren Rainey is not the only African American man with a serious mental illness to be abused by the United States criminal justice system. His death reflects a similar treatment of African Americans with mental health issues. Structural injustices in medical, carceral, and law enforcement institutions, mutually reinforce an oppressive outcome for African American men, creating an ecosystem of abuse. Historical perceptions of African Americans guided by pseudo-scientific conclusions of this group has largely shaped current racial bias that is present within modern institutions, making African Americans victims of arrest, incarceration, abuse, and deprivation of essential medical services. One such result of this injustice is the overdiagnosis of schizophrenia in which African American men are diagnosed 2.4 times more than Whites (Olbert et al., 2023). These harmful historical perceptions lead to racial injustice, further mental health and physical health decline and in some cases, like that of Darren Rainey, death. Racial injustices are ever omnipotent within these institutions despite recent efforts to address the underlying cause: implicit bias. However, these solutions have not been proven to be effective despite their enthusiastic implementation. Why are African American men overpathologized with the diagnosis of schizophrenia, how does it exemplify injustice within the medical, law enforcement and carceral fields and why are current solutions to this injustice so ineffective? This article seeks to answer this question.

## **History**

To understand how bias against African Americans still prevails within institutions today, we must first understand its origins. “Race science” was heavily influential in the perception of African Americans, pushing the narrative that Africans were subhuman. The medical field would use this perception to justify dehumanizing African Americans (Bernier, 1684; The Linnean Society, n.d.; Smith, 2021).

## ***Race Science***

The pursuit of science and research is celebrated and praised in Western society. Its merits include curing disease, advancing technology, improving our understanding not only of the world but also of the universe, and saving countless lives. However, this praise is met with disdain and disgust by many who have suffered the consequences of its method of attaining this cosmic power: unethical research. Although Western science is perceived as superior and righteous, for its victims, it has caused illness, destroyed traditions, burned lineages along with culture out of history, and taken countless lives (Smith, 2021). The too-often glorified Western pursuit of knowledge has ruthlessly abused marginalized groups, particularly African Americans, by propagating the belief that they are inherently animalistic (Smith, 2021). This was all done through crude and inhumane experimentation in the name of a pseudoscience called “Race Science.”

## ***Classification of Races***

The concept of races originated in the archaic beginnings of what is now called scientific research. The classification of “races” was first introduced by the French explorer and scientist, Francois Bernier, who coined the term in 1684. His theory of races was subsequently published in an early issue of “*Journal des Savants*,” and spread like wildfire in the research and scientific community. Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish scientist, would later be inspired by the concept of races in the 1750s and would write the tenth edition of “*Systema Naturae*.” This text would lay the foundation for Race Science, classifying what Linnaeus called the “*Europaes*” (people of European origin) as “muscular” and “wise.” In contrast, he would describe “*Africanus*” (people of African origin) as “lazy” and “fat” and so insolently mentioned that their women had “breasts that lactated profusely” (The Linnean Society, n.d.). Anthropologists today still use “Linnean Taxonomy” to classify species, immortalizing Linnaeus’s influence on the scientific community.

### ***Social Darwinism***

Another notable theory that supported Race Science is possibly the most well-known among the scientific community to this day: Darwin's theory of Natural Selection. This theory of "survival of the fittest," insofar as it posited observable differences among species, was unfortunately misapplied to variations within our own species. This would become the concept of "Social Darwinism," used to characterize different races of humans. The theory attributed "negative racial differences" as a result of Natural Selection, creating the common belief that lesser races should be left to die out. This can be observed within Britannica's ninth edition as it states that Africans are at the "lowest position of the evolutionary scale" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1884). Even so-called "extraordinary, leftist thinkers" like Clémence-Auguste Royer, a French scholar, would accept this theory as fact. Her book, "Origine de l'Homme et des Sociétés" would explain how "only the European branch of the Aryan family is capable of achieving the highest perfectibility" (Darwin Project, n.d.). As a translator of Darwin's work, Royer would use her profession as a means of twisting meaningful scientific discovery into a hateful perversion, contributing to the popularization of negative perceptions associated with Africans. Her mistranslation would shape not only the French perception of Darwin's theory, also of White Supremacy.

Just across the Atlantic Ocean, these theories of classification would pave the way for perceptions of African inferiority and the notion that Europeans were the most evolved race.

### ***Perception that African Americans are Subhuman***

The perception that Africans are less evolved than other races led to the placement of African Americans as a subordinate group of humans who were more akin to animals in the eyes of Whites. In many descriptions of Race Science, Africans are described as having smaller brains compared to Europeans based on a pseudoscience called craniometry. This idea was further reinforced in Britannica's ninth edition, which noted that African brain size was closer to that of a gorilla than to that of a European (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1884). This inferred relation to animalistic traits among Africans made it more plausible for researchers and scientists to attribute higher reported crime rates in African Americans within the United States.

An example of this conjecture from Frederick Ludwig's writing, an American statistician, in his book "Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro" (1896) states, "...the criminality of the negro exceeds that of any other race..." (Hoffman, 1896). This increasingly popular rhetoric within the scientific community would create the stereotype of the African American criminal, rhetoric that remains popular.

### ***Conclusions***

The history of the treatment of African Americans in the United States had a powerful impact not only on its victims but on society as a whole. Although these events may seem distant and bygone, their influences and remnants are hardly antiquated. These perceptions of African Americans are a sediment in our history, compacted into our foundations, and can be observed in many concentrations (Olbert et al., 2023). Societal differences, diagnostic bias, and mass incarceration have scars of this history beneath the surface of their modernity.

### ***Modern-Day Perceptions, Implicit Bias***

Implicit bias as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) is known as "implicit prejudice or implicit attitude, is a negative attitude, of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group" and further explains that implicit bias plays a role within implicit social cognition which can be defined as "the phenomenon that perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes can operate before conscious intention or endorsement." (APA, 2018).

The brain interacts with many inputs constantly, and it is impossible for the mind to be conscious throughout all of this processing. For this reason, many of our thoughts and actions are processed through "nonconscious systems" or "...processes that do not themselves reach consciousness, although they may have consciously experienced outcomes' such as reflexes, startle responses, postural/balance adjustments,

habitual motor actions, “gut” reactions and most importantly for the given topic: implicit bias (Kandel et al., 2021; Forscher et al., 2019; LeDoux & Brown, 2017; Wood & Runger, 2016). These systems are highly interconnected neurologically, as they operate continuously and do not require intention or attention, allowing these networks to strengthen more than other conscious neural network systems (Suri & McClelland, 2025).

This psychological phenomenon is a significant contributing factor in racially biased decision-making, particularly under conditions of stress, uncertainty, and time pressure, and is influenced by stereotypes that are perpetuated in society almost constantly.

### ***Broader Notions of Implicit Bias***

African Americans have historically been seen as animalistic or subhuman in White societies, and this bias still lives on in many fields. A study done in 2017 revealed that Americans believe that African Americans are more “physically formidable” and therefore are capable of causing more harm (Holmes et al., 2017). A study conducted in 2016 revealed that 40% of first-year medical students at the University of Virginia believed that “blacks’ skin is thicker than whites” (Hoffman et al., 2016). In a 2010 NORC survey, Whites were rated higher than African Americans in intelligence (44% vs. 30%) and work ethic (37% vs. 20%) (Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Additionally, a study done by Harvard compared the perceptions that White teachers had for their White students as opposed to their African American students. The study found that 4.3% of White teachers believed that their White students were lazy, while almost 24% of White teachers believed that their African American students were lazy. Even more disturbing, about 20% of White teachers considered their White students to be violence-prone. In comparison, more than 50% of White teachers believed this about their African American students among children of only eight years or younger (Goff et al., 2014). This ubiquitous bias can perhaps answer the question of why African Americans receive higher diagnoses of schizophrenia among African American men. To examine this, it is necessary to further analyze the fields of medicine, law enforcement and incarceration.

## **Oppression in Psychiatry**

### ***Implicit Bias***

Jerome Wakefield, a Professor of Psychiatry at NYU, suggests that psychiatrists run the risk of misdiagnosing individuals because of a lack of understanding of the causes. He explains how easy it can be for medical professionals to confuse normal distress with [mental] disorder, as “normal human distress contains many of the same symptoms of disorder” (Wakefield, 2010). Historically, African Americans have endured significant trauma and therefore a vastly different experience than White Americans in the United States. This distinction creates a barrier of understanding the American racial experience between these two racial groups. When a White psychiatrist assesses an African American, they often do not understand many of the societal implications that they face, and they conflate symptoms of an unjust society with symptoms of a disorder or illness. Additionally, only 10% of psychiatrists in the United States are African American, making it difficult for African Americans to receive competent care (PBS NewsHour, 2021). When considering Wakefield’s theory, lack of consideration of the African American experience in the United States directly leads to misdiagnosis.

So if psychiatrists lack contextual information to make an accurate diagnosis, what do they use instead to fill in the gaps? Jack Glaser, a professor of social psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that decision-makers exhibit implicit bias. Glaser states that in the absence of contextual information, people rely on their implicit biases and social conditioning to fill in the rest of the picture (Glaser, 2024). This can be observed in a famous study by economists Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), titled “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal?” (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004).

Bertrand & Mullainathan conducted a study in which hiring managers were tasked with hiring applicants in two rounds: one before background checks and one after background checks were conducted. In the second round, when background checks were used, African Americans were hired more often. This study exemplifies Glaser’s theory: when information about applicants was limited, hiring managers relied on

implicit biases to make decisions, thereby discriminating against African American applicants (Bertran & Mullanithan, 2004).

**Implicit Bias and Schizophrenia**

Avicenna, often considered the father of modern medicine, describes schizophrenia as “severe madness” in his book *Canon Medicinae* (1025 A.D.), which is revered as one of the foundational texts in the medical field (Avicenna, 1025). According to the DSM-5 (our modern-day Canon Medicinae), to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, a patient must display two of the following symptoms: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and thinking, extremely disorganized or unusual motor behavior, and negative symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, in practice, it is critical to examine the manifestations of these symptoms in healthcare to understand their real-world implications.

Mental health professionals are often relied upon to assess mental health illnesses accurately. However, overpathologizing schizophrenia is disturbingly common within African American communities. According to a study done in 2023, “...black Americans are 2.4 times more likely to be diagnosed with [S]chizophrenia” (Olbert et al., 2023). This disparity can be attributed to the common practice of discretionary judgment, which leaves room for implicit bias to influence diagnostic decisions.

A comparative table has been constructed to understand the eerie comparison, as perceptions of race and the symptoms of schizophrenia happen to overlap. This comparison displays the potential for professionals, such as police officers and mental healthcare providers, to make connections between symptoms of their implicit bias and the symptoms of schizophrenia.

| The ‘Scary Black Man’   | Symptoms of schizophrenia  |
|---|--|
| Paranoid; stupid; cowardly; mentally disturbed                | <i>Delusions</i> are fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence.   |
| Paranoid; stupid; cowardly; mentally disturbed                | <i>Hallucinations</i> are perception-like experiences that occur without an external stimulus.   |
| Uneducated; unsophisticated; less evolved; stupid; illiterate | <i>Disordered Thinking (formal thought disorder)</i> is typically inferred from the individual’s speech.   |
| Uncivilized; uncontrollable; angry; dangerous                 | <i>Grossly disorganized or abnormal motor behavior</i> may manifest itself in a variety of ways, ranging from childlike “silliness” to unpredictable agitation.  |
| Anti-social; evil; lazy; stupid                               | <i>Negative symptoms</i> account for a substantial portion of the morbidity associated with schizophrenia but are less prominent in other psychotic disorders. Two negative symptoms are particularly prominent in schizophrenia: diminished emotional expression and avolition. |

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

In order to avoid this discrimination, it would be undeniably essential for African Americans with a mental health concern to visit a competent health care professional. It would be extremely pertinent for a careful selection to be made while the presence of implicit bias remains so rampant. However, this life-altering luxury is not afforded to many African Americans, especially those who are experiencing an SMI.

**The Attempt to Receive Competent Medical Care**

As African Americans face higher rates of poverty, many cannot afford private medical care or

even remain uninsured. According to a study done by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2025, 9.7% of African Americans lack medical insurance while 6.5% of Whites face this issue (kffcareneec, 2025). The barrier of receiving medical insurance can be in-part attributed to job-linked insurance coverage which puts African Americans at a disadvantage as African Americans face systemic discrimination when applying to jobs that have such benefits. As a result, many African Americans rely on Medicaid, a program “designed to provide health coverage for low-income people” (Medicaid, 2025). This connection between African Americans and users of Medicaid can be demonstrated by this group making up 21% of Medicaid enrollees, while only representing 13% of the general population (Medicaid Awareness, 2024). Despite Medicaid’s humanitarian mission, the program unfortunately does not have the capacity to achieve its ultimate goal.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General (2025) reports that only 45% of behavioral health specialists were able to accept patients with insurance from Medicaid, Medicare, or Medicaid managed-care. This number plummets to 33% among Medicaid enrollees in rural communities (Medicaid Awareness, 2024). Another study found that one-third of psychotherapists in private practice did not accept any insurance at all (Zhu et al., 2024). Mental health providers are less likely to accept Medicaid because they incur a significant pay cut in doing so. The Medicaid and CHIP Payment and Access Commission (MACPAC) reports that mental health care providers lose about 17% of their earnings when being reimbursed by Medicaid due to administrative errors and denials. MACPAC also cites that health care professionals who provide long-term treatment, like psychiatry, more frequently deny Medicaid than Medicare or private insurance. Additionally, Medicaid displays outdated providers who are no longer in service, making the search for mental health care even more difficult (MACPAC, 2025).

### ***Consequences of an Untreated SMI***

Due to this disparity in access to medical care, African Americans are often unable to access critical medical mental health services needed for treatment of an SMI. Left untreated, those with SMIs are at higher risk of substance use and being unhoused and thus, being arrested. The high rate of unhousing and substance use among African Americans are undoubtedly a significant factor in their high rates of arrest. Deeply embedded ideas of the past are directly linked to a high risk of unhousing and drug abuse for African Americans, which leads to disproportionate abuse within the criminal justice system (Olbert et al., 2023; Kennedy, 2021).

### **Socioeconomic Drivers of Criminalization**

The increased risk of arrest is not simply because of the disorder alone; rather, it stems from the everyday struggles associated with an SMI, such as drug use and unemployment. A study done in 2014 suggests that the risk factors associated with people with a SMI do not inherently come from the symptoms of a mental illness itself, but from the challenges brought upon by circumstances created by an SMI, for example, being unhoused (Skeem et al., 2014). Similarly, African Americans are not inherently more susceptible to poverty, being unhoused, or using drugs, but rates are higher due to systemic oppression and historical wealth distribution (The Century Foundation, 2020).

### ***Unhousing***

African Americans *and* individuals with an SMI are disproportionately affected by homelessness. The 2022 Annual Homeless Assessment reports that 21.1% of the unhoused population has a serious mental health condition (HUD, 2022). A 2022 study found that 28.2% of veterans with schizophrenia had experienced being unhoused (HUD, 2022). African Americans make up about 12% of the U.S. population but account for nearly one-third of the unhoused, according to the 2024 Annual Unhoused Assessment (HUD, 2024). These overlapping factors create significant challenges for African Americans with SMIs. While these statistics on their own are concerning, the fact that unhoused people are also more vulnerable to arrest makes the intersection even more alarming.

### ***Substance Use***

The NAACP cites that although African Americans only make up 5% of illicit substance users, this population represents 29% of those arrested for illicit substance use (NAACP, 2025). This statistic indicates how African Americans have harsher outcomes and are more targeted by the criminal justice system (Kennedy, 2021). Additionally, African Americans are more likely to self-medicate as many cannot access prescription medication (PBS NewsHour, 2021). Unfortunately, for many African Americans, the absence of accessible psychiatric care does not end in treatment, but in neglect—where untreated illness gives way to becoming unhoused or substance use, and the first real intervention comes only in the form of arrest, long after meaningful help could have been given.

### **Mental Health within the Incarceration System**

African Americans lack access to medical care essential for treating an SMI due to underfunding and administrative errors within the Medicaid insurance system, leading to their first interaction with mental health services to be simultaneous with their first interaction with the incarceration system and often are forced to rely on that system for medical services.

### ***Police Assessments of SMIs***

A study done in 2018 indicates that police officers have three main ways of assessing mental illness: information from dispatch, collateral contacts, and using on-scene judgments based on their own understanding of mental illness (Bohrman, C., Wilson, A. B., Watson, A. C., & Draine, J., 2018). However, most departments lack a standardized mental health screening tool, forcing officers to use their own personal knowledge of mental illness as a way to enforce the law. This type of assessment is highly discretionary, which has been proven to lead to more cases of racial implicit bias within policing. The San Mateo County 2023 Annual Program Summary underscores the outcome of such discretionary policing: 86% of detainees in the Acute Stabilization Unit were diagnosed with schizophrenia or schizoaffective Disorder, and nearly 30% were African American, despite African Americans making up only 2% of the county's general population (Liberty Healthcare Corporation, 2023).

### ***Bookings within Jails***

Jails are legally required to perform mental health screenings during bookings, resulting in many schizophrenia diagnoses as a result of becoming system-affected. As this is not a requirement for most other government systems in the United States and those with limited access to mental health services receive mental health examination only upon becoming system-affected. As demonstrated in Iowa, 99% of all mental health diagnoses within the incarcerated population were identified during incarceration (Al-Rousan et al., 2017). Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) reports that 44% of those in jail suffer from a mental health issue, despite that proportion amounting to only 18% of the general population. This data implies that a significant portion of those arrested and diagnosed with an SMI did not receive mental health care before being arrested.

### ***Within Prison Walls***

Within the American incarceration system, the lives of African Americans have been disproportionately impacted, exemplified by the fact that “African Americans make up 13% of the U.S. population but 40% of its prison population” (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012). This harrowing disparity puts African American communities at a greater risk of facing the prison system's structural failures, such as inadequate mental health care and disproportionate abuse, which can leave this vulnerable group traumatized. Additionally, African Americans are far more likely to face further discriminatory abuse from prison personnel, making their experience while incarcerated even more damaging to their mental well-being, even after release.

### ***Racial Disparity of Prison Population***

Prisons are not equipped to deal with the large number of incarcerated people with poor mental health. A study done in 2018 indicates that correctional facility personnel felt that “there are too many inmates with SMI in jail who would benefit from more comprehensive treatment elsewhere” (Watson et al., 2018). The DOJ reports that 63% of incarcerated people who had a mental health indicator were not receiving treatment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012). As African Americans represent a disproportionate amount of incarcerated people in the United States, that means that they are also disproportionately not receiving the medical care that they so desperately need. This intersection of racial bias and neglect is even more harmful to the community and points to a larger structural failure within the prison-industrial complex. African Americans are not being cared for within prisons, but when they are, they are being treated for mental health disorders that they do not have.

### ***Abuse and Racism in Prison***

Not only are African Americans at a high risk of suffering from societal factors like disproportionate unhousing and drug use, misdiagnosis, and inadequate care within prisons, but they are also re-traumatized by prison personnel, further deteriorating their mental health. An article in 2023 states that in a Washington D.C. prison, when incarcerated persons expressed feelings of suicidal ideation to overnight staff, the protocol was to subject the victim to a padded, confined room with a small drain in the floor to defecate. The drain is not functional without assistance from a staff member to flush it, which was supposedly done every few hours (Washington City Paper, 2023). Furthermore, investigations have been conducted in California prisons, revealing that incarcerated people spend days at a time in these “temporary” holding cells (Disability Rights California, 2021). In a federal investigation conducted in 2019 for a prison in Massachusetts, it was revealed that the prison “...fails to Provide Adequate Supervision to Prisoners in Mental Health Crisis and Thus Protect Prisoners from Serious Harm in Violation of the Constitution.” Some of these constitutional violations included “failing to remove instruments that could be used for self-harm.” For example, incarcerated people on “mental health watch” were permitted to access razors and other items with potential use for self-harm. One particular instance was so absurdly negligent that an incarcerated person on mental health watch had access to a razor and cut himself so severely that pools of blood gathered around his body. In CCTV footage, officers can be seen shrugging at the incident and chatting among themselves after the incarcerated person is known to be harming himself. The man began to cut himself so deeply that blood began to spray. Officers still neglected him. After 45 minutes of the man continuously bleeding, officers finally intervened. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2021).

### ***Re-entry / Recidivism***

Incarcerated people face many barriers upon release, including being stripped of their right to vote, limited access to education with little to no eligibility for student aid, and being ineligible for public housing (The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, 2016). Along with these barriers to success, released incarcerated people have inadequate mental health check follow-ups and further difficulty obtaining medication. With these difficulties subsequently increasing medication non-compliance, incarcerated people have a higher likelihood of crises leading to recidivism.

### ***Medication Non-Compliance***

Symptoms of schizophrenia do not inherently lead to arrest; rather, it is the surrounding societal factors that contribute to a decline in well-being, placing an already vulnerable group at greater risk of incarceration (Skeem et al., 2014). Studies have shown how symptoms of schizophrenia like hallucinations, delusions, and depression, do not predict violence, but instead link violence as a greater risk due to medication non-compliance (Swanson et al., 2019). Consideration of these societal factors is a critical point in explaining why African Americans are often unable to access necessary medication.

### ***Accessing Insurance***

Consideration of societal factors is a critical point in explaining why African Americans are often unable to access necessary medication. Many lack the resources to afford insurance, are unhoused, or may be traumatized or reluctant to trust the medical field due to years of abuse of African Americans (PBS NewsHour, 2021). Upon reentry, incarcerated people are not automatically provided with health insurance and need to acquire it themselves. This causes a gap in medication which can severely affect a person's well-being, making them very vulnerable to being unhoused. Even the installation of halfway homes acts as an insufficient buffer. Many of those who are moved into halfway homes end up unhoused upon release and face further struggles to support themselves, and recent studies have shown that halfway homes have no effect on the rate of recidivism (Wong et al., 2025).

### **Crisis Intervention Team Training as a Solution**

Although it may seem as though these issues are being ignored, policy and lawmakers are taking steps to mitigate the disparity. The discrimination and abuse of African Americans can never truly be abolished without true radical revolution, however there are some solutions that could be achieved before a more permanent and fundamental revolution. One such solution that has recently been implemented is the usage of Crisis Intervention Teams.

#### ***Crisis Intervention Team Training, Defined***

Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training is a current method used in law enforcement agencies that seeks to provide officers with insights and skills regarding SMIs. The National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) claims that CIT training 'create[s] connections between law enforcement, mental health professionals between law enforcement, mental health providers, hospital emergency services, and individuals with mental illness and their families' (NAMI, 2025).

The training is delivered in a didactic, classroom-based setting in which mental health professionals, law enforcement personnel, and, at times, individuals with lived experience of SMI (e.g., substance use disorder or schizophrenia) give presentations and encourage officers to reflect on how they might respond in encounters involving individuals with SMIs (CIT International, 2025). The course reviews and explains a variety of SMIs and their symptoms, providing officers with mental health literacy, and presents de-escalation techniques, encouraging officers to reduce excessive use-of-force. It provides role-playing scenarios in which officers may enact the steps they might take when interacting with someone with an SMI, using the techniques and knowledge provided by the training and guidance on navigating mental health treatment settings to divert arrests and jail time.

#### ***Effectiveness of CIT Training***

It may come as a surprise that, despite CIT's efforts to build community connections and limit undesirable interactions between law enforcement and individuals with SMIs, the program has shown limited and inconsistent effectiveness, with benefits largely confined to officers' perceptions rather than to measurable reductions in arrests, racial disparities, or long-term community harm.

#### ***Misleading Language***

Contrary to the name's implications, CIT training does not function as specialized teams within law enforcement agencies (Compton et al., 2025). The training is self-selected; therefore, participation is not required by law enforcement agencies. While law enforcement agencies encourage officers to complete CIT training, there is no financial incentive for them to do so. Law enforcement agencies rely on individual officers to participate in a 40-hour training (while also working their regular 40-hour workweek) out of their own desire to learn about crisis intervention—voluntarily (Compton et al., 2025).

#### ***Yielding Little Evidence of Success***

Most studies on the effectiveness of CIT programs have inadequate data to prove a reduction in

arrests, racial disparities, or other long-term harm, while others conclude that available data is insufficient to determine its effectiveness. Although reports (mostly self-reported) of increased understanding of mental health rose, the amount of arrest-reduction due to CIT training efforts remains unknown (Taheri, 2016). Another study conducted in 2024 found no significant difference in arrest rates between officers with CIT training and those without (Boddy et al., 2024). The study confirmed that both trained and untrained officers utilized outreach programs at the same rate, and even more surprisingly, CIT-trained officers were more likely to arrest people with mental illness.

### ***Misleading Statistics***

Despite the existence of a plethora of heavily researched literature that proves CIT training's ineffectiveness, its creators often boast misleading statistics that promote the usage of the program.

Although CIT training participants report increased confidence in responding to mental health crises, the program's empirical support relies almost entirely on officers' subjective assessments. This reliance is blatantly inconsistent with the program's alleged objectives, as existing evaluations of CIT effectiveness fail to cite statistical evidence indicating lower crime rates or improved public attitudes toward police. As a result, CIT effectiveness is assessed primarily through officer perceptions rather than through objective measures of public safety, community trust, or crime rate.

According to Stanford's psychology lab, 'Stanford Psychological Answers to Real Questions' (SPARQ), and the California Department of Justice (CA DOJ), participants of CIT training often report heightened feelings of understanding of procedural justice and implicit bias, heightened confidence of the course's effectiveness of increasing community trust and decreasing police-community tension (SPARQ & CA DOJ, 2016). The CA DOJ and SPARQ insist that these statistics offer enough proof to conclude that the program has been successful in 28 police departments across California and strategically omit statistics that prove that crime rates, mental health arrests, and racially motivated arrests have failed to decrease even with the implementation of CIT training (SPARQ & CA DOJ, 2016). These willfully ignorant claims offset essential statistics such as the fact that 44% of those who are jailed have an SMI despite only representing 18% of the population (SAMHSA, 2024). Statistics like the CA DOJ's and SPARQ's attempt to overshadow statistics that actually hold value to vulnerable populations, and furthermore, reward systemic oppressors by converting measurable harm into institutional achievement.

The only study that offers some positive outcomes from CIT training states that officers' "comfortability" with mental health crises is increased after receiving the training (Compton et. al, 2025). Mental health organizations like NAMI promote CIT training, citing that Memphis's *police* injuries decreased by 80% after implementation. (NAMI, 2025). NAMI charges \$60 for a two-hour CIT session (NAMI, 2025). NAMI also makes bold claims such as 'CIT reduce[s] arrests of people with mental illness,' while providing no literature that establishes this claim. Instead, it relies on the mischaracterization of tentative, context-specific findings as evidence of general effectiveness. Additionally, subsequent CIT research has yet to replicate these findings; however, organizations that promote and sell CIT training, such as NAMI, continue to cite and misrepresent these articles on their websites (NAMI, 2025).

Although the concept may seem like a step in the right direction, the only possible beneficiaries of CIT training are police officers and mental health professionals—not wrongfully arrested individuals.

### ***CIT Does not Help with Implicit Bias***

The methods of CIT training are wholly reliant upon explicit bias and encourage officers to utilize logic, reason, and deliberate judgment. Although perhaps well-intentioned, CIT training fails to consider the most crucial factor that goes into motivated police brutality against those with an SMI: implicit bias. As implicit bias neurologically occurs before any conscious, logical thought, meaning that attempts to rely solely on critical thinking are insufficient, as implicit bias will always precede critical thought in high-pressure encounters, which law enforcement officers often experience. This poses a unique problem when addressing police brutality, as intervention methods such as CIT encourage officers to utilize critical thinking skills in mental health crises, which directly contradict theories of neurological processing. When

implicit bias precedes critical thinking, it is nearly impossible to exercise metacognitive control in life-altering split-second decisions.

### ***Devine-Style Implicit Bias***

Unfortunately, most studies have shown limited and inconsistent effectiveness in reducing implicit bias. Most studies have encouraged participants to use critical thinking to adjust their biases. However, many have failed to demonstrate lasting effects beyond a short period following participation (Compton et al., 2025). Most studies on bias reduction aim to modify participants' internal belief systems to alter their overall attitudes toward a marginalized group. These methods therefore, assume that bias is a result of moral individualism, thus implying that implicit bias is a choice that can be made, rather than a nonconscious response due to long-term socialization, cultural conditioning, and implicit cognitive processes (Bellah et al., 1985).

There is, however, hope for practical training. There has been one influential study that has yielded modest but statistically significant results following an anti-bias training. This study was conducted by Dr. Devine, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who took a different approach by teaching participants to frame reducing implicit bias as an actionable goal rather than a moral goal. The study showed that participants who expressed awareness of their bias demonstrated no reduction. In contrast, participants who actively used strategies to reduce bias were able to reduce it over several weeks. The strategies were also actionable goals—not merely moral. Dr. Devine used strategies such as stereotype replacement, which encouraged participants to immediately recognize stereotyping as an error and replace it with a non-stereotypical thought. Another strategy included counter-stereotyping imagery, which prompted participants to recognize the activation of a stereotypical response and intentionally substitute it with a non-stereotypical or individuated thought. The study also yielded reductions in implicit bias lasting up to twelve weeks—longer than many prior bias-reduction interventions. The researchers attributed much of the study's success to participants' ability to apply bias-reduction strategies without assistance. Devine's study demonstrates that implicit bias is not a moral choice, but a learned cognitive habit that can be regulated with appropriate procedures and training (Devine et al., 2012).

However, there is still much progress to be made as participants of the study were only able to reduce their biases from 'moderate' to 'low.' The study also found a higher success rate when participants had motivation to reduce implicit bias, leaving a large gap for those who may have implicit bias but are unwilling to change.

### ***Conclusions of CIT Training***

A long history of structural racism and continuous socialization has resulted in strong implicit bias. Unfortunately, law enforcement agents also suffer from implicit bias and have therefore made split-second decisions that have left individuals, families, and communities devastated. Government intervention has introduced CIT training as a way to reduce the brutality and abuse as a result of this bias. Still, it has yet to demonstrate consistent effectiveness beyond officer self-reported confidence. Devine's study has demonstrated comparatively greater effectiveness, but it has not been implemented within government-funded programs. Programs like CIT training have failed to demonstrate consistent effects on crime rates, yet continue to be widely implemented. Further research on implicit bias is required before implementation. The low success rates of implicit bias studies are an invitation to perform even more research as opposed to choosing one that may yield some effectiveness. Even studies that have shown measurable bias reduction still require further research before they can be implemented in law enforcement agencies.

## **Conclusion**

The treatment of African Americans as well as those with mental health illness in the United States is nothing short of deeply appalling. When compounding these two groups, a disproportionately high amount of abuse and neglect can be observed across a multitude of institutions, including medical, policing, and carceral systems. The enduring and grave influence of race science in modern psychiatry has only

exacerbated systematic misdiagnosis of mental illness within the African American community, causing many to be routinely mistreated or untreated. With African Americans often unable to access adequate and consistent mental health treatment, and frequently mistreated even when they are able to access it, many interact with the medical world concurrently with the incarceration system. This deeply entrenched mental illness-to-prison pipeline leaves millions of individuals cycling between untreated illness, incarceration, and persistent institutional neglect.

The most current solutions have been to introduce CIT training in order to mitigate implicit bias in law enforcement agencies as a means to reduce the rate of abuse and incarceration among those with an SMI. CIT training neglects sustained discussion of implicit bias, a central feature of these interactions. A study has been conducted to demonstrate the usefulness of considering nonconscious systems, but this approach has yet to be meaningfully implemented in practice within government-funded law enforcement agencies.

While these stopgap solutions are far from ending the disparities faced by African American communities, addressing the root causes that exacerbate this crisis is a first step in the pursuit of equity within medical institutions and the greater criminal justice system. Efforts to prevent vulnerable people from being unjustly arrested should go towards those vulnerable people, not towards the people who are unjustly arresting them. Giving more funding to the police to prevent a problem *caused* by the police is not only immensely hypocritical but also has historically been futile or has often inevitably caused even more damage.

**“Prisons do not disappear social problems, they disappear human beings.” — Angela Davis**

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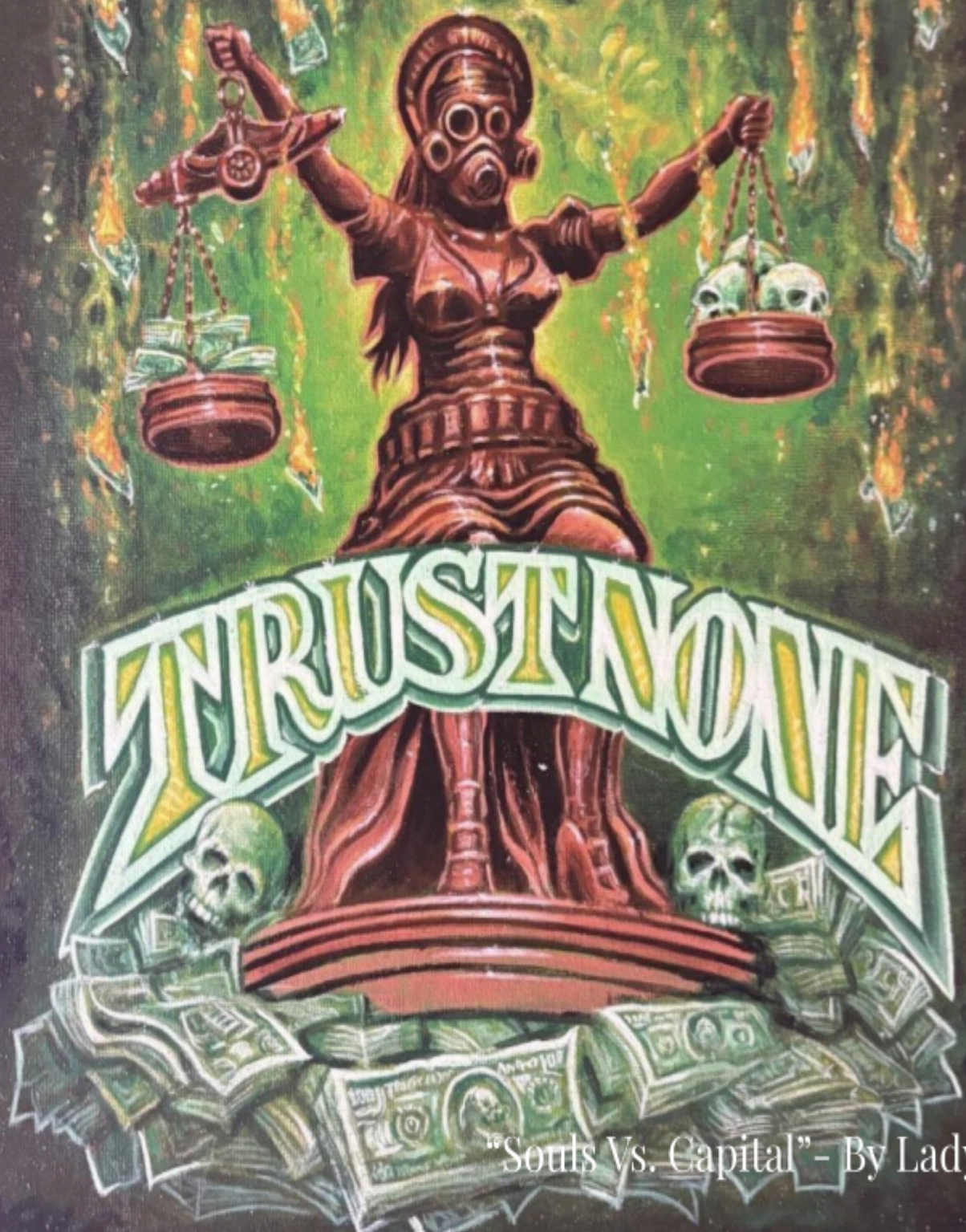
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# 3. People v. The Institution



"Souls Vs. Capital" - By Lady J



**FELON: How I Conned a  
Rigged Criminal Justice  
System, and Owned a Label**  
Kim Lonzo

In *Jailed*, I unpacked the experience of being housed in a jail unit awaiting bail. Charged with four counts of criminal sale of a controlled substance to an undercover officer, my route was laid out, according to my legal aid society lawyer, Ms. She Had-to-go (It was obvious from our first interaction, where she yelled shut up at me, that she had to go). She had arranged a plea deal for three years; the prosecutors wanted no less than twenty years with no parole.

I did not understand what the charges were. I had serious questions for Ms. She. How could I have done any of that? Why was Ms. She talking about incarceration with such a high number of years? She had a lot to say, but none of it was information; it was directions and orders. When it was my turn to talk, I told her that I would do no time. She told *me* that I had a mental illness. I felt powerful when I fired her. A few days later, I was assigned a pro bono Fifth Avenue attorney, Mr. Smooth Cat (a play on his real name which suits his personality, he charmed his way through the process). When I told him that I would do no time. He said, “Mr. Lonzo, that’s highly unlikely and improbable.”

In the film *Jackie Brown* by Quentin Tarantino, there’s a character named Beaumont, played by the comedian Chris Tucker, who is a low-level associate to a major drug dealer who is being targeted by a major law enforcement operation. In a scene where this drug dealer talks to a bail bondsperson about why he is bailing Beaumont out of jail, he explains that “Beaumont ain’t got a ‘doing time’ kinda disposition.” I thought about Beaumont in those moments when the attorneys present mentioned incarceration, the scene playing in my mind. It made me chuckle every time.

I did no time, however I left the experience with a new label, a societal encumbrance that I carry in my hand and gleefully show the world. I am a felon! Yes, I am a felon. That’s a harsh reality to accept. Felon! What a chilling word! When you hear, see or think about the word, an idea becomes an image, a snapshot, a stereotype embedded somewhere deep in your subconscious. An idea that few people would ascribe to me and when confronted with my pronouncement, the same response rushes out with that same bewildered look, “You’re a felon?”

I keep tossing the word around so that it forces your own ideas around the word “felon,” (see, I did it again), to the forefront of your mind. Let’s unpack and deconstruct this word, together.

It has Old French roots in the word *fel*, describing a wicked or cruel person. Through war and conquest, it made its way into the English legal system through feudal law, a system based on land as currency and service to kings and lords with pledges of loyalty for protection and access to limited rights and resources. In this system, where legal felons were born, breaking your oath of loyalty to a lord was punishable by the return of the land you held in tenancy to the king, the confiscation of your personal possessions, the “staining of your bloodline,” meaning your children could not lay claim to the land or your possessions, and the potential to lose the last piece of your personal property, your life.

Felons were people who had forfeited possessions or land; they were branded by their punishment. If a felon fled, as free movement was not a right to all, they forfeited all rights and were deemed outside of the protections of the law and thus became outlaws. Without protection of the law, outlaws could be killed by anyone. Why might a felon flee if certain death awaited them from anyone they could meet? Before trial by jury, (shout-out to the Magna Carta, 1215), trial by ordeal was the rule of law. There were three trials: trial by combat (knights and lords only), trial by fire (can you walk nine feet with a blessed, hot iron, have your hands bandaged, and three days later have clean and healed hands?) and trial by water (if the water accepts you, you are innocent. Some call that drowning).

Imagine being accused of a serious crime like stealing twelve pence, punishable by forfeiting your life, and your innocence relied on whether or not you survive the ordeal administered by a priest. Interesting fact: more than 60 percent of people accused and put to trial were acquitted; the priests rigged the system. In 1215, the pope pulled priests from trial duty and juries became the fashion. Juries of twelve men became the triers of fact and evidence laid before them. With this, the definition of what constituted a felony grew to include more crimes and therefore punishments. These punishments included branding letters on the body with hot irons that denote the nature of the crime, loss of body parts, or gruesome ways to die. A felon had a distinct look that was obvious to all who saw them because there were visual indicators. Today, the indicators are a created and reinforced fiction of stereotyping centered on certain

Latino and Black males. The idea of what a felon looks like is present throughout pop culture in the form of entertainment and enshrined most especially in youth culture.

Being a felon in modern society can be a constant struggle. While the City of New York supports the formerly incarcerated and people labeled as felons, with laws that bar asking about felony status. However, other socioeconomic factors such as race, educational level, and social status can impact what opportunities you have access to. The aftermath of a felony conviction once you have 'repaid your debt to society' is usually more difficult than the conviction or the time. A lot of doors close.

The story of how my childhood bully became one of my best adult friends' factors largely into my story as a felon. Frank was my childhood bully, who I happened upon one day in my early twenties when I still lived in New Orleans. This chance encounter became a lifelong friendship. I met Frank when he was entering the New Orleans Police Academy, aiming to be an undercover detective, a dream he eventually accomplished as an undercover narcotics detective. You see, Frank was charming and funny. When we were kids, he seemed mean-spirited and funny. Yet as an adult, he smoothed out those rough edges. We used to talk late into the night and early morning about his job as an undercover detective. On occasion, I was even privy to operations when we happened to be near each other. I saw him in action a few times. He was a great actor.

I learned a lot about the mind of an undercover officer. I learned about the culture, information I didn't foresee would be tremendously helpful to me later in my life. When I became a felon, the lessons that I had learned in my numerous conversations with Frank helped me to survive the aftermath. Frank often discussed the role of criminal or confidential informants (CIs) in helping undercover officers find new lines of investigation to make cases. They often targeted low-level offenders and offered them promises of release or leniency in sentencing or reducing charges in exchange for valuable information. Some savvy informants thrived in their criminal activities by supplying undercover officers with a steady stream of information and avoided arrest or jail.

At my first meeting with the assigned prosecutors and my attorney, Mr. Smooth Cat, the prosecutors offered me an interesting deal, they would consider lesser charges and a smaller sentence, *if* I became a confidential informant. When I was alone later with my attorney, he told me, "They think you have information that they can use to make bigger cases." He wanted to employ a strategy of using motions to postpone the court proceedings while we attempted to get a better deal from the prosecutor's office, as they reassigned different prosecutors to cases after a few months. I had no information that I could share to dangle on a leash for their game, but I did have an idea. Could I leverage their gambit against them and avoid incarceration? Could I string them along long enough for my attorney to find a more sympathetic or naïve prosecutor? It was a risky maneuver but I was willing to try it, keeping my idea to myself.

When Frank and his fellow undercover friends talked about their informants, there was an element of pride in cultivating these relationships. The power dynamic was in favor of the officers except on those rare occasions when someone was playing them to eliminate competition. Having a CI "get over on you" or trick an officer into making an arrest on a rival was a mark of embarrassment and open to ridicule from the other undercover officers. Having sympathy for a CI was considered a sign of weakness or poor judgement. As far as all informants were concerned, the group believed that they all lie, they're all poorly educated, and they're all desperate. This thinking allowed more savvy people to manipulate their situations to success. The stories of CIs with colorful names like "Shortbread" or "Crackhead Ronnie" peppered many of the funnier more lively conversations. These anecdotes later served as teachable moments that helped me craft my careful strategy.

The assumption that I was in a desperate situation with multiple possible felonies hanging over my head made me appear vulnerable to the officers that I was assigned to, and also gave me a slight advantage over them. The detectives expected a broken and willing partner flush with actionable information. Newly released from my pre-trial detention, at our first meeting, I appeared weak, tired and frazzled. To them, I was resigned to my fate of having to help them make cases. I tested my persona as a CI and they showed concern for my well-being and postponed any action for a month in order to give me time to recover. When I returned to my apartment after the meeting, I waited until I was inside before I let out a huge laugh. My ruse appeared to be working.

I was a terrible confidential informant. Even though every meeting resulted in nothing actionable, I used those meetings to get to know each officer. I shared little pieces of my life at every meeting. I learned more and more about them and offered advice. I steadily gained their trust and their sympathy all the while playing for time. After almost a year of nothing, a new prosecutor on my case, having talked to the lead detective and my attorney, decided that I had no valuable information and that prosecuting me on multiple felonies did not serve the interests of the state. A new deal was offered, three years of probation on the condition that I pled guilty to one felony count of criminal sale of a controlled substance. Mr. Smooth Cat said something remarkable had happened that made this deal possible, the detectives really liked me and they advocated for probation and no prison time.

I had been swept up in what many continuously arrested and incarcerated individuals refer to as simply “the game”. My discussions with many people affected by the injustice of this system across many states and players in this system confirm that this game is real. The judges, the attorneys on both sides, and the law enforcement agents making the arrest are all aware of this rampant and normalized game. Law enforcement officers identify potential confidential informants based on vulnerability and use them to build cases against other individuals who may in turn offer up more information and this keeps going until someone can’t or won’t provide information and then a conviction is used to justify the entire effort. One low level informant sufficiently coerced with the threat of lengthy incarceration can become a powerful tool of law enforcement. In the wake of these cases, lies destroyed lives.

On many occasions, Frank did not use arrest or the threat of jail to form relationships with his informants. I asked him why once or twice he didn’t arrest someone and he would talk about his ambivalence to ruin someone’s life. He didn’t like the feeling of focusing on “low-hanging fruit”. In the conversations that I had privy to with these law enforcement officers, I saw a humanity in some of their interactions and a cruelty in others. The weight of playing the game over time may have hardened them but it did not extinguish their humanity. This observation guided my own game against the larger one. My victory was not only in avoiding prison but also in offering an opportunity for redemption of the humanity of the people who roped me into this game if only in my situation.



Some felons are seen and treated as irredeemable pariahs despite all the attestation to the contrary. The promises of training and support to prevent recidivism are connected to broken, underfunded programs that are half-baked and run by people providing services with gruff, stern indifference. After my conviction and inside the probation process, I was just a number checking in weekly by automated system. I saw my probation officer, a Latina, who was warm, flexible and open to hear my true and full story. She too was well aware of the game and familiar with my experience. I completed my probation without incident and the challenges of wearing the felon label mildly inconvenienced me.

I was gainfully employed before and after my experience for many years in a lucrative and steady profession. I am a veteran. I come from a background of elite education. The year that I was arrested, I married my longtime partner. I had stable housing and a community of support including my extensive family and loving friends. As fortunate as I am to have these resources, many felons do not. I can forget that I am a felon, which is a privilege. The only negative affect that my felony conviction has afforded me was exclusion from jury service. I have been to the White House as a student travel guide and a felon. I went back to college and received federal financial aid as a felon. I became published as a felon. I mentor many young men of color, as a felon. And I tell anyone who will listen about my journey as a felon.

I own the label felon to disrupt the dangerous narratives and ideas surrounding this word. Every time I shake up or challenge anyone’s notion of what a felon looks like, it is my act of protest and my quest to transform the conversation. Felons are everywhere but the word conjures visions of a particular type of man of color. I have lived with the label of felon now for 12 years, and in those years, a lot has happened. A felon was elected to the White House and not the best representation. A few years ago while reading the news, I came across the name of the detective who arrested me and later lead the team that I was made a confidential informant for. He was arrested for violating the civil rights of scores of people through deceitful behavior. Many of the convictions of the cases that he worked on are in the process of being overturned. Ironically, the man who made me a felon, is now himself, a felon.

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**How the Privatization of  
Carceral Systems Perpetuate  
Mass Incarceration**

Allen Jiang

## **Abstract**

The United States has the largest incarcerated population in the world. Since the 1980s, tough-on-crime policies have led to a sharp, dramatic increase from 300,000 people to over 2.3 million people imprisoned today, with just 5% of the world's population accounting for 25% of the world's prisoners (Greene, 2006). As the prison population grew, it gave rise to the "prison industrial complex" — a system where governments and private companies profit from mass incarceration through industries like prison construction, food services, and healthcare, creating economic incentive to maintain and expand prisons (Davis, 2003, p. 12). To alleviate prison expenditures, federal governments have awarded prison contracts to private businesses to lower costs, improve the quality of correctional facilities, and increase accountability (Greene, 2006, p. 6). However, the privatization of prisons has only increased costs for cities and counties, higher incarceration rates, and exploitation of poor, marginalized communities. This qualitative research paper focuses on the exploitative practices of the prison industrial complex and how it incentivizes mass incarceration without accountability and transparency to the public caused by global capitalism and racism through peer-reviewed articles and non-profit organizations.

*Keywords:* prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, prison for profit, private prisons, forced consumerism, prison retailing, back door financing, kickbacks

## **Introduction**

During the 1980s, known as the Reagan Era, politicians argued for "tough on crime" stances — including certain imprisonment and longer sentences to keep communities free from crime. Although crime rates in the United States have been declining for over two decades, the number of prisons and prison populations have increased dramatically. Since the late 1970s, the state and federal prison system has expanded to more than 1.4 million prisoners. Including local jails and other lockups (juvenile facilities, immigration detention, etc.), the number of people behind bars have increased to almost 2.3 million. Expenditures for corrections increased by 573 percent between 1983 and 2003, with the bulk of the increase going for expansion and operation of prisons (Greene, 2006, p. 4),

As the United States prison system expanded, it increased corporate involvement in construction, provision of goods and services, and use of prison labor, creating the prison industrial complex. (Davis, 2003, p. 12). As the federal government handed contracts to private corporations to build and oversee private prisons, the private prison companies prioritized maximizing profits. The more inmates they housed, the more money they made. As a result, private prisons lobbied for increased sentencing policies, pushing for more inmates in beds. The two leading private prison corporations are Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), now CoreCivic, which holds a net worth of \$2 billion, and the GEO Group, with a net worth of \$327 million, both have lobbied in the past with the federal government (Greene, 2006, p. 11).

## **The Rise of the Prison Industrial Complex**

Many believe the rise of the prison industrial complex is related to the rise in crime. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, crime was going down, so why were prisons being built? Political economists argue that prisons are a geographical fix to the socio-economic problems caused by global capitalism and create the conditions for incarceration. Gilmore (1999) argues that prisons are built to manage the surpluses of capital, land, labour, and state capacity (pp. 180-183).

Drawing on Marx, Gilmore (1999) writes, the tax struggle reflects the oldest form of class struggle. Capitalists in California demanded tax reductions in the 1960s, leading to the homeowner's tax revolt of 1978 (p. 182). As a result, in the early 1980s, the federal government reduced their participation in state and local social programs, pushing the responsibility to states such as California. The new tax measure in combination with federal austerity contributed to states like California's inability to act as a Keynesian state. The actions of a Keynesian state would focus traditionally on social safety nets such as mobility boosters, educational opportunity, and government employment programs. The imposition of austerity and neoliberal ideology has impacted the nation's ability to propose valid solutions to socio-economic problems, leading to incarceration to manage the surplus.

With the old market collapsing and producing surplus labor, land, finance, and state capacity, the state turned to prison construction as a solution to socio-economic problems. California's new prisons are now sited on devalued, rural land. Those disproportionately incarcerated were Black working-class men and women from urban cities who fell out from the post-war economy and dismantling welfare state (p. 184). While voters did approve debt to start the building program, their tax breaks caused the government to go behind their backs (p. 184). Investors with extra financial capital would lend money to states to build prisons in the form of revenue bonds, creating incentive for incarceration (p. 180). The state has used its enormous capacity to build prisons, make new laws for more offenses, and create a managerial court system that speeds up convictions and incarcerations. Thus, the state produces an industrial punishment system – the core of the prison industrial complex (p. 185).

Maintaining a prison-industrial complex is an enormous, expensive, and industrial bureaucracy. The state cannot fund it solely through tax revenues. Gilmore (1999) predicts that the U.S. will pay for prisons through privatization or make all prisoners work to pay their own costs and make a profit for the state. She writes, "In such an eventuality, wide-scale slavery, under the provisions of the Thirteenth Amendment, could be the big state's answer to tax struggle" (p. 186). The expansion of prisons can be traced to the crises produced by capitalism, which generated surpluses of land, labor, finance capital, and state capacity. As the tax struggle occurred, the state undermined its legitimacy to act as a Keynesian state, leading to the creation of a punishment system to manage the surplus crisis. Davis (2003) writes, "This is the ideological work that the prison performs – it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and increasingly global capitalism" (p. 16). Many people believe prisons are built to manage social deviance, when in reality, it's racism and global capitalism, the structural problems that create the conditions for prisons.

### ***Backdoor Financing Incentives for Mass Incarceration***

Before the mid-1980s, states paid for prison expansion by funding new construction with general revenues or by borrowing through the sale of obligation bonds. Obligation bonds are backed by the full faith and credit of the government, and repaid through general taxation (e.g., property taxes). "The issuance of new general obligation bonds often requires approval by taxpayers in the form of a bond referendum." (Pranis, 2007, p. 37). As correctional populations and costs increased, states had greater difficulty funding expansions from their operating budgets or securing public approval for new debt. Failing to secure public approval, the government turned to issuing revenue bonds to finance new prison construction. Revenue bonds are backed by fees or income generated by the prison system (e.g., inmate labor programs, prison retail) and do not rely on general taxation. Revenue bonds create a backdoor financing mechanism to borrow hundreds of millions of dollars to build facilities that the public does not want or cannot afford (Pranis, 2007, p. 36).

Revenue bond financing allows officials to remove restrictions on general obligation debt, such as constitutional debt limits and public referenda requirements. Failing to meet revenue requirements can downgrade a state's bond rating (credit score), making investors reluctant to invest further. This pushes prisons to increase capacity to make money off the beds occupied by prisoners. It also keeps voters unaware of the debt that they will have to pay and "creates large transaction fees for investment bankers and others with deep pockets and close ties to state officials" (Pranis, 2007, p. 41). For example, in 2004, Willacy County faced overcrowding in its 45-bed jail for female detainees and a severe budget crisis. Pranis (2007) explains,

The County had to borrow \$1.5 million for operations, pushing the county's debt load and tax rates to the maximum. Unable to issue county obligation bonds to finance a new jail, they issued a revenue bond that borrowed 'two or three times as much money, at a higher interest rate, to build a jail twice the size needed, marketed as paid for by the inmate population at no cost to the taxpayer. However, when the new jail was built, the detainees did not come. As a result, in May 2006, the county was forced to pay bondholders \$137,000 out of its general funds (p. 42).

Revenue bonds allow governments to overborrow and creates an incentive to overbuild prisons. In the special case of Willacy County, they were already in a budget crisis and couldn't get approval for an obligation bond, so they had to borrow a revenue bond. This creates pressure to build larger facilities than are currently needed, based on demand that does not yet exist. The Willacy County revenue bond failed because they did not secure the number of detainees needed to finance the construction project. This creates an incentive to increase the inmate population with policies advocating for harsher sentencing laws, criminalizing minor offenses, or pursuing contracts with federal immigration authorities.

### ***Prison Labor***

After the 13th amendment was passed, it abolished slavery and involuntary servitude except for punishment of a crime where a person has been convicted. Davis (2003) establishes that the prison industry is rooted in slavery. Before the Emancipation Proclamation, "99% of the antebellum prisoners in Alabama were White." After the abolishment of slavery, former slave states passed Black Codes to regulate the behavior of free Blacks; it made a range of actions, "such as vagrancy, absence from work, breach of job contracts, the possession of firearms, insulting gesture or acts" – illegal only when the person charged was Black (p. 28). Prison became the new form of slavery. Black people became the prime targets for the convict-lease system, where prisons would lease prisoner labor to companies, exploited to build railroads and mines. An 1887 report in Mississippi found that six months after 204 prisoners were leased to a white man named McDonald, dozens were dead or dying, the prison hospital filled with men whose bodies bore "marks of the most inhuman and brutal treatment...skin to bone" (Stevenson, 2019). Although the convict lease system was abolished in the 20th century, the use of prison labor (often without pay) continues under threat of punishment today.

An infamous prison today is named Angola, a Louisiana state penitentiary considered to be one of "America's most violent and abusive" and was built on top of a cotton plantation (Stevenson, 2019). Stevenson, a civil rights lawyer, freed their client, Matthew, sentenced to life without parole at the age of 16, from the Angola State Penitentiary in 2010. In the NYT article, Stevenson describes the conditions the incarcerated faced: "Their disciplinary records show that if they refused to pick cotton – or failed to pick it fast enough – they could be punished with time in "the hole," where food was restricted and inmates sometimes tear-gassed" (2019).

AP News reported that many products produced in prisons end up in the supply chains of some of the world's biggest companies. Many of the conditions for prison laborers are unsafe, and some incarcerated laborers have even died in work-related accidents. Corporations such as Cargill, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus, Archer Daniels Midland, and Consolidated Grain and Barge, which together post annual revenues of more than \$400 billion, have in recent years scooped up millions of dollars' worth of soy, corn and wheat straight from prisons (McDowell & Mason, 2024).

Many prisoners incarcerated are disproportionately people of color compared to the US population. "12.2% of the US population is Black, 32.4% of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons are Black. Men, Hispanic people, and American Indian and Alaska Native also make up a larger share of the imprisoned population" (Mast, 2025). Of the 1.2 million people incarcerated, nearly 800,000 are prison laborers by force. 80% are employed in facility maintenance and operations, 17% work for government-run businesses, and 3% work for private-sector companies, getting paid little to none. Their wages go to court-imposed fees and jail/prison sentence fees (Mast, 2025).

### ***Charging Inmates Perpetuates Mass Incarceration***

As tax revenue for jails and prisons declined, incarcerated people are forced to pay fees while they stay in jail/prison in order to cover the costs of mass-incarceration. (Swanson, et. al, 2020). These fees can add up and prevent successful re-entry into society, as former offenders are burdened with the debt placed on them. Some states place economic sanctions on convicted individuals to punish them if they don't pay their debts. "At least nine states condition the right to vote on the payment of court-imposed financial obligations: Alabama, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia, and Washington." (Levingston, 2007, p. 74). Employers also conduct credit history background checks to reveal debt and criminal history. This can prevent them from voting and getting a job through legalized

discrimination. These barriers place the burden of debt on families, as they are the only source of financial support.

Bianca Tyler, founder of Worth Rises, a non-profit organization dedicated to dismantling the multibillion-dollar US prison industry and ending the exploitation of justice-impacted people, reports that a mother often had to go without lights in order to pay for a collect call to her son in prison. In her TED talk, *The multibillion-dollar US prison industry – and how to dismantle it*, she says, “Families can pay as much as a dollar a minute to speak to a loved one in prison or jail, creating a 1.2-billion-dollar prison telecom industry.” According to their 5-year-impact report, “one out of three families with a loved one behind bars goes into debt trying to stay connected through visits and phone calls, and 87% of those carrying this burden are women, disproportionately Black and brown women” (2025).

While serving their sentence, incarcerated individuals will have to pay fees known as “pay-to-stay” fees, including room and board and medical copays. As Eisen (2015) writes, these fees force prisoners and their families to become “involuntary consumers” and create financial burdens on them (p. 4). As a result, an estimated 10 million people owe more than \$50 billion in debt from their involvement in the criminal justice system. In addition to pay-to-stay fees, “inmates can also “upgrade” to relatively small, new, clean, and local jails – in the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department jail, it’s \$100 per day” (p. 6). It creates a disparity between those who are affluent and can afford it and those who cannot.

Eisen (2015) argues that inmate fees are a bad policy—they force prisoners to pay for services when they are already punished by the state, and create burdens on families, affecting at least 80 percent of individuals in jail who are indigent (p. 4). It will cost \$25,000 per year for an inmate to stay in jail (p. 9). In addition, many inmates reported having a chronic medical condition but are deterred from getting help because of these fees, depriving them of necessary medical treatment and hygiene (p. 4).

In addition to inmate fees, bail also burdens indigent people with costs. According to Nam-Sonenstein (2024), the median bail amount for detained defendants is \$25,000. However, the median annual income for people who are detained pretrial and unable to post bail is \$19,970 and roughly a quarter of all cases are eventually dismissed. Bail keeps people with non-violent offenses and misdemeanors in jail for simply being poor. Jails raise revenue by imposing fines and fees on large numbers of detained people who are there only because they can’t afford to leave.

### ***Kickbacks***

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, prisons and jails generate billions of dollars each year by charging incarcerated people and their communities steep prices for phone calls, video calls, e-messaging, money transfers, and commissary purchases (Nam-Sonenstein, 2024). A lot of that money goes back to the correctional agencies as a corporate kickback. Professors Katzenstein, Bennett, and Swanson (2020), authors of *ALABAMA IS US: Concealed Fees in Jails and Prisons*, define “commissions/kickbacks” as a “form of fees” – “fees imposed on prisoners are itemized charges for specific services related to the use of courts, supervision, and incarceration” (p. 260). These go towards the private business and ongoing operation of jails or prisons. Multibillion-dollar private equity corporations such as H.I.G. Capital and Platinum Equity, which owns Securus and JPay, are major players in the prison vendor system. These private equity corporations pay a premium to jails and prisons “to win, secure, and maintain contracts with public carceral facilities” (p. 260). In other words, these corporations are securing a monopoly on carceral facilities. As a result, prisons and jails become “co-beneficiaries of privatization,” accepting corporations that promise the highest commissions/kickbacks (p. 261).

The ethical dilemma is that “private firms are incentivized to find additional ways to shift the cost of incarceration onto prisoners and their families...shouldering more of the costs of incarceration for the state, and it redounds to (the firms’) own profit.” (p. 263). Connecting to revenue bonds, private equity corporations would not only be incentivized to push more costs on incarcerated individuals and families with service fees, but they would also be incentivized to have more prisoners in beds, therefore lobbying for harsher sentencing laws, such as CCA and GEO group.

### ***Inmate Welfare Funds***

The revenue collected from commissions/kickbacks go into Inmate Welfare Funds (IWF). These funds are used primarily for the benefit or welfare of inmates. Nam-Sonenstein (2024) argues that the profits made by the prisons go to these unaccounted, ill-defined funds, and are not given back to improve the “general welfare” of the imprisoned population, but go directly to the prison administrators, who can use the money on “practically whatever they want.” He defines the term “shadow budgets” as prisons/jails: “not detailing the expenditures of their welfare funds, using non-specific language in the fiscal reporting/audits of their funds.” In his report, “17 of the 49 prison policies do not mention any form of oversight or transparency measures of their welfare funds” (Nam-Sonenstein, 2024).

An example of vague, non-specific language can be seen in Orange County’s IWF policy where it states, “primarily for the benefit, education, and welfare of the inmates...” (Katzenstein et al., 2020, p. 265). This gives the county great discretion to spend the money. Vague laws create the term “concealment.” Concealment refers to the ways carceral institutions make information out of reach for public scrutiny (Katzenstein et al., 2020, pp. 265-266). An example, mentioned earlier with non-specific language, is the changing of statutory language (written law) by a single word or verbal modifier that is “so inconspicuous and seemingly inconsequential” towards political or public attention. (p. 266). For example, “in 1993, California state legislatures replaced the word “solely” with “primarily” for the benefit of the inmate...the word “primarily” was defined to require only 51 percent of the Fund be spent on the “welfare” of the inmate and 49 percent spent on prison operations” (p. 266-267).

The use of vague language in Inmate Welfare Funds could lead to misuse. In 1998-99, Orange County was being investigated by the Criminal Justice Committee, appointed by the Los Angeles Grand Jury. Orange County’s IWF generated a “total of nearly \$70 million.” Was this \$70 million used primarily for the benefit and education of the jail population as required by the California Penal Code? No, the Committee concluded the IWF was “not being used directly for inmate services.” (p. 264). \$552,000 was spent on the benefit, education, and welfare for inmates, 12% of the fund (excluding salaries), while 41% was used towards construction. (p. 264).

Although it wasn’t mentioned by the Grand Jury, the professors noted that the jail allocated \$32,000 for the library, compared to the amounts for the commissary building and jail expansion. Although it wasn’t legally required to do so, the jail might have considered funding the law library as an essential operational expense, similar, for insurance, to healthcare. Instead, the commissions/kickbacks arrangement in effect requires poor families to subsidize access for their loved ones to legal resources” (p. 265).

### ***Democratic Scrutiny***

The problem with concealment under the law is that it is undemocratic towards the public. Katzenstein et al. (2020) argue that “The law, when it is used to conceal changes in our institutions of punishment, foreclose democratic scrutiny, debate, and contestation.” (p. 267). In other words, the state is biased to capitalists, and capitalists can influence the legal order to favor them. The law “exclusively” benefits private equity corporations and the prison/jail industry. It acts as a “weapon of the powerful, as carceral facilities gain additional revenue and private firms accrue ever-increasing profits” (p. 267).

Because of vague language, prisons could use, to their discretion, how much they want to spend on services, such as legal or health services for prisoners. Since prisons are co-beneficiaries of privatization, they would care only about increasing operations and vendor services, spending little on services in the well-being of inmates, such as access to a law library. If there are not enough resources covered by the IWF, families would have to pay more to have access to them, even though families are already burdened with the costs of incarceration. This concealment could lead to prisoners struggling on the bare necessities that prisons give them, and now they have to buy/trade, use the money in their accounts to buy more commissary, which is pocketed in the hands of the industry, creating a cycle of disparity in prison and exploitation of prisoners and their families.

## **Campaigning Against the Prison Industry**

Bills and laws can be passed against the privatization of prisons. Private equity are corporations that face limited reporting requirements with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commissions. It has been a growing sector since the last two decades. Private equity controlled corporations have staked monopoly control over vendor operations, such as prison and jail phones, digital communications, commissary sales, and health operations. Private equity owns a monopoly of a \$1.2 billion prison phone industry, \$1.6 billion commissary sales industry, and \$2.5 billion in healthcare annually (Swanson & Katzenstein, 2025, p. 298).

Worth Rises focuses on making corporate involvement “so publicly toxic” that corporations will no longer invest in the prison industry. The organization has passed 10 bills “making prison and jail communication free in various jurisdictions.” In their first campaign, they focused on dismantling the telecom industry in prisons. In 2018, they passed their first bill in New York City, “saving families \$10 million dollars annually and increasing call volume by 35% overnight.” Then, they supported ten other jurisdictions in making prisons and jail calls free for thousands of people, and even at the federal level in encouraging the FCC to increase its regulation of prison telecom, saving a total of \$187 million dollars in communication costs (p. 7).

Private equity corporations mentioned in *Alabama is US* were held accountable by Worth Rises. They have challenged Securus, one of the nation’s largest and most predatory telecoms, in their acquisition of ICSolutions, which would have consolidated 50% of the industry, at the FCC and won. They have also successfully diverted a \$150 million investment from Platinum Equity (p.7). Eliminating corporate involvement in the prison industry will abolish the exploitation of people behind bars and their families, returning resources to communities to further enrich themselves and improve chances of successful reentry.

## **Conclusion**

Just as prisons have long been taken for granted, abolitionist critiques have also been widely dismissed. Abolitionist scholars Gilmore (1999) and Davis (2003) have predicted that the rise of the prison industrial complex would result in widespread exploitation, privatization, and corrupt business practices of the prison industry rooted in the form of modern slavery. Gilmore (1999) anticipated that the government would finance prison expansion money without approval of the public, connecting to Pranis' (2007) analysis of revenue bonds – a financing mechanism that incentives on mass-incarceration by requiring prisons to fill more beds in order to pay for itself.

More recent authors confirm these warnings. Authors Katzenstein et al. (2020) and Sonenstein (2024) expose the true scope of the prison industrial complex. They have confirmed that as tax-revenue decreased, more inmates would be charged to cover the cost of mass-incarceration. The government has become co-beneficiaries of privatization, taking kickbacks from private-equity companies and misusing Inmate Welfare Funds – capital belonging to inmates and their families — under concealment of the law. Eisen (2015) demonstrates how pay-to-stay fees imposed by jails and prisons create cycles of debt and poverty for indigent people and their families, creating obstacles for re-entry. In response, Tylek (2021) and the advocacy organization, Worth Rises, challenges the prison-industry by introducing legislation to keep private corporations from profiting from incarceration.

Ultimately, the prison system was made to be a solution to socio-economic problems caused by capitalism and racism, absorbing the surpluses of labor and capital from marginalized communities and exploiting them to incentive on mass-incarceration. Rather than spending money on building more prisons, resources should be redirected towards communities deeply affected by mass incarceration to reduce recidivism and cycles of incarceration. Investments such as higher education, employment, and childcare would not only lower incarceration rates and costs but also address the structural inequities that the prison system failed to resolve.

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**Asian Prisoners  
Revolution**

Vi Lee

*Titled after Ou Chiew Saetern's drawings for Other: An Asian & Pacific  
Islander Prisoners' Anthology*

Dear Asian Americans (and beyond),

Imagine a world where we are fully humanized. Where we offer that to ourselves and everyone we come in contact with. Where contradictions can be mere curiosities. I want to offer you stories that many of us do not approach. The stories that do not advance a capitalist, Eurocentric world. I want you to hear these stories from the people themselves. I want you to understand the multiplicities of what Asian America has been, is, and could be. Even if it no longer exists as we currently understand it. I want you to understand where our communities came from, how they have been hurt, by the U.S. nation state and by each other, and how we might find healing. I want to situate us within a legacy of revolutionary struggle and understand it has been led by our communities most disregarded and disposed of.

I also want to acknowledge why I am drawn to this work. One of my mentors, Dr. Leora Kava noted that when studying systems impacted people it is important to understand why they chose to study them. I do not have close family or friends who have been incarcerated, I have not been incarcerated myself. I do not believe I am the best person to retell or analyze the stories I have read throughout my research. However, I hope that I can use this position of privilege to reach audiences who may not yet be ready to hear these stories from behind bars. I do not agree with that reasoning but it is the reality for some people. I hope that one day they will listen to formerly and currently incarcerated folks themselves.

It is from my heart, I offer you this writing in hopes of teaching you something new. In hopes of sparking the curiosity of the people you find yourself surrounded by. In hopes of deepening the humanity you feel for yourself and can offer to others.

In solidarity,

Vi Lee, 美华李

## **Introduction**

The model minority myth is a tale constructed and deconstructed time and time again so this paper does not aim to solely dismantle it. I want to subvert that narrative and chip away at our collective assumptions. I simply want to tip the dominos so later the entire system can crumble. To do that, I want to introduce you to a version of our community who did not silently sit with the oppression we face. Those of us who do not make headlines or feature films or sometimes even novels. Those of us who make mistakes and require more help. Those of us who are messy. And yet, still human and in need of understanding, love, and empathy. I consumed documentaries, papers, anthologies, and YouTube panel discussions to compile my research for this paper. I came to this project with very little knowledge of any incarcerated Asian Americans<sup>2</sup>, how they came to be within the system, or how they were faring upon reentry. Everything I read and watched constructed one narrative that few strayed from that I will explore here. I urge us all to question why and how such an invisible dominion remains so seemingly monolithic. I urge us all to wonder about the incarcerated Asian Americans outside of California, the queer incarcerated Asian Americans, the disabled incarcerated Asian Americans. Who is still invisible in this making of visibility?

A majority of Asian Americans within the prison system are Southeast Asian (i.e. Vietnamese, Laotian, Hmong, Mien, Khmer, Filipino, Thai, etc), many of their families came to the United States in the late 1970s or early 1980s as refugees fleeing the Khmer Rouge or other genocides and political upheaval, and nearly everyone was located in California. Vietnamese immigrants especially made up this divide between first and second wave migration which had vast implications for the economic status of incoming migrants. “In 1982, only 25 percent of the first-wave arrivals lived in poverty, but among the second wave of refugees, the proportion reached a staggering 90 percent” (Virgil et al., 2004). Due to their refugee status and lack of material assets at the time of entry to the United States, many people experienced economic hardships intertwined with PTSD, addiction, language barriers, and bullying in schools. This split is integral to understanding the split in Asian migrants who were able to access more material wealth and upward mobility and those who were not. Those who became known as model minorities and those who were targeted by the prison industrial complex.

## **Contextual Statistics and Data**

The trend of Asian Americans being categorized as “other” and aggregated among ethnic groups along with Pacific Islanders leads to this lack of understanding of Asian American communities and crime. *Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the Prison Industrial Complex* author Raymond Magsaysay noted that in 2004 AAPI youth arrests increased by 11.4% while white, Black, and Native arrests decreased (Magsaysay, 2021), similar trends continue in more recent years according to a 2015 study cited by Annie Le, author of *Beyond Usual Suspects*. She found Asian American youth are “more likely to be tried as adults who had committed similar crimes in the 1990s” as well as having higher conviction rates, “and are less likely to leave the juvenile justice system once they enter it” (Le, 2021), a statistic that is evident in the juvenile incarceration cases of Chol Soo Lee and Eddy Zheng. In Oakland between 1991 and 2000, 25% of arrests comprised drug offenses committed by Southeast Asian American youth (Le, 2021). Between 2001 and 2006 in San Francisco County, Vietnamese and Sāmoan youth had some of the highest arrest rates by ethnicity according to the National Center on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD). Similarly, in 2006 in Oakland, Sāmoan youth had the highest arrest rate in the city, 140 per 1,000. To compare, Cambodian

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<sup>2</sup> My research originally focused on Asian Americans, but due to aggregated data and overlapping economic positions, stories and data of some Pacific Islanders was included. The stories of the Sāmoan community I read will be included to highlight the common issues our communities face, but it is important to note they are not to be lumped in with Asian Americans. Pacific Islanders can and will stand as their own distinct community. “AAPI” or “API” will be used in reference to source material as much of their data is aggregated.

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youth sat at 63 per 1,000, Laotian: 52 per 1,000, Vietnamese: 28 per 1,000 and white: 13 per 1,000.

Alameda County saw the highest recidivism rates among Southeast Asians as well, and generally Southeast Asians tend to have higher recidivism rates than East Asians (Le, 2021).

### **Case Studies**

One high profile case from the latter half of the 20th century, was that of Chol Soo Lee. He was born in South Korea during the Korean War and came to the United States, with his mother, at age 12 with little Korean support and few economic commodities. His mother, dealing with trauma from having fled South Korea, would physically abuse Lee, causing him to run away from home and unfortunately, towards the criminal legal system. Lee lived in San Francisco's Chinatown and in 1973 was wrongfully convicted of a murder, receiving a life sentence. Lee had previously been incarcerated as a child, charged with battery, and sent to juvenile hall. While in juvenile hall, he was sent to the psych ward and deemed insane for simply not being able to speak English, yet another example of the low expectations of refugee children who are tracked as criminals. Lee was also on probation for theft at the time of the murder which organizers credit as the reason for such easy scapegoating of Lee, while simultaneously misidentified by popular media and police who stated the perpetrator was Chinese. Lee was Korean. He was ultimately confined in San Joaquin where he fought and killed a fellow inmate, increasing his sentence from life to the death penalty. However, the community rallied behind Lee and he was eventually released, but the expectations following the publicity of his case were so high that he turned to drug use to cope and returned to prison in 1990, going on to describe how incarceration ruined him. Organizers in the 2022 documentary, *Free Chol Soo Lee*, note that the police investigating the murder never interviewed Chinatown residents or witnesses to the murder Lee was convicted of and none of them ever testified in court (Ha & Yi, 2022). Aligning Chol Soo Lee's case of unjust incarceration with a legacy of racial profiling and lazy protecting and serving.

Eddy Zheng, who went on to co-edit *Other: An Asian American and Pacific Islander Prisoners' Anthology*, came to the United States from China at the age of 12 and was convicted of home invasion and robbery by 16, becoming the youngest prisoner at San Quentin (Wang, 2016). The Asian Prisoner Support Committee, co-compilers of *Other* and *Arriving: Freedom Writings by Asian and Pacific Islanders Behind and Beyond Bars* held and recorded a panel featuring Zheng and fellow incarcerated Asians where they highlighted the fear of deportation many incarcerated Asian Americans faced. Rico Riemedio, another man on the panel, talked about the culture among Asian Americans to not talk about negative things, a virtue that extended to the prison (Asian Prisoners Panel).

*Quyên Pham et al. v. City of Garden Grove* was a class action lawsuit filed by five Southeast Asian teenagers in Orange County, California. They sued based on nonconsensual photographs taken of them by police based on the suspicion of their gang affiliation. Preceding the lawsuit, three female students were detained due to their baggy clothing and the location they were in. This case resulted in the city of Garden Grove requiring officers to record their reasoning for the detention of suspected gang members, the written consent of the individual before their photograph is taken for the CalGang database, and the prevention of asking for immigration documents during a stop (Tieu, 2006).

Dan Hoang, a UC Irvine student at the time of his conviction, admitted to having a gang affiliated friend from high school, which increased his own sentence from five years to fifteen despite not being involved in the gang himself. Hoang had been part of a fight, in Orange County, where gunshots were fired. He was "convicted on three counts of attempted murder and received gang enhancement sentences" (Tieu, 2006). Hoang likely wouldn't have received such a lengthy sentence if he hadn't mentioned his high school friend's affiliation. Whether he admitted this fact willingly and easily we may never know, but what we do know is that it isn't unlike the police to force false testimony from people they have prematurely decided are guilty or at the very least not worthy of innocence.

## **United States Imperialism**

Understanding the prison industrial complex as one part of a web of colonialism, extractivism, and capitalism allows us to see a more nuanced view of how people become incarcerated. Annie Le links “the criminalization of Southeast Asians... back to the Indochinese War. Community members suspected that the mechanisms used to surveil Southeast Asians were parallel to how U.S. soldiers could not tell Viet Cong soldiers apart from the Southern Army during the Vietnam War” (Le, 2021). Let us remember, the reasons our communities had to flee their motherlands often circles back to United States imperialism, economic destabilization, and war interventions in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam especially (Le, 2021). They drive us out of our motherlands, beckon us to a savior safe haven and land of opportunity within the United States, and then criminalize our reactions to trauma and inability to survive under capitalism.

Many people were impacted intergenerationally, coming to the United States as young children, living with deep trauma themselves, and witnessing the effects of it on their parents. Children often experienced abuse or distance from their parents as well as bullying from peers and teachers in school, leaving them with feelings of isolation, a lack of support systems, and a divergence from wanting to attend school. “Language barriers for adults, combined with their heavy work schedules, preclude them from actively engaging in their children’s process of growing up American” (Virgil et al., 2004). This left many children virtually on their own and solely responsible for their own construction of self and identity as well as processing the events that caused them to move to the United States in the first place. It was at this point when many people I read about and listened to began to give up on school and sometimes seek an escape from their families. It was within Asian American gangs, made up of people of similar refugee and working class backgrounds, that many people found a community as well as access to greater economic success.

## ***School Desks are Constructed in Prisons***

Nathaniel Tam, one of the introductory authors of the *Arriving* anthology describes the reality faced by many Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander American students as the “migration-to-school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline,” expanding on the more commonly heard concept, school to prison pipeline. This immediately situates Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander American students within a much more complicated narrative than what we typically hear. Unjust stereotyping as gang members leads to harsh punishment in schools, further leading students to disengage and be tracked into lower level classes based on low expectations and lack of support.

For the 2013-14 and 2014-15 academic years in California, Pacific Islander American students comprised a higher percentage of statewide suspensions than total enrollment (Magsaysay, 2021). Additionally, 42% of Hmong, 41% of Laotian and 40% of Cambodian community members lacked a high school degree or GED, they were also found to be 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than graduate high school. The connection between incarceration and education is further highlighted by the fact that 68% of incarcerated men do not have a high school degree. A study of Westminster High School in Southern California “reveals that... the Vietnamese dropout rate is twice that of the school average, 25 percent compared to 13 percent” (Virgil et al., 2004). In 2015, Ahmed Mohamed was interrogated and arrested on suspicion of bringing a bomb to school. In actuality it was a hand built clock. Mohamed was then suspended (Magsaysay, 2021). Such hostility and perception of Brown innovation as inherently threatening further pushes students away from the classroom and toward more illicit communities as students grow tired of needing to prove themselves as something other than the stereotypes thrown on them.

Despite these staggering numbers over dropout rates and high school diplomas, many Asian American gang members maintained their model minority image in schools, referring to themselves as “schoolboy gangsters.” They maintained their good images in front of teachers and their families but still participated in gang activity (Le, 2021). Le asserts this helped the learned behavior of sophistication and calculation when it came to interacting with authority figures (Le, 2021) that sometimes aided Asian American gang members from being caught and gave them this reputation with police.

### ***Racial Profiling and Hypercriminalization***

While some gang members evaded arrest, Asian Americans who “fit a description” were not exempt from racial profiling by police. In 1977, the San Francisco Police Department created the Asian Gangs Task Force to combat the presence of Chinese and Vietnamese gangs in Chinatown, the Sunset, and the Richmond districts. They focused on informing Sunset and Richmond residents of possible extortion schemes and building up their relationships with the community, aware of the distrust they had of police. This resulted in the successful recruitment of “over 150 Asian American police officers” (Tieu, 2006). This move is a key point in the understanding and construction of Asian Americans as upwardly mobile and model minorities. The ability by the police to play on fears of the community and instead of providing material resources for low income refugee families, they institutionalized violence, gave it a badge, and told our people to back the blue.

Similarly, the late 1980s saw the creation of the CalGang database. Police would conduct “‘photo stops’ to collect names, nicknames, gang insignia tattoos, car types, and photographs of gang members and their associates” (Tieu, 2006). They then stored nonconsensual mugshots of Asian and Pacific Islander American youth, justifying this by saying that they were hard to tell apart (Magsaysay, 2021). California police departments reportedly determine gang affiliation based on “personal admission... attire associated with or tattoos of gang symbols, being observed using gang hang signs by a police officer, hanging out with known gang members,” with certain departments also citing “hanging out in neighborhoods where gangs are prevalent” (Tieu, 2006). Recent Los Angeles Police Department policy has begun to require parents be notified when their minor children are put into the CalGang database (Tieu, 2006). Hong Tieu, author of *Picturing the Asian Gang Member Among Us* describes “police action [as] a disservice to the community when non-gang members are harassed or wrongly labeled as gang members” (Tieu, 2006). This points to the inability of police to actually keep communities safe, instead further injuring them by placing the label of “gangster” onto youth. This label tends to hover over them like a ghost they can’t get rid of.

There is a sense of viewing Asian American gang members as highly sophisticated and intelligent when conducting their business, further subjecting Asian American gang members to the model minority myth and “yellow peril dialectic” (Le, 2021). This yellow peril induced fear of Asian American young men and boys rings in the key of “evil” and subhuman Chinese gangs or tongs. Much of this is also predicated on the assumption that Asian American gang members are harder to identify by police due to a distancing from the stereotypical Black or Mexican gang member. Asian American gang members are allegedly harder for police to catch.

Many of the Asian American gangs I read about seemed to focus on home invasions and robbery or other theft based crimes, sometimes surveilling the victim for several days. Most often gangs would target other Asian households, relying on an understanding of their community’s distrust in banks, possession of gold jewelry and expensive items, and their unwillingness to report an invasion to the police. Virgil asserts that drug dealing was also less common for Asian American gangs, writing “they feel that the potential risk involved in dealing drugs is far too great compared to the potential gain” (Virgil et al., 2004). This is of course not true in every situation, some of the people featured in *Other* and *Arriving* were convicted on drug charges as well as more “typical” gang activity such as murder and assault, but the context that led them to rely on and resort to violence largely stemmed from the reasons previously mentioned. Virgil adds, “when gang members acquire a substantial amount of cash, they will often rent a motel room where more than a dozen individuals of both sexes gather to eat, talk, listen to music, watch videotapes, drink beer, and use drugs into the early morning” (Virgil et al., 2004). Pointing to a desire for community and release from everyday life.

### ***Gang Structure***

There is some contestation to the construction and understanding of gangs within the people interviewed by Virgil. “Many of our respondents characterize their association as not so much a ‘gang’ but, rather, a loose collection of friends, amorphous and fluid in structure. Membership is determined almost arbitrarily; initiation rituals are absent” (Virgil et al., 2004). Le’s research split respondents into two categories based on age and generation that reflect similar sentiments. Folks 25 years and older were considered “original gangsters” (OG) and those under age 25 were considered youth. She found that within the older group “gang involvement was primarily out of survival and necessity against racialized violence” (Le, 2021). She, like Virgil, found youth gang involvement to be less rigid and more dependent on social desires. Interestingly, some of the OGs didn’t identify the youth gang members as living up to the same standard they set and maintained. They described a sense of unity and common understanding in the things they did and did not do, such as an unwillingness to snitch on each other to police even if it meant prison time, something the youth didn’t seem as willing to do (Le, 2021). This shifting sense of community within a gang speaks to the younger generations’ involvement as no longer entirely reliant on survival like the OGs. Some people also saw gang involvement as a way to resist tenets of the model minority myth, such as being obedient and quiet (Le, 2021). Reframing views of gangs to be a form of resistance and community safety that is then highly criminalized helps us understand what draws youth in and how community based alternatives can be structured.

### ***The Model Minority Myth***

Yet, not even gangs are liberated from the model minority myth. As explanation for found community among gangs, Virgil (2004) writes “the yearning for family was perhaps the most important reason for joining gangs” however, Le contests this immediate conclusion on lack of familial support or cultural barriers as the only reason why Asian Americans join gangs. She writes that this idea of having good family relationships making people less likely to join a gang is a notion that is predicated on the model minority myth. Magsaysay (2021) adds “because the model minority myth is so capacious and pervasive, even the unintentional neglect of AAPI criminalization can be weaponized as additional evidence that AAPI’s are indeed prosperous, law abiding model minorities who are not impacted by the engines of mass incarceration.” He cites the murders of Akai Gurley and George Floyd, both unarmed Black men killed by police (some of whom were Asian American) as ways in which the silence around incarcerated Asian Americans feeds into the model minority myth and fuels anti-Blackness. The prevalence of Asian American cops is further contextualized by the intentional effort to build rapport between Asian American communities and the police. Magsaysay raises an important point that by disregarding, intentionally or not, Asian Americans as part of the prison system and as people impacted by these arms of state violence, we reinforce the idea that the state will not come for us and that Asian Americans are inherently “too good” to be impacted by these axes of oppression. As if being too good would actually save anyone.

### ***Fresh Off The Boat***

Much of the model minority myth is reliant on assimilation towards Americanness and a rejection of Asian values, cultural signifiers, and beliefs. One of Le’s participants, Anh, very intentionally and specifically embraced the anti-Asian stereotypes he faced as a part of his understanding of gang involvement. He said “I want them to respect and accept me and admire me for all of these things they think are bad” and “claimed it as a symbolic refusal of assimilation” (Le, 2021). This sentiment, shared by others, led to an embodiment of cultural practices in gang subcultures. One example of this is the dragon tattoos common among older generations of Asian American gangs. The perception of tattooed Asian skin has changed in recent years and contexts, but at the time when many Asian American gangs were beginning to form, there was a heavy association of tattoos with gang affiliation (Le, 2021). This creates a paradox within communities, families, and generations between wanting to feel affinity through things like dragon tattoos but risking racial profiling or the romanticization and dilution of gang culture to an aesthetic.

The community offered through the gang also allowed people to speak their native languages or

accented English with less shame. Le found that the learning process of Asian languages was more common among second generation or youth participants of her study (Le, 2021). Playing into fresh off the boat (FOB) and Asian American whiz kid stereotypes also aided gang members when it came to avoiding law enforcement. This highlights the power of utilizing stereotypes from the dominant culture and the unique ability of Asian Americans to switch between identities and understand different experiences. One of Le's respondents, Tyler, kept his braces on longer than he needed to, wore thick glasses, didn't get tattoos, and only drove a run down 2007 Honda Accord to continue to play into perceptions. This tactic successfully allowed him to move through his routes as a "broke college student" (Le, 2021). Of course, this is a privilege that may not be afforded to those who have more melanated skin, but it is an important exercise in how you can use racial privilege to your community's advantage. This liminality that is seemingly common within the Asian American experience was common sentiment from the study respondents and contributing authors about the racial dynamics and hierarchy within prison, mentioning that during fights, Black and Latino incarcerated would be put on lockdown while API prisoners would not (Asian Prisoner Support Committee, 2008).

### ***We Keep Us Safe***

Historically speaking, some gangs began as groups of friends (Le, 2021). In some cases, this led to gangs being seen as the original community defenders, something brought back to attention recently by some of Chicago's gangs putting out bounties for ICE agents who have been terrorizing community members. Asian Americans are not typically understood to be subject to police harassment however, "another source of pressure toward gang involvement is the discrimination the youths perceive from law enforcement officials. Informants complain they have been unjustifiably harassed and even beaten by police on several occasions" (Virgil et al., 2004). Many of Le's respondents mentioned racial violence from peers as a reason for creating or joining a gang. Students were getting bullied for their low economic status or lack of English skills and found that the community within the gang offered protection and a desire to shield other students from the same torment (Le, 2021). Many youth had other family members involved in gangs and created a sense of idolization around the culture and lifestyle, especially when their role models would confront racist bullying with violence (Le, 2021). One of Le's respondents expressed a desire to fight for a cause, the cause being the well being of his community, even if it meant sacrificing himself. This mentality seems honorable until the breadth of it is understood. Part of communal healing is no longer having to resort to personal sacrifice to keep others safe. This desire to do something for a cause also pushes back against the model minority myth and suggests the ability to plug perceived "at risk" youth into organizing and community efforts that don't have to be reliant on violence or prisons.

Prison organizing is something often overlooked, but many people told stories of organizing efforts from behind bars. Charles "Bula" Joseph, an interviewee for the *Arriving* anthology described organizing for better conditions in the Mesa Verde ICE detention center during the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown. He said:

"So one phone would be Priya [from Centro Legal], and there would be a line of guys on one phone back to back handing the phone off while Priya is taking down their information and writing down their health risks. And then I go use the other phone and I call Susan and Susan is taking down information. So it was about three phones and three different attorneys taking down information." (Asian Prisoner Support Committee, 2024).

Joseph's story shows the unity of Asian American and other prisoners and the incredible ability they had to organize themselves in some of the most restrictive conditions. This also allows those of us on the outside to see Joseph and his comrades in their full humanity. They were unwilling to accept their conditions, despite being told they were in the safest place they could be during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have much to learn from their efforts.

### ***Racial Violence is Gendered Violence***

Many of Le's participants draw on Western ideals of masculinity in the construction of their understanding of the reasons behind their gang involvement. "Their use of violence to resist disrespect was also tied to masculinity... API youth enacted masculinity to confront racial injustices" (Le, 2021). Black and Brown men and boys are viewed as hypermasculine and inherently violent. The "enactment" of masculinity performed by API young men in this context draws on the construction of masculinity as violent and Asian American men as effeminate or emasculated. This serves as further context and understanding for the ways in which Asian American gangs are viewed in American politics and media. One of Le's participants noted that oftentimes when Asian American boys would be bullied in schools it was assumed that they wouldn't fight back, so being able to prove that assumption wrong provided a sense of confidence and reassurance in their ability to stand up for both themselves and others (Le, 2021). Gang affiliations and violence became a way for some Asian American men to redefine their understanding of masculinity.

Many of the different studies I've referenced thus far have been focused on men, but women are making up an increasing percentage of the prison population. Their circumstances for incarceration and their experiences before, during, and after prison can differ vastly from men. Ny Nourn, a contributing author to *Arriving* and Cambodian migrant and refugee was incarcerated for sixteen years and upon her release was detained by ICE. Nourn wrote about surviving an abusive relationship in her youth and how that man went on to kill someone else Nourn had become involved with. When she finally reported the murder to the police, rather than receiving resources to help her leave the abusive relationship and establish her life, she was arrested, charged, and convicted for the murder. At 21 years old she was sentenced to life without parole (Asian Prisoner Support Committee, 2024). Nourn's story comes at the nexus of domestic violence, economic hardship, immigration rights, and the prison system. The unjust detention, conviction, and sentencing of a woman in dire need of resources and support shows the willingness of the prison system to put people away. Nourn never stopped fighting for her release, despite her sentence, and with the help of her community, the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, and the Asian Law Caucus, she was released and granted an unconditional pardon. Meaning she no longer needs to live in fear of another ICE detention and possible deportation.

### ***Immigration Implications***

The ease with which criminal convictions can lead to deportations is terrifying. When migrant communities are so heavily criminalized the motivations to remove them from hegemonic America become clearer. Immigration agents are able to access CalGang and "single out non-citizens who have prior convictions for deportation" (Tieu, 2006). In 2015, AAPI Behind Bars found "Southeast Asian communities are 3-4x more likely to be deported for old convictions compared to other immigrant communities." Even if refugee or undocumented folks have been released from incarceration, any record they have leaves them at risk for deportation. Xuliyah Potong, a featured writer in *Other* was imprisoned in ICE facilities awaiting deportation. However, his mothercountry, Laos did not have a repatriation agreement with the United States, meaning the Laotian government would not take back deportees. This left Potong with an impossible decision: sign an order of removal and self deport to Laos should they take up a repatriation agreement in the future, or remain in detention. Many Cambodian Americans facing this same predicament were forcibly deported in March 2002 after Cambodia entered into a repatriation agreement with the United States. In 2007, at the time *Other* was published, Vietnam and Laos were the only two Asian countries who did not have repatriation agreements with the United States (Zheng et al., 2007). Vietnam however, signed a repatriation agreement in 2008, leaving Laos as the only Asian country who will not accept deported American non-citizens (Asian Law Caucus, 2025). This harkens back to Nathaniel Tam's "migration-to-school-to-prison-to-deportation pipeline." Any run in with law enforcement and incarceration threatens people's existence in America if they are not citizens.

## **Conclusion**

The true degree of harm by labeling Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander American children as delinquents and gang members is family separation, loss of livelihood, and in some cases the return to unsafe conditions abroad. The fear of deportation among Asian American communities began long before Donald Trump's presidency and is intrinsically intertwined with the criminalization of Asian Americans, gang affiliated or not. This all exists within the complexity of education, gender, stereotypes, racial profiling, migration, refugee status, and material wealth. The gaps in my and others research point to significant entries for further exploration on incarceration beyond the West Coast, as well as harm reduction and material aid for migrant communities before the need for violence as safety is introduced. I do want to bring you back to the beginning of this paper. Do you feel your humanity deepened? Widened? Are you drawn to further curiosity? Are you ready to listen to those who are incarcerated themselves? Remember these are only some of the stories of incarcerated and gang affiliated Asian Americans and there are some stories we will never know. What is most important is trying to listen.

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## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, thank you Dr. Lobo for recommending me to write for this journal and constantly supporting my process. Dr. Lobo was one of my first criminal justice professors and as soon as he began talking about how nothing is inherently criminal I knew he would become someone I could lean on. In one of the first weeks of that semester, we ran into each other at the bus stop and he gifted me a poster with an Assata Shakur (may she rest in power) quote that still hangs on my wall.

Thank you to all my San Francisco State mentors and supporters, Dr. Leora Kava, Gopal Dayaneni, Jaimy Mann, Teresa Pratt, Dr. Arlene Daus-Magbual, Dr. Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales, and Leila Malikyar. I feel honored to follow in your academic and movement footsteps and get to be under your guidance.

I am eternally grateful for my community and all my friends here in San Francisco, Japneet Khanuja, Sohrab Ford, Abby Schwartz, Micaela Buller-Rodrigo, Jasper Robledo, Anni Welch, Josh Crosby, and all my other Student Union comrades.

Thank you to first comrades, lifelong friends, and future academic colleagues, Lily Lockwood, Yuki Hoshi, Sam Lee, and Jiayi Guo. To be able to tell our 17 year old selves where we are now.

Thank you to my family who generally thinks the things I ramble on about are insane but support me nonetheless.

And finally, thank you to my partner Char Bennett, for always sharing your knowledge and pushing me to deepen my own.



**The Cost of Being an  
Autistic Minority**  
Nat Marberry

## **Introduction**

People of color (POC) have dealt with unfair and oppressive treatment from law enforcement and the criminal justice system for years, with the process to reform only coming from community pressure or through the devastating loss of lives. Edwards et al. (2019) report from their findings, “Our results show that people of color face a higher likelihood of being killed by police than do White men and women, that risk peaks in young adulthood, and that men of color face a nontrivial lifetime risk of being killed by police.” Outside of an individual’s ethnicity and the color of their skin, there is another major aspect that is hardly considered in the heat of the moment, if at all: Having a disability that one may not be able to recognize upon a first encounter, solely because it is not visible. Invisible disabilities, according to the Invisible Disabilities Association (2010), are defined in simple terms as a “physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person’s movements, senses or activities.” To the majority, people may only consider someone to have a disability when they have a mobility aid or some form of assistive equipment. On the contrary, as stated by Invisible Disabilities Association, “...the 1994-1995 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that 26 million Americans (almost 1 in 10) have a severe disability, while only 1.8 million used a wheelchair and 5.2 million used a cane, crutches or walker (Americans with Disabilities 94-95). In other words, 74% of Americans who live with a severe disability do not use such devices.” (Invisible Disabilities Association, 2010). To determine whether an individual is disabled depending on if they use mobility aids is not considered practical and has its significant flaws. By considering this information presented regarding invisible disabilities, it prompts a major question: What would the most likely outcome be for a person of color, who has some form of an invisible disability, in a potential altercation with law enforcement?

Disabilities, more specifically ones that are ‘invisible’, are incredibly important and crucial to document in unfair police treatment, as disabled people are more likely to be victims of crimes committed against them by police. The Guardian has its own journalist-ran database known as the ‘The Counted’, which collects information regarding police violence and confirmed accounts of each person killed by law enforcement within the United States from 2015 to 2016. The information comes from verified sources such as police reports, witness statements, regional news outlets, research groups, and open-source reporting outlets. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015, The Guardian reported that out of 246 people, or 1 in 5 killed by law enforcement, had a known mental health disability or that the person’s mental health was involved in the attack. Similarly, The Washington Post has a personal project, ‘Fatal Force’, which keeps track of each law enforcement shooting that occurs throughout each year, and collects their data from local news reports, independent non-governmental databases, records requested from police departments directly, and investigative reporting (Julie Tate, et al.). Reported on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, The Washington Post revealed that 768 people were killed by law enforcement, with one in four deaths involving a documented mental health disability. However, The Washington Post had no specific documentation on the exact mental health conditions/disabilities that the deceased victims had.

While these sources and data date back to around eight to ten years ago, in the year of 2025, there were reports of police violence against autistic people of color. Reported on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025, Devon J. Hampton published, “The killing of an autistic teen highlights potential police violence that people with disabilities face”, highlighting the death of Victor Perez. Perez was a nonverbal, Autistic 17-year-old with cerebral palsy, who was facing a mental health crisis and brandished a knife. Despite his family not viewing him as a threat, the police had come with guns already drawn, and “shot Perez nine times within seconds of arriving at his home” (Hampton, 2025). Perez is just one of many documented cases of a formally diagnosed, Autistic person of color who had a fatal interaction with police, when all that was truly needed to handle Perez was just to deescalate the situation. For there to be proper training on how law enforcement responds to mental health crises, there needs to be guidance for this change to be enacted. Proper education for law enforcement about disabilities, specifically Autism, will provide a more comprehensive understanding about the disability and how to properly deescalate these situations for law enforcement. In turn, it can lessen the number of altercations that have higher chances of fatal outcomes, leading to longer lives and different responses from law enforcement. The police cannot hold these

assumptions that encountering hidden disabilities will lead to a negative outcome because of personal biases or lack of proper education. Reform is necessary since police are ‘Public Servants’ where they are meant to protect the public, not just the neurotypical population.

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder and People of Color**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as defined by the National Institute of Mental Health (2024), is “a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is described as a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life.” People who have an Autism diagnosis do not fit one perfect mold, as it is a spectrum containing a wide range of symptoms. These can include numerous differences in socializing and communicative behaviors, forms of intellectual disabilities, and various forms of both physical and mental health conditions. Therefore, it is crucial to note that each Autistic individual has unique and varying needs depending on what symptoms and conditions they are faced with. Additionally, Autism Spectrum Disorder has dramatically increased in diagnoses in just the past two decades. According to Durkin et al., 2017, a research study conducted focused on the years of 2002 to 2010, where the data highlighted the distribution of diagnosed Autistic children across states in the United States. Non-Hispanic White children were diagnosed more often and at higher rates, as they comprised of 55.8% of those diagnosed within the study, while POC made up the 44.2%. Black diagnosed children represented 20.4% of the diagnosed population, ethnically Hispanic represented 16.6%, and “other races” (which primarily include Asian/Indigenous communities/people) represented the smallest amount at 7.2% of the diagnosed population.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), directly funds a program known as The Autism and Developmental Monitoring (ADDM) Network. As reported by the CDC (2024), the ADDM provides information that can be utilized to better understand the number of characteristics of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), cerebral palsy (CP), and other developmental disabilities living in the United States. The combined data collected by the ADDM Network from 2000 to 2022 had reported the combined prevalence per 1,000 children, which ranged across ADDM sites. Reported in 2020 (CDC, 2025) there was a combined prevalence of 27.6 (23.1-44.9) from 11 reported ADDM sites, which meant that 1 in 36 children had been identified with a prevalence of ASD. In comparison to the most recent documentation from 2022, 16 ADDM sites reported a combined prevalence of 32.2 (9.7-53.1), leading to 1 in 31 children being identified with a prevalence of ASD. Additionally, reported by Shaw (2025), the prevalence of ASD among 8 year old children was shown to be much higher in 2022 compared to previous years. The prevalence of ASD was much higher among Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic children aged 8 years in comparison to White children of the same age, which confirms a continued pattern first observed in 2020. As a final point, the Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Hispanic groups of children were more likely to have a co-occurring intellectual disability. With the statistics presented, it can be noted that there is an evident amount of information pointing to POC children for higher documentation of ASD diagnoses, as well as the potential chance of another mental disability accompanying the ASD diagnosis. However, there are various financial hurdles that can prevent POC families and their children from receiving a proper Autism diagnosis. With a lack of resources, the children may struggle with transitioning into a well-functioning and adjusted adult, especially in the chance that they are able to be independent from their families in the future.

### **Socioeconomic Barriers and the Impacts on Autistic Adults**

Children and adolescents who are White and come from wealthier socioeconomic backgrounds have an easier time receiving a proper diagnosis and accessing the developmentally crucial services that follow suit (Alyward et al., 2021). In comparison, children of color such as Black, Hispanic, or Asian/Pacific Islander children who come from lower income backgrounds are more likely to have multiple factors that contribute to why their children may be diagnosed much later in comparison to White families and their children. Sociodemographic influences, which include financial and educational barriers, are main contributors, since a lack of financial resources can be a huge limiter in access to necessary information, education, and access to quality health care (Tek S, Landa RJ, 2012). These lack of

services can lead to a reduced quality of life for diagnosed Autistic individuals once they reach adulthood, as prevalent mental health conditions can arise alongside their lifelong invisible disability. A clinical study found that between 54% and 94% of Autistic adults will experience reoccurring psychiatric disorders or physical health issues within their lifetime that are active detriments to their quality of life (Hossain et al., 2020; Pehlivanidis et al., 2020). “All psychiatric conditions examined were more common amongst adults with autism after adjusting for age, sex and deprivation. Prevalence of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (7.00%), bipolar disorder (2.50%), obsessive-compulsive disorder (3.02%), psychosis (18.30%) and schizophrenia (5.20%) were markedly elevated in those with autism, with corresponding odds ratios 8.24–10.74 times the general population. Depression (25.90%) and anxiety (22.40%) were also more prevalent, with epilepsy 9.21 times more common in autism.” (Underwood et al., 2022). As healthcare inequalities may still be present well into an Autistic minority adult’s life, mental health crises have the higher chance of occurring more often if the individual is not receiving the necessary healthcare services to aid their day-to-day lives. This can be incredibly problematic, as more negative, damaging, and harmful behaviors can erupt when an autistic individual is in the middle of high stress situations with little to no forms of support available.

### ***Autistic Behaviors Presented During High-Stress Conflict***

When an Autistic individual is dealing with mental health issues and externalized behaviors, it heightens their risk of encountering law enforcement. As each Autistic individual has specific and complex social, health, and mental health needs, each interaction may differ or hold similarities depending on the external behaviors exhibited. Some of the notable behaviors for an Autistic individual that may potentially co-occur with their mental health issues include all or some of the attributes listed – emotional dysregulation, heightened levels of stress and anxiety, restricted interests, repeated behavior, and even the chance of increased aggression. The actions that follow suit can be caused by a build-up of stress, where according to the research found by MacAlister (2024), it can leave an individual in a constant state of hyper-arousal, commonly known as ‘fight or flight’ mode. When Autistic individuals reach this point of hyper-arousal, mild to severe meltdowns or shutdowns can occur as a result of being completely overwhelmed. In addition, there have been accounts of Autistic people who have discussed their experience with alexithymia, which is a difficulty surrounding the understanding, describing, and overall identification of emotions. The struggle with emotions can add an additional layer of difficulties to properly understand how to handle one’s emotions and calm down. When an Autistic individual is placed in a high-stress situation, such as a police confrontation during a meltdown, this can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations from the police. If the police have no prior understanding or training on what exactly occurs to an Autistic individual during these moments of heightened stress, there is a much higher chance that the Autistic individual will be viewed as a threat instead of a person in distress. To add, there are actions that an Autistic person can unintentionally add to these heightened conflicts, some of which include non-verbal cues and/or a lack of eye contact, pacing, and constant fidgeting. These specific actions could be perceived incorrectly by the police that the individual is possibly dangerous. If the Autistic individual is refusing to comply or that they are acting ‘suspiciously’, that can have a strong impact on the outcome of the interaction as a whole (Debbaudt, 2001). For Autistic individuals and law enforcement to have a safe interaction lies on the disclosure of the individual’s diagnosis, but there are factors that heavily depend on whether that sensitive information will be shared. There is no standard protocol for the disclosure of this information, but what matters is sharing the previous types of experiences that the Autistic individual had up until that point to law enforcement. Autistic individuals will feel less inclined to disclose their disability to police if they have had a negative experience previously when disclosing that information to the police, or if they feel that the police will not completely understand what Autism is and view the disclosure as unhelpful (Salerno & Schuller, 2019). To start the process of bettering the individual’s outlook on interacting with law enforcement, there needs to be more care provided to ensure that trust can be earned. Providing the necessary care and understanding can allow law enforcement a stronger chance at diffusing situations that could be on the brink of turning into a severe mental health crisis.

### **Proper Training and Guidance for Law Enforcement**

When an active severe mental health crisis *is* occurring, there are methods for law enforcement to follow to potentially diffuse the situation without committing harm to the Autistic individual. In the United States, there are various states that provide additional training to law enforcement that centers how to have a better understanding on Autism and the needs of Autistic individuals. Presented in California, there is a guidebook for Peace Officers titled, “A First Responder’s Guide For Persons With Mental Illness Or Developmental Disability”. This guidebook provides in depth information that surrounds various mental illnesses and developmental disabilities by defining what the mental illnesses and disabilities are, the indicators that an individual may have said mental illness and/or disability, and proper communication tips that provide simple yet instructive education on what should and should not be done during these encounters. In the section ‘Calls for Service’, it emphasizes the importance of officers obtaining as much information as possible to accurately assess and stabilize the scene. “The more information an officer has prior to contact, the more likely the response will be appropriate.” (A First Responder’s Guide For Person’s With Mental Illness or Developmental Disability, p. 1-1) What follows suit are various questions that the police can ask the reporting persons and/or bystanders that can aid in information gathering. The questions can center on what the subject was doing, where the subject is located, if the subject is armed, have any form of criminal history/previous police contacts, any known usage of substance use, whether or not the subject is currently or has previously been violent, and most importantly if the subject has any conditions and/or disabilities that need to be accounted for. By asking these brief yet in depth questions, these can aid with the police’s pre-planning strategies and gauging what kind of support will be needed depending on what is occurring at the scene. By doing this, the police will be able to dispatch better suited resources, such as specialty teams or paramedics, to be present to handle individuals with specific triggers.

Following this, there are organizations that advocate strongly for Autistic individuals, which can be present in and outside of the United States. These organizations have their own guides, which can be easily accessed online, for how law enforcement should handle situations with Autistic individuals to result in positive outcomes. The National Autistic Society, which is an organization in England established in January 1962, works to reform society to have it properly aid Autistic people and their lives. The National Autistic Society provides a comprehensive guide that is available to the public titled, “Criminal Justice – a guide for police officers and professionals”. It holds information that explains how an Autistic individual may behave when approached by law enforcement, as well as multiple indicators of how one is Autistic. The guide delves more into how exactly the police can initiate contact with Autistic suspects, witnesses, victims, and so on. The guides mentioned collectively contain vital information that can prevent situations from becoming fatal and instead better the chances of a successful deescalation. Though it may prove to be difficult, there are numerous non-lethal techniques that can be provided and taught through extensive training.

### **Conclusion**



Autistic people of color are shown to be an incredibly marginalized group who deserve to be treated as a person first, no matter the circumstances presented. Each year of new and updated data recorded by the CDC shows that more children are continuing to be diagnosed with Autism and/or other co-occurring mental illnesses. This emphasizes the need for law enforcement to be better educated on handling Autistic individuals, as the future lives of these children are in their hands. In addition to this, these people’s skin colors and their invisible disabilities should not dictate whether or not they walk away alive after a police encounter. These individuals are not born with the choice of being Autistic, what the color of their skin is, and if they can receive the proper treatment and coping mechanisms to avoid these severe mental breakdowns. Where in comparison, police and law enforcement are in positions of power and are shown to have the ability to properly provide support and protection for the people when necessary. It should not be normalized that there are Autistic youth from varying ethnic backgrounds still dying at the hands of police misreading situations, instead of actively taking the time to assess how to properly handle the subject and diffuse the situation without a fatality. To combat police brutality, especially conducted against Autistic people of color, the work and effort has to be done from the inside

out. Proper reformation and training needs to be taught to law enforcement, regardless of whether or not they personally believe that an individual at the scene is a threat. These people of color with Autism, more often than not, can have invisible disabilities that lead them to behave in abnormal, erratic manners during high-stress situations. This does not automatically mean that their behaviors justify the police taking their life to protect others and themselves as the sole solution. These Autistic minorities need to be handled differently, and there are measures that can be taken prior to encountering the situation. This includes having a better understanding of what the individual could potentially be experiencing within that very moment, or what mental disability and/or mental illnesses the individual has and how to safely resolve the conflict. This vital information is not automatically provided, taught, or even discussed by the police departments, which emphasizes the strong need for this necessary and important change. Those people of color who are Autistic, who could have other invisible disabilities, or who suffer from mental illnesses, do not deserve to be profiled as automatic dangerous threats. These people deserve to be accommodated just as much as someone without these distinguishing attributes and aspects.

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**Examining the Long-Term Effects  
of California's Inmate Fire Camp  
Program: Recidivism,  
Employment, and Rehabilitation  
Results**

Ariana Martinez

## **Abstract**

California's inmate fire camp program is often presented as a rehabilitative initiative that offers incarcerated individuals vocational training, discipline, and chances for reintegration into society. However, a closer examination, based on data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and critical perspectives on carceral labor, reveals a more complex reality. While participants in the program exhibit slightly lower short-term recidivism rates than nonparticipants, the program's potential benefits are frequently undermined by significant barriers after release. Restrictive occupational licensing laws, a lack of recognized firefighting credentials, employment discrimination, and racial inequalities hinder many former participants from securing stable employment in the firefighting profession. As a result, the program's rehabilitative claims are weakened, leading to outcomes that often resemble labor exploitation rather than meaningful justice reform. Without systemic policy changes, including certification pathways, licensing reform, and structured reentry support, the program risks perpetuating structural inequality while continuing to provide the state with inexpensive, high-risk labor. Addressing these contradictions is essential for transforming wildfire suppression practices to promote equity, genuine rehabilitation, and long-term public safety.

## **Introduction**

In recent years, California has increasingly depended on incarcerated individuals to assist with wildfire suppression through the CAL FIRE Inmate Fire Camp Program. While the program is often promoted as a rehabilitative opportunity that provides vocational training, discipline, and structure, its long-term effectiveness remains a subject of debate. Many individuals who have participated in the program face significant barriers after their release, including employment discrimination, a lack of recognized certifications, and restrictive occupational licensing laws that limit access to firefighting careers (Goodman, 2012; Tolin, 2025). Data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2023) indicate that participants in the program have a lower three-year recidivism rate (45.3%) than nonparticipants (51.1%). However, these short-term gains do not necessarily lead to long-term success in reintegration. This study explores the long-term effects of participating in the CAL FIRE Inmate Fire Camp Program on recidivism rates, employment opportunities, and rehabilitation outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals in California. Using a qualitative policy and literature review approach, this paper draws on state data and peer-reviewed research to assess the gap between the program's rehabilitative claims and its actual outcomes. **Although California's inmate fire camp program is presented as a rehabilitative opportunity, its long-term benefits are undermined by systemic barriers such as licensing restrictions, employment discrimination, and the state's reliance on low-cost prison labor, demonstrating the need for meaningful structural reform rather than symbolic rehabilitation.**

## **Carceral Labor and the Political Economy of Fire Suppression**

California has relied on incarcerated individuals for wildfire suppression since the 1940s, when the state initiated the Conservation Camp Program in response to an escalating wildfire crisis (Goodman, 2010). This program aimed to achieve two primary objectives: alleviating prison overcrowding and enhancing the state's firefighting workforce. It was presented as a rehabilitative opportunity for inmates. Over time, the program has become an essential element of California's wildfire management strategy, with incarcerated firefighters comprising up to 30% of wildfire suppression crews during peak fire seasons (CDCR, 2023). In addition, the CAL FIRE program cultivates a positive rehabilitation image, yet its primary focus is on the state's economic benefit. According to Goodman (2010), California saves around \$100 million each year by employing incarcerated individuals who earn as little as \$2 per day, compared to professional firefighters who earn \$40 or more per hour and receive benefits. These cost savings come at the expense of the incarcerated workers, who face hazardous working conditions with minimal financial compensation and no guarantees of employment opportunities upon their release. While the program instills discipline and provides valuable firefighting experience, Goodman (2012) argues that it often lacks the systemic support necessary to help participants transition successfully into society after their release.

## ***Short-Term Recidivism Reduction and Long-Term Structural Barriers***

The CAL FIRE program provides valuable training for incarcerated individuals; however, systemic barriers limit its long-term effectiveness. Many participants struggle to find employment due to restrictive licensing laws and the stigma associated with criminal records (Tolin, 2025). Those who fight wildfires are often excluded from professional firefighting careers, undermining their rehabilitation and future stability. California saves approximately \$100 million annually by employing incarcerated firefighters for as little as \$2 per day (Goodman, 2010), yet they receive minimal compensation and few benefits. Additionally, racial disparities within the program reflect broader systemic inequalities (Goodman, 2014). Despite these challenges, some perspectives question the need for broader reform. One common counterargument is that incarcerated individuals should be grateful for the opportunity to participate in the fire camp program and that the state is not obligated to provide additional employment options after their release. Some may argue that since these participants have criminal records, expanding access to professional firefighting careers is unnecessary or undeserved. However, this perspective overlooks the fact that most participants will eventually return to their communities. If the state relies on incarcerated individuals to perform dangerous, frontline work, denying them meaningful employment opportunities after their release undermines both rehabilitation and public safety. Supporting reentry not only benefits individuals but is also crucial for reducing recidivism and enhancing community safety.

### ***Structural Barriers to Reentry: Licensing Laws and Racial Inequality***

The CAL FIRE program offers vocational training for incarcerated individuals; however, systemic barriers significantly hinder its long-term effectiveness. Tolin (2025) argues that many participants face substantial obstacles in securing employment as firefighters due to restrictive occupational licensing laws and the persistent stigma associated with a criminal record. Even those who bravely risk their lives during California's most devastating wildfires often find themselves excluded from professional firefighting careers. This legal exclusion perpetuates cycles of poverty and incarceration, undermining the very rehabilitative goals the program claims to promote. Financial exploitation adds to these challenges. California saves approximately \$100 million annually by employing incarcerated firefighters at wages as low as \$2 per day, which is a fraction of what professional firefighters earn (Goodman, 2010). Despite performing life-threatening work, these individuals receive no hazard pay, healthcare benefits, or workplace protections. The lack of formal job certifications and post-release employment support leaves many former participants without viable pathways to economic stability, trapping them in the same disadvantaged conditions that contributed to their initial incarceration (Tolin, 2025). Moreover, racial inequalities within the program reinforce broader systemic injustices. Goodman (2014) observes that while inmates work together across racial lines during wildfire suppression, segregation remains entrenched in their living quarters, perpetuating social divisions that hinder meaningful rehabilitation. These disparities create additional barriers for marginalized groups, particularly people of color, making it even more difficult for them to break free from cycles of incarceration and poverty after their release. Without comprehensive policy reforms that address licensing barriers, fair compensation, and post-release support, the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program will continue to prioritize the state's financial interests at the expense of the vulnerable individuals it claims to rehabilitate.

### **From Exploitation to Reintegration**

#### ***Building Equitable Futures Through Policy Reform***

Policy changes are essential to breaking the cycle of incarceration and helping individuals in the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program rehabilitate successfully. Without these changes, barriers will prevent formerly incarcerated individuals from using their skills and achieving economic stability. One important change is removing licensing laws that block qualified former inmates from pursuing firefighting jobs. These laws mainly affect those with non-violent convictions, despite their willingness to contribute positively (Tolin, 2025). Allowing record clearing and offering licensing waivers would help them find jobs that match their training. The state should also establish certification programs in the CAL FIRE training curriculum. By providing recognized credentials, California can help inmates become more competitive in the job market (Goodman, 2012) and support employers in recognizing them as qualified candidates. Lastly, developing reentry programs focused on transitional jobs, mentorship, and job

placement can support individuals after their release. Partnerships between state agencies, employers, and community organizations can ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals have the resources they need to reintegrate successfully (Apel, 2011). These reforms can turn the CAL FIRE program into a real opportunity for rehabilitation and reintegration.

### ***Reframing Economic Efficiency and Community Impact***

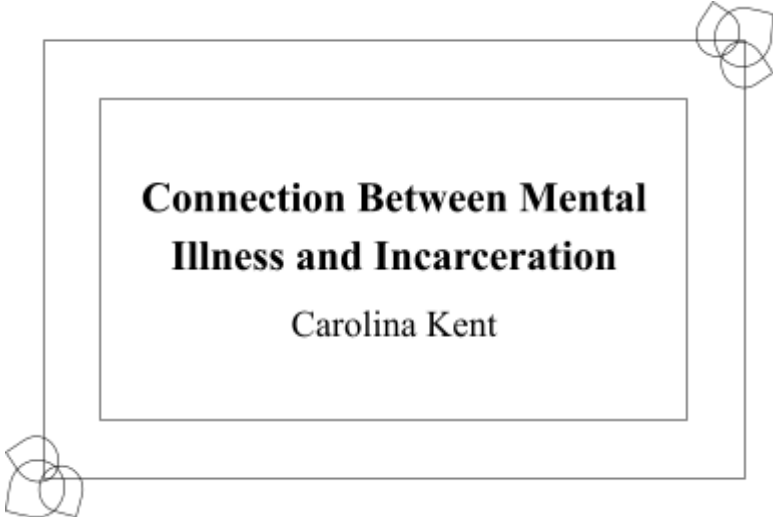
Addressing the systemic failures of the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program can provide significant benefits for both individuals and society as a whole. Reducing recidivism rates would not only decrease the financial burden of incarceration on taxpayers but also enhance community safety (CDCR, 2023). By providing meaningful employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals, we can reduce reliance on public assistance programs and strengthen local economies. While the state currently benefits from substantial financial savings from inmate labor, Apel (2011) argues that the long-term societal costs, such as higher unemployment, increased poverty, and higher recidivism rates, outweigh these short-term fiscal advantages. Redirecting state resources toward reentry programs and eliminating systemic barriers would lead to healthier communities and a more equitable criminal justice system. As Goodman (2012) highlights, adopting a restorative justice model focused on rehabilitation rather than exploitation would position California as a leader in progressive criminal justice reform.

### **Conclusion**

The CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program reflects a deeper contradiction in California's criminal justice system. While it provides valuable skills to incarcerated individuals, systemic barriers continue to impact their long-term success after release. Without proper certifications, job opportunities, and reentry support, the program risks becoming a source of low-cost labor rather than a true path to rehabilitation. The debate over Proposition 6, which aimed to eliminate the constitutional provision for involuntary servitude in prisons, reflects ongoing controversies surrounding prison labor in California (California Legislative Analyst's Office, 2024). Although the measure was rejected, it highlights the political divide on these issues. Recent efforts to expand opportunities for formerly incarcerated firefighters indicate a recognition of these barriers, but reforms remain limited and do not fully address underlying inequalities. Effective reform must create certification pathways, remove licensing barriers, and invest in reentry support. Addressing these challenges would improve outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals while enhancing public safety and community stability. Ultimately, transforming the CAL FIRE inmate fire camp program requires confronting the broader inequities within the criminal justice system and prioritizing long-term reintegration over short-term economic gains. Without these reforms, the program will continue to embody a system that values economic efficiency over genuine rehabilitation.

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**Connection Between Mental  
Illness and Incarceration**

Carolina Kent

## **Introduction**

There has always been an unsettling connection between mental illness and incarceration, especially in major urban settings, including Los Angeles, where jails have effectively become mental health facilities. According to Ochoa et al. (2020), people with mental illness are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and frequently lack access to quality care while they are behind bars. The function of the criminal justice system in treating mental illness, public health, and systemic injustice continues to endure criticism due to this trend. Los Angeles County's jailed populations continue to face barriers to receiving adequate mental health treatment due to overcrowding, inadequate funding, and punitive practices, despite legal commitments to provide care.

The mental health crisis escalation in prisons raises concerns about inequality, justice, and safety. Although legal mandates require these correctional facilities to provide psychiatric services, underfunding and poor implementation deny incarcerated individuals' proper treatment, especially in Los Angeles County jails. These institutions focus on control rather than care, which causes rehabilitation practices to be ineffective and leads to high rates of recidivism among mentally ill individuals. This paper examines mental health policy in correctional facilities, identifies service shortcomings in the Los Angeles County jail system, and evaluates the general implications of criminal justice reforms on public health. Systemic inequalities in the Los Angeles County jail system significantly limit incarcerated individuals' accessibility to mental health resources, which promotes incarceration cycles and undermines rehabilitation attempts.

### **Insufficiencies**

One reason for poor mental health in incarcerated people is the lack of funding for mental healthcare. Chronic underfunding, in Los Angeles County jails, limits the resources needed to address mental health issues in correctional facilities. Levenson and Samra (2023) explain that the jail environment facilitates the planning and normalization of violence, while also experiencing overstretched care, if it exists. Mental health units usually struggle with overcrowding and staff, and in most cases, are either unskilled or overworked, resulting in neglect rather than treatment. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2025), jails across the nation have been spending fewer resources to accommodate meaningful psychiatric care. In LA County, an underinvestment means that people must wait extended periods for evaluation, receive limited therapeutic contact, and focus more on crisis management than consistent treatment. The outcome is that mentally ill people end up untreated or get even worse during detention, recording higher rates of disciplinary infractions and longer terms of imprisonment. Furthermore, prison funding is spent focusing on security instead of clinical services; the correctional model supports punishment rather than healing. Chavira et al. (2016) reveal that a lack of consistent service delivery to match California budget constraints compromises AB109 efforts in many areas. The lack of reliable funding impedes efforts to implement sustainable reforms that target mental health services in jails.

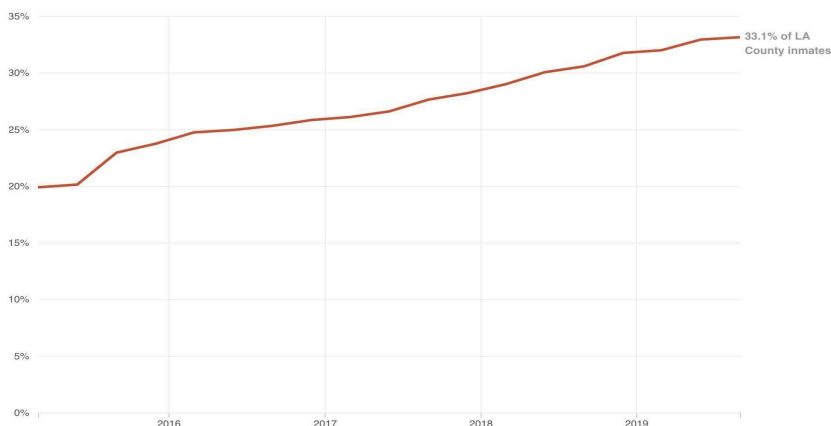
### ***Recidivism for Mentally Ill Individuals***

The incarceration cycle further perpetuates recidivism rates for mentally ill individuals in Los Angeles County jails. Studies show that brief jail stays for low-risk individuals with mental illness can more than double recidivism rates (Westervelt & Baker, 2020). Los Angeles County jails have become the "largest treatment facilities in the country;" they are receiving countless new inmates with mental illness every day. These facilities incarcerate more than 5,000 inmates classified as minimal risk, with 3,000 held in Twin Towers Jail. The lack of adequate mental health care in Los Angeles County jails contributes to the elevated level of recidivism among individuals with severe mental illness. Many inmates keep revolving in and out of jail due to unattended psychiatric needs rather than criminal behaviors. The effects of the short periods in jail are devastating. Based on the observations by Westervelt & Baker (2020), temporary imprisonment of people living with low-risk mental illness leads to a more than doubled recidivism rate. Judge Steve Leifman, an expert in mental health and the criminal justice system, agrees that jail time for these people is devastating (Westervelt & Baker, 2020). The unconstitutional delay in the evaluation and treatment of mental illness complicates the issue, as noted in over half of the jail population in LA, that is yet to be untried or sentenced. Consequently, mentally ill inmates struggle due to prolonged sentencing and the chronic lack of appropriate care services.

Figure: Mental Health Diagnosis Trends in LA Jails

### Share Of Los Angeles County Jail Inmates With A Mental Health Diagnosis Is Growing

One-third of Los Angeles County inmates received some level of mental health treatment in the third quarter of 2019. In comparison, estimates show that only 4.6% U.S. adults experience a serious mental health disorder in a given year, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.



#### Notes

Latest figures available up until third quarter of 2019.

Source: LA County Sheriff's Department

Credit: Stephanie Adeline/NPR

Source: Westervelt, E., & Baker, L. (2020). *America's mental health crisis hidden behind bars*. NPR.

## Substitution of Correctional

Jails and Prisons were never designed to function as psychiatry units but have become vital providers of mental health care. This unsuitable substitution has a significant impact on severely mentally ill persons. Segal et al.'s (2018) study reveals that;

Jails and prisons were not designed to be mental health care facilities. They have five recognized purposes: deterrence, elimination of dangerousness (incapacitation), rehabilitation, retribution, and restitution (Storm, 2015). They are not the appropriate setting to treat individuals with SMI for several reasons. First, jails and prisons are total institutions, where individuals have little freedom or privacy (Goffman, 1961). They provide structure, like a psychiatric institution, but are not a sanctuary designed to provide relief (Lamb & Weinberger, 2016). The act of confinement itself leads to serious health consequences (Vanjani, 2017).

This quote reinforces the claim that jails are unacceptable places for individuals with mental illness to be in. Instead of healing, imprisonment in such circumstances normally affects the inmates through trauma, isolation, and regression. According to Levenson & Samra (2023), many people experience deteriorating psychiatric symptoms due to environmental stressors such as sensory deprivation and lack of therapeutic relationships. Working on mental issues in punitive setups is ineffective and unethical. The intersection of mental health and incarceration requires critical restructuring to emphasize care rather than control.

## Solutions and Proposals

Addressing mental health needs in the LA County jail system requires a comprehensive strategy focusing on funding issues, policy alteration, and the development of community-based care. One approach requires a refunding shift toward mental health staffing, psychiatric evaluation, medicine availability, and therapeutic measures in jails rather than punitive measures. As mentioned by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2025), these correctional systems need to conform to the best practices in psychiatric care and not crisis management. In addition, LA should prioritize diversion programs before incarceration.

Procedures emulating LA County's Mental Health Evaluation Teams (MET) or Psychiatric Mobile Response Team (PMRT) have proven successful in de-escalating crises and linking individuals to care rather than jails (Ochoa et al., 2020). These teams provide a humane and clinically effective alternative to a law enforcement-only reaction.

Furthermore, the reentry services must ensure the delivery of ongoing care. Chavira et al. (2016) claim that in the absence of stable housing, medical coverage, and behavioral health support, formerly incarcerated people face the risk of relapses and re-offending. While AB109 addresses these issues, gaps exist in consistency and follow-up. Providing released persons with comprehensive services such as therapy, substance use treatment, and vocational support is important. Besides, decreasing punitive measures involving mental illness in jail settings is necessary. Levenson and Samra (2023) recognize the need to replace punitive logic with relational and restorative care. For this reason, the correctional system should shift to trauma-informed (as opposed to solitary confinement or physical restraints) practices and provide training for the staff in de-escalation and mental health awareness.

Lastly, the criminal justice system should address the mass imprisonment of the mentally ill through intentional reformations. These interventions include abolishing policies that criminalize homelessness, substance use, and psychiatric crises, social problems that usually involve appropriate handling through the public health systems. The government's representatives in policymaking should fund supportive housing, outpatient clinics, and emergency psychiatry care away from jails.



These reforms would not only reduce the suffering of imprisoned people but also enhance the safety of public safety, lower the expenses of taxpayers, and encourage long-term public health. A movement towards a treatment-first model would recognize mental illness as a medical problem rather than a moral or criminal flaw, restoring dignity and justice to an underserved marginalized population.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of mental health policy in correctional facilities reveals service shortcomings in the Los Angeles County jail system that significantly affect the general criminal justice system and necessitate urgent reforms in public health. The current mental health crisis in the Los Angeles County jails reveals severe systemic defects in the criminal justice system, extending to the public healthcare system. Instead of providing treatment and rehabilitation, jails have become de facto psychiatric facilities, condemning thousands of persons with serious mental illness to imprisonment without treatment or proper care. Overcrowding, a lack of adequate staff, and long pretrial detention that contravenes legal limits in mental health evaluations and transfers compound the problem. Present research indicates that these facilities overlook the needs of the mentally ill while exposing them to punishment without therapeutic care. These practices result in high recidivism rates among such a population. Abandoning jail-based practices in favor of mental health, preventive, and restorative solutions is vital. Changing the injustices means re-envisioning public safety, committing resources to effective treatment rather than punishment, and foregrounding the dignity and recovery of persons with serious mental illness.

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**Anti-Intellectualism as  
Voter Disenfranchisement  
in the United States**

Liberty Dixon

## **Abstract**

This article examines the influence of anti-intellectual ideology in the United States, with a particular focus on its effect on citizen voting. Historical context is used to show the innate American tendencies to choose an anti-intellectual system of belief to uphold cultural and democratic norms, which can be seen through the lack of adequate required education to understand cultural diversity or democratic systems, geographical differences, polarization, and the prioritization of monetary success (the “American Dream”). This results in the disenfranchisement of diverse and systemically impacted voters: individuals who are non-white, non-male, non-cisgender, non-able-bodied, or intersectional.

## **Introduction**

Following the 2024 presidential election, amid a multitude of Truth Social tweets that could be deemed less than intellectual, then-president-elect Donald Trump was quoted as saying, “smart people don’t like me” (Crowley, 2025). While this video clip caused controversy for being considered immature and was claimed to be “taken out of context” according to the original poster, it does pose a few questions regarding those who support Donald Trump and their reasoning. If this quote were taken at face value, it would indicate that the sitting president believes all individuals who voted for him and his Republican/conservative agenda are uneducated and unintelligent. Is this true? It is completely unfair to assume any category of millions of United States voters is not “smart,” nor could any generalization based on intelligence within voting capacity be taken lightly, considering the stain of Jim Crow era literacy tests.

So, why did U.S. voters vote Donald Trump in for a second term when his approval ratings were low during his first term and have consistently dropped during this second term, despite having been in office for less than two years upon the publication of this paper (Daniel et al., 2025)? Education and literacy are tricky to question as current generations are seven percent higher in postsecondary achievement than the previous decade (NCSL Task Force on Higher Education, 2024); however, the term education itself is far too broad a categorization. It is therefore relevant to lessen the umbrella of this term into one focus: anti-intellectualism, as a direct influence on conservative voting trends and ideology.

Intellectuals are individuals who pursue intellectual action, most often connected with the interest in becoming educated, for the sake of it. This interest in intellect and education must surpass the general means of attaining education, which includes any foundational K-12 education, and is more modernly encompassing both associate and baccalaureate degrees as the general population pursues them more frequently. Anything above this level of attainment would, in turn, describe an intellectual; however, individuals capable of obtaining these secondary levels of education will not all be intellectuals and may simply be chasing a better-paying career in the long run. An anti-intellectual would then be the antithesis of this—someone who is against intellectual action, thought, institutions, and individuals. Being that education builds intellect, it must be factored in, but it must not be looked upon as the main issue, for this would be both untrue and dangerous due to historical factors. It must simply be defined as people or systems that are driven to learn for the sake of learning rather than for the sake of making a profit. Under these definitions, there arises an argument for voter disenfranchisement by means of anti-intellectual ideology influencing the education and democratic systems. This can disqualify systemically impacted groups from access to adequate foundational education and, therefore, set them up for future voting and political participation trends, as well as discourage public opinion from being shared and trusted to carry influence.

## **History**

The United States has a history of anti-intellectualism because of the national attitudes towards “the American Dream” and the capitalistic prioritization of financial success. Intellect is not sought out for the sake of learning, but rather for economic gain. Anti-intellectualism has, by William E. Leuchtenburg (1955) and his studies, been deemed an inherently United States American trait which originated in the colonial settlers' need to focus simply on day-to-day circumstances of land, power, and livelihood, which took away from any human need or want to think intellectually. This anti-intellectualism may look like a rejection of intellectual pursuits such as thought, theory, and learning, or the rejection of intellectuals themselves: people who embody one, if not all three, previously listed things (Leuchtenburg 1955, 3).

In a more modern context, a recent study on civic engagement among college students showed: “Four in 10 young adults reported being pessimistic about the future of American democracy, and more than five in 10 reported having no or little trust in government institutions. More importantly, public trust in higher education is also on a downward trend, particularly across ideological lines” (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024, p. 5).

In this, there is a lack of understanding of what political ideology the United States abides by, either because the terms “republic” and “democracy” are misunderstood, with the latter often used to describe the U.S., and being something it is under threat of losing. In believing the U.S. is a “democracy,” civilians are taking some part in government-promoted anti-intellectualism, as it was originally founded as a constitutional republic. This longstanding political confusion and division allows for limited change to take place, as the institutions capable of teaching about politics and the advanced methods of technically patching governmental issues are also distrusted by those who stand against either the government, higher education, or both. Anti-intellectualism, while not exclusive to the U.S., is certainly uniquely existent in the national culture because of this deep historical context of anti-intellectualism within power and success.

As culture in America becomes subject to increasingly fast changes, Brameld (1955) can be drawn back to the forefront of considering anti-intellectualism in education. In this dated but relevant article, Brameld (1955) indicated two groups of individuals within the realm of education, the traditionalists and the progressivists. The latter becomes the author's subject as he presents it as the less anti-intellectual group and highlights its importance in a quickly changing society:

For one thing, progressivism needs to incorporate into its theory and practice much more of the recent findings of the psychological and social sciences that demonstrate the unrational or, if you please, the *un*-intelligent aspects of individual and collective behavior. To accomplish this does not contribute further to anti-intellectualism; on the contrary, it enables education to become more maturely intellectual by assessing more fully the emotional and cultural obstacles that must be coped with through intelligent means (p. 40).

As progressivism and the inclusion of more in-depth cultural understanding (including modernizing understandings of race, class, and marginality) will help to curb anti-intellectualism, the prioritization of STEM degrees and careers can pose a dangerous risk of perpetuating anti-intellectual ideology in the United States.

### ***Anti-Intellectualizing Race and Class in Education***

An altercation with the attitude of education being a necessity to civic engagement was seen during the Jim Crow era, when schools for African Americans “received about one-third the funding of schools for white students, their teachers earned less pay, and the students received fewer months of schooling each year” (Hill 2017, 11). Education and literacy were weaponized against particularly Black citizens to uplift the vote of the “literate,” who were mostly white and had access to better education and funding. Literacy has always had a negative connotation in the United States; those who have it are powerful and typically white, and those who lack it are undeserving and typically people of color or low-income (often both). When looking at education through the light of being a tool for wielding power, the recent demonization of curricula such as critical race theory and AP African American Studies becomes nothing more than an attempt to erase historical diversity in a continuous national effort to protect and empower white interests. On the other hand, the way historical courses are regulated when allowed to be taught will also leave room for erasure if the communities they discuss are not the ones creating the curricula. Disallowing large groups of people from learning any kind of specific curriculum with the expectation that this will create an educated voter, then makes the fact of having education or not completely irrelevant to the person or to the argument of anti-intellectualism. As foundational education is state-sanctioned and government-enforced, it is not a power that is fully in the hands of the people. President Trump has even gone so far as to “pursue these federal cuts on the campaign... saying he would focus on schools that push “critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual, or political content.” Public school systems are targets for cuts too” (Seminera, 2025).

Education is, to a large extent, an instrument held outside the hands of the voters themselves. Peltzman (1993) found that “rising parental education attainment and declining school performance suggest that better-educated voters do not constitute a powerful pressure group for better public schools” (p. 367). Education is obviously an important priority, with parents pursuing post-secondary education themselves; however, this did not motivate them to vote for better education for children. Instead of being straightforwardly read as such, it can instead be looked at as an influence of anti-intellectual thinking rising among developing generations. The author described college as “a new middle-class birthright” (p. 367), in which it can be assumed that the majority of the middle-class are white families with immediate access to better primary and secondary school zones, and later on higher rates of attendance to colleges and universities as they can better afford it. There would be a much smaller need for members of these communities to vote for supposed “better education” for their children, as their children already have access to it.

In lower-income communities, which will likewise have less access to the same quality of foundational education for their children, the parents will likely not have had the same financial income to afford post-secondary schooling for themselves, or often later for their children. Voting in person for either of these communities will depend on the ability to have time off work and have transport to and from the location where they must cast their ballot. The latter community will again have far less opportunities to do so. It is not a question of which broad economic group wants the best for their children, but which group has the means to fight for that cause. The group that does have the means to fight for that cause, the middle-class or above families, do not have any need to because they already have been awarded the privilege of access to adequate education. The resistance to voting in the benefit for communities outside of one's own is inherently anti-intellectual as it is selfishly safeguarding education based upon class and oftentimes racial factors.

Likewise, Ray and Mahmoudi (2022) found that “the blind pursuit of educational degrees and status as means to an end (e.g., jobs, careers, and wealth) breeds practices in schools and communities that reinforce social stratification and thus inequality” (p. 131). The cyclical nature of this pursuit of monetary success in the United States perpetuates the class boundaries and glass-ceilingesque structures that keep certain individuals and families in specific class situations. Those who have the means to afford higher education will pursue it and will likely earn a degree, which leads to a job with pay equal to or higher than their parents’. While scholarship does exist, it is not in enough abundance to send people from marginalized communities to school at the same rates as those who can already afford it out of pocket or through loans over time, depicted by low-income families enrolling at a rate of nearly 50 percent less than their high-income peers (Cahalan et al., 2024).

### ***Anti-Intellectualism in STEM Education versus Humanities Education***

As education has been ruled too broad a factor on voting influence, so must anti-intellectualism. It is important to note that STEM education has been on the rise in the U.S. since 2012, while historical and social science-related degrees have been experiencing downwards trends and hold only seven percent of bachelor's degrees awarded in the 2021-2022 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, Figure 4). STEM has been societally deemed the most prosperous field(s) to pursue due to the prospect of higher-paying jobs seen in, for example, healthcare and engineering. This increase of interest because of financial concern is inherently anti-intellectual, looking back to Leuchtenburg's explanation of the term, due to the lack of interest in pursuing thought and theory, and, arguably, learning, for the sake of doing so. STEM majors have also shown less civic engagement than their peers in humanities-based education (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024, p. 3). With these upward trends in STEM education showing less civic engagement, and a slight downward trend in humanities education, the two are not differentiated enough to prove that people are choosing their degree paths due to anti-intellectualism (NCES, 2024), and it must therefore be considered that the curriculums of any number of degrees themselves are becoming or have always been more anti-intellectual in their own nature.

When granted access to institutes of higher education, it is decidedly more honorable to choose a career that will make more money than will be more meaningful or enjoyable to the individual. It is placing educational favor on survival, which these days is based almost entirely upon income and finances, rather

than the pleasure of pursuing the intellectual endeavors themselves. This is not to say that every person pursuing STEM is only doing it for the money, as many will enjoy the career itself; however, it is certainly an aspect of U.S. culture that must be acknowledged. Is it societally more honorable to be a teacher or a surgeon? The answer to this question is entirely influenced by the American hunger for money.

STEM-based intellect, and therefore the higher honor placed in choosing a career as a surgeon, is racialized property. In a study done by Erika Bullock on the gentrification of schools in Memphis, Tennessee, under a lens of critical theory, she found that high schools with a majority-Black student base were being bought out and repurposed into STEM-based schools, which then became majority-white. These schools exist on the presumption that students with more desirable skills will enter the economy and help the city, and are therefore founded on merit-based admissions (Bullock 2017). This ideal of meritocracy, making students better suited to the economy, is not only anti-intellectual because of its reliance on, once again, money as a measure of success, but also shows how this attitude is inherently racialized. The kids gaining access to these pre-college institutions are privileged by their status of race and income, which makes it easier for them to access more economically desirable education. In pushing marginalized racial and class groups out of “better” schools, citizen and voter disenfranchisement becomes clearer.

Additionally, in nationally funded research done by Riegle-Crumb, King, and Irizarry (2019), it was found that:

“STEM is the only field where Black and Latina/o youth are significantly more likely than White peers to switch and earn a degree in another field... [there is] evidence of White privilege in STEM degree attainment that is not mirrored in other major fields” (Does STEM Stand Out? p. 141).

There is then not only an issue with the accessibility of STEM at a youth level but also at the collegiate level, proving that people belonging to marginalized racial groups are withheld at all levels from achieving the same education and therefore financial success that comes with the prioritization of STEM education in the United States. An industry that already rejects the necessary diversity and cultural-humanities education required to fully understand the nation's civilization is also rejecting the diverse members of the society from participating in and gaining access to the elite class of wealth. Race and financial success within this industry are then almost entirely codependent.

STEM-based schools, such as those in Memphis and at the collegiate level, will be considered “good” because of their economic implications. Ray and Mahmoudi (2022) argue that “the establishment of “good” schools, as we know them conventionally, in stratified societies such as the United States also means the perpetuation of social and economic segregation... [this] is neither a race nor a class-neutral project” (p. 131). This would also include other economically promising schools that may exist without a curriculum focused only on STEM. This, however, does not exclude the inaccessibility seen in the Memphis STEM-based schools from “good” schools. Both will exist under meritocratic management, either through special admissions or training students to have competitive merit so they are well-suited to enter the market economy. If race is a major factor in gaining access to the STEM industry, which has a likelihood to provide the most financial success and entrance to the “American Dream,” then the so-called “American Dream” cannot be accessible to anyone who is non-white. This will only be perpetuated as wealthy white and STEM-educated individuals continue to vote to uphold the system(s) they benefit from, as their money and race provide them with more powerful say. People who have been denied access to the same institutions will continue to be awarded less and less access to the power required to make a democratic influence.

### ***American “Rural Identity” and Patriotism***

An additional factor encouraging anti-intellectual thought is the “rural identity” of Americans. This concept is introduced by Kristin Lunz Trujillo (2022) as a preexisting anti-intellectual mode of thought in which rural-dwelling Americans see intellectualism as an urban endeavor and are therefore opposed to it. This is characterized by a long-standing divisiveness between rural and urban communities based on a historic difference in education access and geographically influenced stereotypes that reinforce the concepts

of certain educated individuals as belonging to certain geographical areas (Lunz Trujillo, 2022). However, seeing as these rural communities are less densely populated than typically coastal urban states, this concept of a “rural identity” needs to be broadened in order to be applicable to the argument of anti-intellectualism influencing conservative voting trends. The author found that “The results of this study imply that anti-intellectualism in American society is group-based and rooted in longstanding norms and attitudes relating to groups,” and that “rural identification encompasses a worldview not *necessarily* tied to current location” with some 27 percent of rural identifiers not residing in rural areas (Lunz Trujillo, 2022). This “rural identity” must then encompass some form of American patriotism to classical southern or otherwise rural roots in order to include non-rural dwellers who still subjugate themselves to this “rural identity.”

In targeting this American sense of patriotism and its occasionally accompanying “rural identity,” Susan Giroux (2009) exemplifies prior presidential “appeals to practicality and patriotism” in running campaigns. These appeals were aimed directly against opponents who showed open value in things outside of Christianity and whiteness, such as Thomas Jefferson's stance on education and Barack Obama's race, among other things (p. 297). While both of these individuals were elected after their campaigns, it does not take away from the attempts to disarm them for stepping outside of the stereotypical patriotic attitude. To be a patriot has been manipulated into being seen as toting unwavering loyalty for the United States government and complying with gender, race, or religious standards. If one does not exude these “unspoken” policies, they must not be patriotic, and politicians enjoy to make that known through their heeded warnings of losing the romanticized patriotic America “as a result of some marauding horde—thugged out young black men, welfare queens, overpopulating Latinos, illegal immigrants, radical Jihadists, or “gay married terrorists” in economist Paul Krugman's satiric phrase” (S. Giroux, p. 297). It is no mistake that the way in which the powerful political elites speak to the people whom they serve—which is a highly optimistic term to use—is meant to manipulate. In establishing fear over certain marginalized and minority groups of people, there is a perpetuation of patriotism being an alternative term for white supremacy.

This use of extreme polarization as a tool in manipulating the masses is no stranger to historical or modern American politics. In an article from Gordon Clapp (1955), it is emphasized once more how intellect is looked down upon in the United States government:

I strongly suspect that when we know more about the “security system” now operating in the federal government, we shall find that one of its primary characteristics is a prejudice against dissent, an impatience with dissenters, and apprehension, even resentment, about those who as public employees insist upon thinking for themselves under the discipline of an active and informed conscience. Perhaps we shall find that scorn for the “brain truster” has raised a crop of petty tyrants and ambitious cynics who seek to be “brain-busters” (p. 32).

The continuation of this act of “brain-busting,” most evidently seen by government officials and the citizens who have come to support them, can be seen in the current Trump administration's efforts to silence and repress political opposition. From aggressive rhetoric and lawsuits against media outlets that have openly criticized anything to do with Trump (Spike and Riccardi, 2025) to a massive increase in citizen surveillance in a historic anti-immigration campaign (Campbell et al., 2025), there is no explanation other than anti-intellectualism and its hunger for power.

There should, in theory, be nothing less patriotic to the American public than to revoke their constitutional rights, including, but not limited to, the right to freedom of speech; however, patriotism and the “rural identity” connected to the feeling of being American has never been about being a proud American, rather it has only ever been about forcing citizens into control by feeding them a false sense of autonomy and belonging—if you are an embodiment of whiteness, that is.

## **Language**

Language, too, becomes important in assessing anti-intellectual influence as the meaning of words change to fit desired realities. Henry Giroux (2017) argues that this control over speech and ultimately the

“capacity for critical thought” have been shaped by the growing desire for “a market logic that narrows their meaning [of words] to either a relationship to a commodity or a reductive notion of self-interest” (p. 15). Essentially, the language used when discussing any given topic can conflate or reduce the urgency and definition of the subject. Under an anti-intellectual structure, education will be spoken about with hostility and untrustworthiness by higher powers, in turn manipulating the public understanding of such. This goes hand in hand with selective truth-telling and lying by omission.

If monetary success is said to be the main goal of the “American Dream,” the public will then prioritize the attainment of money above all else. This, however, shows the first and most important flaw in its definition. The concept of achieving the “American Dream” allows the public to believe they have a choice in participating in capitalism and the market economy—they do not. Lack of participation is shunned because of this, allowing for the widely accepted demonization of the poor and unhoused communities in the States, which is sitting at around ten percent of the U.S. population as of 2024 (US Census Bureau, 2025). This can also be applied directly to how officials speak about immigrants or “illegal aliens,” LGBTQ+ communities, and groups of specific gender or race (including religion), among others. It is important to note that oftentimes the tone of voice is what indicates derogatory meaning or not, which cannot be displayed as easily in text.

In more recent concerns regarding language and allowance of terminology, the Trump administration has directly moved towards targeting the language in grants seeking federal funding. This has slimmed down even the rhetoric within the prioritized STEM industry to fit into a growing national standard of white-cisgender-heterosexual-masculinity. Instead of simply rejecting classically “woke” terminology, which is typically anything that makes reference to equity, gender identity and transgender individuals, or other members of the LGBTQ+ community, the current administration is also aiming to remove words in reference to womanhood and the research of biological females as well as anything mentioning diversity, equity, and even the term race (Yourish et al., 2025). Some of these terms have been redefined as being separate from the politically woke agenda (Gay Stolberg, 2025); however, even any initial questioning of including them or not in scientific grant funding allowances is inherently anti-intellectual and dangerous to the development of science and production of beneficial, factual truth.

### **Public Protest and Policy**

It is also important to acknowledge the impacts of public protest on United States policy decisions. In a study done on the use of public protesting during the civil rights movement, Andrews and Gaby (2015) found that “At the beginning of 1963, few within or outside the Kennedy administration expected significant policy to be imminent... protest was critical for seizing the opportunity” (p. 525). It was with the immense help and recognition of civilian-led and backed campaigns that legislation was capable of being pushed to pass. This trend can also be seen throughout history as governments are forced to respond to social movements that have become so popular that they can no longer control or ignore them.

This is articulated through the concept of political opportunity, which explains how “In a polity in which political organizing is heavily restricted, for example, virtually everyone with a grievance has interest in cooperating in opposition—to the degree that the threat of repression allows” (Meyer, 2004, p. 140). This can be further explained by more modern spikes in support for public protest and the corresponding response of the government and media. In 2020, which exhibited a heightened interest in the Black Lives Matter movement, support for the movement faltered, sometimes more than ten percent, among racial and political affiliation categories of Americans between June and September of the same year (Blazina, 2024). While Pew Research Center does not provide a direct explanation for the cause of this, it is fair to assume that both distance from the movement and lacking or changing media coverage played large roles in the loss of support. This can also be applied to the increase of protests throughout 2025, with a large majority being in response to the genocide in Palestine and the Trump administration (*Crowd Counting Consortium 2025 U.S. Protest Event Data*, 2025), as the Trump administration has continuously disapproved and discouraged national protests. This has not resulted in the halt of civilian protests but has actually significantly increased them, even in more Republican-leaning states and districts (Shay et al., 2025).

As public protest has historically resulted in public policy influence, there is hope for the recent increase of American civilian action to result in a continued push for political understanding of citizens and residents; however, the concern regarding the language and adamant disapproval of some political power figures, or non-action of others, still presents difficult political opportunities for public protest to currently result in much democratic policy change. Ultimately, under the current system, the decision to enact or repeal policies is up to those in power and how much scrutiny they are willing to take before changing their mind or taking action. There is only so much civilians can legally do, otherwise more changes would likely have already been made at the hands of civil rights movements.

## **Conclusion**

As anti-intellectualism continues to exist and risks heightening levels under the ruse of “patriotism,” it is increasingly important to consider its effect on American voting trends and disenfranchisement. Without diverse cultural understanding in a nation that is consistently displaying mixation, voters will not be capable of recognizing discrimination and a lack of political representation. When whiteness has never been taken out of the norm, yet the public continues to become less white, there can be no means of democratically qualifying systemically impacted groups. Direct access to adequate foundational education, which is diverse and inclusive to represent the true population, is a major key in enfranchising the true voices of voters. It cannot be expected that without this truly equal access and understanding that any one person could make a directly informed and inclusive political decision. Those who have access to adequate education often lack diverse cultural understanding and experience with systemic marginalization, whereas people with diverse cultural understanding and experience with marginalization are often withheld from accessible education that can provide adequate understanding of the current democratic institution and its implications.

Anti-intellectualism is not an exclusive actor: the more that we as Americans allow it to impact us, the more that will be lost. This includes the current understanding of whiteness and its continual empowerment. It must not be forgotten that once Italians and the Irish were not considered to be white either, and now that they have gained access to this racially privileged group, they have likewise gained access to better education. Under this flexible logic, other racially marginalized communities can also gain access to the same privilege. If the current state of the U.S. remains largely unquestioned, voters will continue to be silenced without care or recognition as the privileged white class of Americans continues to be served. This trend of privilege and access is historic and cannot stand forever. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King, 1963, p.1). Likewise, the lack of adequate education cannot exist if a society wants to deem itself intelligent and democratic.

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**The Growing Crisis of Sex  
Trafficking Amongst Native  
American Women and Girls**

Madison S. Blount

Since the early years of colonization of the United States, Native American women and girls have experienced an epidemic of sexual violence and have fallen victim to sex trafficking. According to Nikkel (2022), an organization dedicated to bringing awareness to the trafficking of Indigenous communities, 40% of sex trafficking victims are identified as Native American. However, Native Americans represent only 2% of the population. The high rates of sex trafficking amongst Native American communities will continue to grow with the deficiency of awareness, communication, and resources given to these communities. Due to colonization, Indigenous communities were left scattered and fragmented, resulting in the undersupply of resources needed to conduct proper investigations on women who go missing and who are victims of sex trafficking. Indigenous communities need resources and aid to help find and rehabilitate Indigenous women and girls who have fallen victim to sex trafficking. According to Vice News, “Indigenous Women Keep Going Missing in Montana” (2021), the absence of resources and awareness has led the Crow reservation, a reservation the size of Connecticut, to have only five officers. Reservations need more resources, awareness, and better communication between policing agencies to address sex trafficking amongst Indigenous communities. The lack of awareness and cohesiveness between U.S. police agencies and tribal agencies, when conducting investigations of missing and trafficked indigenous women and girls, leads to higher rates of sex trafficking among Native American women and girls.

### **Historical Context of Sexual Violence Towards Native Women and Girls**

Throughout the history of the colonization of the United States, Native American women and girls have been high targets of violence and sexual violence. According to the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (2011), during the expansion towards the west of the United States, military troops would prey on Native American women and girls for “sexual assault, sexual mutilation, and slaughter” (p. 2, paras. 1). It was not just military troops taking advantage and sexually abusing Native women and girls. The National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (2011) notes that “early British... settlers viewed Native women’s sexual freedom sexual and reproductive freedom... [gave them...] the right to kidnap, rape, and prostitute Native women and girls without consequence” (p. 1, paras. 1). This sexualizing view of Native American women and girls was used as an excuse to violate them sexually. This historical experience of sexual violence from U.S. military troops has built in generational trauma for Native American women and girls to report sexual violence.

### **Sexual Violence towards Native Women and Girls Now**

The acts of sexual violence towards Native American women and girls since colonization continue today. Native women and girls are still highly likely to experience a type of sexual assault with “those of Indigenous ethnicity are...at least 2 times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes” than any other race within the United States (Joseph, 2021, paras. 3). Even with centuries since colonization, Indigenous women are still more likely to experience extreme sexual violence, such as rape. The high rates of sex crimes committed against Native American women and girls continue at alarming numbers, making Native Americans most likely to be victims of a sex crime, even with Native Americans and Alaskan Natives only representing “approximately 2% of the total U.S. population” (Nikkel, 2022, sect. 2). The violence Native American women experience is completely disproportionate from other races within the United States. Indigenous women, girls, and communities as a whole need and deserve to have their voices heard as they continue to experience significantly high rates of sexual violence.

### **Media Coverage**

When a particular population of people is experiencing a series of sexual violence, especially for generations, we expect the problem to be made known and for awareness to grow; However, this is not the case when violence is made against Indigenous women and girls. According to Lopez et al. (2024), 5,491 missing Native American women and girls reported by the U.S. National Crime Information Center, and “national or international media covered less than 5%” (p. 2, paras. 1). The absence of media coverage on missing indigenous women and girls will continue to contribute to the sex trafficking of

indigenous women. If there is no one reporting to the public about the issue of sex trafficking amongst indigenous women, then the issue within the Indigenous communities will continue to remain invisible. The lack of media coverage on the issue of Native American women and girls going missing is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. It is not just the media's coverage that needs to be addressed; it is also the communication between the U.S. criminal justice system and the Indigenous criminal justice system.

### **Policing Agencies**

Historically, Native Americans have been oppressed and failed by our "criminal justice" system; That failure and oppression continue to this day. When an Indigenous woman or girl goes missing on a reservation, there are multiple different policing agencies involved: Tribal, State, and Federal. Since early colonization and the creation of Native American reservations, there has been a disconnect in communication between these policing agencies. When it comes to human trafficking cases on reservations, there are certain laws created for the Federal, State, and Tribal governments. According to Gillespie (2020), the laws created confusion among the three policing agencies because they overlap. There is confusion about who gains control over the investigation of each case. Depending on whether a tribe recognizes the victim and if the abuser is a non-native, the case can go to either Tribal courts or U.S. courts. Even with cases being eligible to go to the U.S. courts, "67% of sexual abuse cases filed from 2005–2009 in tribal communities were never prosecuted" (Hill et al., 2022, paras. 6). That is more than half of these cases dismissed by the U.S. courts. There have to be changes within our criminal justice system and in the way we operate towards Indigenous victims of sex trafficking, in order to support the best and aid Indigenous victims of sex trafficking and sexual violence.

### **What Can Be Done**

Indigenous tribes need more resources and media coverage. These communities need practical resources that best suit their conditions and needs. We need to provide more aid to victims and start to recognize the signs of someone being trafficked. Nurses can play a role in recognizing and providing aid to indigenous women and girls who are victims of sex trafficking. Nurses are our first responders and are more likely to encounter victims. According to Peters-Mosquera et al. (2023), nurses need to learn and know the "historical trauma that the AI/AN population has experienced and the association of historical trauma and missingness of Indigenous women and girls" (Peters-Mosquera, et al., 2023, paras. 27). Learning more about the history and generational trauma will help nurses best aid and understand these women and girls. The article also notes that it is important to "embed Indigenous content within a nursing curriculum" (Peters-Mosquera et al., 2023, para. 28). Nurses with knowledge of Native American culture can better assist victims and show respect for their culture. One of the resources mentioned in the Exodus Road was "Reconnection with Native Traditions" (Nikkel, 2022, sect. 6). Having nurses educated about Native culture can help victims reconnect with their cultural traditions as they receive aid. With these changes, we can provide the proper aid and support Indigenous victims and survivors need to be seen and to begin their healing process.



Throughout this paper, there was an examination of the historical and present abuse Native American women and girls experience. For centuries, U.S. male citizens have taken advantage of and sexually abused Native women and girls; That abuse continues today. This situation has been a crisis for centuries, and still, there is barely any media coverage of what these women and girls go through. Many of the reports of missing Native women and girls are not reported correctly into national crime databases. There continues to be confusion between police agencies, both U.S. and tribal, in terms of control in the investigation and prosecution of cases involving reported missing Indigenous women and girls, and the lack of prosecution for their cases. We have also examined beneficial resources that can best aid and serve Indigenous women who are victims of sex trafficking, with nurses. Better education of nurses in the history of sexual violence towards Indigenous women can help them better understand victims. Providing more education on Native American culture can help nurses with victims reconnect with their traditions. Nurses can be the key in helping Indigenous victims and survivors start their healing process. We should focus more on implementing procedures for Nurses, along with an education on Indigenous cultures, to

help nurses better address Indigenous victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

Along with implementing regulations for nurses, we also need to address the miscommunication between tribal and U.S. police agencies. We need to clarify each agency's roles and determine which agency should be deemed “in charge” during investigations. With better communication, regulations, and education for tribal agencies, U.S. agencies, and nurses, we can help bring justice and begin healing for Indigenous victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

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**Persisting Coloniality: How  
People of Color Have Remained  
Excluded from Equality**

Jesdly Ocampo

## **Persisting Coloniality**

People of color have been coerced to distrust their belonging in this nation, with motions that go against what we have pledged to the United States of America. Coloniality, criminalization, and incarceration dismantle the “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” (Pledge of Allegiance, 1954). Punitive reformations in these systems have guaranteed that people of color will never attain *true* freedom or lives without restraint.

The “fairytale” of Christopher Columbus “discovering” American lands is nothing but a nightmare for people of color. Out of greed, Columbus wanted all the land he could possibly obtain, and he accomplished it through heinous acts, which is now known as the era of colonization. These heinous acts were rationalized with the “power” they believed was given to them by God. This supremacy allowed Columbus and the rest of the colonizers to believe that they were granted the power to set racial differences between them and the people native to the land (Brown and Barganier, 2018, pp. 34-37). In any land that was “discovered,” they determined people of color were non-believers who could not be converted to Christianity; therefore, they would not be considered humans, but slaves. Through this belief, people of color underwent extreme inhumane treatment across many colonized countries. Throughout this era, they remained property of colonizers and if they tried to advocate against their treatment, they would be treated far worse, facing the consequence of murder. Through the excuse of religion, people of color were excluded from equality and faced many years of oppression.

Along with religious dominance, other inequities were embedded into society through the uprising of racial scientists. These scientists tried to methodically prove that people of color should be governed and treated inhumanely since they were degenerate. Their methods resulted in a racial hierarchy where white people were superior and anyone else became inferior. Now there was the belief that in the name of science, people of color could not coexist with whites, and it became recognized not only by supremacists, but by society. More than that, these testings and findings of racial scientists ensured the idea that people of color were not biologically capable of reaching the intellectual levels as white people (Brown and Barganier, 2018, pp. 71-99). People of color were experimented on as if they were animals, creatures, anything far below humans. These are the drastic measures that white people had to take in order to somehow find validation in their radical beliefs that people of color and whites could not be seen as equals.

Since the beginning of history, people of color have been oppressed by forms of authority that derive from the racial hierarchies. They have been seen as beings that are unable to be civil on their own and thus need guidance or training as it may seem. Even then, when granted some form of freedom through the 13th Amendment, which passed in 1865, white supremacists were still able to confine people of color. This amendment states that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (U.S. Const. amend. XIII). Somehow, this freedom was limited through “vagrancy laws.” These laws enforced the crime of any person of color “who could not prove he or she worked for a white employer” (Hinton, 2018, p. 2). Through these laws, they created a loophole between incarceration and enslavement. This allowed for legal control over *free* people of color, even though they were never truly free, they were coerced into encampment by the disparities in criminal laws.

These factors are important to keep in mind because with late modernization, consisting of urbanization and industrialization in 1890, these ideologies were still being implemented into society. The more modern embedment came throughout the Progressive era. A key point to this era is that reformers still held onto some beliefs that were influenced by racial scientists. Due to the migration of races, interracial relationships emerged which was a problem for reformers. They fundamentally believed that black men were degenerate yet disclosed this notion behind the idea that they were hyper-sexual and predatory towards white women. These events were followed by the creation of the Mann Act. This act was enacted in the year 1910 with the purpose of ending “white slavery,” which in reality was just white men not wanting white women to be in interracial relationships as it was considered immoral (Brown and Barganier, 2018, pp. 119-131). By making this an issue of public safety, the laws of anti-miscegenation were implemented, criminalizing interracial relationships. Once again, laws were used to divide people of color and exert the need for safety, except not *for* them, but *from* them.

There is a national psyche that has carried out through history that revolves around the idea that people of color are to be feared and restrained; nowadays it is done through “colorblind” laws that are ironically structured around race. In “*The House That Race Built*,” Angela Davis states that: “race provides a silent justification for the technological expansion of law enforcement” (Davis, 1999, p. 275). Law enforcement, under my understanding, was created to provide safety and order for the public, yet from the days it was developed, it seems to have been a system made to keep people of color away from the supremacy whites have reached. The potential root of this is due to the fear of people of color becoming equal to whites and experiencing the life white people have been privileged to live since the “discovery” of the United States. White people have abused the creation of law enforcement and use it as a gateway to continually make people of color inferior and unequal.

People of color have never been seen as equal through the eyes of the white state, nor have they been seen as a population in need for public safety since they have been portrayed as the danger. News, televised or paper, have all taken a toll on moral panic because they have brought people to believe that crime will always be behind the face of a person of color. People who consume misrepresentation of crime through the media, often picture a person of color next to a crime. In “Understanding Mass Incarceration: A People's Guide to the Key Civil Rights Struggle of Our Time, New Press,” by Kilgore, it is stated that: “stereotypes of black men as violent criminals are reflected in what people recall from news reports. This kind of mismemory has many implications...such as greater fear or distrust of others” (Kilgore, 2015, p.41). This is why society has ingrained a negative stereotype on people of color. In essence, people of color are seen as crime itself, rather than a person who has committed a crime.

There is a misrepresentation when it comes to race, crime, and incarceration. Especially when it comes to drug-related offenses, the excessive emphasis on the incarceration of people of color creates a gap between the same offenses committed by white people. Laws such as the famous “three-strikes-law” and “Rockefeller drug laws,” targeted people of color for excessive sentencing and incarceration. Given that these laws paved ways to cut down on the big drug industry, it has not done so equally. It is hard to believe that laws like these were created for the purpose of getting drugs off the streets. If that was the truth, if the purpose of these laws were to create a safer society, why is it that people of color are the only ones who are majorly sentenced? In “An Unjust Burden: The Disparate Treatment of Black Americans in the Criminal Justice System,” we are told that “for everyone white male aged 21 to 44 incarcerated under the Rockefeller Laws, 40 black males of similar age were incarcerated for the same offense” (Hinton, 2019, p. 5). If we all abide by the law, and if it applied equally to all, how can some be free for the same reason others spend up to their whole lives incarcerated?

In order to understand this system of punishment, I would like to surface the employment and housing barriers that have allowed for the rooted division between whites and people of color to exceed. Despite the efforts for equality through policies such as DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), people of color are still being denied employment. A study done by BLS Reports stated that, “people who are white made up the majority of the labor force (76 percent) in 2023. Those who are black or African American and Asian constituted an additional 13 percent and 7 percent, respectively” (2024, p. 5). Even though these studies are from three years ago, these measures still affect people of color today. For reasons as such, it seems we have yet to cease the ideologies of white people being more capable and intellectual than people of color. It is a deep-rooted belief in degeneracy that has created a false reality for those who believe in white supremacy. As you may imagine, not having a job guarantees the fact that you will not be living as comfortably as those who have a stable income. There is a struggle for the bare necessities, such as food, clothing, bills, etc. With no income, how do you live a suitable life? When you are isolated, in the brinks of homelessness, would you choose a dangerous, yet fast way to make income? For a vast majority, the answer is yes.

As we can see throughout these fragments of history, people of color have been outcasted from receiving the minimum of human rights. In early years it was because they were “heathens;” further on, it was due to the fact that they were “scientifically proven” to be degenerates; and eventually moral panic was introduced as a modern approach to granting racism and exclusion in society. Even though today, we do not see these methods of exclusion as apparent as it was back then, that does not mean they do not exist. It simply means that as we evolved, so did these ideologies except, in more discreet and “legal” ways. See,

when it comes to thinking about equality, public safety, and people of color, I think of incarceration. I think of laws that were created behind the face of racism to oppress these people in ways that society would find “rational” and never once doubt it was inhumane. All of which have guaranteed them to not feel equal to their white neighbor, to feel as if they are not granted safety in public whenever a police officer is around, in fact they may ask themselves whether they are posing as a threat simply by being a person of color. It is clear that the legacy of distrust that people of color have when it comes to equality and public safety has not only been warranted, but constructed throughout years of persistent coloniality, criminalization, and incarceration.

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# 4. Our Stories

**JOY**  
IS AN  
**ACT**  
OF  
**RESISTANCE**

"I HOPE I CAN LIVE UP  
TO MY ANCESTORS  
EXPECTATION OF ME.  
BECAUSE I REALLY  
BELIEVE THAT I HAVE A  
DUTY TO ALL THOSE  
WHO HAVE COME  
BEFORE ME."



**ASSATA  
SHAKUR**

**GOD**  
IS  
**CHANGE**

*Altar by: Ancestors in Training  
and Brooklyn Brujeria*



# **Emancipation Day**

Xytara Astaphan



These words remind me that everything I do in the arts is not just for myself, but for the people who came before me, and for the community that surrounds me.

This day is sacred.  
Not because the chains fell,  
but because we didn't.  
Because our people turned pain into rhythm,  
turned prayers into poetry,  
turned cotton fields into battlegrounds  
for freedom they never even got to taste.

So no,  
this is not just a day off.  
This is a day I carry my people in my chest.  
A day I say,  
I see you.  
To the ones who ran, who fought,  
who died nameless but not forgotten.  
To the ones who whispered freedom  
into the wind and made it law.

Emancipation Day is my inheritance.  
And I will not forget.  
I will not water it down.  
I will speak it loud,  
dance it proud,  
and walk with the weight of it like a crown.

Because I am here  
Black, bold, and unbreakable  
because they dreamed me into becoming.  
And I owe them everything.



**Youth “Gangs” in My  
Community: A Critical Social  
History of San Francisco**  
Neftaly Paredes

The history of gangs and how gangs operate has always been a wide topic that has been talked about throughout the media. Whether it be about the control they have in specific neighborhoods or the violent actions of gangs throughout the years, there will always be the topic of gangs arising in some way. I decided to take a further look at gangs to see how they impact the youth. In this case, I wanted to take a closer look at the neighborhood of Mission located in San Francisco, CA. Diving into the rich history of the Mission District, the Mission carries a big population of Latino descent. This area carries a lot of culture and currently holds a traditional festival on November 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> for Dia De Los Muertos, this place has always been recognized as the Latino district of San Francisco. However, with that history also comes the history of gangs in San Francisco, specifically the Norteños and Sureños gang. Dating all the way back to the 1950s-1990s the Norteños and Sureños are a popular gang that has deemed the Mission District as part of their territory. The Norteños and Sureños history starts due to the prison system here in California separating and becoming into a fight for territory. Throughout the years there have always been fights for this territory, bringing fear and violence to the communities, but how did these gangs even come to be? To know why gangs end up having a high population of young people joining them, we must first acknowledge the history of why gangs were even created in the first place, or more so why the name of “gangs” even came to be. By knowing the history of the Norteños and Sureños along with the effects it has on the youth that join, showing off the impacts of gangs for youth communities.

### **Critical Social History**

The Mission District is one of the most historical districts in San Francisco, CA because it was known as one of the main places with a huge population of Latino immigrants and Latino culture in that area. To figure out more of the history of the Mission District, I decided to interview my brother who was born and raised in San Francisco and spent most of his time in the Mission District. Using previous articles; I decided to ask questions and seek answers based on personal experiences and the research that I conducted. It was time to see exactly how youth gangs were impacted in the Mission District and how history about youth gangs came to be as an important factor to know and acknowledge.

How did youth gangs come to be in San Francisco? For background, Norteños and Sureños started off as a gang in Southern California after the prison system decided to separate. Once that happened, many started to fight for territory, thus the Norteños claimed the Mission District as their main area. This became one of the main reasons why these gangs emerged in the Mission District. However, there must be another reason why they decided to reside in the Mission District for a while. As my research suggests there are multiple reasons why the Norteños remained in the Mission District. During the interview with my interviewee (Arturo Paredes, 2025), there was one consistent reason that kept being brought up in the conversation for why a lot of young people were drawn to gangs, one of these reasons being acceptance. Through the article by Jonah Owen Lamb (2022), it is shown that within gangs there is this sense of community that gangs seem to attract the youth with, giving them a sense of acceptance. In the interview that was conducted it was stated that in present day, the Mission District is becoming more gentrified and there is less of a community now more than ever. Of course, there were signs of gentrification starting in the 1990s, but nowadays it is more obvious than it was before as there is no longer a sense of community when the Mission District is brought up, there is mainly a sense of reminiscing of what the district used to be. This leaves many people longing for someone to not only understand their struggles, but their culture as well.

It is important to know how much the Mission District has been impacted throughout the years. In the 1990s in the article “Category: Mission” published by Foundsf (2015), it is shown that the Mission District was described as “ghetto”. The word “ghetto” is used in a negative way to imply that something, in this case, an area is dangerous to go or reside in. Many children that grow up knowing they were raised in the “ghetto” grow with this mentality that they will never be successful because of where they were born and raised. This can also be seen in recent years, with interviewee Arturo Paredes, stating that in the days he worked as an afterschool mentor many children were shocked to be achieving their dreams because of where they were raised or they already had the expectation that they will not make it too far in life. As a student who spent most of his years around the Mission District, Arturo describes that the people and his

fellow classmates around him were always surrounded by police officers, fear of violence, and had low faith in their future. This perception of being seen as dangerous has more impact on a young person than many seem to realize. By stating or making people seem as dangerous, many youths start to have a notion of who they are or how the public perceives them. A perception of danger leads many young people to find themselves lesser and more dangerous to the people around them.

So, how exactly are youth gangs impacted by the economic aspect of these structures of power as well? In the Mission District, Arturo stated that a lot of businesses have moved out of the area during recent years. This can be a common cause of gentrification, which has been more prevalent in the 1990s and until recently became more evident after Mark Zuckerberg bought a house in the Mission District. Due to this effect of gentrification and multiple small businesses closing, youth gangs or the Norteños and Sureños have not been as present in recent years, but there are still signs of violence occurring due to turf wars. A loss of culture is also mainly seen to impact multiple youths resulting in not feeling like belonging, thus looking for a community where they can relate to.

Youth gangs like the Norteños and Sureños grew in the Mission District due to the feeling of wanting acceptance in young people's eyes. Although they are not as prevalent as they were back in the 90s, youth gangs were made to fight for territory along with being built off from the idea of community and a sense of trust. The youth need a safe place where they can express their culture and also feel accepted. Both gangs in this instance grew due to the feeling of community and reliability. Not only was gentrification a big factor of losing culture, but it also was a factor in the youth feeling alienated.

### **Dehumanizing Discourse**

Discourses of power have always been a topic worth discussing since it ties into the perspective of how youth "gangs" are perceived to the public. As stated by De la Tierra, "Discourse of power is the way dominant institutions use language to support and perpetuate dominant relations of power in society" (De la Tierra, 2025). Discourse of power is mainly used to dehumanize and strip away any dignity which in this case can correlate to the response of youth gangs. Due to dehumanizing language, the media and the people that choose to consume harmful media grow to have a negative perception on youth gangs. The terms "boys" and "delinquents" are used to diminish the youth, making them seem as lesser. As a form of retaliation "youth gangs", or in this case young people, grow to feel unaccepted and pressured into this box of expectations of what they are told to be rather than embracing who they are. In another perspective critical discourse analysis is the ability to understand the impacts of power dynamics, social structures, and themes in stories or discussions. One prominent moment this can be showcased in was in "Why Gang Members are Dehumanized in Court" (Hagedorn, 2022) where a lot of discussion revolved around the impact of gang violence. One such case being, where a girl shot a person with the intention to shoot her stepfather, bringing into discussion the topic of how child abuse is typically handled in the court of law. This does involve the insight and importance of critical discourse analysis as it allows discussion of how the youths are portrayed in situations. Mainly for this case bringing into light how the media portrays the youths that join these gangs.

The first article "Sureños, Norteño Rivalry Endures" by Monica Vaughan talks about the way both of these youth gangs impacted their communities with violence. "Three Norteño Gang Members Who Murdered Victims in San Francisco Sentenced to Decades in Prison Following Their Convictions on Racketeering Conspiracy Charges" is a news outlet posted by Justice.Gov that dives deeper into a former gang member who committed multiple crimes under the Norteños name in San Francisco. In another article, "In San Francisco, How Gangs Are Defined Is Up for Debate" by Jonah Owen Lamb, Lamb talks about the treatment within the criminal law system of a Norteños gang member, or more so how there is a huge neglect of backstory within gangs. For how the CDA was conducted it was important to view a lot of these cases through a lens of how the institution portrays youth gangs and the impact they have on the community. Thus, it was prominent to also know the history of both gangs.

The dominant discourse about the Norteños and Sureños revolved around the violence that was happening within San Francisco and the background of how the Mission District was impacted. For example, in Vaughan (2015), they stated, "Agents who provide witness testimony as gang experts testify the Norteños take their commands from Nuestra Familia, a prison gang started for "northerners" protection

against the Mexican Mafia, which now direct the Sureño foot soldiers,”. The main discussion here revolves in the ongoing war between both the Norteños and Sureños and the violence that they bring within the communities. This can also correlate to the article posted Justice.Gov (2023), “Madrigal admitted he committed these two murders in part to earn respect from other SFMD Norteños and to enhance his status in the gang”. This is interesting to note since it gives a bigger insight into why violence is committed, gaining respect and a sense of trust within the Norteños gang. For youth gangs there is always the conversation revolving around violence committed, especially by their own hand. As it is known by Jonah Owen Lamb (2022), “Madrigal admitted he committed these two murders in part to earn respect from other SFMD Norteños and to enhance his status in the gang”. These gangs are made to show the media that they will not be dehumanized, also known as a form of retaliation. By attracting a sense of community, the youths that get insulted tend to look for acceptance by these gangs, but how exactly does this correlate to injustices?

After careful reflection, it is important to consider that youth gangs are mainly made because they want to have a sense of community. That does not mean that they are good because they still experience violence at the end of the day, however it brings in an insight of how the youths are treated by the media or the people that they are surrounded by. Due to dehumanizing languages and views the youths turn to gangs for acceptance. This ties in with how injustices tend to make the youth feel isolated and turn to a community where they will feel accepted.

### ***Counter-Narrative***

History is always an important thing to note in how gangs were made. In this specific case, a lot of gangs started off as communities that wanted to resist and defend themselves from police brutality. Resistance can be done in multiple ways; however, it is shown more in actions. Brotherton (2008) states, “resistance begins with small oppositional gestures that are aimed at existing power relations as they have been conceived, broadly, in both the Foucauldian and Weberian traditions,”. This concept in understanding youth gangs is incredibly important because most youth gangs are made as an oppositional force. Young people in these communities join gangs to resist a specific institution, mainly institutions that treat them as criminals or lesser beings. These gangs were created and started to grow because to the youths, they build communities where one can go too to feel a sense of self, albeit with the cost of violence.

In the film titled “The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation” also known as AMLKQN, they are a group or as stated a “political organization” that fought for their community. It started out as a group that wanted to protect the Latino community against injustices and violences done by institutions. In the film, the Latino community was shown to go through discrimination and were treated unfairly by law enforcement or their state officials. Multiple young people were tired of this treatment and decided to make this group in order as a form of protest. However, over the years they have evolved into a gang that as stated in the documentary, has become violent.

As said in the documentary, there are multiple instances where people were individually targeted by police officers. Throughout those instances the criminal justice system is shown to be unfair. Tone, a member of the organization, has his situation brought up where officers set him up with possession of weapons when Tone never had a weapon to begin with, yet they insisted that he should be arrested for possession of a weapon. These instances are the reason this group was created and why Tone decided to change the mission and purpose of this organization, to fight back the institutions. For a community to protest the unfair treatment that they are faced by officers and people on a daily basis.

Tone, also known as Antonio Fernandez, is the leader of The Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation organization. While being the leader of this organization, Tone has expressed going through multiple instances where he was mistreated by the institution. Instances where Tone was searched endlessly by officers insisting on weapon possession only to have nothing. Tone with the ability of this organization is able to shed light to police violence and the injustices communities face under police supervision. As stated in the film, “we live in two societies... guilty until proven innocent”. Tone leveraged cultural pride to promote activism and social change because he talks about not only the violence that is being done to the community, but the urgency for unity to fight against this violence. The light being shed about the injustices in these communities is the ability to resist as well, the power to fight back. In this instance, Tone

allowed this organization to show that the communities will not stand back on this violence. It is his mission not only to unite these communities, but to have a positive change as well, one where everyone can unite and talk about their cultures. His goal was always to uplift the youth and strive for a change.

The example of AMLKQN under King Tone changes the dominant narratives of gangs being seen as violent or criminal because it sheds some light to the history of why these gangs were created. It is important to uplift the histories of resistance in youth communities because it also undoes the narrative of the youths in these gangs only being people that are nurtured with violence. Most gangs were originally created as a form of resistance against a system that only worked to hurt them. This can be applied to the local context about justice, dignity, and community because it gives an insight into how gangs grow and what their purpose was. It started out as a sense of resistance and to highlight the injustices within the institutions.

### **Aftermaths of Gentrification**

Taking into account gang presence in the early 2000s means that there also has to be an acknowledgement for why these youth gangs have "disappeared". First, it is important to know how the Mission District was originally known as the “Latino District”, known for the culture there was and how connected the Latino community was to each other. Slowly as the years went by with technology making its way into San Francisco many of the previous community has left behind a significant impact of what the Mission District used to be. Gentrification is such an impactful topic to talk about when it comes to youth gangs due to how prominent its effect had on the Mission District. When it comes to media and how it portrays the multiple aspects of the Mission District, they all have a connection. For one we see that the media heavily disregards the real issues, reporting on the violence. It is important to consider the negative effects of gangs such as the harm they may be causing, but there has never been a deep dive to how it truly affects the youths and why the youths choose to join these gangs. Raygoza (2012), talks about the effects gentrification had on the community. With businesses closing down and the fight to make income for their families, Raygoza speaks on why there is such an effect on these communities. One main argument is that although gangs in the Mission District are no longer as prevalent as they used to be, what once was fear walking through the Mission District wearing red or blue now comes a time where the biggest fear is the loss of culture and community. Although gangs are no longer prevalent in the Mission District, we are left with the aftermath on the effects of community. Raygoza explains this well by stating, “It was forgotten that behind the boutiques and high end restaurants there is a world of gangs who kill and die for the colors red and blue. The community fights for the soul of these men and women while at the same time it fights to remove them from society.” By acknowledging the negative impacts of gangs, the media clings onto the narrative that gangs were created purely to install fear and hurt to others. However, they choose to ignore the second half, the half that talks about the erasure of culture. The youths not having a space to connect with their roots, know more about their cultures. Instead of bringing in a focus on what the youth needs they cling only to the negative aspects of gangs, ignoring the fact on how gangs started which is a form of retaliation against oppression in the system. This, as Raygoza mentioned, is the media leaving men and women to fight a war where they no longer want violence, but they do not want what's left of their culture to become a distant memory and to be discriminated against.

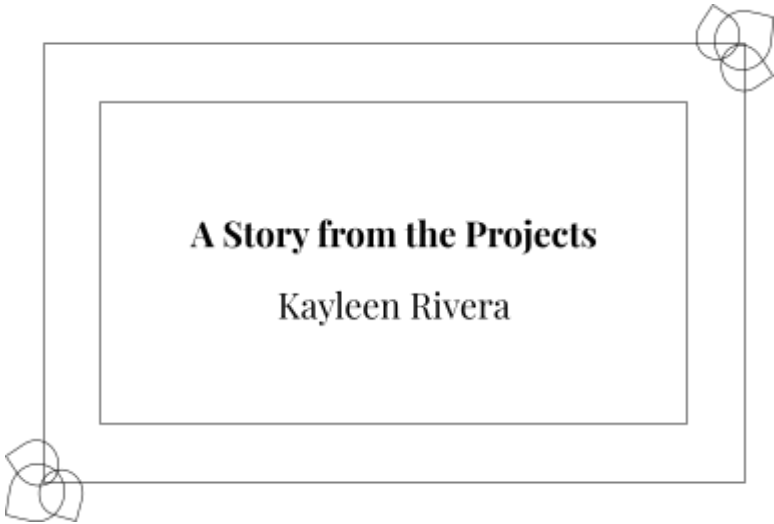
### **Inspiring Conclusion**

So, what exactly can we learn from this experience? The main goal was always to dive deeper into the history of the Norteños and Sureños impact in the Mission District of San Francisco, CA, but as more information shows there are clearly multiple aspects to gangs in the Mission District. One thing that was seen often was just how much history there is when it comes to cultural impact. The interview that was conducted not only shed some light on how youth gangs were impacting the community, but it was also able to shed some light on how other factors impacted the Mission District as well such as how economically and socially gentrification has impacted young people. Being able to see dehumanization being shown frequently in youth gangs through the media or institutions. The strong sense of making these youth gangs as only “gangs”, “ghetto”, or “violent” when there is so much history pointing to a deeper cut of what these youth gangs are, formed to feel a sense of community and retaliation against oppressive

institutions. Lastly, the narrative youth gangs are given. Seen with the AMLKQN project by King Tone, what started off as a group formed to retaliate against police brutality grew into something much bigger. This growth is forming a sense of community, trust, and reliability, but why does this research directly correlate to Norteños and Sureños. Well, both communities are dominantly Latino. In the Mission District there has been a history with Latinos being mistreated by police officers and even nowadays still being targeted by larger institutions. Not only just that, but with the rising evidence of gentrification the Latino community has been heavily impacted by the actions of these effects. A lot of young people, mainly Latino immigrants or first generation Latinos feel lost and confused with their culture. Not having a sense of community, trust, or reliability often leads to the youths turning to gangs to feel accepted or a sense of belonging. This project made me realize multiple things. The fact that the media not only started to villainize "gangs", but also how much gentrification contributes to the growth of gangs. The youth is not supported enough and here in the Mission District do not have a safe space where they can fully embrace their culture. Instead of villainizing or negatively berating the youth, we need to do better. Build communities, make friends, have safe spots and celebrations of your culture. Embrace who you are and support the people around you. Not only was I able to see just how much community is important in these cases, but I was able to see just how much the youth can truly impact our future. Instead of beating them down, we need to lift them up and show just how important their ideas truly are.

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**A Story from the Projects**

Kayleen Rivera

Over the years, institutions, researchers, and policymakers have made various attempts to “improve lives” in public housing. They have tried to design programs, run multiple focus groups, collected data, and more. The people in my projects are not showing up to these focus groups - and it’s not because they don’t care. Not showing up is a systemic pattern due to certain people running these conversations while not speaking their language, not understanding their reality, or their intersectional needs. Every person has their own life and tends to need different things. When you start to look deeper, you question who can actually access or utilize these research initiatives when you have a home to watch over, a child, and Government Assistance requirements to maintain the household. Historically, we’ve been excluded for so long as if we don’t belong, creating a sense of self-exclusion from these research initiatives due to them being labeled as things “only white people do”.

The projects are not one story—they are subcultures. When people who don’t live in NYCHA talk about “the projects”, they talk about it as if they are the same, under one umbrella of stereotypes, but each development has its own history, alliances, oppositions, and norms that outsiders don’t know or see.

Take the Lower East Side, a home to multiple NYCHA developments along the East River. Within just a few blocks, you have two very different worlds—the Baruch Housing units with million-dollar East River co-ops sandwiched between what we call “up the hill” projects. The socioeconomics of our districts are so visible and quite frankly unacceptable. They sit barely a half a mile apart, yet there is a decade-long rivalry and gang violence between them, while the co-ops in between live in comfort, seemingly oblivious to the realities around them.

Outsiders see a cute community with kids playing outside, neighbors sitting on benches. Yet, I see what they don’t see. They don’t see the invisible borders where we learn things early: which staircase not to use, which block means trouble, which faces mean you keep your head down. We see boundaries you don’t cross, and tensions you learn about by the time you’re in elementary school.

So, when a “yuppie” walks up with a clipboard in hand, they have no idea of any of this. They assume all kids can answer questions freely. They assume the community will open up. The reality is that the projects have their own norms and rules, where people who didn’t grow up here won’t understand the silence, the guardedness, the coded speech, or the ways people protect themselves.

### **The Projects vs. The Perception**

Visitors love to romanticize NYC by saying things like, “You’re so lucky to live in Manhattan!” “It’s the city that never sleeps!” What they don’t know is what living in Baruch Housing in Manhattan is like. It is not the same as living in a Manhattan high-rise. My one-bedroom Manhattan apartment in NYCHA fits 8 people. Our struggles are not the same. Growing up in the projects often means growing up low-income, overcrowded, with policing, community trauma, and the constant pressure to survive in a city that calls you “privileged” simply because of your ZIP code.

### **Code-Switching and Interactions with Institutions**

Everyone’s experience is different, in my eyes. After moving away from the projects, I struggled to figure out which code-switching personality belonged to me. A youth of code-switching to be respected by my predominantly white high school so I could secure opportunities that I would not have had in my neighborhood. However, every day I returned home to a life that looked nothing like the one I had at school, surrounded by family and community members whose realities were very different from my classmates’ and even mine.

Every space had a face. If I wanted to be respected by doctors, I had to prove my pain or discomfort and express my pain in a specific way to be believed and treated. At home, I was the only daughter, sweet and innocent; In school, funny and adventurous.

When people from the projects navigate institutions daily, such as schools, hospitals, welfare offices, courts, CUNY, and law enforcement, these systems expect a certain vocabulary, tone, and way of presenting yourself. Many of us learned to code-switch because we had to. However, not everyone can. And kids? Most haven’t learned how to yet. So, when a researcher who is viewed as an outsider comes in with academic language and questions worded like a survey, seeking in-group knowledge, communication tends to become a barrier.

This barrier doesn’t just make the interaction uncomfortable; it makes the data inaccurate. People

will tend to change how they talk, shut down completely, or respond with what they think the researcher wants to hear. Sometimes, to even participate in these surveys, you have to prove that you live in NYCHA. That requirement alone is inaccessible. Many people in the projects are illegally doubled up or living in overcrowded apartments—something NYCHA workers see and either choose to ignore or punish legally. As a result, many residents are automatically excluded from participating, even though they are directly affected by the issues being studied.

Often, the people who end up participating in these research projects are those already involved in community initiatives in the neighborhood, along with their mutuals. What researchers often do not know is that many initiatives funded by NYCHA, and run by community members, tend to support people they personally know, rather than the community as a whole.

When they do support the whole community, they allow people who do not live in the community to strip resources, leaving the community with little to nothing. Meanwhile, researchers walk away believing they captured the “truth,” when in reality they captured code-switching stress, confusion, panic mode, and responses that don't represent the community.

Kids in NYCHA start life already balancing multiple worlds. Many grow up being a type of bilingual without even realizing it - switching the way they talk depending on who they're talking to and where. They go from a high-pitched goodbye with a hug and a kiss before being sent off to school, to a deep voice, slang, and handshakes. Sometimes, even a change in their walk. They might switch back to a softer voice at home, adopt a polite but more assertive tone in places like the doctor's office, and continue adjusting their behavior as they move between different environments. These rules do not just live in the projects - they follow you around when you interact, especially with different institutions.

This process is often not supported, but rather socially acquired and taught subconsciously. We often don't realize we have this skill or how powerful it is. Instead, kids and adults are often penalized or misunderstood by outsiders who read their communication style as “aggressive,” “ghetto,” “uneducated,” or “noncompliant,” especially if they are unable to code-switch - a skill that should not be a necessity. These misinterpretations seep into research, policymaking, education, justice systems, and life outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

What could possibly benefit the community may be more along the lines of a psychosocial and linguistic research that approaches the projects, where the researchers themselves are from the projects.

When researchers share that lived experience, they can enter these communities and have conversations that feel normal. People are more likely to speak honestly when they are not forced to translate their lives into academic language, work through their academically formed questions, or act a certain way for outsiders. This kind of research would reflect how people in the projects actually think, speak, and navigate the world.

Beyond research, we need to mobilize people in the projects by helping them grow and achieve their dreams. People from the projects do have access to low-cost or free college, trade school, and training programs, but there are restrictive requirements such as age, a focus on high-demand fields, and an intense need to keep up with while in the program.

The moment someone gets a job whose income exceeds the eligibility threshold, their benefits are taken away, and their rent goes up—leaving little to no room to save or continue pursuing their goals. This is the main issue. Advancement becomes something that is policed and punished rather than supported. Because of this, many people with degrees remain in NYCHA - not because they lack ambition, but because staying is the only way to keep stable housing, health insurance, and other living necessities.

Right now, this isn't the same for all. Some people want to stay - and they have the right to do so (and are often supported in doing so as long as they maintain eligibility and requirements), but those who do not want to stay are not supported equally. This reality discourages people from pursuing bigger goals, such as owning a home, having more space, or working in their dream career.

Until systems are changed to support growth without compromising basic security, people pursuing dreams outside the projects will continue to face the hardships that come with leaving NYCHA.



**Life of a Child in Foster Care: A  
Retrospective**  
Ramon Leclerc

## **Introduction**

An interview was conducted by Danielle Key, whom I will refer to as Dani throughout this paper. I will examine my foster care experience using sociological questions to point out flaws in the foster care system that cause harm to youth in the foster care system. Using sociological questions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, I describe systematic biases that run rampant through the foster care system. This interview is intended to show the trials and tribulations that youth in the foster care system must endure and persevere to become productive adults.

### **Dani: How would a critical theorist describe the population of children in foster care?**

**Ramon:** A critical race theorist would explain that most kids placed in foster care live in poverty and are usually considered minorities in the United States. A majority of the children placed in foster care are of African American and Hispanic heritage. Many situations of removal are based on race or poverty, with socioeconomic situations leading to the removal of Black or Latinx children due to different situations, some based on facts, but not always.

Also, when I resided in a residential treatment center, the staff treated the Black kids poorly. Even the Black staff would mistreat the Black kids. The restraints after altercations would be rougher, and sometimes the staff would physically attack the Black kids unprovoked. The white kids did not have to endure such violence. One white boy I remember would use derogatory, racist language towards Black kids and then ran to staff when the Black boy would respond in a violent manner. The staff would chastise the Black kids because the white boy's family had money and placed him there voluntarily because of his behavior, without child protective services intervention. The residential treatment center is not meant to make you better; it's meant to keep you where you're at and break you. It's like jail.

### **Dani: How do gender ideologies such as heteronormativity explain the population of children placed in foster care?**

**Ramon:** That is a really loaded question, because there is so much of a gender divide. Not even a divide, but it's just bad. Looking at it from a male perspective, it's like the only people getting placed in apartments are girls aging out who have children, while males and females without children are discharged into homelessness. Also, LGBTQ youth, it seems like most foster parents do not want them in their homes. It's just straight-up discrimination, and the agencies allow it.

There was a situation in a home I was in. The foster mother had two children of her own, her two nieces in kinship care, and me. The two nieces identified as lesbians. One night, I was going out to cash my independent-living stipend, and the younger niece ran away from home. My foster parents put the responsibility of finding her on me instead of calling the agency and making the care worker do their job. When I found my foster sister, she informed me that her cousin, the foster mother's biological daughter, and her friend were making sexual advances towards her, and nothing was being done about it by her aunt and uncle or the agency when she told them. Very little protection is given to LGBTQ youth in the foster care system.

When I was in a residential treatment center, there was this boy we all assumed was gay, and the staff would harass him along with other kids. They would call him a faggot and tell him nobody likes him. I remember one time a staff member dragged the poor guy into the pantry, and all we heard was fists hitting flesh and the kid crying, screaming, and begging the staff to stop, all this just because he was assumed to be gay. It was very traumatizing for me, and more so for the kid who was being abused just because of his perceived sexual orientation. It's sad that a young person cannot express themselves in a supposedly safe place.

**Dani: How does age affect the population of children placed in foster care?**

**Ramon:** I think it is deficient for teenagers. Families prefer newborns who can be adopted or toddlers who are impressionable and can be molded by the family, unlike teenagers who are usually set in their ways and resistant to change. Most foster families do not want to take teenagers because they have their own ways of thinking and will not change, especially if they were taken from their parents as preteens or teenagers. As in my case, I didn't arrive at a foster family until I was 15 years old. I knew what I expected from myself and would not change my perspective or sense of self-worth. I had short stays in four homes and two lengthy stays in homes until I aged out at 21. I went to four different high schools before I graduated. I bounced around a lot because I would not change my way of thinking or attitude. There was no getting me to conform with family norms. I was who I was, no changing me. I often would have conflicts with the male in the home because I never had a father, and no man was going to change me. When you're someone who can't be controlled or molded in their favor, the agency will do everything in their power to vilify you. They slap all kinds of labels on you and make you look undesirable in society's eyes. The agency wants to be in control of your future. If you don't play along, they try to set you up for failure.

I still hear stories of foster parents not wanting to take teenagers. The system has no choice but to place teenagers in group homes, which opens up a cycle of violence for the young person between abusive staff members and other teens who you do not mesh with. Being a teenager in a group home becomes very toxic.

**Dani: How would Marx explain the population of children placed in foster care?**

**Ramon:** Marx would say that the foster care system is a form of exploitation. The government is trying to turn the children into obedient workers, and if the child's parents cannot or will not make their children conform with norms, the government will. The government makes usually false allegations against parents who live in poverty and takes their children to exploit them and create good workers, without considering how the child or children might be brought up by their parents, no matter the income the family has. What the government needs to consider before removing a child is the child's well-being and happiness. If the child is well taken care of and happy, there is no need to remove them from there, even though they are growing up in poverty.

In my case, I was raised in a working-class, poor household. I lived with my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother in Jamaica, Queens, on the south side, a pretty poor neighborhood. I was taken away twice, once when I was a baby and once when I was 12 years old. When I was a baby, my mother told the hospital my great-grandmother's apartment had no heat, so I was taken by the state. They placed me with an ultra-religious family, the foster mother walking around with an "I Love Jesus" pin. They would try to embarrass me as a baby, dressing me in doll clothes because I was so small from being born premature. The state accused my mother of using drugs, but all she did was reach out for help, looking for a better living situation than living with no heat, and they took me. My mother got me back when I was one and a half. They put us in a Red Cross hotel until she found an apartment in Brooklyn.

When I was 12, I was having mental health issues between my mother losing her job and being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, my great-grandmother trying to kick us out, and being bullied at school. I tried to kill myself by taking a knife to my throat. My mother already had an open case because I hated school, so when I tried to kill myself, I was taken again. I was placed in a diagnostic center called Geller House in Staten Island, NY. I was there from April to October of 1999 and went through some trauma. On a July night, staff was showing a bootleg copy of the Fox show "The PJs" and I was listening to the New York Mets game on my Walkman. The Mets were involved in a bitter division race with the Atlanta Braves, who one of my friends there was a fan of. I got up to tell the Braves fan the Mets had won and the Braves had lost, when a 400-pound male staff member pushed me down, saying I was blocking the TV. I felt something snap in my ankle and immediately started screaming, "My leg, my fucking leg," as they laughed, thinking I was fooling around. I heard the female staff yell, "What the fuck you do that for?" across the day room at the male staff who assaulted me. No ambulance was called. Instead, the other male staff on duty drove me to the hospital. I had a fractured fibula. The next morning, all the kids who laughed at me

apologized and told me how fucked up it was what the staff did. I was in pain the whole six weeks of healing and went through years of physical therapy because of the injury. The staff member was fired the next day.

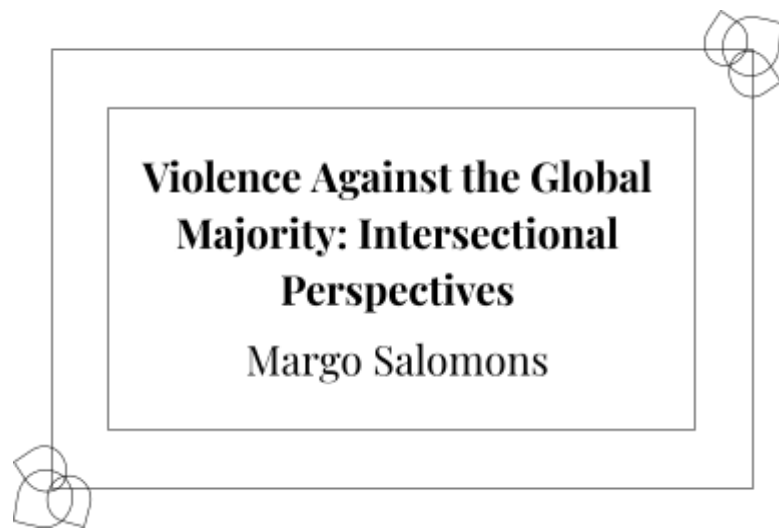
In early October, I was sent to Little Flower Children and Family Services Residential Treatment Center in Wading River, NY. I was there for 3 years. I had some good times and some bad. Seeing staff abuse my friends, like the time a friend of mine got slammed by a staff member just for asking me a question at the homework table, or seeing a staff member slam a boy so hard it broke his collarbone. Staff also cursed at us and played favorites, giving some kids extra food, snacks, or other rewards and denying others. I was one of the lucky ones who got to go to Washington, D.C. for the weekend, and one of the 5 boys picked to go on a trip to Coney Island, so it wasn't all bad for me.

The foster care system is a very abusive and violent system that causes harm to children and families through removal, all types of abuses, and even death. There needs to be a better system to attempt to keep families together, but how?



# 5. Manifest This

*"Mission Street Manifesto" - Juana Alicia*



**Violence Against the Global  
Majority: Intersectional  
Perspectives**

Margo Salomons

## **Violence Against the Global Majority: Intersectional Perspectives.**

This is not an essay. It is not a paper. It is a manifesto. It presents a set of theses followed by a conclusion that is a demand for action and accountability.

### **Introduction**

A few orienting terms:

**Womxn:** a Black feminist, gender expansive term used to honor those who may have the lived experience of womxnhood, but may also be excluded by the gender binary

**LGBTQ+ people:** Those who exist on the gender and sexuality spectrum outside of the cisgender, heteronormative binary. Meaning, with or without a specific label referring to their gender or sexuality. For the purpose of this manifesto, I will be mainly focusing on the LGBTQ+ community as it intersects with PGM identities.

**PGMs:** People of the global majority represent the Non-White, Black, Asian, Brown, Caribbean, Indigenous, Pacific Islander, Arab, Middle Eastern, African Diaspora, Latin American, and Mixed-Race populations. This term recognizes both ethnic and racial groups under the umbrella. It is not only accurate to the demographic being discussed, but it also distances them from the marginalization faced in everyday life. Being a person of the global majority myself, this terminology shift helps to embolden my perspective.

Now.

Womxn and LGBTQ+ People of the Global Majority have been braving constant marginalization for centuries in the US. The narrative against our autonomy has persisted through media and governmental policy. This has caused a steady increase in violent victimization towards the intersectional identities of PGMs

As womxn, we are consistently silenced, as LGBTQ+ individuals, we are constantly overlooked, and as PGMs, we are marginalized. When will the hydraulic press be stopped? We are taught to be docile, to obey, to find a way to maintain that unique identity while fitting into the illusion of equality in the United States. When considering urban areas, it is easy to see how they stand out as hotspots for these victimizations. The high population, coupled with a tragic social hierarchy, creates a cage with high buildings and bustling streets. The ever-expanding weight of the world crushes us all, and yet we are indoctrinated to think that it is better to use our hands to cover our mouths and stay silent, so that we can be fed by the machine built to kill us. Instead of reaching out our hands to help those around us, we stray so far from our intended purpose. Historically, humans are social and thrive in cooperation. Yet these aspects of our species are stomped out under the weight of existence in our modern-day America. This evidence is in the described reality. Who are we talking about? How are we talking about them? Who is leading? Who is listening? Will anything ever change? If it will, there is just one way to do it, through Black Feminism and the triple consciousness.

### **Thesis 1: The Analysis Must Be Black Feminist**

In order to answer my questions about queer PGMs, the orienting lens must be Black Feminist. It must sit at the ideological, theoretical, and empirical intersections of gender and race. It must be both. It can't be either. It certainly can't be neither.

Every time you breathe, there's more negativity being spoken about marginalized communities. Everywhere you look, someone is being oppressed and victimized; everywhere you go, you have to question your safety, and that is not the ideal way of living. The ideal way of living in America is that of peace, that of freedom, that of autonomy. Scholars have outlined this aspect of society explicitly throughout history. But, there are those of us who are the most at risk of facing all of these obstacles, Black womxn.

In the White feminist movements of our past, specifically in the push for womxn's suffrage, there was a level of outrage amongst the Non-Black feminists that came with Black men receiving the right to vote before them, in 1869. The result of this outrage was a shift in the movement where White women separated themselves from the rest. Arguing that their racial separation from Black womxn made them more deserving of these rights, despite common oppression that they face as womxn. Resulting in a long battle for the suffrage of Black womxn that was only technically ended in legislation by 1965. Black Feminism, on the other hand, is naturally inclusive by necessity. Black feminists are the pioneers who have paved the way for the equitable treatment of all womxn, regardless of race. It cradles those who have been

ousted from the collective of other movements, and centers values like empowerment and community care. Since the treatment of Black womxn has shaped the way other PGMs are able to exist, it only makes sense to use the principles of Black feminism to address issues of intersectional victimization. Black Feminism represents the high tide that could carry all of our vessels from the shores of the oppressive systems that are in place.

Angela Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* outlines a system of currency based on the bodies of womxn. She talks about how chattel slavery, and therefore our current government, has weaponized reproductive rights and taken control of them due to the economic incentive. Enslaved womxn were used as objects for breeding, trade, entertainment, and sexual gratification. They were viewed as even less than sub-human, purely as a 'tool' for a purpose. Davis accounts how they were abused in such horrific ways that still sought to protect the womb only for the monetary value that the life inside would have. This system of human currency has shaped our society in such a way where one's life is only equal in value to that of their labor. Overlapping analyses in *Black Liberation and Socialism* by Ahmed Shawki explain the oppressive environment that we see in our modern day in the historical context of how Black womxn were treated in comparison to the rest of society.

Beth E. Richie in *Arrested Justice Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* attests that:

“In the most basic sense, the extent of the problem is underestimated and the corresponding public policy and interventions that have been designed to respond to the problems are inadequate. The tremendous unmet needs of women who fall outside of the common understanding of violence” (p. 23).

We have many examples of this today, such as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. This has spiked maternal mortality significantly in the years since and disproportionately affects birthing people of color. The relationship between labor and monetary value, which is the basis of capitalism, has “unintentionally” enforced a system where the potential for a non-sentient life has greater value than the existing one of the mother.

Our Executive branch has also worked diligently to remove Diversity Equity and Inclusion from federal policy. This was said to be necessary under the basis of the "racially discriminatory DEI activities" according to the White House website. In that same vein, we have government institutions such as ICE being deployed in our cities in hordes and militarizing our streets. They received a reported "\$45 Billion" for detention centers. As well as a modern bill akin to the makings of a poll-tax, being stalled in Congress in the form of the SAVE America Act. This legislation would require more documentation (passport, REAL ID, etc.) to verify the identity of voters, which at first may not sound harmful, until it is acknowledged that more than half of the PGMs in America do not have their passports or the resources needed to get one quickly. *These are only a few of the countless examples of how the throughline peeks through the veil in our everyday life.*

Richie also describes the view of Black womxn from that same structure created during chattel slavery, through the lens of deviant womxnhood. “Black women have typically represented ‘deviant womanhood’... Black Feminist Theory understands that there are varying images of Black womanhood that shape Black women’s identity and social positioning. So, for example, Black women can be strong (and therefore not at risk of violence)...or criminal (and therefore unworthy of protection or support)” (p. 130). This is directly linked to the violence aspect of the victimization of PGMs and womxn in the U.S. The standard maltreatment of Black womxn that was established during chattel slavery was solidified both in policy and the social consciousness, allowing the infliction of violence upon them to go without the same level of consequence. Richie states,

“According to most national studies, African American women are disproportionately represented in the aforementioned data on physical violence against intimate partners. In the Violence Against Women Survey, 25 percent of Black women had experienced abuse from their intimate partner, including “physical violence, sexual violence, threats of violence, economic exploitation,

confinement and isolation from social activities, stalking, property destruction, burglary, theft and homicide.”(p. 26)

The acceptance of Black womxn being inherently less-than and therefore deserving of mistreatment is the same idea that White supremacy inflicts onto other marginalized identities. The difference is that in the other marginalized communities, there is value in the separation or distance from blackness. This creates a social hierarchy where one can occupy multiple marginalized identities, yet still be able to operate from a position of privilege depending on the separation from blackness.

There is this immense weight of existence, the fear for my bodily autonomy in the way that it is threatened constantly. There is also the weight of the anger that lingers in my body from the persecution and the prejudice that it has endured. While it is true that I have witnessed and been victim to the same injustices I'm writing about, you don't have to fill either of those criteria to understand the systemic injustices that affect us. All that is required is openness, motivation to learn, and willingness to reflect on your own positionality. The real question that needs to be asked is what are you willing to do for yourself? Because whether you are able to understand it or not, the ways that the most marginalized people are treated are a reflection of the moral standards of society. Those standards can and will end up affecting all of us; it's only a matter of when.

## **Thesis 2: People of the Global Majority Must Interrogate Themselves. Accountability Not Immunity.**

Depending on the area you live in, it may be hard to see, but those who belong to communities that are marginalized in the U.S. typically hail from other cultures that fall under the global majority. Most, if not all, of those aforementioned people come from cultures that also have a deeply embedded sense of Anti-blackness due to colonization. For example, there was a slave trade beyond the transatlantic route from West Africa to the Western Hemisphere. There was also an Arab colonial slave trade that operated in East and North Africa. It was different in many ways, but it also created a similar social hierarchy that those countries still operate under to this day. In that social hierarchy, it should be simple to infer who was at the bottom: the Black people they had enslaved. There are remnants of the values of chattel slavery in many Latin American cultures as well. For example, in my own culture, being Afro-Puerto Rican, there are beauty standards based on complexion, hair texture, and eurocentric facial features. If you do not possess these things and instead have a more Afrocentric or Indigenous complexion, you will likely face some level of scrutiny, even at the hands of your own family members. In all of these Non-Black cultures (and in Black cultures as well), the common theme that you'll see emerging is built on White supremacy. But it's also important to question how that has shifted due to the involvement of popular media and increasing legislation over the years that have tried to “level the playing field.”

I could tell you about what white sociologists think about culture as capital. I could even cite a PGM like Nancy Leong. But as a queer PGM myself, I will explain it in the way that I understand it. The answer is the increased value of the social currency and how it differs from systemic currency. It can be thought about like money or even game tokens, something transactional. Social currency can be thought of as influencing popular culture or the social atmosphere, and systemic currency can be thought of as an economic or political benefit. In America, with the rise of digitization and the changes to our legislation, all of the discriminatory practices that disproportionately impact Black people as a result of White supremacy have had to morph into waves of subliminal messaging. Now that legislative discrimination against blackness is arguably not as overt as it has been in the past, the media has a role that's imperative to oppressing Black people. People are able to change the way they speak, perform, or their appearance to be more reminiscent of the trends that have been set by Black Americans. So people outside of Black culture are able to benefit socially from having a relationship to it in order to gain social currency, while not straying too far from the underlying White supremacist influence to maintain systemic currency. Those who are Non-Black and marginalized in the U.S. as a result of colonial standards are both perpetrators of, and victims to those standards.

A popular example of this in the media is with the emerging popularity of K-pop. Much of K-pop's musical structure and fashion design is set to emulate the Rap, Hip-Hop, and RnB genres created by Black artists, while still maintaining the White supremacist influences as well. For example, both Western and

Korean beauty standards can be very eurocentric, favoring pale skin, slim noses, etc. Yet the popular media is heavily inspired and influenced by the trends of Black American Artists. Small details like this that we see today are indicators of a larger issue that is still underlying. For the purpose of this discussion, the commodification of marginalized identities can be thought of as the branding, removal, and deconstruction of culture for financial benefit. Recalling an example of this that Angela Davis' analysis discusses in depth is the treatment of Black womxn's bodies as instruments to produce labor. It involves the same breakdown of culture that is widespread in many different ways. Traditional parts of South Asian culture, such as yoga, have been repackaged as a trendy health and fitness activity, when it really represents a much more spiritual and reflective practice. The commodification of marginalized identities separates people and things from their culture as a means of increasing their marketability to the dominant social class. Entire clothing companies, gyms, and other facilities benefit from yoga's separation from culture. The institution is able to benefit financially from the commodity that the practice now represents.

The commodification of marginalized identities can also be represented by the social currency example described earlier. With the social shift toward inclusivity, those who are socially dominant may be excluded from spaces meant to assist or uplift marginalized identities. The interaction of dominant social classes and those they oppress is also described by Patricia Hill Collins in her Matrix of Domination.

It is more socially valuable than it has ever been to have proximity to marginalized spaces. Artists, designers, musicians, athletes, and influencers use their identity as a way to market themselves to the general public. But the people who may not be an outlier won't be able to market themselves to those audiences. Even though there isn't a tangible benefit for these actions in systemic currency, there is a social benefit to having access to previously restricted, marginalized spaces. Whether Crenshaw's Intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination, or other Black Feminist approaches to layered oppression, race and gender intertwine with economic systems of class to further subjugate queer PGMs, even when there seems to be a short-term appreciation or exposure of the products of culture, the long-term fracturing continues.

At the 2016 BET Humanitarian Awards, Jesse E. Williams put it best:

*"Burying Black people out of sight and out of mind, while extracting our culture, our dollars, our entertainment like oil — Black gold. Ghettoizing and demeaning our creations then stealing them. Gentrifying our genius and then trying us on like costumes before discarding our bodies like rinds of strange fruit."*

The action is blatant and deliberate. This consensus about blackness prevents the progression of social movements. How could it not when the exploitation of Black bodies is the foundation? Richie explains, "The evolution of the anti-violence movement toward a more conservative set of intervention strategies and public policy reforms is, in part, a reflection of a broader set of conservative social trends in the United States that occurred during the same time period."(pg.101) In this observation, Richie is contextualizing the policy reforms as an example of the social atmosphere's influence. When the dominant public influence is aware of a system and doesn't want to change it, it will be stagnant. But, when that group does want change, it will happen quickly. Objectively, the anti-violence movement that Richie describes would be a productive social movement if implemented well. But when the underlying motivation behind the policymaking is to not be inclusive, any intervention made cannot be claimed as progress in the same way. The dominant public influence may be content, but there are countless others who are left behind in the process.

To address this, those who are being left behind must first be aware of their predicament. The awareness of this could be described by Paolo Freire's theory of conscientization. This psychological framework explains that the development of critical awareness of your social positionality is essential to the process of overcoming oppressive systems. To achieve this level of consciousness, it is necessary first to reflect on your own position in the systemic power structures; the constant analysis of how the systems affect you and how you affect them. An example of this is simply asking why something exists the way it does, since ignorance is what fuels the fire of oppression. It could be as grand as our government or as individual as how you feel about yourself. Another necessary aspect of conscientization includes praxis. This is the implementation of the things that you learn, in positive ways, throughout your community.

Without the knowledge of our past mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them. The people who have been victimized the most have historically been PGMs and the LGBTQ+ community. There are numerous

ways in which change can be inspired and incited. In our current environment, we do not have consistent access to the education needed to make positive social change. The censorship of education on these important aspects of our history prevents following generations from expanding their knowledge. When people are consistently pushed aside and aren't able to learn, it reinforces the system that overlooks them. They cannot adapt. People without the knowledge of what oppresses them can also deeply struggle with their sense of self. For example, the ban on teaching what the government considers Critical Race Theory in 2020. This was a very recent example of censorship in our education, enforced by the law. The "colorblind" approach to a system that had been constructed on prejudice has not been sufficient in the past. It has created a pattern of maladaptive behavior based on the distorted worldview PGMs are taught to have. The environment we live in requires this distorted view to keep functioning.

Therefore, the first step to a positive change is deconstructing those oppressive biases within us all. This is an action that anyone can take, regardless of the level of access, because it starts with questioning the things you already know about yourself and your environment. This is not unique to race and ethnicity. Gender and sexuality add a plethora of new experiences.

### **Thesis 3: Intersectional Identities & Centering The LGBTQ+ Community**

Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality tells us that understanding how various social and political identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, overlap to create unique, compounded experiences of discrimination is essential for the analysis of any systemic injustice. It describes how multiple, overlapping forms of inequality operate simultaneously and are not just the sum of their parts. With each layer that is included in one's identity, there is also an awareness of one's social positionality in relation to the systemic hierarchy that is needed.

The controlling policies that discriminate against and subjugate people who possess a uterus and the rest of the LGBTQ+ community have a direct relationship to the increase in violent victimizations of queer PGMs. One important piece of legislation to discuss is the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It was introduced and intended to determine "rules of general applicability—that substantially burden a person's religious exercise" according to the congress website. It has been enacted by each state differently, but it has given more discriminatory interpretations the space to emerge. From 2015 to 2017, there were a number of proposed bills that permitted the refusal of service to different identities on the basis of moral or religious beliefs. This included marriage rights, adoption through government and private agencies, hiring practices, access to healthcare services, and more. In Illinois, the 99th General Assembly Senate Bill 2164 of 2015 outlined a restriction on state and local government from taking action against one who has the religious belief or moral conviction that marriage is only between a man and a woman, and that sexuality should reflect that. This proposal directly conflicted with the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision in favor of permitting same-sex marriage from the same year.

As the years progressed to 2018, there was a bit less legal activity compared to the previous years. There were some measures enacted, such as Oklahoma's Senate Bill 1140, which allowed adoption agencies to refuse services based on moral or religious values. Regardless of orientation, this prevented thousands of families from adopting. There was a small success with New Hampshire's House Bill 1319, expanding nondiscrimination protections. Remaining bills from the year were either left in committee, failed, or expired with the end of the legislative sessions, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

Later on in the Spring of 2019, the legislative activity around LGBTQ+ rights steadily increased. Many of the proposed bills reached key decision points. There were a large number of proposals offering incomplete non-discrimination protections and/or broad religious exemptions. With Tennessee enacting Senate Bill 1297 that restricted people's access to certain facilities based on their sex assigned at birth. Even when laws are debated rather than passed, they often amplify stigmatizing narratives by framing LGBTQ+ identities as controversial or illegitimate. This can reinforce people's existing biases and embolden the individuals who already hold discriminatory views. This increases the likelihood of harassment or violence towards marginalized groups. Legislation shapes the public discourse. When policymakers introduce or support measures that target marginalized groups, it can signal to the public that discrimination is institutionally acceptable, and this is a constant theme. The policy changes and other proposals from the surrounding years enforced the political foundation for a discriminatory social atmosphere.

But what happens as a result of that social atmosphere? Beginning with a study that analyzed the

National Crime Victimization Survey from 2017 to 2019, their results stated, “We find SGMs are disproportionately more likely to be victims of violent crime than non-SGM people”. The National Crime Victimization Survey is a sweeping collection of victim-based response data from all over the country. The benefit of referencing datasets like this is that it includes both reported and non-reported crimes. This provides those who may have had an unsuccessful or challenging time reporting their experiences a chance to be counted. The study showed information on many intersectional identities that was consistent with the social and political environment at the time. “When considering race/ethnicity, results show that Black (non-Hispanic) LGBT people have the highest rates of victimization overall, followed by Hispanic.” As I’ve previously described, this is the same historical phenomenon that has disproportionately impacted the Black community and PGMs. In more recent years, we can see the rippling political effects on queer PGMs. A 2024 report from the New York State Comptroller shows that hate crimes in New York rose sharply over a five-year span. There were a total of 1,089 reported incidents in 2023. When you consider that these are only the reported incidents, from a state typically considered blue, the number is even more shocking. When you consider there are only about 1,000,000 queer people in New York State, many of whom are not Black nor of the Global majority, the number is even more shocking. This represented a 69% increase in comparison to the reported incidents of 2019, indicative of a significant upward trend in the bias-related violence across the state. The crimes and incidents that were motivated by sexual orientation and gender identity made up nearly 17% of all the cases reported.

There are fluctuations in crime statistics just as there are with everything else, but the overarching theme that emerges shows that discriminatory policies reinforce and uplift discriminatory ideals. When there is a pattern of legislation that is meant to work against a community, the social atmosphere reflects it. Discussing the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community is challenging in different ways than with racial status. Racially, you are in the box that the person seeing you puts you in. It is how the world perceives you. It is an unmoving pillar of your identity because that is what America has instructed. There is infinite variability in people's experiences in their racial group, but these variances are rarely given the same acknowledgement. When a layer of oppression is added, there is a level of awareness that must be gained as well. Looking at the through-lines of victimization, the people at the highest risk for these incidents are queer PGMs.

The media portrayal of marginalized groups, policy, and changes to education censors the parts of our reality that they exist in. This heavily influences the group of people living in America, regardless of political orientation or identity. Periodically, we are given examples of how the layers of oppression compound, and yet those with marginalized identities aren’t given the tools to address it. The people within oppressed groups often have a distorted sense of self based on the societal perception of their identity.

It creates a miasma of justifiable bias towards communities. *It acts as a veil that you cannot see unless looking in a mirror.*

#### **Thesis 4: Non-Black PGMs and Triple Consciousness**

Some suggest that white people have no racial consciousness at all. It has been studied. We know how to navigate that. There is also an explicit presence of a binary color line, sometimes white versus POC, sometimes Black versus non-Black. People know how to navigate that. Where do (hetero normative) non-Black People of Color within the Global Majority fit into this?

Dubois describes a double consciousness as referenced in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this work, Dubois discusses the inherent survival method of seeing yourself through others' eyes that African-Americans must have, and other aspects of oppression. *There is a separation or “veil” described between the Black and white members of society. This veil represents a mental barrier in the way that white people interact with Black people, preventing them from recognizing their own position in a system that benefits them.* He recognizes that the Black people who are affected differently by those systems can either be found assimilating to the values of whiteness or critique it. Dubois also emphasized the same need for education that Freire discussed with conscientization

Based on Intersectionality, I would develop this idea further to explain Non-Black PGMs and/or heteronormative people. What if there is room for a triple consciousness? Not Black obscured from white, but a liminal space where Non-Black POCs have a choice. Identify with blackness and feel the full power of white supremacy. Or cuddle up to whiteness and cling to it for safety. This dilemma of seeing yourself

through the eyes of others is a bit different with a triple consciousness. You have a choice. Since there is a deeply rooted element of anti-blackness within cultures internationally, it is necessary for Non-Black people in marginalized communities to be aware of not only the dominant white supremacist culture, but also the anti-blackness in their own culture as a result of this colonialism, and the unique struggles that follow with each layer of their identity outside of blackness or whiteness. I emphasize the importance of this order because, without first deconstructing the anti-blackness in your own identity, you cannot move on to deconstructing the other layers of oppression.

An example of the function of triple consciousness is the general public's reaction to ICE as a law enforcement agency versus other institutions like the police. Historically, police violence has been an extremely oppressive force on the Black community in America. Yet, the public reception of ICE as an agency is critical in ways that do not translate to the public's attitude towards police. This difference could be explained by the people who are being targeted and the depictions of violence are being publicized. Richie states, "The idea that the collective wisdom of people with shared experiences is the most accurate source of data is a frequently added element of the notion of how important everyday knowledge is" (pg. 130), highlighting the value in what is already within us. My interpretation of this quote's importance in this case is that she is reiterating a Black Feminist value of collectivism that applies to PGM. The things that people discuss on an everyday basis about their lives and memorable events are comparable to collegiate textbooks in validity. And in this case, it's about the awareness of the proximity to whiteness; in the inherent safety and privilege it provides, along with the degradation of cultural identity that it perpetuates as a condition of its benefits. This is why recognizing the value of a tool like collective wisdom and how it can be used to make change is so important. All told, the combination of white supremacy and heteronormativity not only oppresses, but divides.

## **Conclusion**

After addressing the prominent social issues, the question of what the next steps to take arises. In our current environment, deconstructing the influence of the dominant social hierarchy can be modeled through the praxis of Black feminist principles and my notion of the triple consciousness. In western psychology, there is social learning theory. But what it really means is that the observation of others and modeling behavior are essential for people's learning. Learning can happen at any moment simply by watching the people around you and the actions they take. We see this exemplified by the number of marginalized people who perpetuate the ideals that oppress them. It is learned. The people who uphold harmful stereotypes learned to think the way they do from their environment. So if we change the way that people learn and the way they are able to think, we would be able to access new methods to address issues like the violent victimization of queer PGMs. Through this manifesto, I have asserted 4 theses about *Violence Against the Global Majority* that are based on the analysis of victimization patterns and social conditions. If you agree with what I have laid out, highlighting the throughlines of Black feminism and social psychology, then the conclusion that we would come to together is that we need triple consciousness activated for liberation and not as a survival strategy. We need an intersectional process that finds the gaps in the ways we serve our queer PGMs. As Patricia Hill Collins beautifully stated, "Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them" (pg.39). Just as Black Feminism, there is no triple consciousness without change. The pursuit of knowledge is non-negotiable. One who rejects that pursuit is shamefully rejecting an intrinsic part of themselves. No one should claim to understand the victimization of queer PGMs without first accepting the triple consciousness because you can't begin to understand someone else's existence without considering your own.

*If you aren't taking action to lift your veil, I question if you are conscious at all.*

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**Faith as Empire: A Manifesto on  
Religion, Control, and Community**

Ashley Marquez

**Prologue**

The sermon begins beneath studio lights,  
each bulb a sun ordained by production.  
A gospel of slogans hums through the speakers,  
polished and punctual as policy.  
Hands rise on cue,  
praise rehearsed like choreography,  
faith broadcast in high definition.

The altar gleams with chrome and conviction,  
where once stood a table carved for hunger.  
Now the bread is branded,  
the wine imported,  
and every blessing bears a watermark.

The verses have been edited for efficiency.  
Parables trimmed to fit the frame.  
Even the silence has been scored  
a pause for applause,  
a break for advertisement.

In this liturgy of control,  
obedience masquerades as devotion.  
Freedom becomes a slogan for compliance,  
salvation, a trademark in fine print.  
The preacher's cadence thunders like empire,  
righteousness dressed in rhetoric,  
doctrine distilled into policy.

The crowd kneels before a promise  
that never meant to free them.  
The air itself bends with persuasion,  
thick with the perfume of certainty.

And somewhere, far beyond the broadcast range,  
a whisper still remembers dust,  
remembers a touch that healed without condition,  
a voice that spoke of love  
without a podium.

.....

If there is one thing I've learned after nearly two decades of living in communities shaped by Pentecostal and conservative Christian churches, it's this: faith is rarely just faith. Even at its best, it functions as a structure of control. That's a harsh thing to say, but it's true. Religion, in these communities, does more than shape belief. It shapes behavior, identity, families, and entire communities. And in minority communities, where systemic inequities already exist, the burden of this control is often heavier, more insidious, and profoundly personal.

Growing up, I noticed the sermons first. The lights, the microphones, the perfectly choreographed applause: it was ALL theater. Not theater meant to inspire reflection or critical thought, but theater designed to ensure compliance. Every gesture, every tear, every repetition of the “right” words signaled belonging. Obedience became performance. Performance became identity. Identity became survival.

Survival of the fittest.

.....

**Part One, The Word**

In the beginning was silence.  
And silence was not enough.  
So language was carved from fear,  
shaped into doctrine, sharpened into rule.

The ink was still wet  
when authority spoke its first prayer.  
Letters became chains,  
and scripture, a blueprint for obedience.  
Those who could not read were taught to bow;  
those who could were taught to lead.

The Word promised light  
but delivered order.  
It sanctified kings,  
absolved their wars,  
and wrote mercy into margins  
small enough to overlook.

Every syllable bloomed into judgment,  
every verse a stone in the foundation of control.  
The prophets were replaced with translators,  
their tongues washed clean of rebellion.  
Meaning was measured,  
cut to fit the mouth of power.

In time, even truth forgot its sound.  
The holy tongue spoke only in imperatives,  
its vowels gilded, its consonants exact.

And faith!  
That tender, trembling thing  
was pressed into the parchment,  
flattened between the lines.

Thus the Word became law,  
and the law, unchallengeable.  
The voice of creation,  
now a decree.  
The Father’s echo  
rewritten to command,

remembered not as breath,  
but as a border.

.....

The Word came first. Before the altar, before ritual. Far before identity. And from the first, it was never truly neutral. Language is destiny and words are power, after all. Scriptural syllables, repeated and memorized, were treated as an unchallengeable sort of law. Those who could not read were taught to bow, and those who could were taught to lead others in compliance.

I've seen this happen. There is much that I have witnessed in my short time here. Children memorizing passages they could barely understand, yet internalizing them as moral imperatives. Families teaching obedience as virtue, care as a secondary concern. Community members monitor one another for lapses in faith, policing speech, behavior, and even thought. Sociologists call this symbolic power, the capacity of language and ritual to shape social reality. Foucault calls it disciplinary power: the subtle, pervasive ways that norms are instilled, self-policing is enforced, and dissent is contained.

This Word promises liberation, but often delivers conformity. It sanctifies authority, punishes deviation, and molds identities before they have a chance to form. And in minority communities, this process is compounded. Speaking a home language other than English becomes a marker of difference, a potential threat. Questioning doctrine can bring ostracism or shame. Expressing cultural identity outside the prescribed norms is interpreted as rebellion. Children absorb compliance before curiosity. Parents absorb judgment before love. Communities absorb doctrine before humanity.

Even at its purest, the Word can be weaponized. Verses meant to inspire love are cited to enforce discipline. Passages meant to cultivate empathy are used to justify exclusion. Authority hides behind scripture, scripture becomes law, and law is presented as divine.

The Word, in practice, is not just faith. It is governance.

.....

### **Part 2, The Flesh**

And the Word was made visible,  
poured into stone and circuitry,  
draped in robes of light.  
Hands once lifted in mercy  
learned to bless through glass and broadcast.

The altar grew teeth.  
It devoured the faithful one tithe at a time,  
spitting out gold and slogans.  
Salvation began accepting donations,  
and the miracle of bread  
was rebranded as enterprise.

Faith was no longer a pulse,  
it was a platform.

A body formed from applause and fear,  
every gesture rehearsed,  
every prayer monetized.  
Grace took on flesh  
and signed a contract.

The choir sang louder to fill the hollow,  
their hymns competing with advertisements for eternity.  
The preacher's mouth glowed like a forge,  
shaping words into weapons,  
melting scripture into policy.

Behold the temple, alive and consuming.  
A body swollen with sanctity,  
veins lined with silver,  
heart pulsing with power.  
It feeds on the very souls it promises to save.

And the people look upon its gleam  
and call it divine.  
They do not see the seams,  
the trembling of the thing beneath its skin.

The Flesh walks among the masses,  
not to heal,  
but to be seen.  
And the light that falls upon its face  
no longer warms.

.....

Next comes the Flesh. The Word, when embodied, becomes performance. Hands lifted, voices raised, tears shed are all signs of devotion and compliance. Pentecostalism, in particular, has perfected this: emotion as evidence, physicality as proof, visible devotion as membership. Trembling before the altar signals faith.

Crying, shouting, dancing *must* be evidence that the system works. A distant stranger, Durkheim, would call this collective effervescence. But here, it's engineered, orchestrated, performed. Children learn to cry at the right time. Adults learn to clap and cheer at the right time as well. Communities become self-policing.

Ritual becomes regulation. The Flesh is both worship and measurement.

And in America, the Flesh becomes spectacle. Faith is nationalized, racialized, politicized. The altar may be an altar to God, but it is equally an altar to the flag, to patriotism, to the myth of the "good Christian citizen." The religious body becomes a symbol of morality and obedience. Even sincere acts of devotion are repurposed to serve the machinery of cultural control.

I remember the church where I spent Sunday mornings as a child. Families arrived in matching outfits, children fidgeting in choreographed rows, parents nodding as though every eye in the room was watching them. Tears were expected. Confession was expected. Devotion, if performed incorrectly, could become cause for public correction or quiet shame. I watched children struggle to reconcile their natural curiosity and defiance with the strict choreography of obedience. I watched parents bend under the weight of expectations imposed not only by God, but by the community itself.

Even at its most benevolent, the Flesh is dangerous. It disciplines and it codifies. It has no other goal than to socialize compliance. And when minority families enter this environment, the tension doubles: the weight of belonging collides with the weight of marginalization. A family might be praised for their faith, but simultaneously punished, subtly or openly, for their difference. Obedience becomes survival; deviation becomes risk.

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**Part 3, The Revelation**

Scripture has been edited in marble,  
each verse trimmed to suit the crown.  
What was once a table for the hungry  
has been refinished into a throne.  
Beneath it, the crumbs still gleam faintly,  
memory of a meal that fed without price.

The name lingers like incense-  
sweet, choking, everywhere.  
It rises from banners, from coins,  
from the lips of those who trade grace for votes.  
Each syllable a currency,  
each prayer a contract.

Somewhere, the fields where forgiveness once bloomed  
have been paved into parking lots for temples.  
The shepherd's crook has turned to scepter,  
and mercy now comes with a receipt.

The prophets are quiet,  
their mouths full of gold dust.  
The choirs sing to empty skies,  
and the silence that answers  
is mistaken for approval.

Still, in the cracks of the cathedrals,  
in the ruins of every televised benediction,  
a faint hum remains.  
Sound of truth refusing burial,  
the sound of a kingdom that never asked for walls.

.....

The embodiment of belief turned into social machinery, scripture has been edited, polished, and repurposed not to feed the soul, but to feed power. Every verse is measured to suit crowns, agendas, and political narratives. What was once a table for the hungry has been refinished into a throne. Beneath it, crumbs still gleam faintly: a memory of a meal that fed without price, a reminder of what faith might have been.

And yet, the world built upon that faith rises almost like incense, sweet, choking, unavoidable. It ascends from banners, coins, microphones, and the lips of those who trade grace for influence. Every syllable becomes currency. Every prayer becomes a contract. The language of salvation is now the language of obligation, the medium through which obedience is purchased, measured, and enforced.

Somewhere, fields that once bloomed with forgiveness, compassion, and mercy have been paved over. Churches now sit on concrete, asphalt, or digital screens. Beneath the gleam of altars and podiums, the shepherd's crook has turned into a scepter. Mercy, once freely given, now comes with a receipt, a disclaimer, a ledger line. The prophets are quiet. Their mouths are full of gold dust. Choirs sing, but the skies remain as empty as their verses, and silence is mistaken for approval.

Families bend, children shrink, communities internalize surveillance and compliance as ritual. Minority communities, already navigating the weight of systemic inequities, are forced to perform devotion while simultaneously negotiating other forms of oppression: racial marginalization, cultural erasure, socioeconomic precarity. The altar is not neutral. It literally cannot be because it is a stage, a measuring stick, a site where morality, obedience, and social worth are monitored and codified.

And yet, in the cracks of cathedrals, in the ruins of televised benedictions and social media sermons, a faint hum persists. The sound of truth refusing burial. The whisper of mercy that cannot be fully commodified. The flicker of possibility that faith might still, somehow, breathe freely. It is faint, fragile, and often ignored but it does exist. It reminds me that the kingdom that once asked for nothing now demands everything, yet even within the machinery, human agency and compassion persist.

The Revelation is not comforting, I think. It is a reckoning of sorts. A reflection of what faith becomes when language, ritual, and devotion are harnessed by power: a structure that polices, disciplines, and extracts, even from the most faithful. But it is also a reminder that faith is not inherently machinery. Even here, in the spaces of control, the whispers, the cracks, the unnoticed acts of resistance remind us that belief, care, and humanity cannot be fully silenced.

.....

## **Epilogue**

I've seen this play out in subtle and devastating ways. A child chastised for asking too much during Sunday school. A mother pressured to discipline her child in ways that felt unnatural and violent, simply because the church said it was holy. A family that gave all they had in tithes, only to see the preacher purchase new cars for his children. A teen struggling to reconcile desire, identity, and doctrine, constantly told that questioning God is questioning God's authority.

In a way, I too, have contributed to it all. I am not free of such a sin, it would seem.

But I've also seen resilience. I've seen whispered prayers, quiet acts of care, moments of doubt that are never punished but never celebrated. These are the fragments of what faith could have been, before it became infrastructure, before it became performance, before it became Empire.

All of these things leave marks. On children. On families. On communities. On identity itself. And those marks persist long after the sermons end, the lights dim, and the stage is cleared. For me, growing up in this world has been a constant negotiation. Between obedience and self-expression, between love and fear, between cultural identity and imposed identity. Between faith and autonomy as well. I have witnessed families fracture, communities conform, children shrink, parents bend. I have witnessed hope diverted into ritualized performance. And yet, I also recognize those small resistances. They remind me that faith is not

inherently machinery, not inherently discipline. Faith is, at its core, human. Compassionate. Loving. Vulnerable.

This manifesto is my reflection, my protest, my reckoning. Even when faith is wielded as empire, even when doctrine and ritual serve control, there are cracks. And in those cracks, humanity persists, as does possibility. Resistance, indeed, persists.

Faith was never meant to be infrastructure. It was meant to be human, vulnerable, alive.

And in the smallest acts of resistance, it still is.

## About the Authors

**Aqsa Ahmed** is a 21-year-old, first generation, Pakistani American Muslim studying law at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. She is pursuing a Political Science degree with a double minor in Anthropology and Sociology. Her academic interests include immigration policy, criminal law, and the impact of systemic inequality on marginalized communities. Her paper, *Immigration Raids and Family Separations in the U.S. Border*, examines how immigration enforcement has become increasingly criminalized and how these policies harm children and families. She wrote this to raise awareness about the human and emotional consequences of family separation and to highlight the need for more humane, community-based solutions. She plans to attend law school and pursue a career advocating for justice and policy reform.

**Veronica Agard (Ifáşadùn Fásanmí) (she/her)** is a poet, writer, community educator, and connector at the intersections of Black identity, wellness, representation, and culture. She curated the Who Heals the Healer series and the conference of the same name, and facilitates the Ancestors in Training™ educational project. A joy defender and space holder for over 10 years, she wants to be remembered as a force of nature who created sites of healing. Veronica's debut book, *Ancestors in Training: An Abòrişà's Guide to Lineage Work, Healing Praxis, and Black Diasporic Memory*, is out next year with North Atlantic Books.

**Xytara Astaphan** is a Caribbean American writer and third-year criminology student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Her writing is rooted in emotion, identity, and the experience of growing up as a first-generation Caribbean woman. She often explores themes of mental health, love, culture and self-discovery, using her words as a way to give voice to feelings that are often left unspoken. For Xytara, writing is more than an assignment; it is a form of release, reflection, and healing. This is her first publication, and she hopes to continue creating work that not only tells stories, but allows others to feel seen, understood, and connected.

**Madison S. Blount** is double majoring for BA in Criminal Justice Studies as well as a BA in Psychology. She will be graduating Spring 2026

**KimNgan Diep** is a postbaccalaureate scholar at San Francisco State University. KimNgan earned a BA in Criminal Justice Studies and will soon receive an MA in International Relations.

**Liberty Dixon** is a second year undergraduate student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice studying Political Science and Sociology. Having been born to a family with a long history of military and intelligence careers, she has discovered an affinity for breaking down the patriotic ideology that the United States instills in its citizens. In a passionate effort to address the state of education and truth, Dixon explores anti-intellectualism and its impact on marginalized communities in the States—her first publication of what she hopes to be many. In the words of James Bladwin: “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

**Fiona Engstad** is a student at San Francisco State University, majoring in Psychology, Criminal Justice, and Political Science. Fiona also works as an intern at Project Rebound and as a mental healthcare professional at Mind Therapy Clinic. Fiona plans to apply principles of psychology in order to make positive change within law and government policy.

**Florian Griese** is a critical criminologist studying criminology, psychology, interdisciplinary studies, gender studies and economics at John Jay College in New York City. She specializes in state crimes, police misconduct, war crimes, Palestine, the influence of colonial and neo-colonial structures and the capitalist mode of production on crime and society, prison abolition and alternatives to the current approaches of the criminal legal system. For the future, she aims to further her

economics studies and to create interdisciplinary knowledge beyond the limitations of the narrow approach of singular academic fields.

**Allen Jiang** is a sophomore at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, majoring in Sociology and minoring in Economics and Spanish Legal Translation. His first publication, "How the Privatization of Carceral Systems Perpetuates Mass Incarceration," inspired by Angela Y. Davis' book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, focuses on the prison-industrial complex and how companies exploit and profit from marginalized communities in incarceration. From an abolitionist perspective, he hopes his research contributes to future policy when it comes to how we can end the prison-industrial complex, mass incarceration, and foster restorative community justice programs.

**Carolina Kent** is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice and a minor in Prison Reentry Studies. Inspired by the lived experience of an individual she met through **SFSU's Project Rebound**, her research investigates the systemic intersection of mental health and the carceral state, specifically within the Los Angeles County jail system. Through her work, she seeks to bridge the gap between criminal justice and public health to ensure individuals in crisis receive care rather than confinement.

**Danielle Key** is an undergraduate student at John Jay College, majoring in sociology and criminology with minors in community justice and psychology. Her research examines how oppressive social structures and institutions harm Black womxn. Her work is grounded in Black feminist thought, critical criminology, abolition feminism, critical sociology, the Black radical tradition, and many more theoretical frameworks. Through her scholarship, she seeks to challenge dominant narratives and center marginalized voices. After completing her undergraduate studies, Danielle plans to pursue a PhD in Sociology and continue her research in Black feminist abolition.

**Ramon Leclerc** is a 4th year minor majoring in Sociology and native New Yorker. Ramon has a passion for social justice and equality for all. Ramon's piece is an interview conducted with Ramon by a peer exploring Ramon's experience in the foster care system through a sociology lens. Ramon hopes to destigmatize people who experience the foster care system with his piece. Ramon hopes to continue his education after earning his bachelor's by earning a master's degree in Public Policy. Ramon will continue to fight for social justice for all.

**Vi Lee** (they/them) was born and raised on unceded Wampanoag land (Boston, MA) and currently lives in Yelamu (San Francisco). They are a student at San Francisco State University, working toward Bachelor's degrees in Political Science and Asian American Studies. Vi is of mixed Chinese and Italian Sicilian ancestry and holds their ancestors central with all the work that they do, understanding their family's migratory history as it relates to settler colonialism of Turtle Island and Western imperialism at large. They began organizing in high school around Ethnic Studies principles and the inclusion of Asian American histories within school curriculum as it relates to resisting the model minority myth. They continued organizing at SFSU with the Student Union, working on resisting the budget and class cuts as well as the university's OpenAI contract, and former financial investments in weapon manufacturing companies. Vi could not be where they are without the support and guidance of others, especially faculty in the Race and Resistance Studies Department at SFSU, namely Dr. Leora Kava and Gopal Dayaneni, as well as Teresa Pratt, James Martel, Dr. Albert de la Tierra, and many more.

**Kim Lonzo** is a recent B.A. graduate of the City University of New York's (CUNY) Graduate Center Baccalaureate for Unique and Interdisciplinary Studies program, a recipient of the prestigious CUNY Graduate Center's Thomas W. Smith Fellowship, and a returning author to the ARCJS. With access to hundreds of courses from within the CUNY system, Kim chose John Jay College of Criminal Justice to craft his degree program which draws from three disciplines: dispute resolution, sociology and psychology. He believes that effective advocacy for others requires an understanding of how we see ourselves, how we

think others see us and how we communicate our wants and needs to each other. At John Jay College, Kim distinguished himself as the lead mentor with the ACE-My Brother's Keeper Connect Summer Program, an Obama Foundation initiative. This student success program aims to support men of color as they navigate the challenges of entering college. There, he spearheaded an innovative training for fourteen mentors using restorative justice practices and group facilitation skills. Kim's specialized programming supported over 140 mentees' academic, emotional, and career development as well as established a connection that will greatly improve their chances of college completion. A veteran of the United States Air Force, Kim has proudly served as a member of the John Jay Student Council, volunteered as a Court Navigator with the New York State Court's Access to Justice Program, and is a certified Divorce Mediator. Kim will bring his skills and knowledge to law school in the Fall of 2026. He wants to work in public interest law where he will focus on underserved communities as a legal advocate and researcher.

**Nat Marberry** is an undergraduate scholar at San Francisco State University. Nat is double majoring in Criminal Justice Studies and Psychology.

**Ariana Martinez** is a first-generation college student who is set to graduate from San Francisco State University in Spring 2026. She is pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice with a minor in Early Childhood Development. Although these fields may seem distinct, her academic and professional interests intersect through a shared commitment to advocating for youth involved in or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Throughout her undergraduate experience, Ariana has engaged in community outreach by visiting local schools to educate young people about the law and their rights, reinforcing her dedication to prevention and empowerment. Her research, titled "Examining the Long-Term Effects of California's Inmate Fire Camp Program: Recidivism, Employment, and Rehabilitation Results," was inspired by news coverage and social media depicting incarcerated firefighters on the front lines of wildfires. This coverage sparked her interest in a more critical examination of the program. Ariana's work analyzes how systemic barriers, particularly the lack of recognized certifications and employment pathways, limit successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals, despite their essential contributions. While the program may reduce short-term recidivism, her research highlights that long-term outcomes are undermined by structural inequalities that restrict employment opportunities. As a result, Ariana advocates for policy reforms that include fair wages, accessible certification pathways, and stronger reentry support systems to ensure that individuals who risk their lives in wildfire suppression have equitable opportunities upon release.

**Ashley Márquez** is an undergraduate student majoring in Law & Society at the John Jay College campus. Proud of her Salvadoran heritage, her writing often focuses on matters affecting the Latino community. The writing within "Faith As Empire" comes from her experience with religion, community, politics, and identity all tangled into one complex issue. Despite writing being more of a pastime for her, Marquez takes pride in this first published piece and has hopes that it resonates with those who share similar experiences within today's confusing, and often contradictory, world.

**Shania McCombs** is an International Criminal Justice major with a minor in Human Rights. Photography has always been a friend of hers; at her middle school's club fair, the table displaying different cameras and lenses piqued her interest. When she picked up a camera, it was heavy but warm. She shares, "As I looked through the viewfinder the room around me, which previously seemed so colorless, had become saturated. Although the lens could barely fit in my hands, I held onto it for dear life, for I didn't want the liveliness of the very scene to dissipate. At that moment, my narrative crafted behind the lens had started. From protests and museums to the kitchen of my house, I had documented not only my life but the experiences of complete strangers. I captured many emotions that were shown in different forms: laughter at sweet sixteens, the chants that fill the streets filled with grief and liberation, and the silence of exhibits showcasing the strokes of an individual fully engulfed in their craft. I have taken steps to highlight movements that shatter societal norms and to enhance the beauty of communities that shaped the scene that had made me pick up the camera in the first place. In this journal, I'm sharing this vision with you."

**Anna Morin** is a Forensic Psychology BA/MA student with a minor in Creative Writing at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Originally from the woods of Maine, Morin now resides in New York City with her three cats. She is interested in how popular media influences perceptions of the criminal justice system and justice impacted individuals, as well as finding ways to help reduce recidivism in the correctional system. This is Morin's first publication, and she hopes to have many more as she pursues a career in research and academia.

**Neftaly Paredes:** Neftaly Paredes was born and raised in San Francisco in a Spanish speaking household, and is a first-generation college graduate along with her older brother. She grew up with both her parents, who came to the U.S from Mexico during the 90s. She and her brother were raised in the southeast side of the city. Despite its reputation, her community is multi-cultural, hardworking, and beautiful. Growing up, she and her family would see inequity and face discrimination due to their background as Latinos. With the support she received from her family, teachers, and community, she decided to pursue higher education and become the first person in her family to get a double major.

**Kayleen Rivera** is a Manhattan-born Puerto Rican writer and psychology student at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Whose work explores identity, culture, and social inequality. Raised in public housing, she writes about growing up in the projects while navigating code-switching, the perceptions vs. reality of NYCHA, and community dynamics. Her lived experiences shape her academic interests in understanding trauma, systemic inequality, and misinformation about public housing. She blends personal narrative with research to highlight overlooked voices and challenge assumptions about marginalized communities. Through her work, she aims to bridge lived experience with psychological research and advocate for more inclusive, accessible support systems.

**Margo Salomons** is an Afro-Puerto Rican woman and a graduating Forensic Psychology student with a Health and Wellness Minor. Their work in this journal is a manifesto titled Violence Against the Global Majority: Intersectional Perspectives, is a description of the struggles that marginalized communities in the US face, and the benefit of using black feminist ideology to expand the way that we think about them.