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How Racial Profiling Robs Black People of Freedom

Racist assumptions infringe upon the liberties afforded to others



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Photo of young Black man wearing a hoodie | Photo by hamdi films via Pexels

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, the same can be said about threat perception. Someone who seems perfectly harmless to some may face scrutiny from others. For instance, Black people are stereotyped as more

likely to engage in criminal behavior, which robs them of the freedoms afforded to others. In February 2012, Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager wearing a hoodie, walked to a nearby convenience store to buy a pack of Skittles and an Arizona tea but never made it home. A neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, spotted him in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, and called the police to report seeing a "suspicious" person. Contrary to guidance from the 911 operator, he followed the 17-year-old, confronted him, and initiated a deadly physical altercation. What began as a baseless assumption ended in tragedy.

Still, more than a decade after Trayvon Martin's death, a case that for many triggered discussions about the harm of racist assumptions, many continue to believe the trope that a Black teenager wearing a hoodie is more likely to engage in criminal behavior. This viewpoint overlooks many legitimate reasons someone might cover their head, ears, and neck outside the home. In the fall and winter, many people wear outerwear to keep warm. But some physicians also encourage patients with severe allergies to cover themselves regardless of the season, such as by wearing a jacket, scarf, hoodie, or sweater. And of course, hoodies are a popular piece of modern fashion, and some take on special significance if they have their high school or college mascot, business name, or sports team logo on them. Sadly, Black people, particularly young people who wear hoodies, often face discrimination for wearing them.

If Black people in America were truly free, they wouldn't be frequently subjected to racial profiling by members of law enforcement and others. Yet this discriminatory practice of stopping, questioning, and even harming Black people whom they assume are criminals is a pervasive problem that infringes upon their rights. The Fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is supposed to protect citizens from unreasonable searches and seizures, but Black people are disproportionately affected by stop-and-frisk policies. According to the Stanford Open Policing Project, "officers generally stop black drivers at higher rates than white drivers and stop Hispanic drivers at similar or lower rates than white drivers (Simoiu et al., 2017)." Under these conditions, Black people are not granted the same freedom of mobility to walk, jog, run, or drive without the risk of triggering someone's suspicion.

One of the most iconic symbols of chattel slavery was the shackles placed on the arms and legs of enslaved Black people. While these metal links and locks served as a literal representation of their bondage, these physical restraints were not the only aspect of their condition. Indeed, some did not wear chains but were bound by the threat of violence. During the chattel slavery era, Black people did not have the freedom to read and write, to choose who they'd marry or have children without facing the constant threat

of family separation, or to earn wages for their labor and thus accumulate wealth they could use or pass on. In addition to the metal chains, the intangible effects of slavery, including their mistreatment, weighed them down just as much as any wrought-iron shackles. The knowledge of freedom was tied to their actual freedom. As the formerly enslaved woman Harriet Jacobs wrote in her autobiography, “the slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be chattel.” After developing an understanding of slavery, they felt its harmful effects. This spark of understanding also occurs in the modern era, as Black people who’ve endured racial profiling become acutely aware of the limited nature of their freedom.

While America formally abolished slavery at the end of the Civil War through Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th Amendment, Black people are still subjected to racism. Simple goals such as “making groceries,” attending doctor’s appointments, or traveling to school or work can be interrupted by baseless assumptions about their character. Black people are routinely followed around stores, questioned and searched, and, as the case of Trayvon Martin illustrates, sometimes someone thinking they look “suspicious” can lead to a violent, deadly altercation. The belief that Black people are more likely to engage in criminal behavior deprives them of the peace and security afforded to others.

In a recent example of racial profiling, narcotics detective Tyson Havens stopped Jessie Lopez Jr., an 18- year- old Black teenager, on July 8 th in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The officer deemed him “suspicious” for wearing a hoodie in the summer. Later, Jessie explained that he had severe eczema that flares when he’s exposed to direct sunlight. As a result, he often wore his hoodie to protect himself, not to disguise himself as the officer assumed. This incident highlights how society overly scrutinizes the behavior of Black people. During the search, the detective found no drugs, guns, or other illegal substances. Rather than offering an apology, the officer still charged Lopez with jaywalking.

When Atlanta Blackstar reporters questioned District Attorney Tom Marino about this case, his response revealed prejudice associated with support for stop-and-frisk policies. He claimed that “in the black community… there’ s no supervision of the kids,” and that in most cases “the father’ s gone… the mother unfortunately has half a dozen kids.” His response highlights the commonly held presumption that Black families are dysfunctional compared to White families. This characterization is often used to justify the disproportionate rate at which police officers stop and search Black people.

Those in positions of power argue that these tactics are necessary to maintain safety and order.

Contrary to Marino's statement that Black mothers typically have "half a dozen" children, Black families in America have approximately 2.1 to 2.5 children, according to the Pew Research Center. Furthermore, a Social Science Quarterly report found that Black fathers "shared responsibilities more frequently and displayed more effective coparenting than Hispanic and White fathers " (Ellerbe et al., 2018). So, the description of Black homes as overcrowded spaces where Black children are neglected is unfounded. Sadly, the background noise, the racist assumptions about Black people and their families, is often much louder than the signal. When stereotypes are endorsed, they drown out the positive characteristics of a group of people.

Some believe that "time heals all wounds," but Black people are not wholly free from prejudice in our society despite the passage of time. Due to a loophole in the 13th Amendment, which permits involuntary servitude for those convicted of a crime, between 260,000 and 300,000 Black Americans are subjected to compulsory prison labor. This estimate is based on the total population of incarcerated prison laborers under threat of forced labor, as documented by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), multiplied by the Black incarceration rate provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) (1,200,000 x 0.80 x 0.3.24 ≈ 309,120). Black people are more likely to be

wrongfully convicted of crimes, and as a result, this estimate includes not just the guilty but the innocent as well, unjustly deprived of their freedom. Nina Mast, an analyst for the Economic Policy Institute, argued, "incarcerated labor is rooted in slavery and bears an especially striking resemblance in the South."

When it comes to racist assumptions, they're more than unkind. Indeed, they limit the social, economic, and political mobility of Black Americans, and to some degree other racial or ethnic minorities. While America's criminal justice system is often presented as a race-neutral mecca in the post-civil rights era, racial bias and prejudice persist, diminishing their liberty. It is not easy to dislodge racism from our society, because it was not casually included, but rather foundational to the republic. But racial profiling has harmful implications for Black people. And unlike physical shackles that can be felt confining wrists and ankles, this bondage is of a different kind. It is felt through the scrutiny of a night watchman, an officer, or even a neighbor who believes simply being Black and wearing a hoodie is suspicious.

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