

**Institutional racism in the United States:**  
**Its origins, persistence, and impacts on social mobility**

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# **1 Introduction**

Racism is a form of discrimination against people of a different race or ethnicity, most commonly against the minority groups within a population. Institutional racism, also known as systemic racism, refers to discrimination that “is structured in the organisational culture, fabric and practices within institutions” (Patel, 2022, p. 93). In other words, it is discrimination that manifests at the institutional or societal level instead of from the actions of select individuals, as opposed to general racism. A survey conducted by U.S. News & World Report (2021) ranked the United States as the 11<sup>th</sup> worst country for racial equality. Despite the traction of recent racial equality movements, such as the “Black Lives Matter” campaign, the situation has not improved significantly (Malik, 2020). Patel (2022) attributed the persistence of institutional racism to discrimination being more subtle and embedded, making its manifestations harder to spot and pinpoint. This essay aims to analyse how institutional racism in the United States originated, why it persists, and how it affects racial minorities’ social mobility.

Due to the America-centric scope of this essay, terminology such as “black” and “white” should primarily refer to African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans, respectively.

## **2 Catalysts of Institutional Racism**

### **2.1 Origins**

Historical ideologies of racialisation were a significant catalyst for the institutionalisation of discrimination. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ideologies promoting a social hierarchy based on race and other biological characteristics were mainstream (Patel, 2022). Europeans and Caucasian-Americans were classified as the superior race, while all non-whites were classified to be inferior. Alongside this ideology was the propagation of slavery. They acted as justification for the devaluation of the inferior race and further consolidated racialisation into the social construct (Patel, 2022).

Undoubtedly, such hierarchies provided immense advantages for whites. Bonilla-Silva (2021) argued that most acted racistly not because their intentions were racist but rather that such behaviour was normalised and habituated to be socially acceptable and became the path of least resistance; this effect was so dominant that it impelled even advocates of the Civil Right movement to become blatant racists and white supremacists later on, after failing to find success in their socio-political movements. Bonilla-Silva (2021) and Patel (2022) both commented that racist acts could induce similar acts, thus reproductive in this regard. They ascribed this snowball effect as the reason for racism’s propagation. Hence, racist ideologies were rapidly institutionalised in the form of segregation policies (Bonilla-Silva, 2021).

## **3 Persistence of Institutional Racism**

### **3.1 Unlikelihood of Change**

Institutional racism persists in the US because there is little incentive to abolish discriminatory conventions beneficial to the dominant community. Patel (2022, p. 92) noted that racism “[advances] the interests and privilege of dominant groups in society”. She called this “material determinism” since current material and privilege distribution dynamics determine that of the future. In addition, the dominant race tends to protect its privileges to

maintain a racial order (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). The nature of racism dictates that power is unlikely to escape from the dominant race.

Powell & Butterfield (1997) noticed that non-whites accounted for less than 1 percent of top US government management positions. The lack of representation is likely the primary culprit of policies seldom reflecting the voices of minorities. Their study discovered that although ethnicity did not directly affect the promotion decisions for such positions, it indirectly contributed to other vital variables negatively. Following the inauguration of Joe Biden as president, 23 percent of Congress members are non-whites; although a definite improvement, it still fails to adequately represent the 40 percent non-white population of the US (Schaeffer, 2021).

Moreover, Corak (2013) found that Americans' cultural and societal values are detrimental to attaining social mobility. He explained that intergenerational advantages are regarded as an "equality of opportunity" (p. 98), and policies that help only the disadvantaged would violate the principle of equality, thus unacceptable. He emphasised that these values "imply that it may be impossible, and indeed not even desirable, to change the degree of mobility" (p. 98). Few policies that significantly address inequality-related issues have been instituted as a combination of these factors.

### **3.2 Difficulties in Extermination**

Institutional racism is often downplayed or obfuscated, furthering the difficulties in its detection. An example would be blaming the actions of institutional racism on a rogue individual within the system (Patel, 2022). Additionally, trivial everyday acts of racism are often tricky, if not impossible, to investigate. Bonilla-Silva (2003, as cited in Bush, 2006) noted that whites often believed and reported themselves to be more race-neutral and racially accepting than they were.

Although a distinction between individual racism and institutional racism was made in the introduction, Bonilla-Silva (2021) argued that the distinction is not as well-defined since most individual acts of racism result from living in a culture saturated with discriminatory infrastructure. He further emphasised that everyone, including those discriminated against, is an actor of institutional racism and aids its growth to some extent. However, he highlighted the impossibility of completely exterminating institutional racism unless the delineation of the race could be entirely abandoned such that the concept of race and being a racist is eliminated in all contexts, including in academic or medical research.

## **4 Contemporary Impacts**

### **4.1 Housing Segregation**

Despite abolishing segregation policies in housing and education long ago, remnants of such discriminatory policies remain, resulting in intergenerational gaps between American racial groups. In the 1930s, federal programmes sectioned housing areas during suburban development to separate racial minorities from the rest of the population as a eugenic reproductive control measure (Lovett, 2020). This practice, known as "redlining", was made illegal by the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Hillier, 2003); however, the public perception has already been heavily influenced in the 30 years it was enforced.

Ellen (2000, as cited in Hwang & Sampson, 2014) noted that black neighbourhoods are perceived to have a lower quality, which compels white residents to leave the area, a phenomenon known as “white flight”. The gentrification rate of neighbourhoods begins to plummet significantly once the black population increases past around 40 percent, making such neighbourhoods an unworthy or risky investment which deters future investors (Hwang & Sampson, 2014); another study suggested that the threshold might be as low as 15 percent (Emerson et al., 2001). A report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2013) revealed that housing agencies show 11 percent fewer houses to black house-buyers, likely fearful that they may bring down the value of the neighbourhood. In tandem with this, insurance companies followed suit in the spirit of “redlining” and started labelling communities of colour as high-risk areas, which triggered an upsurge of insurance rates to unaffordable levels (Ansfield, 2021), further deterring buyers. Ellen (2000, as cited in Hwang & Sampson, 2014) also attributed the lack of investment appeal, known as “white avoidance”, to be the main reason for contemporary housing segregation. These practices effectively trap the black population within their communities and discourage residential racial integration.

## **4.2 Education Segregation**

Disparities in residence allocation directly translate into school funding and quality disparities, resulting in education segregation. Since children tend to study in schools near their neighbourhood, 76 percent of school segregation stems from neighbourhood segregation (Monarrez, 2018). Reminiscent of the dynamics of residential neighbourhoods, parents perceive schools with higher percentages of black students as having lower quality (Goyette et al., 2012); therefore, they are more inclined to choose schools with lower percentages of black students for their children, giving rise to school segregation (Sikkink & Emerson, 2008).

From the government’s perspective, funding the already advantaged tends to be a safer and more worthwhile investment, incentivising it to spend less on the disadvantaged (Corak, 2013). As a result, predominantly non-white schools received 23 billion USD less funding in 2016 alone despite serving the same number of students (Edbuild, 2019). Understandably, most able teachers choose to teach in advantaged (white) schools due to their abundance of resources (Corak, 2013), which draws quality teachers away from non-white schools, furthering the disparities. As can be observed, the perception of quality affects the actual quality of schools: essentially a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a study, Muller et al. (2010) revealed that non-white students have a lower chance of pursuing higher education. Additionally, minority groups are still marginalised even in higher education academies (Arday, 2020).

## **4.3 Career Hindrance**

Racial stereotypes and inequalities hinder the job opportunities and prospects of ethnic minorities in the US, thus lowering their social mobility. Bertrand & Mullainathan (2003) and Kline et al. (2021) separately conducted the same experiment in which they sent mock resumes to employers across America. Half of the resumes had stereotypically white names, while others had names typically associated with ethnic minorities. Both research teams reported receiving fewer interview callbacks for the latter half, with Bertrand & Mullainathan finding the difference to be a staggering 50 percent. Both studies concluded that employers are prejudiced against hiring ethnic minority applicants. In addition, they also noticed that the education level displayed in the applications did not affect non-white applicants’ callback rates as notably when compared to that of white applicants, which suggested that ethnicity was a

more dominant factor than education level. There is a growing trend of ethnic minorities “whitening” their resumes by removing racial identities from them to combat this phenomenon. Although found to be able to augment their chances of acquiring job offers, Kang et al. (2017) noted that resume “whitening” was only effective for some companies and industries.

In addition to challenges in employment, ethnic minorities also earn less in general. Akee et al. (2019) found that most non-whites make 20-50 percent less money than whites across all percentiles, while Chetty et al. (2019) reported that 99 percent of black children grow up to earn less income than white children despite their parents earning similar amounts. Both studies highlighted that these disparities worsened at higher income levels. They clearly illustrated that ethnicity is a substantial hindrance to their career prospects. Corak (2013) explained that many economic advantages and disadvantages are propagated intergenerationally since parents with more power and resources can support their children to achieve higher regardless of their actual abilities. Likely due to the widening income gap, the income mobility of black men has actually declined despite their educational mobility improving (Bloome & Western, 2011).

## **5 Conclusion**

This essay discussed the origins of institutional racism, its persistence and its contemporary impacts on ethnic minorities today. Nevertheless, it did not explore all effects of institutional racism, most notably homophily and biases in the justice and healthcare system (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Furthermore, institutional racism also perturbs other parts of the world, which this essay did not address. As a final message, being more sensitive and trying to acknowledge our privileges is the least one can do. Despite being a stubborn problem, the awareness of institutional racism has only increased in recent years. Only by opening conversations can we formulate solutions to exterminate discrimination entirely.

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