

The detrimental
factors of african
american society in
jesmyn ward's "men
we reap..."



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The United States of America is a country that, despite much of the relatively progress in race relations, remains gained by a history of prejudice. Even today, elements of our society have a significant impact on the life expectancy and mortality rates of African-Americans. According to Jesmyn Ward's memoir, *Men We Reaped*, and researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, the greatest contributing societal factors of black deaths in America are poverty, lack of education, and poor social support (237). These factors are the most significant elements that connect the deaths of the five young black men in Ward's memoir and many deaths of other African-Americans today.

Of the three greatest contributing factors, poverty is the most significant. In our capitalist society, money buys happiness or at least better living conditions in general; therefore, the lack of wealth in many American "black neighborhoods," is the leading societal factor of African-American deaths.

One of the five young black men in *Men We Reaped*, whose name was Charles Joseph Martin, died in a car collision with a train. According to Ward, "there was no reflective gate arm at the railroad crossing. There were flashing lights and bells that should have warned of the passing train, but they didn't consistently work, and because it was located at a crossing out in a mainly Black area, no one really cared about fixing them or installing a reflective gate arm." Chances are, if this accident had occurred in a wealthier neighborhood, the flashing bells and lights would have worked and a reflective gate arm would probably have been installed long ago. While these are just assumptions, the concept that wealthier neighborhoods generally have utilities that are safer and more consistently updated than

less wealthy neighborhoods, is not. The lack of funding creates an unsafe environment in which the likelihood of death is much greater.

In neighborhoods with a greater black population, it is common for teens to drop out of highschool. Ward's memoir exemplifies this notion, stating " Rog dropped out of highschool in the tenth grade; it's not uncommon for young Black men to drop out here" (26). What's worse, is that this commonality is not only accepted, but expected. According to Ward, this systemic type of racism leads teachers and school administrators to question, " why figure out what will motivate this kid to learn if, statistically, he's just another young Black male destined to drop out anyway?" (208). This forced lack of education has some serious side-effects. In an environment lacking education, drug abuse often becomes more common. According to Drugscope. org, " drug education, based on lessons from research, ... has the potential to reduce drug misuse." Rog, who was formerly known as Roger Eric Daniels III, died of a cocaine-related heart attack. It is difficult to live a safe and healthy life without education.

While having poor social support does not only occur in African-American societies, it is still one of the greatest contributing factors of African-American deaths. A lack of social support often leads to negative social interactions such as homicides and suicides. Men We Reaped exemplifies one of these social interactions " when someone stepped out of the bushes in front of Demond's house and shot him" (77). Later in the memoir, another interaction is demonstrated when Ronald Wayne Lizana " shot himself in the head, and died" (177). Poor social support is the most violent of the three most significant contributing factors of Black deaths in America.

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Men We Reaped illustrates how five seemingly unrelated deaths of Black men in Delisle, Mississippi, are connected through poverty, lack of education, and poor social support. Roger Eric Daniels III died of a cocaine-induced heart attack. A lack of education and poor social support can often lead to drug abuse and drug addiction. Demond Cook was shot in the back in his own front yard. Poverty and poor social support create scenarios in which needless violence occurs. Charles Joseph Martin died in a horrific car collision with a train. Neighborhoods lacking wealth are often lacking safety as well. Ronald Wayne Eliza purposefully shot himself in the head. Depression is often caused, in part by poverty and poor social support. Joshua Adam Dedeaux was rear-ended into a fire-hydrant by a drunk driver. This death is difficult to classify into one of the three contributing factors; yet this death helps connect the five deaths together.

In truth, the poverty, lack of education, and poor social support that black neighborhoods face today are all based on one concept: the discrimination between black and white. Joshua's collision was caused by a drunk white man in his forties. This man was not charged with vehicular manslaughter but instead charged him with leaving the scene of an accident. While the equality gap has thinned since the '60s, we still struggle with the concept of equality (E. g. police brutality, the persistence of white supremacist groups). If we hope that one day we will overcome this great obstacle of discrimination, we must join together as a nation, and cleanse one another of the virus that plagues us all.