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Introduction

Racism in America has been a topic of discussion for a long time in the view of the fact that the country hosts people of different races. It occurs every where; in hospitals, learning institutions, prisons, and in social institutions, to name just a few. In the same country, there are a lot of people who have been put in prison as studies of Quigley(par. 3) explain that around 2. 4 million American citizens have been imprisoned excluding the number which is held under probation and parole, who are over five million. Most surprisingly, further studies indicate that despite the fact that racial minorities like the blacks and Latinos are less than a quarter of the total population, they comprise around sixty percent of the total prisoners. Therefore, it is clear that racism and racial inequality has not been eradicated but has taken a different form. According to Quigley (par 4.), racial disparity in the juvenile justice system is also paramount. It is quite explicit that racism in American prisons is a real phenomenon. With that background in mind, this paper shall discuss more about the same problem and narrow down to root causes, history and explore the reason why it takes place as well as its impacts and consequences.

Factors Contributing to Racism in Prison

There are many factors that contribute to racism in prison and in most cases; the same contribute to racism in the free society. For instance, superiority complex contributes to racism not only in prison and other penitentiary institutions, but also in the free society (Bhavnani, Mirza and Meeto pp. 42).

The feeling of whites as the most superior race has persisted for a long time and the same is also present in prison facilities. Since racism is also a problem of the prison officials, whites are treated better than the other racial minorities especially if the official happens to be a white. The nature of prison life is also a causative factor to the racism in such institutions. There are many gang activities in prison formed by the prisoners and more often than not, each gang contains members of a similar race. Given that gangs are involved in violence, prisoners are forced to join a particular gang of their race in order to be protected from the criminal activities of the other gangs.

Therefore, it is clear that the existence of various gangs in prison is an important factor attributing to racism. It is amazing but also true that some racists groups in the free society contribute greatly to the racism in prisons. Such groups incite criminals of their race by influencing them to establish racism groups in prison. At times, they send some information and literature to them either in books or tapes to help them spread racism ideologies among the prisoners. Prisoners hailing from the racism groups are treated as heroes and often do appear in publications that spread racism ideologies (Quigley par 4).

The Root Cause of Prison Racism in America

Laws in the American constitution have contributed greatly to racism in American institutions, prison facilities included. For example, the 13th Amendment of the American constitution created a loophole which helped to influence racism in prisons as it stated, " Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime.... Shall exist within United States" (Truax par.

4). Although several states continued to revise such laws, new laws which were formed continued to contribute to racism in prison. Immediately after the abolishment of slave trade, slaves continued to be imprisoned after committing crimes such as refusing to work, insulting the workers and even handling money carelessly. Slavery codes were changed to black codes and since they allowed blacks to be imprisoned after committing petty offences, the same can be viewed as the root cause of racism in prison. Having discussed the causes of racism in prison it is important to explore its history which also helps explain the root cause.

History of Racism in United States

Prison racism in United States has been in existence for a long a time; since the era of slave trade although blacks were rarely imprisoned as they were more valuable while working in the plantations. However, there were local jails and other facilities which used to control and limit the freedom of the blacks.

The number of the blacks in prison increased following the end of the civil war and after the abolishment of slave trade. Studies of Acoli (par. 5) indicate that once blacks were arrested even for the very minor and petty crimes, they were sentenced more harshly, compared to their white counterparts. Further studies indicate that immediately after the civil war, the percentage of the black citizens increased to thirty three percent.

The trend continued during the cold war era. Racism was not only being exercised by the prisoners but also by the prison guards bent on the fact that most of the guards were whites. Black prisoners were not only

mistreated, but they were also deprived some of the important social amenities that are necessary even to a prisoner.

Prison life in America was a reflection of the life in the free society. During the civil rights era, life in prison was segregated and the same condition was present in the society. White prisoners and the prisoners from other races were treated differently. While the whites were allowed to be clerks, electrician and other good jobs, black prisoners were given the lowest jobs like garbage disposal, working in the farms and washing clothes. Moreover, blacks were segregated in all other places in the prison life. For example, they were supposed to live in their known separate cells and the same segregation existed even recreation facilities such that black prisoner used to stay at the back while the white prisoners occupied the front seats. Nevertheless, civil rights movements which were upcoming during the same era influenced the prisoners to contest against racial discrimination which was taking place.

Consequently, there was a lot of violence in prison because the white prisoners and administrators were resisting any change. On the other hand, black prisoners were not ready to take anything less than equal rights and abolishment of discrimination (Acoli par. 8). Although there was some improvement, prison racism was not abolished completely since the same problem is still present even in the twenty-first century.

The Nature and the Effects of Prison Racism

United States has the highest number of people in prison at any given time than any other country in the world. The most amazing issue is the fact that

majority are racial minorities. The problem is evident in the whole process of criminal justice system starting from the arrest up to the sentencing and provision of various services like probation and parole.

Of all other Americans who have been sentenced death, forty two percent are African Americans. Similarly, African Americans women are imprisoned in higher rates than the white women, actually four times more. In addition, African Americans receive harsher jail terms compared to their white counterparts Fisher (par. 5) & Collins (pp. 42).

The problem of prison racism in America starts even before any arrest has been made. For example people, of color are targeted by the police more than the whites. In the transport sector, blacks and other racial minorities are more likely to be stopped and searched by the police more than the whites. Apart from being the target, people of color are also arrested at higher rates than the whites even though they commit the same offences. During trial, studies which have been conducted indicate that the natives are more likely to be sentenced to prison. For instance, in a place like Montana, studies of Political Research Associates (pp.

2) indicate that American Indians account for around 16% of the total prisoners even if they are only 6% of the total population in the region. Similarly, the same case also applies to blacks, Hispanics and other racial minorities in the region. Some of the drugs laws present in the criminal justice system are also an indicator of how racism is propagated.

For example, while focusing on drug laws, a person is jailed for eight to ten years if found in possession of crack cocaine of fifty grams and for twenty

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one to twenty seven months while found in possession of powder cocaine. The main point of interest is based on the fact that powder cocaine is mostly used by the whites while the crack is used by the Latinos and the black population due to difference in cost. Therefore, the blacks and the Latinos end up suffering more than the whites although the two types of cocaine are the same (Truax par. 2).

Effects of Racism in Prison

The impact of racism in prison cannot be underestimated at any given time. There are many consequences but the financial cost stands out. As highlighted in the introductory part, racism leads to violence especially caused by prison racist gangs.

Consequently, the prison healthcare system incurs a lot of expenses while treating the inmates injured during the violence. Any form of violence leads to great loss not only on property but also on people's lives. Prison is supposed to be a rehabilitative center where behavior of people is reformed. Racism thus interferes with the function of the institution for it is possible for people to leave it even worse than they were before. Moreover, once released, prisoners find it hard to relate with the members of the society due to the effects of racism and the same affects their productivity.

Conclusion

Racism in prison is as real as it is in the free society.

It is characterized by segregation, discrimination and violence, to name just a few. In addition, racial minorities are disproportionately represented in most local, state and federal jails (Cole and Smith pp. 91). While there may be <https://assignbuster.com/introduction-persisted-for-a-long-time-and-the/>

many causes of the same, white superiority contributes greatly to prison racism. However, the root cause of the problem can be traced back in the nineteenth century after the abolishment of slave trade.

Therefore, the problem has existed for over a hundred years and recent statistics indicate that it is still paramount. In the view of the fact that there are many negative impacts related to prison racism, the concerned parties and stakeholders in the criminal justice system ought to find the root cause of the problem to be able to come up with lasting solutions.

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