More on the History of the Black Ghetto

Ten years ago I wrote *Urban Injustice*, a short book about the history of the inner-city, African-American ghetto. I now think that the book is misleading. It's not that it's inaccurate: no one has disputed the claims in the book. But it leaves out three important episodes of overwhelming violence and oppression that are necessary to understanding the ghetto's history.

A recent speech and slide-show on the history of the Lakota people provides important background. In this fifteen-minute video the photographer contrasts photos of the current desperate poverty of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota with a partial history of the US government's violent oppression of the Lakota tribes. Before reading on, watch it at: http://www.ted.com/talks/aaron_huey.html
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What I quickly realized after watching the video was that virtually every Native Americans tribe has an almost identical history of oppression followed by generations of poverty and dysfunction. As a European American, I tend to think of Native Americans as a single group, quite forgetting that they are separate peoples, most of whom didn't have much to do with each other for most of their history. In other words, the trauma that led to extraordinary poverty among Native Americans didn't happen just once. There are 562 Native American tribes currently recognized by the federal government. [1] It happened over and over again.

The video contains quite enough detail of the oppression to remind me once again how both my privilege as a white person and the extreme poverty of the Native American depend on the same violent history. We who benefit from our positions as Americans, therefore, have a responsibility to Native Americans that extends beyond generosity.

But the video also reminded me of what didn't make it into my book.

The most obvious was the violence of the slave trade and 400 years of African-American slavery. That omission was intentional on my part. So many whites just roll their eyes when one suggests that the history of slavery has anything to do with current black poverty. "That was so long ago. We have a black president. Massachusetts has a black governor. Oprah Winfrey is the richest woman in America. Get over it." But over and over again in this country (and in many other places around the world) oppression and violence have led to searing and enduring poverty that lasts for generations. The final stage of oppression—as Aaron Huey, the author of the Lakota video, reminds us—is when the oppressor can take his hands away and the oppression continues.

The second chain of events that are not mentioned in *Urban Injustice* occurred well after slavery, between 1890 and 1930. In his 2005 book *Sundown Towns*, James Loewen chronicles the forced removal of African Americans from towns, villages and small cities across the country. By 1890, twenty-five years after the Civil War, many African Americans from the South had scattered and settled in the North in a fairly random distribution. The 1890 census, for instance, shows that blacks were dispersed in small numbers in most northern counties; every county in Montana, for instance, had black residents. By 1930, however, the census showed no or very few blacks in many of those previously settled counties and new concentrations elsewhere, especially in northern cities.

What had happened? Ethnic cleansing had happened! [2] White communities across the country forcibly expelled their black residents and refused to allow other African Americans to settle. The methods employed in these expulsions varied. Murders of groups of black individuals, [3] burning of whole communities to the ground, threats, laws, official policy, and/or extra-legal police activities were the most obvious and vicious. But there were less noticeable means, too: on-going harassment (especially of children in the schools), freeze-outs and buyouts. Suburban methods included zoning and public planning. Exclusion remained official policy in many jurisdictions until 1968, but the more informal methods persist to this day in more than a few American virtually all-white communities. There is a reason for black segregation, especially in urban areas, and it has little to do with their preferences.

The stories my book did tell emphasized the decimation of the black inner-city society in the middle of the twentieth century. At the time these areas, while completely segregated by race, were integrated by class and had little of the violence, single-parenthood, poor education, and so on now associated with the poor, black inter-city ghetto. Beginning in the 1950s, however, urban renewal and interstate highway construction, construction of "projects" for poor African Americans, the flight of the black middle class after the end of legal segregation, and the loss of inner-city manufacturing jobs transformed these vertically integrated, well functioning ghetto

communities into the poor wastelands that are the ghettos we know today.

In some senses the worst of the oppressive events in the history of the ghetto, however, was the mass incarceration of poor African Americans since 1970. Many people have assumed that the high numbers of blacks in prisons have mostly been due to higher rates of crime resulting from the higher rates of poverty among African Americans. But no, it's much worse than that.

It's true that the poverty of the ghetto has led to higher crime rates than in many other parts of our country. But higher crime rates are a relatively insignificant cause of black mass incarceration.

One statistic should stand as a marker for the whole story: Blacks and whites use and sell drugs at about the same rate, but a black drug user has twenty times the chance of going to prison as a white drug user for his "crime."

Historically, black mass incarceration results from:

- a bipartisan political emphasis on "law and order" (deliberate tactics of President Richard Nixon and President Ronald Reagan) to woo Southern and working-class whites away from the Democratic Party,
- a drug war that has been overtly directed at black communities,
- racially motivated decisions by police and prosecutors, and
- Supreme Court decisions that have
- a) seriously weakened constitutional protections in drug cases and
- b) prohibited overwhelming statistical evidence of discrimination from being admitted as evidence in court.

I suspect that little of this was done with the explicit intention to incarcerate masses of poor African-American men. Nevertheless, it should have been perfectly clear who was going to be hurt at each step of the way. Even more damning is the fact that after forty years of black mass incarceration there is still no recognizable political movement toward changing the on-going causes. That is intentional!

Mass incarceration has decimated black poor communities. *At any given time*, as many as 25% of young black men in inner-city ghettos are imprisoned, utterly destroying the social fabric of the community. Take a quarter of the young men away from *any* community, and economic and social issues will become overwhelming. Families lose income, children lose parents, women lose their partners, and even women who find partners lose much of their power in the relationships they do have. Imagine your own community suddenly bereft of a quarter of its young men.

Even worse, if anything, is the impact of mass incarceration *after* imprisonment. Ex-offenders can be (and are) legally discriminated against in hiring, housing, and government benefits for the rest of their lives. Such discrimination—complicated by poverty, a poor education, little job readiness (especially after returning from prison) and poor skills—leaves the ex-offender with little chance to get a job, find housing, or survive the transition into society … all this for a conviction of youthful marijuana possession, a crime hardly noticed in white communities, for example, most college campuses.

How much of the black inner-city population does this affect? In Washington DC, 75% of young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison, [4] and then suffering the enormous post-prison collateral damage. The havoc wrecked in these lives and in the inner-city as a whole is immeasurable.

Although some states are trying alternatives to imprisonment for drug offenses, the impetus is strapped state budgets not the injustice of mass incarceration. Virginia's senator Jim Webb has introduced legislation to create a congressional commission to examine thoroughly our criminal justice system. While this may be the start of a long overdue process, the Senator's website does not mention the mass incarceration of African Americans and, as far as I am aware, there is no congressional activity even to examine that issue.

Writing *Urban Injustice* ten years ago, I tried to show the injustice that has led to the black ghetto. What is mostly missing from the book is the level of violent, intentional oppression in that history. This violence continues unnoticed and unabated at this very moment. Parallel to slavery and the Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration continues to devastate African-American communities across this country. The causes of the formation of and persistence of the black ghetto have been the history of societal violence toward African Americans; the causes have had almost nothing to do with the behavior of the African Americans who lived there.

Over the last fifty years, our country has demonstrated that it is unwilling to do much to ameliorate the conditions in the black ghetto. Perhaps we could at least take our boots off the necks of its residents.



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