

The Impact of Institutional Racism on the African American Substance Abuse Population in the United States

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Institutional racism is a type of racism that is structured into political and social institutions. Some examples of institutions are governments, corporations, and universities. It occurs when these institutions discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly, against certain groups of people to limit their rights.

According to institutionalracism.net (2008), "Institutional racism is more subtle, less visible, and less identifiable than individual acts of racism, but no less destructive to human life and human dignity." The author goes on to say that, "Race-based discrimination in housing, education, employment and health for example are forms of institutional racism. It reflects the cultural assumptions of the dominant group, so that the practices of that group are seen as the norm to which other cultural practices should conform..."

Institutional racism also describes policies, systems, and processes that are not necessarily caused by intentional racism but have the effect of disadvantaging certain racial groups. Psychology.wikia.com (2008) provides an example, "An institution which expects everyone to wear the same hat is institutionally discriminating against Sikh men, who are expected to wear

turbans... Institutions don't necessarily adopt such rules with the intention of discriminating, and often, once the discrimination has been pointed out, institutions revise their policies. For example, Sikh police officers may now wear turbans instead of helmets.”

The heads of our institutions are not always racist. But they may discriminate while carrying out their job. Many times, like shown in the example above, they aren't even aware that they are discriminating. Even though this racism is not always caused intentionally, it does have serious ramifications for minorities and, specifically for our discussion here, the African American substance abuse population.

Unjust Federal Crack Cocaine Laws

The Federal mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines for crack cocaine offenders are a prime example of institutional racism. There is a 100 to 1 sentencing disparity between powder and crack cocaine. This means that a person can be arrested for a very small amount of crack cocaine and they will get the same mandatory minimum sentence as a person that is arrested for 100 times the amount of powder cocaine.

Crack cocaine is much cheaper than powder cocaine. Therefore, the people who use it are usually poor, many of whom are African American. Since powder cocaine is more expensive it tends to be used by more affluent white Americans. In support of this racial divide, statistics compiled by United States

Sentencing Commission (1995) show that African Americans are more likely to be convicted of crack cocaine offenses, while white Americans are more likely to be convicted of powder cocaine offenses.

Deborah Vagins (2006) wrote a report for the ACLU concerning the consequences of these unjust drug laws. She explained that, “In 1986, before the enactment of federal mandatory minimum sentencing for crack cocaine offenses, the average federal drug sentence for African Americans was 11% higher than for whites. Four years later, the average federal drug sentence for African Americans was 49% higher.”

She reported that. “Recent data indicates that African Americans make up 15% of the country’s drug users, yet they comprise 37% of those arrested for drug violations, 59% of those convicted, and 74% of those sentenced to prison for a drug offense. Specifically with regard to crack, more than 80% of the defendants sentenced for crack offenses are African American, despite the fact that more than 66% of crack users are white or Hispanic.”

She also noted that, “As law enforcement focused its efforts on crack offenses, especially those committed by African Americans, a dramatic shift occurred in the overall incarceration trends for African Americans, relative to the rest of the nation, transforming federal prisons into institutions increasingly dedicated to the African American community.”

Ramifications of these Laws on Substance Abuse

A study written by Jonathan P. Caulkins (1997) that was sponsored by the Rand corporation concluded that, "...mandatory minimum sentences may not reduce cocaine consumption since they do not focus on high-level drug dealers and drug demand. If reducing consumption is the goal, more can be achieved by spending more money on arresting, prosecuting, and sentencing drug dealers to standard prison terms than by spending money on sentencing drug dealers to longer, mandatory prison terms."

According to a TRIAD study by Rounds-Bryant, et al, (1995), "Recent information on prison releasees shows that 66% of state prisoners were released to counties that contain the central city of a metropolitan area. However, communities characterized by high rates of incarceration tend to be socially chaotic and have fewer resources to address the needs of returning offenders . Furthermore, it is likely that communities with high percentages of African Americans are more likely to be profoundly negatively impacted because of the higher incarceration rate among African American men compared with white men."

The authors continued to explain that, "The socioeconomic disintegration of urban communities as a result of such phenomena as disproportionate incarceration rates, and increased exposure to drugs, alcohol, crime, poverty, and unemployment creates an extremely challenging context for African American releasees to maintain abstinence from drugs and alcohol."

A Better Solution

A better solution to putting drug users in prison is utilizing a whole range of possible family and community services. These might include expanded inpatient and outpatient treatment options, group counseling, faith based programs, job creation programs, support for pre-school families, community-based policing, and other services.

According to a report prepared for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights by Marc Mauer (1999), "A consistent body of research has demonstrated that treatment interventions for substance abuse are far more cost-effective than continued reliance on an expanded prison system."

Conclusion

Mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines for crack cocaine are an example of institutional racism that primarily effects the African American substance abuse population. A better solution to putting drug users in prison is utilizing a whole range of possible family and community services. Utilizing these services would prove more cost effective and be a better overall solution.

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