

Race and Racism in America: Class Does Not Explain Everything

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How do American leftists and progressives understand the issue of race [1] and racism? While economic analysis, social class, and the role of the police, that is, the American capitalist system, explains much, they do not explain everything. Race and racism play a power role. Racial statistics, separate from class, are absolutely necessary to understanding racism.

In the United States, the federal government, economists, sociologists, and epidemiologists, among others, include race in looking at the national census, voting patterns, unemployment and wealth, or public health. Everywhere we keep race data and draw conclusions from it, with the goal of ameliorating the situations of historically oppressed racial groups and making society more equal.

The U.S. Census taken every ten years has counted whites and Blacks since 1790, Asians since 1860, Native Americans since 1890, Hispanics since 1940, “other race” since 1950, and people of “two or more races” since 2000. The census determines geographical congressional representation and the distribution of federal funds. The census also provides information on age, sex, marital status, household composition, family characteristics, and household size. The U.S. Census Bureau also keeps monthly data on employment by race. Other surveys provide information related to health and educational attainment.

Thanks to these statistics, we know that in 2020 there were 47.2 million people who self-identified as Black, making up 14.2% of the country’s population. We know that the median Black household in America has about \$24,000 in savings, investments, home equity, and other wealth, while the median White household: around \$189,000, a huge gap that has grown greater in recent decades. We know that Black unemployment is always greater than white unemployment. We know that Black people make up 12.1 percent of the population, but that Black men constitute 35 percent of the incarcerated.

A striking example

Social class explains much, but not everything. Consider this, for example. *The New York Times* of February 12, 2023 reported,

New data from California shows that, for every 100,000 births, 173 of the babies born to the richest white mothers die before their first birthday. 350 babies born to the poorest white mothers die. 437 babies born to the richest Black mothers die. 653 babies born to the poorest Black mothers die.

Even the richest Black mothers, who have access to excellent health care, lose more of their babies than the poorest of white mothers. Some say bias in the health care system is a major contributor. Why? Joia Crear-Perry, founder and president of the National Birth Equity Collaboration says, “Race

is not a factor for illness and death, but racism, bias, and discrimination definitely are.”

If we think class is the only problem, then we would fund prenatal care for the poor, for example. This should be done but the racism of society would continue to cause Black women to lose their babies at a higher rate. There is also a general problem: on average, US infant mortality figures are the worst among rich countries.

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Here is another example of the impact of racism on health. The strands of DNA called chromosomes have tails called leukocyte telomeres (LTL); the length of these is an indicator of general systemic aging, with shorter LTL being associated with several chronic diseases of aging and earlier mortality. Several studies of Black people, found that experiences of racism caused shorter LTLs suggesting that that racism results in a shorter life expectancy. As a study in the Journal of Preventive Medicine reports:

Results suggest that multiple levels of racism, including interpersonal experiences of racial discrimination and the internalization of negative racial bias, operate jointly to accelerate biological aging among African-American men.

As Marxists and socialists we continue to look at capitalism and class to understand our society, but we must also use racial statistics to understand and fight against racism. We also know that some reactionaries can use these statistics to stigmatise certain racial groups, and it is our responsibility to rise to this challenge. We are, after all, scientific socialists.

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P.S.

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