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“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” Martin Luther King, Jr.

## THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE IS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

By Ira W. Whitlock

### I. ILLEGAL SYSTEM

The African American male is one of the main targets of oppression of the United States' system of jurisprudence. Many people characterize the United States' system as an illegal system. An illegal system is symbolized by systematic and unpunished brutality, judicial bias, governmental indifference and racial hypocrisy. An illegal system definitely exists when a human being can be kidnapped from his home, transported half a world away, sold as a slave, and then punished under the “color of law” for attempting to escape his chains of slavery.

### II. HISTORY

The history of this country and the racist laws and policies it has implemented is representative of this country's intent to oppress and dominate African people (while the focus of this note is on the endangered status of African American men, I do understand that other groups of people have also been systematically excluded). The United States' system of government was developed on the theory of criminalizing that which is inconsistent with the Eurocentric male perspective.

The African American's very existence, in the United States, has been criminalized.

Since being brought to this country the African has been physically, mentally, and spiritually shackled. By this I mean that the African American has been denied the fundamental freedoms of expression, action, and the pursuit of happiness; all of which were given to and cherished by white men. In attempts to free themselves from the shackles placed upon them, African American people have come into confrontation with the system.

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The Constitution and many of the laws made pursuant to it have been constant reminders of the system's intent not to include the African American. No case better exemplifies the true intentions of this illegal system than the Minnesota case of Dred Scott v. Sanford.

The Supreme Court's 1857 decision in Dred Scott crystallized the intentions of this government to not only exclude the African American, but also put laws into

effect that would assure the maintenance of the status quo. The status quo is to keep the African American (and other groups) in a recessive and dependent position, while keeping whites in the position of power. The Court in Dred Scott held, “The words people of the United States and citizens are synonymous terms ... [Africans were] not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word citizens in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States.” The case went on to state that Africans had no rights as human beings; and that Africans were an inferior people to whites.

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ment confirm the belief that employers value the white job seeker more than African Americans, regardless of education. Research shows that African Americans with high school degrees are more likely to be unemployed than white high school dropouts. Further, African Americans with college degrees have higher unemployment rates than white high school dropouts (18.4 vs. 15.1). Employment segregation of this kind means that African Americans will continue to lag behind whites in mobility.

Professor Gibbs describes the chronic unemployment facing African American males as the forming of a permanent underclass. High unemployment rates contribute to the rising poverty rates of African American families. It also contributes to a variety of social problems, such as crime, drug use, suicide, and school violence. After watching the constant and seemingly inevitable failure of family, friends and loved-ones, African American youth (especially in the inner-city) begin to posit their ultimate failure. These youth develop hatred and distrust for what many describe as an illegal system, and ultimately the vicious cycle of the status quo is perpetuated. According to William Strickland, political science professor in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, if current trends do not change, "most black men, in most parts of this country, for most of their lives, will never be employed." Professor Strickland states that, "there is a straight line from joblessness to the deadly chaos and its multifaceted destruction of black men."

**B. MORTALITY**

The demographic and social factors of poverty or low socioeconomic status, deteriorating housing and neighborhoods, unstable families, high rates of unemployment, crime and delinquency, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, and homicide, all contribute to a pathogenic environment for the African American male. The prejudice and discrimination of the broader society have direct and indirect effects on the health of young African males in terms of the barriers to health

care, their increased level of stress, their occupational environments, and the limitations on their mobility and life options. As a result, the African American male has the shortest life expectancy of any group (African male 64, white male 69, African female 73, and white female 79).

**1. CRIME**

Over the past fifteen years, the United States has increased employment for every group in this country, with the exception of African American males. Lacking skills and the ability to obtain gainful employment, African American males consider crime and "hustling" as attractive and rational alternatives to the normal working world. Employment gives a person dignity. When a person cannot find employment, whether due to an inferior education or a lack of job skills; the loss of dignity, personal pride and hunger provides the impetus to enter into a life of crime. To be unemployed and unable to provide the simplest of necessities for oneself and one's family is the springboard to crime. For many African American males, to be able to provide (at least) the minimal necessities of life is worth the risk of confrontation with the criminal justice system.

Studies have consistently shown that people who have low incomes and poor employment records are more likely to break the law than persons from higher income brackets. In fact, young persons raised in unstable homes and who face chronic unemployment may be expected to turn disproportionately to crime. In 1972, African American male inmates were forty-two percent of the nation's jail population. Most of these men were poorly educated, low-paid wage earners or unemployed prior to their arrest.

With today's unemployment rates being higher for African American males than for any other group in the United States, it is no wonder African American males make-up almost fifty percent of the prison population. Studies show that this country is doing a better job at putting African American males in jail than into college. Almost 610,000 African American men (455,000 of whom are inmates) are under the control of the criminal justice system, either in jail or under the supervision of parole or probation, while

only 436,000 African American males are enrolled in college. Only South Africa (Azania) has comparable numbers on the incarcerating African males.

**2. HOMICIDE**

One of the most alarming statistics in the assault on the African American male (age 15-24) is the fact that homicide is now the leading cause of death for this group. Statistics show that 42 percent of all homicide victims are African American. In 1977, more African American males died from homicide than were killed in the Vietnam War.

It is sad to note that the perpetrators of most of the homicides involving African American males are other African American males. Professor Gibbs states that, "We are suffering ... from a double-edged holocaust: self-inflicted on the one hand and system-administered on the other."

**CONCLUSION**

The entire system has failed to respond to the needs and problems of the African American male. The African American male faces chronic unemployment, due to handicaps of race, poverty, inadequate education, and illiteracy. The African American male faces the constant high probability of incarceration or death. To state it simply, the African American male is being systematically annihilated. Unless major changes occur within the system, African American males will continue to be disproportionately represented in prisons and cemeteries.

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The struggle of the African American to achieve personhood and citizenship in a system which legitimizes the subordination of African American people, explains why the very existence of the African American, in the United States, has been criminalized.

**III. ENDANGERED SPECIES**

One hundred thirty four years after Dred Scott and the passage of the thirteenth (abolishing slavery), fourteenth (right to citizenship), and fifteenth (right to vote) amendments, African Americans are still fighting for a system that recognizes their personhood, that is humane in its treatment of all people, and that is egalitarian in nature. While the United States' system of government is a very good system, because of the way the system is implemented African American and other minorities find it hard to believe that the system is fair and delivers justice to all. As a matter of fact, the system continues its blatant attack on the African American (Hispanic and Native American) male, and more specifically the African American male between the ages of 13 and 25.

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**“black males are stereotyped by the five ‘d’s’: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed.”**

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The attack on the African American male has been so great that he is being systematically annihilated. The African American male has become an endangered species. An endangered species is a class of individual having common attributes and designated by a common name which is in danger or peril of probable harm or loss. African American males “have been miseducated by the educational system, mishandled by the criminal justice system, mislabeled by the mental health system, and mistreated by the social welfare system.” The entire system has failed to respond to the needs and problems of the African American male. As a result, they have become rejects of our affluent society

and misfits in their own communities.

The media has played a major role in the assault on the African American male. The African American male has been portrayed by the mass media in a limited number of roles, most of them deviant, dangerous, and dysfunctional. These stereotyped roles have contributed to the public's negative image of the African American male. Professor Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, of the University of California, Berkeley, states that, “black males are stereotyped by the five ‘d’s’: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed.” It is because of these perceptions that society has been unwilling to show comprehension, care, or compassion for the plight of the African American male.

A major factor in the plight of the African American male is the African American middle class drift away from the inner cities. This drift has resulted in the loss of African American leadership, and resources in the inner city. As a result, the power of political organizations has diminished. There has also been a breakdown of the traditional African American community values of the importance of family, religion, education, self-improvement, and social cohesion through extensive social support networks. As a result of the breakdown of values, today's inner city reflects hopelessness, alienation, and frustration. The frustration being experienced in inner cities is similar to the kind of frustration that exploded in the urban riots of the 1960s from Harlem, to Watts, to Detroit, to Washington D.C. This frustration erupts into urban crime and violence that is pervasive throughout the whole community.

An overwhelming and explicit display of this government's intent to endanger the African American male, is shown through the fact that all other groups, including women and recent immigrants, have made progress since 1960 in the area of all six social indicators (education, employment/unemployment, delinquency and crime, substance abuse, unwed teenage parenthood, and homicide and suicide), while African American males are now more likely than they were in 1960 to be unemployed, to be addicted to drugs, to be involved in the criminal

justice system to be unwed fathers, and to die from homicide or suicide.

**A. EMPLOYMENT**

Handicaps of race, poverty, inadequate education, and illiteracy combine to plague African American males in the labor market. The primary basis of male identity in this country and around the world is work. Males are taught from youth that their role in the family structure should be that of the provider. Due to historical practices of discrimination, specifically in the area of unemployment, African American males have been denied their masculinity. Estimates show that it cost more than \$250,000 to raise a child to the age of 18 in a middleclass environment. This is an inconceivable concept for many African American males, who as a group are ostracized, alienated from the education system, and discriminated from the labor market. To state it simply, African American males (and their families) are facing a situation of hopelessness.

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**African Americans with college degrees have higher unemployment rates than white high school dropouts.**

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Today many members of the community would argue that African Americans face little or no discrimination and need only to increase their educational attainment to enjoy equal opportunity. However, there is clear and convincing evidence that discriminatory labor practices and racial segregation continue to have an adverse economic impact on the African American population. In 1975, African American unemployment was 14.1 percent, doubling that of whites (7.6 percent). By the end of 1984, African American unemployment was 16 percent, while 6.5 percent for whites. While making up more than 10 percent of the labor force, African Americans account for more than 20 percent of the jobless.

In fact, statistics from the Labor Depart-

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