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Examining Social Injustice Issues in The Modern World

There are countless social injustice issues in the United States that have challenged our human rights. Although our rights being violated sounds like something that would only occur in the 19th century, it actually still goes on today. Individuals have attempted to protest against these acts of unfairness so that our rights may be preserved and protected. The social injustice issues that I believe has had the most exposure in the news within recent years and would be more interesting to discuss include the death penalty, police brutally, and the right to privacy in the digital age. All three have also been heavily debated as many have strong opinions on these topics. I am interested in these issues because I wish to learn more of them and perhaps raise awareness of their existence.

The death penalty, also known as capital punishment, is “the punishment of execution, administered to someone legally convicted of a capital crime” (Oxford). These crimes include espionage, treason, and murder related to automotive robbery among thirty nine others. Currently, the death penalty is legal in thirty one states and illegal in only nineteen. According to The Death Penalty Information Center, the latest state to abolish this act was Nebraska as of this year. I find this fact to be interesting as I wonder why such a horrible punishment would still be legal in so many states. Knowing these facts, it’s easy to see why the death penalty has been the subject of multiple protests and labeled a social injustice.

One of the main reasons that many protest the death penalty is because it unfairly judges those of color. A recent study conducted by David Jacobs, a professor of sociology at Ohio State University, examined 1,560 individuals throughout sixteen states from 1973 to 2002. It was discovered that blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be executed if they kill whites; “[b]ut the risk of execution were not as strong for Hispanics who killed whites as they were for blacks who killed whites”(Grabmeier). The same could not be said for whites who kill non-whites. Another study by David Baldus, a University of Iowa law professor, detected similar results. Baldus “studied 667 homicides in Philadelphia between 1983 and 1993 and found that black defendants there were nearly four times likelier than white defendants to receive a death sentence for the same crimes” (Ford). These studies shocked me as I had no idea that such prejudice existed when deciding who lives and dies. I also begin to wonder how this issue could be remedied for the future. Overall, These studies have shown that there is racial bias in determining who receives the death penalty.

Another major reason individuals protest the death penalty is because it does not deter crimes. Max Ehrenfreund of the Washington Post reports that several studies suggest this. One study in particular, conducted by Professor of Law John J. Donohue, and assistant Professor of Business and Public Policy Justin Wolfers, “compared the amount of violence in U.S. states with and without the death penalty” (Ehrenfreund). They could not find any deterrent effects as it was “very difficult to find evidence of deterrence in these Supreme Court-mandated natural experiments… Clearly, most of the action in homicide rates in the United States is unrelated to capital punishment” (Donohue 801). This study shows that the death penalty may or may not have a deterrent effect on crime, however the fact that “there’s certainly no reason to believe there’s a significant deterrent effect should give pause” (Ehrenfreund).

Police brutality is another social injustice that has been heavily protested by civilians in the United States. Multiple cases of excessive force by police officers have appeared throughout the years, especially on people of color. According to USA Today, “[o]n average, there were 96 such incidents among at least 400 police killings each year that were reported to the FBI by local police… The reports show that 18% of the blacks killed during those seven years [ending in 2012,] were under age 21, compared to 8.7% of whites.” It should be noted that these numbers were reported by several police departments as not all participated; so the actual amount of deaths is most likely higher. USA Today states that “[a]bout 750 agencies contribute[d to this data]... a fraction of the 17,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States.” As I look at these numbers, I realize how big of an issue police brutality in the United States really is as the amount of of deaths may be double or even more than stated.

#### One of the most infamous cases of police brutality occurred in 2005 where sixty four year old retired elementary school teacher Robert Davis “had returned to New Orleans to check on property his family owns in the [Katrina] storm-ravaged city, and was out looking to buy cigarettes when he was beaten and arrested”(CBS News) by four officers that believed he was intoxicated. Davis pled not guilty as he stated he “haven't had a drink in 25 years." The officers also pled not guilty; in the end, the officers lost and were only fired or suspended for their excessive force. One fact that should be noted is that racial discrimination may have been a factor as davis is a black man while the four police officers are white. As a result of cases such as these, individuals have decided to fight back against excessive force in new ways.

#### One way civilians fight against police brutality is by simply using their own smartphones. Neera K. Badhwar, a professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma, discusses how using the camera on one's own smartphones helps reduce excessive force by police officers:

#### What might prove to be the most important factor causing panic among

police officers is that smart phone cameras are not only exposing the killing of unarmed people of color; they are a powerful instrument in piercing the so-called blue wall of silence, the unwritten code among cops to not report a colleague’s misconduct. Smart phones can identify those officers who either observe or participate in killing but who remain utterly silent (2).

Those with a smartphone may also download an app named Moble Justice CA. This app is “an easy way to record and report interactions with law enforcement”(Mobile Justice). All footage recorded using this app will be sent to the persons nearest American Civil Liberties Union affiliate instantly. I personally never knew such apps existed and believe that everyone should download it to help reduce excessive force by police officers. Cleary, smartphones have proven to be a helpful tool in the fight against police brutality as they can be used to record incidents. Eliott C. McLaughlin of CNN adds to this by stating “humans are visual creatures, videos impact people more than might a written or spoken narrative, and many experts feel the images help drive coverage of the incidents.”

Finally, the right to privacy in the digital age is one of the few social injustice issues that has multiple opinions. Many believe we are better off having security cameras view our every move, while others wish to not have them around. Heather Kelly of CNN discusses the pros and cons of security cameras as she states: “[t]he cameras make some people feel more secure, knowing that bad guys are being watched. But privacy advocates and other citizens are uneasy with the idea that Big Brother is monitoring their every public move.” She later explains that these security cameras now contain facial recognition and individuals believe “it could be used to single out a person attending multiple political protests.(Kelly). I personally believe security cameras should be preserved as they help catch criminals. For example, as Kelly discusses in her article, they were used to catch those involved in the Boston bombing. Although security cameras violate our privacy, it’s worth it to obtain some kind of safety.

According to Jessica Gallinaro, our own smartphones may also violate our right of privacy. Gallinaro states that “[m]any retailers are now tracking their in-store shoppers using the Wi-Fi signals emitting from their shoppers’ smartphones.This Wi-Fi tracking allows retail stores to anonymously track their customers with even greater accuracy than video surveillance” (355-356). Gallinaro explains that the information extracted from the customers Wi-Fi signals are used to discover who the person is (gender, likes, dislikes), where they go and what they do. I find this to be scary as it seems that just about anything can be found about us by using Wi-Fi. I oppose of this tactic as there would no way for anyone to know this could occur.

Based on this research, I think the death penalty may be a topic that I can discuss more of in the future. I believe this social injustice issue has plenty of information that can be used unlike the others. For example, I surprisingly could not locate much information for the right of privacy in the digital age. On the other hand, while police brutality seems like a decent topic to discuss more of, it’s too big of a topic and only explains one thing, and that is excessive force by police officers.

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