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Exploratory Paper

For the basis of this exploratory paper, I will be discussing the causes of violence in urban communities, the social construct of race and racism, and the rate of poverty in America along with its effect on children. My interest in the issue of violence in urban communities was peaked initially, because of the growing crisis of gun and gang violence in Chicago, Illinois and the possible causes for it. I was also drawn to this topic because I am a part of an “urban community.” Urban communities are usually occupied by people that are considered “minorities” and it was decided that I am unfortunately a component in what is labeled a “minority” group. With those ideas in mind, this topic seemed spot-on for me. When it comes to the social construct of race and racism, once again, I found myself familiar with this issue and felt it was an appropriate topic to tackle. Everything I am, or considered to be, is determined by an unrelenting and ignorant theory of classism that generally has nothing to do with the content of character or a person’s worth. Lastly, I decided to focus on poverty in America and how children are affected by this epidemic. These topics are all relative to me, and if you dig deeper, you will understand how each topic has a connection to the other, whether it’s overtly or covertly.

*The Causes of Violence in Urban Communities.* Black-on-black violence is usually a topic of discussion amongst different types of races, and is often frowned upon as though other races do not commit violent acts against one another within their respective communities. What I want people to understand is that there are underlying issues that often result in these aggressive attitudes. I am in no way trying to conjure up excuses for the erratic behaviors that often stem from minority communities, but unfortunately, for every action there is a reaction. I strongly believe in people taking responsibility for their own choices and putting an end to vicious cycles, but in order to move forward, we must understand why things are and have been the way they are.

In the *Oxford University Press and Society for the Study of Social Problems* journal, there was an article written by Julie A. Phillips entitled “White, Black, and Latino Homicide Rates: Why the Difference?” in which she delves into various reasons for why there is spike in homicide and violence in urban communities. In this article, she chose to focus specifically the Black and Latino communities. Phillips describes that the conditions that many Latinos and Blacks are bound to are a key factor in why disturbing behaviors can erupt. She believes that if White people were bound to those same conditions that the eruption of acts of violence would be the same for them also. Many of the conditions she described are growing up in single-parent homes, unemployment and poverty, inadequate education, and living in segregated and crime-ridden neighborhoods. She even goes on to describe that the leading cause of death for Black males ages 15-24 is homicide. While she discusses the fact that violence and homicide is a common issue in Black and Latino communities, she also focuses on the fact that there is a slightly higher homicide rate in the Black community. Her reasoning for this was that there was a higher deprivation of resources in Black communities and that for the most part, Black people were subject to more social isolation. Phillips then explains that due to segregated living conditions, Blacks and Latinos have formulated a way to survive, even referring to it as “the Code of the Street”, a term initially used by Elijah Anderson in his book *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*.

An article from the journal *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, entitled “Putting in Work: Black Male Youth Joblessness, Violence, Crime, and the Code of the Street” written by Joseph Richardson and Christopher St. Vil, further discusses the theory of “The Code of the Street” that Phillips talked about in her article. The authors’ main focus in their article was about how young Black males perceive violence and crime as a legitimate form of working. They start off by describing that in a response to limited resources, unemployment, poverty, and segregated communities, a lot of young Black men have redefined the idea of “work.” They then discuss that it has become a normal way of life for young Black youths to engage in illegal activities and violence as a way validate themselves. This is what the authors described as “putting in work.” Putting in work also leads to recognition and respect in urban community streets. This, in return, perpetuates the cycle of violence due to the fact that many young Black men pass these ideas on to their siblings and/or children. It also has a lot to do with defeatist attitudes and feelings of hopelessness.

In regards to both pieces written by Julie A. Phillips, Joseph Richardson and Christopher St. Vil, I feel as though they all brought up a lot of great points about what causes the outburst of violence in urban communities. There is an overall sense of hopelessness and a desperate need to be recognized and feel important. Due to racial discrimination, prejudices and social isolation, many minorities tend to channel their aggression into violent crime and illegal activities. Unfortunately, since many cannot afford to move elsewhere, a lot of these aggressions are taken out on those closest to them which would be other Blacks or minorities. From a young age, a lot of Black people grow up in broken homes that also suffered the same fate of hopelessness, poverty and social isolation. Because of this hopelessness, it’s hard for people in urban communities to see each other as valuable. This makes it easy for them to commit heinous acts of violence towards one another. The violence will continue to be a constant issue if there are no ways to express aggressions and desires in a healthy and productive way. Violence and crime will also progress if that is the only way for people of color to feel a sense of validation and accomplishment. Unfortunately, violence and crime has become a moniker for “living” and given some Black people a role in life, be it negative or positive. I strongly believe that conforming to a life of violence is a way of avoiding the fact, or a defense mechanism against the fact there truly is no hope.

*The Social Construct of Race/Racism.* From the days of slavery up until it was abolished in 1865, there has always been boxes that people of color, mainly Black people have been placed in and standards were already set in motion for them. Race and racism is a form of social classism, that in this day and age, have become less about the genetic construction of a human being or the region in which they originated. It has been used to determine to a person’s educational level, financial and economic status, content of character, and almost every other aspect of that person’s life.

To understand the social construct of race and racism, we should look into the origins of this ideology. In the journal, *Indypendent*, there is an article entitled “White Anxiety: Rachel Dolezal, Dylann Roof and the Future of Race in America” written by Nick Powers. Powers explains the origins of racism as he goes back to when Africans, Europeans and other Native people were enslaved during the colonial era. He talks about them being indentured servants and the unity that developed from the fact that they were all living a life of brutality. They even rebelled against their master together. Powers goes on to discuss that things took an interesting turn during Nathaniel Bacon’s rebellion in 1676 against Governor William Berkeley. This is when a lot of Africans and European indentured servants invaded Jamestown, (a colony of Virginia) and burned down the capital. Because of this incident, Europeans were awarded privileges, while Africans were given restrictions. Africans were made to do the labor that Europeans once did. This became the origins and basis of white supremacy. Europeans recognized an association (both legal and cultural) surrounding the color of their skin. Out of this notion, the idea of a “white race” was born. The white skin color became a synonymous with power, respect, and dominance. White people began to fear the “contamination of Blackness”, as Powers put it. When Africans took over the labor that Europeans once did, Africans started being viewed as subservient. Any association with Africans became impure or tainted. White supremacy took on a life of its own after the discovery of white skin and the positive connotation attached to it. This ideology is still pervasive throughout the America and many other countries across the globe.

An article taken from the journal *Ethics* entitled “The Cultural Theory of Race: Yet Another Look at Du Bois’s “The Conservation of Races”” by Chike Jeffers, further discusses the issue of race as a philosophy. The author focuses mostly on an essay written by W.E.B. Du Bois which he references to in the title of his article. He argues that while other philosophers may have taken issue with Du Bois’s essay, he has found a substantial amount of information relative to the creation of racism and the social construction of race, despite Du Bois’s insufficient clarity on the many ways he (Du Bois) describes exactly what race is. Jeffers explains that, “A central reason that “Conservation” (a reference to Du Bois’s essay) has been such a powerfully relevant resource for contemporary thinking about the nature and reality of race is the way that Du Bois raises prescient questions in the essay about the disciplinary perspective most appropriate to thinking about race. He suggests that efforts in the natural sciences to clarify the concept of race eventually reach a dead end but that by taking up a social scientific perspective—that of “the historian and the sociologist”—we are able to achieve a deeper understanding of the relevant phenomena.” Jeffers points out that Du Bois initially felt as though the use of natural sciences should’ve been enough to explain the concept or race, but later understood that there is a major social component when it comes to race and even racism. Jeffers goes on to describe that many African-Americans have felt that their race always predetermined things about them such as their intellectual capacity, political and moral code, along with natural abilities. Jeffers also states that most of the time, when African-Americans are discussing their race or racial issues, they’re usually talking about the many injustices they face or the unfair treatment by the powers that be. This leads them to believe that race was in fact a created concept based on the idea that it gives way to discrimination and prejudices.

Nick Powers’ article offers great insight into the origins of race and how the concept of white supremacy began to form. I do understand how white supremacy came out about and how it came to be. What I don’t understand is the mentality behind it and how many people have suffered for hundreds of years because of an illusion. The illusion of a human being greater than another human being solely on the basis of skin color. When the Europeans and Africans were working alongside each other, they didn’t see color. However, they both felt the impact of injustice and unfairness. This brings about another issue: classism. More often than not, classism has little to do with skin color, but socioeconomic classes. In Jeffers’ article, he confirms what Powers’ discusses by referring to another essay he read in which W.E.B. Du Bois talks about the evolution of race being thought of as scientific to it being a defined social structure. It is a system in which people are prejudged and held to a certain standard because of the color of their skin.

*The Rate of Poverty in America and Its Effect on Children.* Many of the issues I’ve discussed in this paper stems from poverty and the devastating and everlasting mental trauma it can leave on an individual. Whether we’re talking about the violent outbursts in impoverished communities, or the disassociation and superiority that projects from one race to another based on socioeconomic status, one thing is consistent: poverty. Poverty in America is a growing issue and is also a breeding ground for the circle of violence and hopelessness.

In the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, there was an article by Hilary W. Hoynes, Marianne E. Page and Ann Huff Stevens called “Poverty in America: Trends and Explanations.” This article talks about the increase of the standard of living in America over the past 45 years and how the Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP) has shot up more than 50 percent in between 1959 and 2004. The nonelderly poverty rate declined from 1959 to 1969, but quickly rose in 1970 to 10.7 percent and then up to 12.7 in 1980 where it has remained up until 2003. During this time, many people have lived under the poverty line. The authors explain that women are more likely to be impoverished as an opposed to men, therefore many children born into these single-parent homes will also be poor. In 2003, 11.7 percent of males were living below the poverty line, whereas the rate for females was 13.9 percent. Race and ethnicity plays a large part in these statistics according to the authors. Blacks and Hispanics were more likely to live under the poverty line with the 2003 poverty rates among Blacks being 24.3 percent and for Hispanics 22.5 percent. These statistics nearly tripled the 8.2 percent poverty rate for whites. The article also explains that education is a strong predictor in whether or not a person will become impoverished. People who live in families where the head of the household has less than a high school education, are about 31.3 percent below the poverty line compared to 9.6 percent for those whose head has at least a high school education.

As discussed above, women are more likely to be stuck below the poverty line with less than a high school education and many times they are the head of their households. Many of these women are mothers and their children are greatly affected by this circumstance. A journal by the name of *The Future of Children: Children and Poverty* included an article by the name of “The Effects of Poverty on Children”. It was written by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Greg J. Duncan in 1997, however it provides useful insight to how poverty can affect children. The authors determined that there is a strong correlation between poverty and children’s health, achievements, and behaviors. Many children are forced to adjust to living in poverty as they are not in a position to change their lifestyles. Poverty can greatly affect a child’s physical health. Low birth weight is one of these effects can be an indicator in the progress of other problems such as emotional, cognitive, and mental issues. Learning disabilities are also common with children born at low birth weights. Starvation and malnutrition are one of the more overt negative impacts of poverty. Many parents living under poverty lines cannot afford to nourish and feed their children in a way that is sufficient enough to provide nutrition. Many of these afflictions usually affect children of color, especially Black children. There has also been a link between children and their parents having poor communication and poverty.

Poverty is a pervasive issue sweeping the nation and nations abroad. In the article, “Poverty in America: Trends and Explanations”, it explains the statistical consensus about the growing epidemic of poverty through the United States. As time progressed, more and more people have begun living under poverty lines, starting with the female. She is more likely to lead a life of poverty over her male counterpart. Females are more often than not, the leaders of their households and the providers for their children. Unfortunately a lot of children grow up with single mothers and continue the cycle of poverty as they were not taught or shown any differently. Children grow up and most of the time they encounter the ramifications of living poorly. They are brought down with emotional, mental, and health issues which I would assume turns into aggressive behaviors and attitudes. These factors create a great probability that many of these children will grow up to engage in violent and criminal activities all in an attempt to get noticed or feel adequate. They will eventually fall into the socially and ignorantly constructed ideology of what race is and what’s expected of people of certain races, making them another statistic in a long line of statistics.

**Conclusion**

While spending time on these topics, I have decided that I would like to explore the topic of the causes of violence in urban communities in more depth. I don’t think I’ve fully gotten my answer, aside from the ones provided by my sources. I do understand the underlying issues, but what I really want to understand is why the violence is being perpetuated. At what point do people take full responsibility for their own actions? When do people in isolated communities band together and say enough is enough? When do people channel their aggressions into positive outlets? At what point do we recognize that this is not the answer and it isn’t helping us progress as a unit? These are the questions I hope to answer or attempt to answer in the next paper.

Works Cited

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