

OUR NATION'S PRIORITIES: THE ROLE OF PRIVILEGE IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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## Table of Contents

<i>ABSTRACT</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>I. Introduction</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>II. Understanding Racial Privilege</i> .....	<i>3</i>
<i>III. Protests and How They Start</i> .....	<i>7</i>
<i>IV. Hindsight is 20/20: How Did This Happen?</i> .....	<i>12</i>
<i>V. Fighting White Terrorism or Promoting Injustice?</i> .....	<i>19</i>
<i>VI. Pulling Ourselves up By our Bootstraps. Let's Try it</i> .....	<i>24</i>
<i>VII. The Wealth Divide</i> .....	<i>29</i>
<i>VIII. Conclusion</i> .....	<i>36</i>
<i>References</i> .....	<i>38</i>

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is exploring social privilege, defined as the theory of special advantage or entitlement, used to one's own benefit or to the detriment of others, and how certain groups are inherently discriminated against. Coming from the perspective of the new generation, we are taught that in U.S. Society social injustice belongs to the past. While our country prides itself with its advancements of freedom and opportunity for all, there are numerous contemporary instances where all are not treated equally. The selected examples of such instances are addressed through analysis of primary sources such as video footage and direct documentation of various protests as well as secondary sources surrounding racial and class discrimination. The findings suggest that minority and lower socio-economic status groups are disproportionately confronted with violation of their civil rights and opportunity for advancement because of their lack of privilege in today's society. This thesis challenges the idea of equal opportunity in the United States whilst revealing the supposed true determiner of success: Privilege.

## **I. Introduction**

Growing up in the United States, one is assured the promise of equal opportunity through stories of pilgrimage west and personal advancement. However, even though America's entire history is filled with examples of mistreatment and discrimination against various minorities, the American education system leads youth to believe that those are issues of the past, that in solving has strengthened the country's aspirations for equality and social justice as a whole. High school students are often made aware of the Civil Rights movement of the 60's, highlighting events such as the ever-famous supreme court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, after the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance to the "the nation... with liberty and justice for all" every morning. However, the lack of discussion surrounding modern information leaves these issues in the past. However, with the recent Black Lives Matter movements, the new generation is learning that our history's discriminatory tendencies are a very present issue. There was once a time when the topic of social discrimination was not spoken about in schools and in day-to-day conversation. The fact that these issues can now be openly discussed does prove that society has come a long way in modern times. Nevertheless, racial and other types of social discrimination still hold back a large proportion of the population from being treated fairly and finding success. The present argument holds that discrimination and prejudice is not a thing of the past, but is a currently relevant concept that is held back by the absence of a specific thing: Privilege. Social Privilege is defined as the theory of special advantage or entitlement, used to one's own benefit or to the detriment of others (Black & Stone, 2005). Groups affected by privilege or lack thereof can be distinguished based on many different aspects such as, but not limited to: socio-economic status,

disability, ethnicity or race, gender, or religion. In this paper, ethnicity and socio-economic status are going to be the main focuses of discussion.

This thesis describes the theoretical concept of privilege through analysis of the various advantages the status entails, one of which being the safety net that enables risk taking and the promise of security. This promise can seemingly come in many forms, but the promise of safety when protesting in public assembly, alongside the financial safety net that is accumulated with generationally privileged families is going to be the forefront of this work. This paper is going to challenge the rhetoric surrounding the concept of *pulling oneself up by their bootstraps*, coming from the perspective of one who grew up in the society that phrases its discrepancies as being in the past. These clashes of privilege in the modern day will provide for the argument that privilege plays a significant role in how different people are treated in the real world.

## II. Understanding Racial Privilege

The topic of privilege is in no way a new concept. The important work done by famous sociologist and Civil Rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois is critical in understanding the history of the conversation surrounding social, and by extension racial, privilege. He named the “*Negro Problem*,” later coined the “race problem,” and recognized it as a societal issue. This identification was pivotal, as he argued that the concept of race is used as a mechanism of power, and, by extension, of privilege. According to Du Bois, “a social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life” (Gooding-Williams, 2020). He described the failure to incorporate Black people into normal group life in the United States as a social problem with the attendant consequences for all of society. Du Bois theorized that this issue arose primarily because of two factors. First, prejudice of White people towards those in the Black community creates the circumstance that no matter how the Black community acts or develops, they will not be allowed admittance to group life. Second, “Negro cultural backwardness” (Gooding-Williams, 2020), which he defined as “economic disadvantage, ignorance, and deficiency with regard to the art of organized social life” (Gooding-Williams, 2020). This basic analysis laid the groundwork for his research investigating Black people as a specific social group that faces exclusion and disadvantage due to their social environment and racial prejudice. W. E. B. Du Bois’s seminal work laid foundations for further investigation of social privilege in the modern age. His efforts to identify, name, and analyze the “*Negro Problem*” opened a new and fertile landscape for thinkers, researchers, and policy developers.



In order to properly discuss how racial privilege affects American citizens an understanding of how the lack of privilege affects those who do not inherently possess it is necessary. Specifically, we must explore the problems faced by African Americans and other minorities within American society. After Du Bois introduced racial discriminations as a mechanism of power, the thoughts surrounding White privilege became that of confronting White supremacy as the weaponry of Whiteness. A main aspect of this confrontation is to focus attention upon the fact that the social privilege in question is less often played out in the arena of civil liberties like the right to vote, but more so surrounds daily activities. Even when partaking in the most basic aspects of life, the privilege or lack thereof that one's skin color grants can be not only unjust, but life-threatening. Activities like sleeping and simply residing in one's home can end in killing by police, as it recently did for the following members of the Black community: Aiyana Jones, Botham Jean, and Breonna Taylor. Playing music too loudly like Jordan Davis, or going for a run as Ahmaud Aubrey did, can end in a loss of life (Smithers, Franklin, 2020). These tragic incidents essentially showed that simple activities and certain physical qualities can trigger the death of a human being in our society. They revealed what kind of globally invasive threats one faces when of differently colored skin than those in societal power. Rev. Al Sharpton once put it this way: "From racial profiling and being pulled over just for 'driving while black' to this new phenomenon of killing unarmed people out of some preconceived idea of fear, our lives and our children's lives are not being valued" (Sharpton, 2014).

When one looks at how acts of aggression are perceived depending on the person's skin color, the activity of privilege becomes evident. Take White mass shooters,

for example. When caught, they are frequently detained because of mental health concerns with the premise that treatment for their ailment is better than retributive death. However, the same privilege is not assured for those whose skin is of a darker hue. In analysis of press coverage of mass shootings Butler (2015) argued that stereotypical explanations for White acts of violence is that of mental illness, and the lack of resources to combat mental illness is blamed for the act of violence. The White offenders are humanized by being labeled “sick” and a victim of mistreatment. Back in 2015, Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old White man, fatally shot nine African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. After the tragedy, the Mayor of Charlestown Joseph Riley emphasized that this shooting was an act of just “one hateful person.” Butler highlights that “while White suspects are lone wolves — violence by Black and Muslim people is systemic, demanding response and action from all who share their race or religion” (Butler, 2015). When the media reports a crime perpetrated by a member of a minority group, the suspects are frequently and quickly characterized as committing acts of terrorism or deemed as thugs with malicious intent. However, when the aggressor in question is White, it is described as a rare situation that came as a byproduct of their environment. This difference in phrasing used in popular media is inherently racist and asserts privilege of one group over another.

Another way in which the media's rhetoric affects the reaction to White versus minority crime is how White aggressors are often described as children, even if they're in their 20s. When reporting about a 12-year-old African American boy named Tamir Rice, who was shot by police in Cleveland while playing with a toy gun, he was described as a “young man.” However, James Holmes, a White 25-year-old man who shot dozens at an

Aurora, Colorado, movie theater, was frequently defined by his youth in media profiles, which described him as “a normal kid,” a “typical American kid” and “a smart kid” (Butler, 2015). This narrative is also inherently racist. White aggressors are excused due to immaturity, while even younger Black children are presumed almost adults. The impression given becomes that Black children are held to an adult standard of accountability while White, older perpetrators are seen as having less accountability. Even Black victims of crime are villainized. For example, commentators said that Trayvon Martin’s choice to wear a black hoodie moved responsibility for his death to him, the victim, from his vigilante killer. In other words, his outfit choice was just as responsible for his death as the person who killed him. Fox News’s Geraldo Rivera said this quite literally when he stated that the hoodie was “as much responsible for [his] death as George Zimmerman” (Butler, 2015). Minorities are more at risk to be met with violence and be assessed unfairly than the rest of the population, and therefore do not possess the same privilege of physical safety and police protection. This concept has become increasingly clear in the past few years with the stark realities of our society being highlighted through the reactions of the media, political leaders, and the public to the expression of both the right to public assembly and the freedom of speech.

### **III. Protests and How They Start**

Throughout the past ten years, there have been countless protests and demonstrations supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and calling for police accountability for brutality and unequal treatment for individuals of color. The growth and energy of these public actions have given rise to powerful social justice movements and a growth in awareness in the general population. For many within our culture, this has been an uncomfortable shift in public attention. Since the demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movements and anti-war efforts of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, such widespread public protest has been less frequent in the United States and is in comparison unfamiliar to many individuals today. However, since the time of the first European settlers in the Americas, public protest has been an important, but polarizing, force in our society for the less privileged to express their needs. Protest is the “voice of the voiceless” as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and many others have described it. Many times, the protestors involved came from marginalized but easily distinguishable groups such as women, racial/ethnic minorities, workers in certain industries, and those who differ in sexual orientation. Yet our history is replete with protest movements drawn across such lines. Notably, the Depression-era protests of the unemployed, the more recent Occupy Movement, and the Poor People’s March brought together disparate groups around socio-economic issues. Yet our current political climate has created a deep division between populations along policy issues.

These divisions serve to build passions in different ways and to extreme levels. As divisions deepen, so also do the effects of privilege. One essential characteristic of the operation of privilege is in reinforcing membership boundaries in a group. If one is “in,” they are seen to deserve privilege, and those on the outside do not. By the extension of

privilege, one reinforces the kinship of the group. There was a time, for example, when members of a single church gave preferential deals on cars, property, and services to other members of the church. It was seen as a (somewhat) benign reinforcement of the church's family relationship. However, as the groups involved become more deeply divided from others, the extension of insider privilege may challenge legal access to services or products, as is typified in the oft-reported unwillingness of a bakery to provide a wedding cake for a gay couple (Barnes, 2019). The same is true regarding the practice of red lining which restricts property ownership, residence, educational opportunity, and wealth accumulation for persons of color has been active in the United States for many years, creating whole communities of privilege and non-privileged. Recent research shows that red lining, even though technically illegal, still continues in other ways today (Brooks, 2020).

The development of hard-boundary groups leads to a competitive society where groups will try to gain more power for the betterment of their own group. By doing so, privilege is acquired, the exclusion of which can lead to protest. These kinds of patterns are vital to the understanding of societal selectivity of protection from law enforcement, who are typically tasked with handling protest safety. Regarding the discussion of privilege in the midst of protest, the comparison between two modern day examples can be used to shed light on how the right to public assembly is met with differing standards by political leaders and police reactions.

The most recent outcry for Civil Rights was sparked by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Black Lives Matter protests quickly popped up all across the nation, and "on Friday, May 29, around 1,000 people marched through D.C. to call

for justice and an end to police brutality” (Greenburg & Kim, 2021). Later that night, the protests began to get more heated around the White House grounds and the police began to disperse the protestors using chemicals and riot shields, eventually causing the crowds to split up into smaller groups. As a result, the White House went into a lockdown to protect the president who then tweeted the next day about how if protestors had breached the grounds they would have been met with “vicious dogs” and “ominous weapons” (Greenburg & Kim, 2021). Over the course of the next few days, police officers charged protestors on horseback, used tear gas, pepper spray, riot gear including shields and batons, and shot rubber bullets into the crowds. The newly militarized gear and training of local police was even more enhanced by the deployment of soldiers. Over 19 people were killed over two weeks of protests across the country, although nobody was killed in Washington D.C. (McEvoy, 2020).

As previously stated, when people think of protests in the modern age, they may think of Civil Rights and feminism. They may associate protests with the political left. However, this is not always the case. For example, the 2021 storming of the United States Capitol with the intention of disrupting the certifying of the 2020 election that confirmed Joe Biden to be president of the United States began as a protest. Massive crowds met at the Capitol in Washington D.C. to support their presidential candidate who had legitimately lost the election, but who was fomenting anger through the dissemination of disinformation. The crowds soon became aggressive, and the protestors entered the Capitol and began to loot the congressional offices. On Jan. 6th, then-President Trump spoke at the “Save America” rally on the Ellipse, which is a park close to the White House. At that protest rally, Trump called his supporters to take action

against the “stolen election,” and told them to march to the Capitol, even saying he would be there with them (Hall, 2021). They proceeded to the Capitol and breached it as they had been encouraged to do. Lawmakers and staff evacuated to safer locations onsite while the Capitol was seized by the mob for the next few hours as overwhelmed police waited for backup. In the midst of the rioting, Trump finally made a statement to the crowds, releasing a video on Twitter that showed him saying “We have to have peace. So, go home. We love you. You're very special. You've seen what happens you see the way; others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel. But go home and go home and peace" (Hall, 2021). All in all, the Capitol Police were not prepared for the chaos that ensued, so they fell back, and the rioters took control over the Capitol. Once inside, officers were even more limited in options, as getting aggressive crowds out of a space is much harder than keeping them out in the first place. After the riots took place, inspector general, Michael A. Bolton, published a report that found the capitol police were told to refrain from using their most aggressive crowd controlling tactics (Broadwater, 2021). Five people died and more than 140 were injured in the melee (Hall, 2021).

Another instance of right-wing protest is the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. What initially was a protest surrounding the removal of a Confederate statue turned violent when a car plowed into a crowd of counter-protesters that were gathered downtown. One person was killed by the impact, and dozens of others were injured after the vehicle sped away from the scene (Keneally, 2018). After the fact, President Trump addressed the scene as an “egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides” (Keneally, 2018). This response was controversial because

Trump did not make any mention of the White nationalists who were an organizing force of the protest or of racism, but only addressed that violence had occurred and implied that both sides were equally at fault. One of the critics to this response was Oregon Senator Ron Wyden, who tweeted “What happened in Charlottesville is domestic terrorism...the President’s words only serve to offer cover for heinous acts.” (Katz, 2017). After being pressed by Senator Wyden and the public, Trump defended his original statement by saying "You had some very bad people in that group. You also had some very fine people on both sides" (Keneally, 2018), inferring that the White nationalists, at least some of them, were justified in their actions.



#### **IV. Hindsight is 20/20: How Did This Happen?**

After the Jan. 6th insurrection took place, President-Elect Joe Biden released a statement highlighting the difference between the actions that took place that day versus the events in early June during the Black Lives Matter protests. In an emotional video statement, he preached that "No one can tell me that if it had been a group of Black Lives Matter protesting yesterday, they would have been treated very, very differently than the mob of thugs that stormed the Capitol, we all know that's true. And it's unacceptable. Totally unacceptable" (Williams, 2021). These statements were justified, as police officers were seen at Black Lives Matter protests wearing helmets and bulletproof vests while shoving and tear-gassing peaceful, mostly Black protesters in June. In contrast, "Some Capitol Hill officers in street uniforms chatting with and helping some white rioters even as the mob overran and attacked their comrades" (Williams, 2021). There was a video clip that went viral during the insurrection that showcased an officer of the United States Capitol Police posing for a photo-op with one of the rioters who was unlawfully storming the government building. Journalist Timothy Burke posted the video to Twitter with the caption "'Cops are taking selfies with the terrorists.' The footage quickly went viral, with over 200,000 likes and retweets, fueling criticism of the police response to the riot" (Hall, 2021). While there is, of course, no scientific way of knowing what would have happened if the Capitol rioters had been people of color protesting police brutality or gathering in support of Black Lives Matter rather than supporting a failed presidential candidate, the two can certainly be placed side by side and compared and the privilege or lack thereof can be analyzed through the events that took place.

The first difference is found in expectation and preparation. Before the two protests, law enforcement believed that those who would show up for the Black Lives

Matter rally would pose a direct threat. Therefore, the police prepared for violence to ensue. This is obvious when looking at the photos of the Lincoln Memorial decorated by rows of soldiers in full riot gear in preparation for the Black Lives Matter rally that was scheduled to take place (Williams, 2021) in the summer of 2020. However, when it came to the "Save America" rally in January 2021, Capitol Police acted as if they were expecting a peaceful protest from President Trump's supporters, with little or ineffective procedures in place to deal with violent escalation. In fact, protesters showed up to the Capitol only separated by a portable metal barricade with uniformed police behind them. This difference in preparation is even more egregious when one sees the extensive online chatter among the radical right wing leading up to the date. Preparations were made by groups such as the Proud Boys, the 3%ers, the Oath Keepers, and other far right militia groups to have a coordinated command structure among the rioters and many of the insurgents were encouraged to come wearing both defensive and offensive gear (Diaz & Treisman, 2021). This information about the potential level of violence was available to the Capitol Police and other law enforcement agencies well in advance, as made clear by the FBI intelligence report disseminated days before the riot (Diaz & Treisman, 2021). The marked difference in preparation by law enforcement in the two situations speaks loudly of the role of privilege and its accompanying stereotyping.

Both the reactions to the BLM protests and the Capitol insurgency had serious flaws: however, those flaws were opposite in nature. BLM had what seemed to be an over-response. What was meant to intimidate crowds to prevent aggression ended up with officers acting out in violence against those they were supposed to protect. On the other hand, there was an under-response to the Capitol riots, leading to unregulated anger

expression leading to drastic consequences. These differing expectations could have been vital in determining what degree of violence was going to ensue in both situations.

The different expectations seem to be linked to racism. There is an argument that says that if the Black Lives Matter protests had the same limited kind of police presence, it might have become just as out of control as the riots at the Capitol became. Of course, there is no way to judge the accuracy of that statement as the past cannot be rewritten, but the fact that the police presence was almost nonexistent at the start of the Capitol riots is rooted in racism and difference in privilege. While the police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests were all planned as peaceful gatherings, the case is not the same for the Capital riot. In fact, those who study both crowd tendencies and police beg to differ, saying there was more than enough evidence to justify preparing for an aggressive group. Arizona State University criminologist Ed Maguire says that ““there was clear intelligence about where this was headed...All you had to do is go on Parler (the alt-right social media platform) for 10 minutes. I was on the night before. They were talking about violence. This is open-source material, and the police would have had more”” (Greenburg and Kim, 2021). Even only a month earlier, the infamous Proud Boys, a group that is extremely pro-violence, had been present at a pro-Trump rally inciting aggression. There were plenty of resources that foreshadowed the upcoming violence that was to be enacted at the capital, but because of the preconceived image of the protestors as “White, patriotic Americans” it was not taken as seriously. One wonders at the level of importance of the shared insider demographics in the Capitol situation. Many of the leaders of the insurrection belonged to groups that pull from military and law enforcement, such as the Oath Keepers. There is a perception that the military and police share a common

commitment to the rule of law in our society. The tragic irony of videos showing rioters beating police with posts attached to American flags show the fallacy in this perception (Shephard, 2021). At least 60% of the Capitol Police are White and the organization has long dealt with racial prejudice in hiring and promotion, and the officials making decisions about deploying the National Guard were White (Kaplan & Sapien, 2021).

Why was there so much crowd intimidation present at Black Lives Matter protests and so little violence prevention for the Capitol riots? Protestors in Charlottesville, Virginia and the Capitol openly carried weapons of various sorts, unlike protestors at Black Lives Matter who appear to be unarmed. The answer can partially be explained by the concept of privilege—privilege surrounding one's skin color and the accompanying stereotypes. When gun possession statistics are analyzed it is found that the most likely individual to own a firearm in the United States is a White male (Cooke, 2000). If you add in political affiliation the difference in these statistics skyrocket; Republicans are significantly more likely to own a gun than Democrats (Cooke, 2000). So why would there be less police force for a demographic that is overwhelmingly more heavily armed than the other? The answer is at least in part due to implicit racial bias.

Another potential factor that can help explain why Black Lives Matter protests were treated with less privilege is because of the public's perception of the Black Lives Matter's position towards the police. A major aspect of the protests deals with the frequency of police brutality and the lack of accountability of the police. The movement is seen by many officers and parts of the general public as synonymous with being anti-police. Michael Sierra-Arevalo, a professor at the University of Texas-Austin, phrases the concept perfectly, stating that some police officers “view it as an existential threat to their

job, their profession, and in some cases to their very lives. That's not something that's going to be as near the fore when you're looking out into the crowd and you can quite literally see Blue Lives Matter flags flying somewhere" (Greenburg & Kim, 2021). In this way, even if it is not morally or even logically correct, it is understandable why an officer would have a different mental standpoint when working during a Black Lives Matter protest rather than a pro-Trump rally, especially when so many conservatives sport Blue Lives Matter flags. It can even be simplified to just Black versus White treatment, regardless of whether or not those involved are in a protest setting. A study conducted through Stanford University observed how police officers communicated with community members through body-worn camera footage taken during traffic stops. The data found that White members of the community were 57% more likely to hear the more respectful phrases used in the data set, while Black members were 61% more likely to receive that of the least respectful phrases (Voigt et al., 2017). While the cause of this difference is officially unknown, the mindset inherently gives privilege to one group over another. When applied to a higher stress situation, like a protest, this pattern of differing communication can turn the protests into self-fulfilling prophecies of violence if police are acting out of fear for their own well-being or a perceived lack of respect, instead of acting to keep the public safe. This trend is proven in respect to the fact that a Black man is 2.5 times more likely than a White man to be killed by a police officer, and another study found that when a Black man is fatally shot by an officer, they are twice as likely as a White person to be unarmed (Peeples, 2020). These statistics show that those in the Black community are perceived to have a higher threat of danger than those in the White community. If one is expecting violence, then they are more likely to perceive an action

as violent, which sets up the Black Lives Matter protests for failure before they had even begun.

The Capitol rioters also faced a variety of consequences for their insurrection. Many critics are quick to bring up statistics about the numbers of arrests between the Black Lives Matter protests and the Capitol insurrection, and while there were more arrests across the country following Jan. 6, during the two isolated incidents in Washington D.C. that is not the case (Greenburg & Kim, 2021). One might understand that there were few arrests on the first day of the Capitol riots, as it is very difficult to make arrests when the officer is alone, and, as discussed elsewhere in this writing, law enforcement was poorly prepared and overwhelmed. There was such an increase of force later on in the timeline in both the Black Lives Matter protest as well as the Capital Riot, “Within days, police using cellphone data and facial recognition software began to track down rioters, arresting several dozen by Tuesday and saying they expected the arrest tally to rise into the hundreds” (Williams, 2021). Hundreds were placed on no-fly lists and listed as domestic terrorists. It was not a very difficult feat to find the rioters, as many had taken to social media to post their conquests with smiling and unmasked faces. If that does not show the privilege they possess, then what could? They had access to and expertise in using social media, and, perhaps more tellingly, they had little fear of being held accountable.

It is apparent that the preparations and the reactions in the two situations were severely flawed, so something should be done about it... right? This is where the conversation surrounding privilege goes even deeper, because even when laws are

enacted to address such discrepancies, those same laws end up widening the gap between those who possess privilege and those that do not.

## **V. Fighting White Terrorism or Promoting Injustice?**

After the Jan. 6th, 2021 insurrection, an outcry called for making domestic terrorism a separate federal crime (Hager, 2021). Because of the differences that White privilege has made in the protest responses, many Civil Rights activists are worried about the effect such a change would have on the treatment of non-White protestors. Upon first glance this might seem a non-issue, i.e., the rioters at the Capitol were predominantly White, so why would other races be worried about their treatment? Unfortunately, past hate crime legislation that was targeted at White aggressors have had various negative impacts on minority groups. Eli Hager, a writer for the Marshall Project, describes three ways in which people of color are historically subject to discrimination after White violence. These include the Mafia, the Oklahoma City Bombing, and the Columbine School Shooting.

About 50 years ago, the Mafia was considered one of the largest threats to American society, and in 1970 the government passed what can be considered the “most sweeping federal criminal legislation ever enacted” (Hager, 2021) that sought to eradicate organized crime. It is called the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), and it provides “powerful criminal penalties for persons who engage in a pattern of racketeering activity or collection of an unlawful debt, and who have a specified relationship to an enterprise that affects interstate or foreign commerce” (Coppola & DeMarco, 2012, p. 242). In simpler terms, it allows the government to pursue members of criminal organizations solely for their participation in larger criminal enterprises and not only for the individual crimes they may or may not have personally committed. RICO also recommends lengthy prison sentences for these crimes with the goal of disrupting the power hierarchies of the Mafia families. Of course, it was not just a general



population of White people that were being targeted as many of the Mafia members were Sicilian immigrants, but for the point of this paper, Black criminal groups were not intentionally being targeted in the passing of this act. However, research completed by a University of Arkansas School of Law criminologist found that “86% of federal criminal prosecutions of gangs using the RICO statute have targeted racial minorities” (Hager, 2021). The racial stereotypes held by law enforcement and prosecutors have reinforced bias. Their implicit bias allows that White groups are only considered gangs when they are a formal group like a motorcycle gang. However, when it comes to African Americans, a group of friends or even individuals in physical proximity to one another are oftentimes labeled a gang. Privilege is demonstrated when White collar criminals who partake in organized crime are brought into civil court, not criminal. When this happens, RICO is used to hand out fines rather than prison time. When members of Black or Hispanic groups are taken to trial, it is more likely to be a criminal case rather than a civil one (Hager, 2021). Heavier sentences are also more likely to be given by federal prosecutors to African Americans: they are twice as likely to charge Black people with crimes that involve a mandatory minimum sentence than White people in similar situations (Starr & Rehavi, 2013). This means that privilege is what determines whether or not somebody is sentenced to up to 20 years in prison. This disparity in prison sentences in relation to White aggressors keeps minorities in a subordinate status, allowing the criminal justice system to act as a system of racial control.

In 1995, a group of anti-government extremists murdered 168 people, 19 of them children, when they bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City. This was the most lethal single act of domestic terrorism in United States history. In response to this

bombing, the government enacted the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA) which was initially designed to “expedite the legal processes from sentencing to execution” and increase the consequences of terrorist crimes (Brock, 2019). It also included multiple opt-in statutes for qualifying states to add even stricter limitations. For example, the process of habeas corpus, the right of prisoners to appeal their state court cases to federal court, was taken away under this Act. Habeas corpus is the legal foundation for prisoners to challenge their detention and is oftentimes the last resource they can use to avoid the death penalty. In some cases, the time frame made it almost impossible to reverse death penalty convictions (Brock, 2019). This right was enacted after the Civil War and gave Black people a way of gaining a fair trial when they did not have the opportunity to do so in the past. The repercussions of the AEDPA taking the possibility of this right away has very obvious potential to be used against one's right to a fair trial. In reaction, The New Yorker said it was “surely one of the worst statutes ever passed”— and it has disproportionately impacted Black and brown criminal defendants, as well as immigrants" (Hager, 2021). Because the U.S. legal system already discriminates against people of color, taking away one's right to appeal was, of course, going to punish Black defendants disproportionately more often than White defendants, even though the law’s original intention was to address domestic terrorism such as that promulgated by White men in the Oklahoma City bombing. In this specific case, it is not the advantage of privilege that is the issue, it's the lack thereof. While the law was not made with the intention of taking away minority rights, the way it operates within a justice system rife with racial discrimination makes that the de facto outcome.

As has already been described, mass shootings are predominantly committed by White males. This was the case in Colorado's Columbine High School in 1999, where two White teenagers used shotguns and other weapons to kill 12 other students and one teacher. Because of news networks live streaming of the event and the police's reactions to it, the nation watched the scene in horror. In response the government doled out \$750 million to schools across the entire country (Addington, 2019). The money went to hiring police officers in various districts and providing other security tools, including metal detectors students would have to walk through before entering their schools and surveillance cameras that taped students for the duration of their class time. A direct outcome of these procedures is that student actions that historically resulted in school disciplinary actions, i.e., schoolyard fights, disobedience to teacher's orders, and graffiti, are now being managed by arrests and criminal charges. Even though the mass shooters had their own profile which included being White males, the new security systems were frequently used against students of color because of the intrinsic bias of the school environments. Racial biases began to be increasingly supported as urban schools had more difficulty than suburban schools like Columbine High School. "Recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights found that schools with majority Black student enrollments were more likely to have security personnel than those with majority White student populations" (Addington, 2019, p. 299). This development is what created the school-to-prison pipeline: "Black students had become three times more likely than their White peers to be suspended and even more likely to be referred to law enforcement for the exact same infractions, according to Civil Rights data from the department" (Hager, 2021). Instead of focusing on helping the students cope

with their ongoing issues, the on-going lack of funding for urban school districts used the new-found money for security to shift their disciplinary issues into the court system.

All in all, efforts made to support the safety of United States residents end up promoting injustice because of the differing levels of privilege of the people involved and our country's innate racial biases. The privilege that comes along with lighter skin color and higher social class makes it much harder for White individuals to be sorted into targeted groups even when the definition of those groups were initially specified for them. It is especially shocking because "In 2019, for example, Black people made up roughly 13 percent of the U.S. population yet were accused by law enforcement of nearly 24 percent of hate crimes, according to Justice Department statistics. White people, conversely, were 60 percent of the population yet faced fewer than 53 percent of hate crime accusations" (Hager, 2021). The majority of the population is white; however, arrests and incarceration do not reflect an equal application of the legal system.

## **VI. Pulling Ourselves up By our Bootstraps. Let's Try it.**

When people think of the household expression *pull oneself up by the bootstraps*, Americans see it as an approach to life where one individually does everything they can to succeed and through this hard work, flourish. However, the expression in and of itself is impossible, and it is ironic that Americans use it as a motivational tool when it is literally an illusion of an impossible act. The phrase produces a tempting narrative, but is inherently flawed if examined in the context of evidence of social injustice and privilege in the United States.

The concept of upward mobility resonates within an individualistic society such as that found in the contemporary United States because it promises personal success alongside personal gain with the input of individual effort. However, it also promotes two unrealistic expectations that only the privileged can actually access. Nicholas Kristof, a journalist for the New York Times, describes how the phrase “suggests that benefits programs are counterproductive because they foster “dependency” (Kristof, 2020). The rhetoric encourages participants to believe that effort must be given, even if it is at a disproportionate amount, regardless of one’s access to opportunity. A White male born into an upper-class family in the suburbs has multi-faceted privilege above a Black female who is born into a family which is struggling financially in an inner city, and to assume that they are starting off their academic or career lives with the same opportunity is to ignore accumulated empirical data. To one who subscribes to the bootstraps phrase, taking any type of financial assistance from welfare programs or systems that actually are set in place to help the impoverished, like food stamps, is considered cheating or exploiting the system. Under this logic, anyone appropriately availing themselves of the help provided is undeserving of any success that follows from assistance. While there

may have been a defensible argument decades ago in the largely agrarian society based on manual labor that once existed, there is no evidence to suggest such findings in the present day. In countries like Canada and Australia, there is a “much more robust social welfare system than the United States, but Americans in the prime working years (ages 25 to 54) are more likely to drop out of the labor force than Europeans and Canadians in those years” (Kristof, 2020). This “out of the labor force” trend is because workers health, education, and training the United States drastically falls behind in quality and equality. In the U.S., health issues have crippling financial effects. Lack of access to equal educational quality leads to a lifetime of reduced opportunity. Even though welfare programs and support systems are oftentimes erroneously seen as pandering to the lazy, they actually promote a healthy working environment that encourages workers to perform at their best ability. In this way, America’s refusal to acknowledge the need for support is a destructive fantasy. It underscores the likelihood that people who have the privilege of preferred skin color, money, and opportunity are more often the ones who achieve financial and career success. Significantly, when in these environments, it is easy to overlook the privileges that one possesses, and the essential support that those privileges offer. Take a rigged game of monopoly for example. In social psychologist Paul Piff’s TED talk, he describes an experiment performed at UC Berkley where 100 pairs of subjects were randomly assigned to be either the privileged player, meaning they had double the money and advantages, or the non-privileged player in a simple game of monopoly. Soon after the game started, the privileged played began to boast about their money, move their pieces louder, display power poses, and even became rude to their opponents. The most important finding however was revealed at the end of the game

when the privileged player was asked about their success. They attributed it to their own playing and strategy, ignoring the inherent privilege they were given before the start of the game (Piff, 2013). These findings are so important because it directly exemplifies the concept of not recognizing the privilege one possesses. This causes a lack of understanding that others who are not born into privilege need support from other routes, like welfare programs, simply in order to approach an even playing field. In extension, by diminishing the validity of success aided with those resources, this attitude inherently holds those who do not possess privilege down and keeps them from obtaining what our society claims to offer: equal opportunity.

The second toxic assumption that the bootstraps mentality implies is that anybody and everybody has the ability to succeed to the same level as everyone else. When faced with a single teenage mother or a 70-year-old factory worker, many assume that they are at that point in life because of the choices that individual made. Little regard is given to the fact that their available choices were inevitably granted and/or limited by systems of privilege and social bias. In relation to the modern-day controversy, Mark Wingfield, a journalist for the Dallas Morning News, brings up the following scenario that puts this concept to light: When considering a blue-collar worker, many believe that if they just had the will and hard work to get a better education and move to a state with more job opportunities, their life would be better. The fact that those steps have not been taken is seen as meaning that they are not very gritty. Wingfield challenges this perspective, “Imagine, if you can, how hard it would be to pick up your family and relocate to another state when you can’t afford where you currently live. Moving is expensive, and when you’re already broke, the promise of future income in a far-away place hardly seems like

a promise” (Wingfield, 2019). While it is true that availability of jobs does spark moving cross country, for most people that is only done with a promise of a certain income level. So, without the hope of an income level that provides security, what is the next option? Many would say that finding a new career and educating yourself to succeed within it. That path is plausible for the blue-collar worker, with no familial wealth, to accomplish only if there is an affordable school in proximity to their home, as well as a way to pay for childcare and living expenses until graduation. In a perfect world that would be possible, but unfortunately that is rarely the case. Sweeping statements that generalize a group of people and their unique life circumstances is an example of logical fallacy that leads to flawed conclusions. Yet, it is often heard that there is equal opportunity for everyone if you just look and work for it, a statement with the clear subtext of “if you're poor it's just because you are lazy,” is the same as saying all rich people are entitled or all white people are racist. Neither is true in actuality.

Even with the disparity of wealth causing such a dramatic difference in personal privilege, the mythology surrounding American society still emphasizes individualism. This mythology in recent years has been honed to a sharp point by the “prosperity gospel” proponents of big megachurches, which is essentially the idea that one can become rich through prayer (Burton, 2017). Their recasting is even more pernicious, through saying that wealth is a reward for piety or subscription to a narrow orthodoxy and, by extension, poverty is a sign of spiritual weakness. All these bootstrap narratives insist that wealth and the amount of it a family possesses is independently achieved. The widespread acceptance of this mythology is seen in public response to politician’s statements and media reactions. This entails that commentary surrounding the realities in



our country place blame on minority families for either A.) being too lazy to make the money in the first place, or B.) not saving enough when they do. Even after the dismantling of Jim Crow laws, which were intended to provide opportunities to people of color by altering employment practices/public policies which then in turn helped shift societal norms, those changes have had very little effect on the growing racial wealth gap. While the durability and transferability of wealth is a great privilege to those that have access to it, it acts as a disservice to society because it tends to reproduce itself for every future generation. It all comes down to the privilege of generations; wealth, the absence of which is an indicator of the defect.

## **VII. The Wealth Divide**

It is no secret that being White in America comes with many advantages. Already discussed is the privilege of safety while protesting in public assembly and a more assured sense of free speech, alongside the detrimental rhetoric surrounding American opportunity. Financially, White people also hold substantial privilege in income opportunity/occupational status. However, all of these are subsidiary to the wealth divide. White families earn 60% more on average in comparison to Black or Latinx families. When it comes to accumulated wealth, they surpass the others by tenfold, “even when controlling for household income, Black or Latino households rarely hold one third of the wealth their white peers have” (Williams, 2017). Without reference to this knowledge, comparisons between white and minority families are, at the very least, incomplete.

In order to understand the severity of the problem, the difference between income and wealth must be understood. While a family's income is predictive of future success, wealth is a different concept altogether as it can ensure success. Income, by definition, is an amount of money a household accumulates over a certain period of time, like an annual salary or hourly wage. On the other hand, wealth is the result of accumulation of assets, including real and personal property, stocks, bonds, and other categories of value, held by the person or household. Wealth includes the amount of land owned and assets accumulated like cars and investments. Wealth is what “enables families to get ahead, whether by financing additional education or professional certification, funding business opportunities, providing the down payment on a home in desired neighborhoods with better-resourced schools, or paying their children’s college tuition” (Williams, 2017). The gap in wealth between minority and White families has been growing over the years, especially since the Great Depression. This growth has caused increasing concern that the

widening gap is going to further limit potential gains by Black and Latino households “in reducing the continuing disparities in the classrooms, workplaces, and paychecks” (Williams, 2017). Media outlets and experts tend to comment more frequently on disparities in income. However, if the importance of the wealth gap and an awareness of all the factors deriving from that gap goes without public understanding, then the ways it drives racial discrimination and polarizes privilege will never change. This change is becoming a dire need, as “the wealth gap is the worst it’s been since the U.S. government started keeping track, with the median household wealth of a White family being eighteen times higher and twenty times higher than that of Hispanic and Black families respectively” (Utt, 2014). One way this plays out in the real world is that even the most fiscally minded families can be faced with a major economic event and a White family will have a substantially larger safety net in comparison to a Black or Latino family in the United States of America. This was demonstrated on to a great scale with the COVID-19 pandemic, showing how uncontrollable twists can be crushing to those without the privilege of wealth. In the United States, the pandemic affected those of African American and Latino decent the hardest on every front, including that of higher infection and death rates, business closures, and job losses (Cohen, 2021). This may seem like common sense to some, but the ways in which wealth privileges one is the direct cause of a lack of privilege for another.

Wealth creates two very important sources of power: durability and its ability to survive and accumulate through generations. One of the most common assets that comprises wealth, real property, tends to hold its value when viewed over long spans of time, especially during times of crisis. When it comes to emergencies like an expensive

medical bill, wealth can ensure survivability when those living paycheck-to-paycheck would be financially debilitated. Wealth especially influences further generations, as parents may play a fundamental role in their child's education and health care. Those who have substantial wealth may help with their grandchildren's education, or help their family members with a new home, allowing the freeing up of resources for other uses. The importance of protecting wealth over long periods of time has been the impetus for our legal system controlling estate planning and wealth transfer. These types of assets, called transformative assets, have the ability to substantially change the future of the recipient, (Shapiro, 2005, p. 2). Legal entities, such as generation-skipping trusts and others, allow wealth to pass through time without being subject to taxes at the same rates. In most families holding substantial assets, any remaining wealth after death can be passed down to younger generations relatively untaxed and protected. Thus, a subclass of society has been created holding a disparate amount of the wealth available, drawing a distinct line in the sand between the privileged and the not. Clans have built and retained economic power over time allowing them access to extraordinary privilege, the exercise of which has had far-reaching consequences in the political landscape of the United States.

Families having a great accumulation of wealth can lead to success. However, what is done with wealth is just as important in determining the degree of success available to different groups of the American population. A major use of wealth is associated with education attainability. Since White families not only have greater wealth but expect to get more of it in the future, those resources do a great deal to explain why White households are less affected when they need to pay off student loans. That is even

still true when calculating the fact that White people hold twice the rate of college diplomas as Black and Latinx families do (Williams, 2017). Speaking of student loans, when raised in families with different levels of financial resources, regardless of grit or intelligence, it will be more challenging to earn a college degree. There are many reasons for this increased challenge: one is the fact that since public schools are funded by taxes, the higher property values a neighborhood boasts, the more money will be directly funded into the local public school. This means that the quality of education available to students is directly correlated to their surroundings' class level. Another factor is the necessity to work while in school. Many students are expected to help support their families. In fact, this holds true with respect to both children helping their parents but also parents helping their parents. "Black and Latino households are almost twice as likely to report helping a parent or older family member in the past year as do White families" (Williams, 2017). Because of this increased pressure to aid in familial crisis, Black households typically end up giving away double the gift amounts of white families, even though they have lesser means to do so. This means that while wealth that aids the next generation can be of service, if one generation lacks that resource, they can hold back the next if there is increased pressure to help older family members. With this expectation, time is taken away from study and a higher reliance on income is developed in comparison to their wealthier peers. Both of these factors assist in the lack of attainability of a university degree, and the outcome of not getting one leads to further challenges in securing sufficient income to save for the future. Even when a university degree is achieved, when coming from an affluent family one is more likely to be able to afford taking an unpaid internship, leading to more long term gainful employment. The

same is not the case for those who must rely on income to get themselves through college. These damaging domino effects are why programs like Affirmative Action exist, a policy that was put in place to help bring balance to such disproportionate privilege.

Why is upward mobility difficult to achieve in the United States, the land of opportunity, at such disproportionate rates? The answer falls, once again, on privilege. In this case, having the means and ability to pass any wealth down to family members is a privilege that many takes for granted. As previously touched upon, the owning of land can only serve as a monetary advancement for future generations because its value is sustainable. So, having land passed down through generations can provide for a substantial advantage for affluent families. However, what about acquiring land in the first place? It turns out that there is a substantial advantage to being a White household when it comes to buying a home in general, as Black and Latinx households are forced to jump hurdles that others do not. Applicants of color were found to have received substantial unfavorable treatment at the hands of rental offices as well as real estate agents over 20% of the time, according to a paired testing study (Turner, 2002). This unfavorable treatment came in the form of less opportunities to inspect homes that had been advertised and given less information regarding the process of buying a home. When it comes to acquiring credit in order to be accepted for loans in the process of buying a home, Black and Latinx households face even more challenges as they are rejected as mortgage applicants substantially more so than White families (Charles & Hurst, 2002). Knowing these tendencies, potential applicants of color report not applying at all to mortgages because they think they are going to be rejected any way (Charles & Hurst, 2002). This mindset is likely to continue as the COVID-19 pandemic

unproportionally affected minority households, so the idea of purchasing a home may seem even more daunting when taking more job loss into account (Stauffer, 2021). If the families do manage to get the loan, they need to get the house they desire, Black families pay higher interest rates on all sorts of loans like car and mortgage, as well as student debt (Chiteji, 2010). Back in the 1970's, new policies to encourage lower-income families to gain homeownership just ended up creating new ways to disadvantage Black families (Taylor, 2019). In an effort to undermine the resistance to Black homeownership, the government guaranteed urban mortgages, but what this did was make it seem like unprofitability, rather than racism, was the cause of housing segregation (Taylor, 2019). These kinds of institutions and policies inherently favor the affluent, and while in a perfect world this would not mean that minorities are discriminated against, reality shows that they suffer under these confines on the daily.

It is not just major financial milestones that determine monetary stability in one's life, but how a company treats their workers and the resources they make available, or do not offer, also have a say. Many low-paying careers do not offer employer matches for retirement plans, or even have access to said plans at all. This takes away the opportunity to save to only the higher up employees who are paid more in the first place.

Homeowners are even able to save with each mortgage payment, whereas renters do not have the same access to the privilege. Without the means for a down payment at all, homeownership may be out of grasp completely. This prevents those families from being able to appreciate their assets in the future and offering their children help. This means that even regardless of racial discrimination, the wealth gap will widen. The idea that willful behavior and financial discipline alone will ensure success shrinks in comparison

to the evidence proving the importance of agency and opportunity. Alongside a surplus of family wealth, “White households can more effectively leverage the benefits offered by the Household Saving and Asset Appreciation pathways. In contrast, Black and Latino households benefit only marginally from all three pathways, given the much lower levels of wealth in their communities” (Williams, 2017). Those findings once again confirm the difference in opportunity between minority and White household groups. Essentially, the unique qualities of wealth ensure that racial discrimination and polarization will continue well into the future. This makes the racially covert nature of privilege a particularly disastrous kind of oppression, a kind that holds generations down with an unseeable end.



## VIII. Conclusion

When it comes to a true determiner of success in the United States, the concept of privilege can be a very telling factor. Americans refer to their discriminatory past surrounding slavery and discrimination as evidence to its growth as a country. Modern youth are educated on the past Civil Rights efforts, but are not informed of its modern struggle. Through research and analysis, it has been found that minority groups still have inherently less opportunity to achieve financial and societal success due to the connection between success and race. When it comes to that connection, the concept of privilege is inarguable, especially given the relationship to wealth with its ability to endure over generations. Knowing this quality, it is no shock that the wealth gap is so rooted in United States history.

The attitudes surrounding people of color and White Americans are demonstrated daily, but one of the more effective examples was shown in the differing expectations and preparation surrounding Black Lives Matter protests in comparison to the Capitol riots. The force that was made readily available to guard the Black Lives Matter clearly exemplified their perceived threat. The fact that the threat perceived of the pro-Trump rally was next to none, knowing the demographics tendency of gun ownership and past violence, is related to the race of those involved. Race is very obviously a key factor in who gets the privilege of protection, as even today there are bills being introduced that can be interpreted to criminalize protests including Black Lives Matter (Rowland & Eidelman, 2017). The importance of privilege is also expressed in the rhetoric used to describe America's overwhelming philosophy of hard work and motivation. The philosophy that one will get as far as one wants in life if they only work hard is inherently flawed and promotes unrealistic expectations that only those born into privilege can

achieve. The narrative falsely warns the impoverished against the utilization of welfare policies because the acceptance of any aid entails that one is not working hard enough, with no regard to inherited privilege in a drastically unequal society. This narrative has promoted the perceived fairness of the wealth gap, that highlights how the possession of valuable assets like property can be passed down through generations therefore benefiting a select group of people: White families. Through the inarguable connection between wealth and race to social status and power, marginalized populations will continue to be discriminated against in the foreseeable future. The combination of societal discrimination, and economic inequality, being born and raised into privilege can be considered the end all be all of American success. In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the limited scope of discussion presented in this thesis, as it was only based on selected examples of social disadvantage experienced by minorities. There are many other areas, like environmental inequalities or health disparities, that social and economic injustices are documented and entangled with, the understanding of which provides hope for systematic change in the United States.

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