



BlackEconomics.org

“Everybody: Do Something!”

In the gavel-to-gavel televised coverage of the trial of George Floyd’s murderer (Derek Chauvin), we received clear evidence of the Black-White income and wealth gap expanding power of the US criminal injustice system.

We have seen a parade of judges, attorneys, police, first responders, pulmonologists, forensic scientists, medical examiners, and others during the trial itself and during expert wraparound commentary on the trial. Understandably, in the State of Minnesota with a 7.0 percent Black population, most of these players are White. However, even at the national level there is evidence that, on average, Black Americans do not account for an outsized (greater than 25 percent) presence in criminal injustice proceedings.¹

Before our very eyes, we watch an important industry in America operating and fueling the lives of mainly Whites with jobs with above average wages and salaries. These White workers are paid mainly with your tax dollars, while they criminalize, jail, and imprison in an outsized fashion (Black Americans comprised about 14 percent of the nation’s population, but 33.9 percent of those incarcerated through the criminal injustice system in 2019) Black men and women; keeping the latter outside of the labor force.²

It is really simple math: If Whites earn income and generate wealth by working in the criminal injustice system, while at the same time preventing Blacks from earning income and generating wealth by incarcerating us through the criminal injustice system, then this is a perfect equation for broadly expanding the Black-White income and wealth gaps.

The fact is that Black Americans serve as key fodder for the nation’s criminal injustice system that accounted for nearly \$300 billion (about 5 percent) of the \$6.4 trillion in total government spending in 2016—the most recent year for which complete “justice expenditure” statistics are

¹ According to the US Department of Labor, Black Americans account for about 21 percent of corrections, judicial, and police workers in the nation: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>. (Retrieved April 8, 2021)

² The incarceration percentage is derived from two reports from the Bureau of Justice Statistics: “Prisoners in 2019” <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>; and “Jail Inmates in 2019” <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ji19.pdf>. (Retrieved April 8, 2019)

available.³ Think about it, it costs government about \$134K per year to maintain each inmate.⁴ Most of this money is going into the pockets of White Americans.

There is well-known and increasing evidence that many Black Americans in the criminal injustice system are there unjustifiably, while others are there because they were treated unfairly when compared with their White counterparts. Nevertheless, we must conclude that some Blacks—too many—commit acts that lead to incarceration.

What does not compute is that Black America is the most religious ethnic group in America, yet the most incarcerated.⁵ Given Black America’s long history of maltreatment by the criminal injustice system, it seems that we would learn how to avoid the system. This goes beyond “having the talk” about what to do when stopped by the police on the roadway. It means not being at the wrong place at the wrong time. It means avoiding even the appearance of impropriety. It means recognizing and dispensing with every action that could be perceived as outside of the law by the police. Also, it means not glamorizing incarceration as a rite of passage or as a badge of honor.

If you say, “I will not change my lifestyle because I deserve to be ‘free’ in America,” then you should know that even with many millions of dollars in wealth you are not guaranteed freedom as a Black American. As outlined above, many paychecks (mainly White Americans’ paychecks) depend on you being incarcerated. There are big incentives to incarcerate you. And until real change comes, you will be incarcerated with—in some cases without—justification. Ask Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. how it works.⁶

Reducing Black American incarceration should be near the top of Black America’s agenda to improve life outcomes and to close the Black-White income and wealth gaps. We must develop a strategy for addressing this issue. If we do not, then we will continue serving, unintentionally, as a cause of these gaps.

Everybody: Do something!

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³ The justice spending data (corrections, judicial, and police) are from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Justice Expenditure and Employment Extracts, 2016 – Preliminary;” <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6728>. Total government spending data (Federal, state, and local) are from the US Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, NIPA Table 3.1; www.bea.gov. (Retrieved April 8, 2021)

⁴ See Tara O’Neill Hayes (2020), “The Economic Costs of the US Criminal Justice System;” <https://www.americanactionforum.org/research/the-economic-costs-of-the-u-s-criminal-justice-system/>. (Retrieved April 8, 2021)

⁵ The Pew Research Center (Religion & Public Life) (<https://www.pewforum.org/>) has confirmed through several studies that Blacks are the most religious ethnic group in the US.

⁶ See Abby Goodnough (2009), “Harvard Professor Jailed; Officer Is Accused of Bias,” *The New York Times* (July 20); <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/21/us/21gates.html>. (Retrieved April 8, 2021)