



Racial trauma, also known as race-based traumatic stress, refers to the stressful impact or emotional pain of one's experience with racism and discrimination. Common traumatic stress reactions that reflect racial trauma include increased vigilance and suspicion, increased sensitivity to threat, sense of a foreshortened future, and maladaptive responses to stress such as aggression or substance use. Further, racial trauma can have a negative impact on individuals' physical and mental health, including negative mood and depressive symptoms, and hypertension and coronary heart disease.<sup>1</sup> Because of the prevalence of racial discrimination, being a racial minority generally leads to greater stress. Further, simply anticipating racist events will switch on the body's stress response systems. Systemic racism, everyday racial discrimination, and the fear of racist events can cause people of color to live in a constant state of red alert. This toxic stress increases wear and tear on the body--the sustained release of stress hormones can lead to multiple health issues including high blood pressure, high glucose levels and a weakened heart and circulatory system.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

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## HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is among the most diverse democracies in the world.<sup>5,6</sup> However, much of its history includes systems of violence and discrimination that have not only had traumatic consequences for those directly affected, but affect future generations and communities.

### INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Treaty promises, made by the United States government, were broken by deceptive language designed to extricate valuable lands from Indigenous people. Aggression and violence often accompanied the rapid expansion of colonization. Calculated introduction of alcohol and disease, together with the slaughter and abuse of innocent individuals, caused deep and lasting traumatic wounds to Indigenous individuals and families and allowed no time for the necessary mourning, regrouping, and restructuring of Indigenous societies. Indigenous people were relegated to reservations, restrictive environments that destroyed many aspects of societal health that had been supported through intra- and intertribal relations.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>

Between the late 1800s and mid-1900s, the United States government mandated that all Indigenous children between the ages of 5 and 18 attend boarding school. By severing children from the nurturing and protection of their parents, school authorities were implicitly granted license to use and abuse children according to whatever exploitive, punitive, and perverse treatment they deemed advantageous to their fundamental mission of stripping the children of their natural beliefs and attachments.

The current social-environmental, psychological and physiological distress in Indigenous communities is a result of the historical losses this population has suffered over time. For example, the removal of children into boarding schools left generations of Indigenous people subjected to prolonged institutionalization, void of positive models of family life and family discipline and disconnected from the aspects of their culture that were critical for resiliency.

### BLACK / AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE

Slavery in the United States spanned from the 1600s to the mid 1800s. It is estimated that six to seven million enslaved Africans were imported to the United States during the 18th century alone. The rapid expansion of the cotton industry in the late 1700s and early 1800s made Southern States dependent on slavery for their economy.<sup>10,11</sup> Virginia was the second largest state for the importation of enslaved Africans and the number one state for the domestic slave trade, and, Richmond, Virginia was the epicenter of that trade. Richmond's economic success in the antebellum is largely due to the impact of the slave trade as a commercial enterprise. In fact, "In the 1850s, Richmond's biggest business by dollar volume was not tobacco, flour, or iron, but slaves."<sup>12,13</sup> Enslaved individuals were denied the opportunity to learn to read or write and were prohibited from associating in groups (with the exception--in some cases--of religious meetings). Beatings and murder of enslaved persons were allowable if the enslaved person was "resisting" or if done "under moderate correction." Rape and sexual abuse of enslaved women were common, and families were regularly separated when children and spouses were sold.

Although chattel slavery in the United States created horrific intergenerational trauma in and of itself, it was followed by a series of laws and policies that supported the powerlessness of African Americans and expanded the legacy of historic traumas against African Americans in the United States. One example of such legacies is the Jim Crow Era, which spanned from the 1880's to 1965, post emancipation in the American South. Jim Crow laws supported race-based segregation and resource attainment in public and private domains. This formal codified system of racial apartheid affected almost every aspect of African Americans' daily life, mandating segregation of schools, parks, libraries, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, trains, housing and restaurants. "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs were constant reminders of the enforced racial order.<sup>14</sup>

For African Americans who are descendants of enslaved Africans, the dynamics of slavery itself; the institutionalized segregation and violence that followed emancipation, and ongoing struggles for racial justice continue to have a multi-faceted impact on African American Life.



## CURRENT SYSTEMS OF RACISM

Policies and practices entrenched in established institutions that harm certain racial groups, and help others create systemic racism. Systemic racism has roots in historic racism; however, it is reinforced by contemporary environmental, institutional, and cultural structures. Nationally, people of color are more likely to live in poverty than their White peers. Eight percent of White Americans live in poverty, while 20% of Black, 16% of Latino, and 22% of American Indian and Alaska Natives live in poverty.<sup>15</sup> Families of color are also between two and four times more likely than white families to live in areas of concentrated poverty, exacerbating the effects of poverty and impeding access to opportunity.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, African Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of Whites. Though African Americans and Latinos make up approximately 32% of the United States population they comprised 56% of all incarcerated people in 2015. More African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.

The United States has been known throughout its history as a nation of immigrants; however, the United States also has a long history of xenophobia, or the dislike, prejudice and/or intolerance of immigrants. Today in the United States, immigration has become a focal point of heated national debates. Immigrants

are repeatedly and incorrectly associated with the declining economy, overpopulation, pollution, increased violence, depleted social resources, erosion of cultural values, and terrorism; and immigrants are often portrayed as criminal, poor, violent, and uneducated.<sup>17</sup> Immigrants coming to the United States have often been met by discriminatory policies coupled with prejudice and distrust from their host communities. Restrictive and punitive immigration measures have specifically targeted immigrants because of their race and social class.

Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. While individuals may not openly discriminate against people of color, they may engage in microaggressions such as avoiding eye contact on the street or making assumptions about someone's intelligence or mental state. Microaggressions are sometimes conscious and intentional, however on many occasions, the perpetrator may not be aware of the harmful effects of their behavior. Research on microaggressions provides strong evidence that these small slights accumulate over time and negatively affect people of color's mental and physical health such as elevated levels of depression, trauma and heart disease. Additionally, the ambiguous and subtle nature of microaggressions makes them especially frustrating for victims, since they may be unsure how to respond.<sup>18</sup>

## FAMILY VIOLENCE & RACIAL TRAUMA

- **Child Welfare:** Research has shown that some children are disproportionately likely to become engaged with child welfare services based on their racial identity. A 2014 study found African American youth were overrepresented in foster care at a rate 1.8 times their rate in the general population in the United States—whereas White children were underrepresented in foster care at 0.8 times the rate in the general population.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, racial disparities exist at various decision points in the child welfare involvement process. Compared to White and Asian children, African American and multiracial children are more likely to be removed from their homes, spend longer time in foster care, and are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their families before aging out of care compared to other racial groups. Not only are children of color overrepresented in child welfare, but they also experience inequity in the quality of care provided. Contact with child protective services has been described by families of color as invasive, disruptive, unjust, and unsafe.
- **Domestic Violence:** Domestic Violence occurs among all races, ethnicities and socio-economic classes; however, for women of color, high rates of poverty, poor education, limited job resources, language barriers, and fear of deportation increase their difficulty finding help and support services. Some reasons for not reporting domestic violence are more specific to individual communities. For example, as a result of historical and present-day racism, African American women may be less likely to report their abuser or seek help because of African American men's vulnerability to police violence. Similarly, immigrant and undocumented women may not seek help due to fear of their or their partner's deportation and/or separation from children.<sup>20</sup>

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