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PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND THE WHITE MIDDLE-CLASS

The Function of the Media and Politicians in Shaping the Mass Incarceration of non-Whites

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INTRODUCTION

"For at least the past two decades, Black people have made up more than a third of jail populations nationally, despite constituting only about 14% of the general population"[1]. Whether such a high incarceration rate be swept under the rug with the excuse of a "War on Drugs" or a "War on Crime", critical race theory, political science and sociology scholars and activists have been protesting for decades against the damages inflicted upon African-American communities, and on non-Whites as a whole, by the devastating discourses that justify mass incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex. The Prison Industrial Complex can be described as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems"[2]. As the latter definition states, surveillance and policing are both major organs in the repression and overpolicing of non-Whites. These tools are often commandeered by elected officials in order for them to consolidate a promise to their predominantly White constituencies, the promise to provide them with safe, sustainable, and healthy communities. But how are those communities constructed? How do individuals interact with each other among said groups? Which criteria must one fill to be part of them? And how are those communities considered and administered by policymakers and politicians? As it turns out, surveillance and policing are tools often resorted to when it comes to structuring those communities, mainly by dictating who does or doesn't belong within them. This thesis aims at demonstrating how

[1] "Racial Disparities Persist in Many U.S. Jails." *The Pew Charitable Trusts*, May 16, 2023, https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2023/05/racial-disparities-persist-in-many-us-jails.

[2] "What Is the PIC? What Is Abolition?", *Critical Resistance*, https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/.

patterns and evolutions specific to White-middle class conscience have been mobilized by both policymakers and the media to push for the overpolicing -and consequently, the mass incarceration- of nonwhites. In an effort to gain insight into the White United-Statesian middle-class, I sat down with citizens from ten different states, with ages ranging from 18 to 96 years old. Half of the interviewees share republican beliefs, while the other half shares democratic principles. In order to preserve the respondents' anonymity, I have chosen to quote them using their initials. I also want to clarify that I chose to capitalize the denominations Black and White so as to underline their essence as socially constructed identities: " 'Black' and 'White' people are perceived as such by others, must respond to those perceptions and reactions accordingly, and thus have some collective shared experience not just as a person but as a 'Black' or 'White' person"[3].

The shift in mentality that has recently emerged among United-Statesians is especially interesting to investigate among the White middle-class, though this shift has grown to become a generalized experience among Whites:

> When members of a dominant group feel threatened, several well-established reactions help these groups regain a sense of dominance and wellbeing. First, perceived threat makes status quo, hierarchical social and political arrangements more attractive. Thus, conservatism surges along with a nostalgia for the stable hierarchies of the past. Perceived threat also triggers defense of the dominant ingroup, a greater emphasis on the importance of conformity to group norms, and increased outgroup negativity. It is psychologically valuable to see one's self as part of a

[3] Shawn E. Fields, *Neighborhood Watch: Policing White Spaces in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 10.

> dominant group; therefore, when group members feel threatened, this prompts defensive reactions. It is precisely this form of group threat that may have motivated Trump supporters.[4]

As a matter of fact, the relationship between the White working class and its attitude towards non-Whites has already been vastly and accurately studied. Works such as David Gillborn's 2010 *The White Working Class, Racism and Respectability: Victims, Degenerates and Interest-Convergence* or Jonathan Metzl's 2019 *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* have painted a rather rich picture of the dynamics that interweave working-class Whites and non-Whites. While many connections have been established, I believe it is necessary to correct the widespread assumption according to which the White working class is predominantly to blame for racism in the United States. White people are often considered as a whole and grouped because of their shared Whiteness as it is the case in Patrick Williams and Becky Clarke's 2018 *The Black Criminal Other as an Object of Social Control*. This interpretation, while valid and relevant, can sometimes erase complex and meaningful dynamics that may explain how White people's perception and treatment of non-Whites can vary depending on their socio-economic backgrounds. Such dynamics have been explored and studied in Ian Haney López's 2013 work titled *Dog Whistle Politics: How coded racial appeals have reinvented racism and wrecked the middle class*, as well as in *Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote*, a 2018 statistical analysis-based article realized by Diana Mutz. Indeed, the White middle class must also be recognized as a key link in the process of ostracization and exclusion

[4] Diana C. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 115, n°19 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718155115, 2.

against people of color, even though they might be told to be more educated on progressive issues or more aware of the socio-racial dynamics that shape the world around them due to their backgrounds. The reality is that contrarily to working class individuals who are both set back and set aside due to their economic -and, consequently, social- situations, the White middle-class does not share an intersectional overlap with most non-Whites, which to an extent makes them immune to the harsh socio-economic limits and obstacles imposed on non-Whites.

That is not to say that the White middle-class deliberately adopts behaviors and practices that are directly harmful towards racial minorities, but rather that their social class and ethnicity provide them with a certain power and status relative to decision-making and action-taking, which might then be sought after by institutions and stakeholders to help further their interests. This idea is tackled in David Garland's 2001 *The Culture of Control, Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*, in which he argues that social evolution can be perceived as a threat by the White middle-class and thus induce changes in crime control practices that can hinder the well-being of non-White communities. Of course, not all individuals adhere to the beliefs and initiatives presented to them because of their skin color and social class, but both of those factors cause them to be interacted with in a specific way, even if they do not realize it. However, it remains undeniable that members of the White middle-class share a history and common interests which inevitably shape them into who they are and how they conduct themselves, both individually and collectively. Those shared values and common ground allow individuals to group into communities that become entities of their own, playing a

direct role in how members navigate society. Firstly, I will study the loss and redefinition of the concept of community among White middle-class groups.

As will be highlighted through an analysis of testimonies collected to try and get a grasp of how United-Statesians perceive their immediate vicinity and the institutions around them, the concept of community has become a long-lost treasure for many. Communities used to represent immediate, built-in support systems that did not consist only of one's friends or family bur rather of neighbors willing to navigate their similarities and differences in order to create peaceful and long-lasting relationships among individuals who strive for every member's safety and inclusion.

To get a better grasp of the reasons behind this decline, I will examine the various contributing factors. Before anything else, I will tackle the core values of the United States. Prosperity, individualism, freedom, and autonomy are all principles that cement the minds, habits and daily lives of United-Statesians. Those values have been drilled into the general public's mind and have grown to be associated and intertwined with multi-layered national ideologies such as the American Dream and the Promised Land. What pertains the most to our understanding of the decline of engagement towards community is to capture how these values come into play to influence decision-making among groups. Afterwards, I will try and discern how the peculiarity of the United-Statesian landscape impacts the requirements for well-functioning and healthy communities.

The White United-Statesian middle-class is a particularly relevant group to focus on as they have had to endure a strong feeling of socio-racial demotion over the course of the last eighty years. As a matter of fact, they have had to adapt to Black people being able to challenge their position and match the lifestyle only they used to be able to afford

over the course of desegregation. This causes them to face the disruption of their status, standard of living and everyday life overall. Moreover, deindustrialization and globalization have brought up new obstacles that forced the White middle class to confront the fact that their good life was being "stripped away from them": "For the first time since Europeans arrived in this country, white Americans are being told that they will soon be a minority race. [...] symbolically, it threatens some whites' sense of dominance over social and political priorities"[5].

A rising climate of malaise and insecurity is developing within the borders of the country, with the threat of White United-Statesians becoming a minority for the first time since the establishment of the country. This is an eventuality that has come to push even moderate Whites to overly advocate for themselves and their position as the dominant group to maintain a semblance of control over a life they feel is slipping through their fingers.

The death of community echoes the decay of the country. White United-Statesians are living through a second, large-scale demotion. United-Statesian culture has been pushed from the pedestal it once occupied on the worldwide soft-power ladder. As a matter of fact, the U.S used to paint a reliable, solid, desirable, and united portrait of the country for the world to witness. Ever since President Trump came into office, and more particularly since the beginning of his second term, the country has offered a grim and dispassionate picture of itself:

[5] Mutz, "Status Threat", 2.

> To some extent, America's retreat from public diplomacy reflects a narrowing of the media culture within the US itself. Trump and his cabinet members and officials only ever seem to talk to friendly, softball media, like Fox TV or Breitbart, or to Musk on X, where the questions will border on the deferential and the obsequious. Chatty podcasts where guests are free to expound crazy ideas, such as that of Joe Rogan, are part of this landscape too. Journalists who ask difficult questions or do not go along with Trump's version of the truth are excluded from the White House briefings, as in the case of Associated Press.[6]

This diminishing enthusiasm for United-Statesian ideology is not confined to the rest of the world. I noted a certain hesitation to indulge in patriotic pride during the interviews I conducted. When asked about how it felt to be a United-Statesian nowadays, DJ, a 23-year-old man from New Jersey, answered: "I guess historically I'd be proud or on the fence, but just how it is currently, I'm pretty ashamed. Like, other countries are not...They're not having us at all. They hate us. The political climate sucks"[7]. GP, a 96-year-old man from Colorado, answered: "I am proud to be an American . . . but not as proud as I was during World War II"[8]. This claim is understandable, given the fact that national spirit peaked around the time of the Second World War. Indeed, at the time, national pride was encouraged by a series of consecutive successes, including but not limited to the New Deal, World War II, and the Marshall Plan[9]. However, not every United-Statesian seems to feel this way. It is relevant to underline the fact that out of the ten United States citizens I sat down with, only the republican half expressed pride to be

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[6] Jamie Shea, "Soft power suicide: America gives up the battle for the hearts and minds" *Friends of Europe, 2025,* https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/critical-thinking-soft-power-suicide-america-gives-up-the-battle-for-the-hearts-and-minds/

[7] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

[8] Interview conducted on June 7, 2025.

[9] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000).

American. These findings align with nation-wide numbers: "Democrats are mostly responsible for the drop in U.S. pride this year, with 36% saying they are extremely or very proud, down from 62% a year ago. [...] Republicans' level of national pride has been much steadier, typically registering above 90%, including 92% this year, up from 85% in 2024" [10].

Moreover, for the first time, the country must face the threat of becoming obsolete in the face of an ever-growing, high-performing intercontinental competition:

> Americans feel threatened by the increasing interdependence of the United States on other countries. For example, in 2011, 38% of Americans endorsed the view that "[t]he US stands above all other countries in the world"; by 2014, that same percentage was down to 28%. This drop has been most precipitous among Republicans. The «China threat» in particular looms large in many American minds[11].

The internalization of global-scale demotion has, quite evidently, impacted the perceived cultural and economic worthiness of the country. Once I have explained how the White middle-class has come to construct itself, and which values and principle are central to its sustainability, I will explore how the White middle-class conscience has been weaponized by elected officials and the media.

First, I will shed light on how generations of politicians have grown to rely on fearmongering to mobilize class and race-related anxieties within their constituencies.

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[10] Jeffrey M. Jones. "American Pride Slips to New Low." *Gallup.Com*, June 30, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/692150/american-pride-slips-new-low.aspx.

[11] Mutz, "Status Threat", 3.

Describing how Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton have shaped the standard for covert racist policies, I will argue that Donald Trump's accession to the White House has symbolized a significant deviation from the established norm. Through the study of several excerpts of Donald Trump's social media posts, I will analyze Trump's drift away from political correctness and dog whistle politics, a tool favored by his predecessors. Dog whistling consists in employing coded language that is suggestive enough to be understood and shared by their electorate and supporters but still using a vocabulary that is mundane enough to allow them to refute their rival's potential accusations of using offensive and hateful language. I will underline how this behavior encourages a climate of violence and intolerance enabled by centrist-leaning Democrats eager to stay relevant in a climate that requires elected officials to provide their audience with sharp and definite views.

This analysis will be corroborated by an examination of the persona beyond the man. Donald Trump has indeed managed to build a cult-like following by asserting a national narrative appealing to a heavily patriotic White population aching to reclaim the hegemony and control they used to maintain over the country. It is unfathomable to try and paint an accurate picture of Donald Trump without getting a firm grasp on his party's history: indeed, it is not baseless or superfluous to question the Grand Old Party's reputation and past as the "White man's party" considering the recent revolutionary legitimization of extreme right-wing thought and action that has largely emerged since the Tea Party, a republican movement created to protest the economic policies put in place by President Barack Obama to counter the 2008 stock market crash.

Capitalizing on moral panics and public outrages surrounding discriminatory discourse has become common currency for politicians, although hardly any other

presidents have been so blunt about it. Appealing to the public's distrust of the unknown and the expanding polarization within the country remains standard practice in elected officials' rhetorics as well as in most media, to the point where some have internalized that politicians being tough on crime is the main argument to consider when voting to ensure a safe future for their children. That is the precise angle officeholders are working when trying to mold and manipulate White middle-class conscience: "The media [plays] a key role in reproducing the dominant field of the ruling ideologies"[12].

These elected officials work hand in hand with the media, profiting from their special status as primary definers and figures of authority. Wrongful and incriminating portrayals, decontextualization in crime reporting, dramatizing front-page title, imbalances in offence coverage... Many are the means through which the media works that contribute to maintaining the narratives surrounding ideal criminals. Moreover, journalists are quick to get bogged down in both-sideism in fear of being reprimanded for showcasing one opinion more than another. Those practices and actors function symbiotically to facilitate and encourage the othering of non-Whites, and their portrayal as ideal criminals:

> Crime, then, is "news" because its treatment evokes threats to, but also reaffirms, the consensual morality of the society: a modern morality play takes place before us in which the "devil" is both symbolically and physically cast out from the society by its guardians -the police and the judiciary[13].

[12] [12] Jeffrey M. Jones. "American Pride Slips to New Low." *Gallup.Com*, June 30, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/692150/american-pride-slips-new-low.aspx.

[12] Mutz, "Status Threat", 3.

[13] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 40.

Consequently, I will try and examine how the increasingly influential rhetoric of Whiteness and middle-class as fundamental identities contribute to the overpolicing, that is the increased focus and surveillance of non-White groups through rapidly evolving tools and resources. This systematic scrutiny is being operated at several levels and by several actors: their White counterparts, police officers, prosecutors, lawyers, judges, prison guards... I will try and focus on analyzing mainly two institutions: the police and the Prison Industrial Complex. It is particularly relevant to direct our attention to both since they might represent the first and last instances non-White citizens could be confronted to when dealing with the criminal justice system.

Firstly, a summary of the police's historical stance regarding Black Americans will provide an enlightening sight into the heavy legacy the institution seems to carry today. To further my analysis, I will explore the complexities of the police through a review of their evolution from the origins of the role of sheriff and to the practices associated with it, such as slave patrols and convict leasing. The transformation from the figure of peacekeeper to crime-fighter will also be tackled, commenting on both the changes in attitudes and behaviors as well as in equipment, indulging in a necessary commentary on the growing militarization of crime-fighting institutions.

To fully perceive and grasp the various facets of influence the police hold, an investigation of their relationship with the media is unavoidable. Their word is widely considered undisputable since they seem to profit from divine authority, conferred by both their self-protecting structure and their perceived status as supreme incorruptible witnesses.

An analysis of the ongoing and blatant mistreatment of non-Whites during apprehension and incarceration is demanded to be cognizant of large-scale

malpractices within the justice system, which will provide a transition towards the last part of our study: the process of incarceration and the ascendancy of the Prison Industrial Complex. These issues are intertwined with the construction of White middle-class communal identity, since they are presented to them in such a way that those communities are made to believe said processes and institutions serve their interests and protect them and their status as privileged citizens: "There are more people in prison in order for 'the state' to help rural areas hungry for jobs; in this explanation of prison expansion, prisoners of color presumably provide employment opportunities for white guards"[14]. Some sort of fantasized narrative is being carefully crafted and fed to them so that they are inclined to believe that "Communities, especially poor communities of color, would be more deeply decimated by addiction, drug dealing and gang violence were it not for the restraining force of prisons"[15]. One might say that the feelings of adherence or passiveness that might emerge among White middle-class communities regarding such issues are evidence of a complicity that only reinforces and reproduces the cycle of violence enforced on non-Whites.

Circling back to our focal concept, I will try and go over the different factors through which the mass incarceration of non-Whites has disrupted both White and non-White communities. I will try and give an accurate definition of the Prison Industrial Complex by explaining how private institutions and companies rely on the insufficiently remunerated labor of inmates. Moreover, I will underline the role of interest groups and lobbyists in the process of implementing abusive corporate-like practices within prisons through collaborations with private companies. It is easy to lose sight of the impact those

[14] Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (University of California Press, 2007), 44.

[15] Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 40.

practices can have outside of prisons, but it is necessary to bear in mind that they do not only alienate inmates: they ostracize and jeopardize their relatives as well. After inquiring about the consequences for inmates' relatives, I will shift my attention to the way the installation of prisons is perceived and received within neighboring communities, and how members deal with the reorganization of their surroundings when faced with the proximity of containment and exclusion-based institutions.

I. LOSS AND REDEFINITION OF THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A. Polarization within United-Statesian Society: The Emergence of the White Middle-class

a. Forging Whiteness through labor

In order to fully grasp the construction of a specific White middle-class conscience, one needs to understand how the characteristic of Whiteness came to light. White settlers originally constructed their identity through characteristics that would distinguish them from non-Whites. Their perception of race emerged when they were confronted, upon arrival to what would become the United States of America, to Native Americans. White identity then relied on two factors: their race, and their class. Priding themselves in being professionally active and expanding their trade, which they equated as a direct opposition to the Native way of life, White workers cultivated their credibility through their ability to become incomparable to non-Whites. White working-ness took on an even more meaningful value when it was confronted with Blackness. Working and lower middle-class White workers associated slave descendants with a sort of pre-industrialization frivolity that was unattainable to them, since it would have signified a penchant for hedonism[16]. Whites who could not claim socio-economic worthiness despite belonging to a privileged race depended on their ability to place other racial groups on a lower rank on the social stratum pyramid. The price to pay for becoming

[16] David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (Verso, 2001).

respectable, decent citizens was work, and more particularly the earning of the status of worker.:

> It is labor which has disciplined the working-class into respectability. Loss of respectability is therefore associated with loss of occupation and with poverty. [...] In the middle class, the idea of 'respectability' carries with it the powerful overtones of competitive success, its token is the ability 'to keep up appearances', to secure a standard of life which enables you to afford those things which befit -and embody- your social status in life [...] Respectability is the collective internalization, by the lower orders, of an image of the 'ideal life' held out for them by those who stand higher in the scheme of things[17].

Such behavior can also be explained by the indisputable influence of the Protestant work ethic upheld by the pilgrims who reached the land they would later claim as the United States of America. As a matter of fact, the Protestant work ethic supports the idea that one should strive to be hard-working and to dispose of the assets thanks to this hard work responsibly, which might explain the origins of United-Statesian ties to values such as productivity and merit. C.S, a 62-year-old white democrat from California, describes her republican sister and brother in law's mentality as in alignment with this inherited Protestant work ethic:

> They look around and subliminally they think "if you're doing well, you must be good. If you're not doing well, you've done something bad. If you're a

[17] Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clark, and Brian Roberts, "Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order." British Journal of Sociology 29 (4): 511, 1978, https://doi.org/10.2307/589668,141.

> homeless person, you're not right". [...] So, for them, you know, a house, a nice car, indicates you're closer to God[18].

This White infatuation for discipline ultimately set the standard for all society. Blacks, though actively suffering from systemic discrimination, were expected to follow a code of moral respectability dictated by the White middle class[19]. Willingness to conform did not, however, guarantee special treatment to Black individuals. The standards of living Whites enjoyed were considered the well-deserved fruits of their labor, which non-Whites, be it Blacks or Native Americans, could never pretend to due to their supposed lazy and reckless habits.

Work-related bases for exclusion also supported segregation in other related areas. Indeed, the idea that one's hard work is always compensated through merit and the right to enjoy leisure spaces and activities entails that the unworking, namely Blacks, is thus undeserving of enjoyable free time. If one does not partake in work, they should not expect to deserve any sort of reward[20]. Whites' willingness to separate themselves from non-Whites extends to all areas of life, especially in Southern states where some still hold the legacy of the Confederacy close to their heart: "Southern whites cannot walk, talk, sing, conceive of laws and justice, think of sex, love, the family or freedom without responding to the presence of negroes"[21]. In other words, Whites had to carefully organize their daily lives as to never risk assimilation with non-Whites, thus furthering both geographical and socio-economic polarization.

[18] Interview conducted on February 3, 2025.
[19] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (The New Press New York London, 2020).
[20] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis".
[21] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 32.

This ostracization from both the job market and the preconceptions relative to the concept of work contributed to the perpetration of a cycle of oppression. Indeed, non-Whites' exclusion from the working world prevented them from perceiving any sort of sufficient monetary compensation, thus excluding them from property-owning opportunities and condemning them to perpetual poverty. Aside from ensuring that non-Whites remained property-less, Whites also made sure that they were regularly stripped of whatever right they attained that made them closer to losing their status as second-class citizens:

> White supremacists reasserted control and "took back the South" through the institution of Jim Crow laws and the disenfranchisement of black voters. Slavery was replaced with the system of exploitation known as sharecropping and the use of lynching as a means of social intimidation designed to enforce racial subordination.[22]

The practice of sharecropping became common currency after the fall of slavery. Its establishment allowed former slave masters to maintain control over formerly enslaved individuals: since they did not have the means to purchase their own lands or tools to work, former slaves "worked" in the same plantations, this time with the promise of earning part of the harvested crops at the end of each year's reaping. This form of compensation was, of course, too dire for them to ever be able to afford their own properties or choose other career path. Sharecropping came to an end at the beginning of World War II, as industrialization and the need for new factory workers increased. Jim Crow laws, which emerged after the end of the Reconstruction period, in 1877, aimed at

[22] Beverly Daniel Tatum. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (Basic Books New York, 2017), 25.

maintaining a stern racial hierarchy that had not been previously necessary, since Black people's slave status sufficed to ensure their subordinacy.

Both apparatuses were entertained by Whites in the hopes of maintaining sustainable systems of control that would ensure the confinement of Blacks to a "racial undercaste"[23]. The Jim Crow system was gradually dismantled along the sixties, with founding acts such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which rendered segregation illegal, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits racial discrimination in voting, being passed, as the treatment of Black people in the country eerily echoed the treatment of European Jews in Nazi Germany, which "severely [damaged] the nation's credibility as leader of the free world"[24]. However, African-American victories were short-lived:

> In the early 1980s, just as the drug war was kicking off, inner-city communities were suffering from economic collapse. The blue-collar factory jobs that had been plentiful in urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s had suddenly disappeared. Prior to 1970, inner-city workers with relatively little formal education could find industrial employment close to home. Globalization, however, helped to change that. Manufacturing jobs were transferred by multinational corporations away from American cities to countries that lacked unions, where workers earn a small fraction of what is considered a fair wage in the United States. To make matters worse, dramatic technological changes revolutionized the workplace—changes that eliminated many of the jobs that less skilled workers once relied upon for their survival. Highly educated workers benefited from the pace of

[23] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow,* 17.
[24] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 48.

> technological change and the increased use of computer-based technologies, but blue-collar workers often found themselves displaced in the sudden transition from an industrial to a service economy. The impact of globalization and deindustrialization was felt most strongly in black inner-city communities[25].

Economic hardships were, of course, not the only obstacles suffered by African-Americans. The rise of Black-initiated and Black-led entertainment, through the form of shows or spectacles, elicited visceral responses among White audiences: "racially mixed and black-led entertainments provoked the special wrath of the agents of the new industrial morality, who especially disliked the mixing of Blacks and working-class whites"[26].

White resentment towards black-led entertainment also stems from a certain envy to associate with the carelessness promoted in the shows. However, the constructed attachment of Whites to values such as self-restraint and discipline prevented them from allowing themselves to participate in the festivities, thus leading them to manage their frustrations through other outlets. Violence was often resorted to, of course, but White participants also tried appropriating some sort of counter-culture base of the physical appearance of original entertainers: "Blackface served not only to identify the white crowd with the excellence of Black popular culture but also to connect its wearers. [...] even in the midst of revelry and even given the real desires of the crowd to 'act black', the celebrants needed to underscore continually the point that they were still white"[27].

[25] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 63.
[26] Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 128.
[27] Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 133.

Blackface, and more generally the act of disguising themselves as what they perceived to be lesser, savage beings, allowed Whites to bond as a community around not only making a mockery of Blacks but also reaffirming their inherent superiority. Unlike their African-American counterparts, they could choose to wash away their Black skin and what it entailed once the party was over. Seeing Blacks perform minstrel shows on stage was also meaningful for African- Americans:

> Many people are unaware that, although minstrel shows were plainly designed to pander to white racism and to make whites feel comfortable with—indeed, entertained by—racial oppression, African Americans formed a large part of the black minstrels' audience. [...] To some degree, then, black minstrelsy—as degrading as it was—represented success[28].

b. The prospect of race traitors

The claiming of Black characteristics by Whites, then, was nothing more than a way to entertain in-group loyalty and solidarity. The fraternization between Blacks and working-class Whites was demonized by Whites for multiple reasons. On one hand, well-off Whites saw in those relationships the possible emergence of a resentful attitude that could blossom into a threatening movement towards them: what if Blacks and working-class Whites united against their shared oppressor, the social class that worked so hard to maintain their social, racial, economic and political hegemony over them? The image of " 'lower-class groups', enslaved Black Americans and poor whites socializing together,

[28] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. The New Press New York London, 2020 reedition.

was a dangerous prospect to America's capitalist class"[29]. Lower-class Whites were also bribed and charmed by colonial narratives which positioned them as innately superior and steered them to ask for more from life, since their Whiteness predisposed them to greater fates:

> Deliberately and strategically, the planter class extended special privileges to poor whites in an effort to drive a wedge between them and black slaves. White settlers were allowed greater access to Native American lands, white servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and barriers were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor. [...] Their own plight had not improved by much, but at least they were not slaves[30].

This makes up another justification for why the middle-class and the working-class cannot be grouped together when taking into account their relationship and interactions with non-Whites. Since the White middle-class could enjoy both their Whiteness and their presence on the spectrum of wealth and socio-economic status, they need to be considered separately from the working class. Even former allies to the African-American cause eventually wielded when confronted with the magnitude of the privilege that racial solidarity would bar them from:

> Dominant whites concluded that it was in their political and economic interest to scapegoat blacks, and "permission to hate" came from sources that had formerly denied it, including Northern liberals eager to reconcile

[29] Ian Cooper-Smith, "How The Ruling Class Utilized 'Whiteness' to Divide the Working Class." *EWOC*, December 5, 2023, https://workerorganizing.org/how-the-ruling-class-utilized-Whiteness-to-divide-the-working-class-5717/.

[30] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow,* 35.

> with the South, Southern conservatives who had once promised blacks protection from racial extremism, and Populists, who cast aside their darkskinned allies when the partnership fell under siege[31].

On the other hand, sentimental and sexual relationships between races were vilified if not prohibited: "Feelings of failure were compensated for by 'rage against the black beast rapist'"[32]. Black men were vilified, presented as uncontrollable sexual predators who would prey on the White wives, daughters, and sisters of respectable Whites, as South Carolina governor Ben Tillman proclaimed in 1907: "I have three daughters, but so help me God, I had rather find either one of them killed by a tiger or a bear . . . in the purity of her maidenhood, than to have her crawl to me and tell me the horrid story that she had been robbed of the jewel of her womanhood by a black fiend"[33].

In that particular era, Black men were erected as the principal threat to Whites, and especially to White women. Those who dared have sexual intercourse with White women were eliminated for the affront made to the dominant race, even if the act had been consensual. The White women who engaged in those relationships were considered traitors when they stood by their decision, and victims of the bestiality and the barbarity of Black men when they did not. The stereotype of the Black beast rapist has largely been promoted by White supremacists since the start of the colonization process and the attribution of characteristics such as violence and savagery to indigenous populations as well as Blacks:

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[31] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 46.

[32] Jonathan M Wiener, "The 'Black Beast Rapist': White Racial Attitudes in the Postwar South." *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*, by Joel Williamson. *Reviews in American History* 13, no. 2 (1985): 222–26, https://doi.org/10.2307/2702414, 225.

[33] Wiener, "The Black Beast Rapist", 3.

> Following the Civil War, it was unclear what institutions, laws, or customs would be necessary to maintain white control now that slavery was gone. Rumors of a great insurrection terrified whites, and blacks increasingly came to be viewed as menacing and dangerous. In fact, the current stereotypes of black men as aggressive, unruly predators can be traced to this period, when whites feared that an angry mass of black men might rise up and attack them or rape their women[34].

This stereotype has not yet been completely left behind: as of February 25, 2025, the official White House website proudly stated that: "President Donald J. Trump is removing illegal immigrant killers, rapists, and drug dealers from our streets and sending them back where they belong"[35]. The establishment of non-White men as ideal criminals is an ongoing, uninterrupted process that still harms non-White communities in various ways.

c. Planes of racism

As mentioned in the introduction preceding this essay, not all White middle-class United-Statesians willfully engage with racism or with racist actions. As a matter of fact, some unconsciously partake in movements or systems that infringe the agency and the rights of nonwhite people. Racism actually operates on several levels, which Whites might casually resort to in their daily lives. Firstly, racism motivated by hate, is generally

[34] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 39.

[35] "Sick Politicians Want Killers, Rapists Roaming Our Streets." *The White House*, February 25, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/02/sick-politicians-want-killers-rapists-roaming-our-streets/.

understood as « discrete acts of bigotry by malicious individuals[36] ». This specific expression of racism often evokes images of rather violent and radical groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan or attackers of civil rights protesters, images that are seldom anchored in the present, but rather reminiscent of past attitudes. Consequently, few White people can tolerate being called racists because they automatically assume they are being accused of perpetrating racism to its most extreme extent:

> [If] racists are like those in the 1950s who screamed at black school children and burned crosses, then most everyone can safely conclude that they, at least, are not racists. [...] Conservatives, with the important assistance of the Supreme Court, also propagate this understanding of racism, as it undercuts claims that racial discrimination remains a major social problem[37].

Another expression of racist patterns is implicit bias, a theory popular among liberals since it supports the idea of some sort of unconscious hate mechanism being engraved into our brain, as if humans were programmed to be wary of those who do not share the same physical characteristics they do. The issue with this theory is that it introduces racial prejudice as something that cannot be remedied. A third type of racism is structural racism, which mostly focuses on the broader lasting effects of the past treatments of marginalized populations and how they have shaped current inequalities. The downside of this consideration is that while challenging harmful societal, economic, and political structures, one can be lead astray from taking into account the experiences of individuals and how racism impacts their daily lives. Moreover, strict belief limited in structural

[36] Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How coded racial appeals have reinvented racism and wrecked the middle class* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 60.

[37] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 61.

racism might prevent one from considering the consequent weight of individual biases, and propagate the idea that while the system might be racist, people have evolved past racism and have become "colorblind", in the sense that they behave the same way with anyone regardless of skin color. Colorblind racism:

> [E]xplains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics. [...] Whites rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks' imputed cultural limitations [...] Most Whites believe that if Blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past, work hard and complain less (especially about racial discrimination), then Americans of all hues could all 'get along'"[38].

Such behavior inherently entails a widely accepted minimization of racism since it implies that discrimination is no longer a major factor in minorities' daily lives, holding sway over their opportunities and living conditions, but that it is the behavior of said minorities that sets them back, for instance their assumed perpetual reliance on welfare programs: "The 'social pathologies' of the poor, particularly street crime, illegal drug use, and delinquency, were redefined by conservatives as having their cause in overly generous relief arrangements"[39]. Such assumptions were reinforced through political works such as political advisor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report released in 1965, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. In the report, Moynihan asserted that it was Black values and ways of life which precipitated their misfortune, and not racism: "At this

[38] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 1-19.

[39] Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 58.

point, the present tangle of pathology is capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world"[40].

This fantasized version of non-Whites as ungrateful welfare recipients has deeply scarred the middle-class conscience, to the point where they can't fathom perceiving themselves as welfare beneficiaries: "Even on death's doorstep, Trevor [a White man who refused to claim welfare despite being sick] wasn't angry. [...] 'Ain't no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it', he told me. 'I would rather die [...] We don't need any more government in our lives. And in any case, no way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens'"[41].

d. Reinvention through moral guardianship

The notion of color-blind racism sheds a much-needed light on the necessity for the myth of racists being "pathologically disturbed individuals"[42] to be reconsidered and dismantled. As a matter of fact, racists who perform and exploit racial discrimination are regular people: "younger, educated, middle-class people are more likely than older, less-educated, working-class people to make full use of the resources of color-blind racism"[43]. Contrarily to popular belief among Whites, racist attitudes are not contained to aggressive acts committed by old, bigoted rednecks who can't seem to process that

40 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." (University of Texas, 1965), 32.

41 Jonathan Metzl, Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland (New York Basic Books, 2019), 4.

42 Haney López, Dog Whistle Politics, 15.

43 Bonilla-Silva, Racism Without Racists, 136.

segregation has ended. As I will explore in this thesis, the majority of racist attitudes are not the doing of frustrated or uneducated working-class members either:

> These petty bourgeois groups have been somewhat left behind in the place of advancing social change; they have remained relatively static in jobs, position, attachments, places of residence, attitudes. They are still firmly in touch with the fixed points of reference in the moral universe: family, school, church, town, community life. These [middle-class people] have never had the upper-class rewards of wealth or the working-class rewards of solidarity to compensate them for the sacrifices they have made to compete and succeed. All the rewards they have ever had are 'moral' ones[44].

The struggle of the White middle-class to reinvent itself in its own eyes as well as in society's heavily relied on reclaiming characteristics such as morality and righteousness. By policing Black-led entertainment, as aforementioned, and Black behavior in general, Whites positioned themselves as moral guardians and regulators of the communities they considered theirs. Aside from the racial and socio-economic privileges that encouraged them to fulfill this self-imposed mission, national stories also contributed to the development of a climate conducive to such behavior. Indeed, national myths and narratives such as the Manifest Destiny lead White United-Statesians to retain settler ideologies including the belief that "White Americans were divinely ordained to settle the entire continent of North America, [which] inspired a variety of measures designed to remove or destroy the native population"[45]. The narratives and imageries of God-given authority and power awarded to White settlers are omnipresent in United-Statesians

[44] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 88.

[45] Michelle Getchell, "Manifest Destiny", *Khan Academy*, 2017, https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-early-republic/age-of-jackson/a/manifest-destiny.

iconographies and traditions: the American Dream, the notion of Promised Land, … The latter concepts provide White United-Statesians with justification for their reoccurring interfering with marginalized population's lands and members, not just in the United States, but also in other territories whose native inhabitants are deemed incapable of managing, which has often been the cause for United-Statesian interventionism. This concept has been coined and theorized: it is white saviorism. The term describes the idea that some Whites "have an underlying belief that they know best or that they have skills that BIPOC[46] people do not have"[47].

The carefully crafted assumption according to which Whites enjoy some sort of innate or acquired superiority has contributed to erecting Whiteness as the norm, the standard individuals of all races should aim at reaching. Therefore, the White middle-class bestowed upon itself the status of authority-bearing citizens entitled to the enforcement of morality and virtuousness:

> They have maintained the traditional standards of moral and social conduct: they have identified -over identified- with 'right thinking' in every sphere of life; and they have come to regard themselves as the backbone of the nation, the guardians of its traditional wisdoms […] This lower middle-class voice has become more strident, more entrenched, more outraged, more wracked with social and moral envy and more vigorous and organized in giving public expression to its moral beliefs[48].

[46] Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

[47] Colleen Murphy, "What Is White Savior Complex and Why Is It Harmful?" *Health*, August 17, 2023, https://www.health.com/mind-body/health-diversity-inclusion/white-savior-complex.

[48] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 88.

e. Attacking affirmative action

The White middle-class cultivates a specific communal heritage reflective of their values and their shared history such as the geographical and socio-economic downgrading of the White middle-class following the desegregation period. The entering of Black people into the socio-economic landscape of the country through job market opportunities and property owning forced the White middle-class to be confronted with status threat: Black families were moving in their neighborhoods, they had to shake hands with Black colleagues, and tolerate their presence in leisure spaces when the workday was over. Worse still, African-Americans sometimes matched or surpassed the socio-economic attributes of Whites, forcing the latter to face the fact that not only would they have to bear equality, but they might also have to withstand being exceeded by non-Whites:

> By 1970 blacks were geographically diffused throughout the United States; 80 percent were urban dwellers and had achieved a higher rate of urbanization than whites; they had increased their education and developed a small but thriving middle class; social and political organizations flourished and became training ground for many black leaders; by virtue of their new geographic dispersion, blacks increasingly became a national group; and they were able to develop a new consciousness, new attitudes, and a new view on how to deal with racial discrimination[49].

[49] Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 47.

White middle-class members felt like their identity was being breached, twisted and attacked the same way their communities were. In order to try and remedy this downgrading, Whites resorted to several methods, among which was attacking affirmative action initiatives. Affirmative action programs are usually sponsored by the state or federal government with the goal of providing additional resources and tools to underprivileged groups in order to try and reach some level of equity, be it in welfare, education, or in the professional sector. Affirmative action initiatives are often targeted by individuals or groups who advance the argument that such programs are actually deepening the gap between benefactors and others by bringing attention to their disadvantaged situation. Moreover, detractors of affirmative action were quick to bring up the assumption that recipients of such programs were underserving and being rewarded for their lack of willingness to take part in the traditional United-Statesian "hustle culture":

> Attacking affirmative action provided a way to paint even successful minorities as thriving in jobs that they had obtained, not through hard work or merit, but through Affirmative Action jobs that under any fair system of competition would have rightfully gone to whites[50].

Those assumptions contributed to the development of a resentful sentiment towards successful non-Whites. Their accomplishments are diminished, overlooked, or swept under the rug because deemed unjustified. Furthermore, those attacks on affirmative action are prompted by a sense of victimization emitting from Whites. "Yet by defining race as a superficial characteristic and racism as any use of race, colorblindness

[50] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 93.

misrepresents affirmative action as the moral equivalent of racial oppression"[51]. Quotas, for instance, are perceived by affirmative action detractors as racial discrimination against White populations. This dismissal of non-Whites' achievements and capacities has direct repercussions within the workplaces, profoundly impacting Blacks who have risen to revered professions: "Black executives, lawyers, and bankers repeatedly reported a feeling of being second class, of having a constant nagging sense that they were being treated differently [and] discussing the feeling of being susceptible to being 'stripped of status at a moment's notice' [...]".

Treating non-Whites as being unable to respond to professional demands despite disposing of sufficient -if not exceeding- qualifications has become a run-of-the-mill occurrence, directly stemming from the lasting consequences of slavery and the post-colonial treatment of non-White populations as being incapable to perform tasks above manual and physical labor.

The fear of being left behind and losing their racial and socio-economic status has compelled the White middle-class to erect themselves as moral guardians among society, but mostly among manageable groups such as their communities, both ideological and residential. The construction of those communities has occurred over a complex intersection of values and infrastructure.

B. Embodying Moral Guardians: The Construction of Communities

[51] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 115.

a. Homeowners Associations and the regulation of residential communities

Regulating their communities has allowed White middle-class members to enforce the authority conferred by their status through various ways. They take on the role of moral guardians, policing individuals or attitudes that they perceive as threats to the well-being of their territories and communities. They assume this role by purposefully placing themselves in positions pushing for regulation-abiding profiles, such as neighborhood watch programs, or Homeowners Association members. Residential segregation bears a strong legacy in United Statesian culture:

> [...] Jim Crow laws mandated residential segregation, and blacks were relegated to the worst parts of town. Roads literally stopped at the border of many black neighborhoods, shifting from pavement to dirt. Water, sewer systems, and other public services that supported the white areas of town frequently did not extend to the black areas. The extreme poverty that plagued blacks due to their legally sanctioned inferior status was largely invisible to whites—so long as whites remained in their own neighborhoods, which they were inclined to do.[52]

Homeowners Association membership has proven to be a great tool for middle-class Whites eager to exercise authority over their territories, going as far as psychologically and physically terrorizing Black people to keep them outside the bounds of the community, through policymaking as well as direct confrontation.[53] Numerous accounts of overpolicing directed towards non-White residents have emerged in the past few years.

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[52] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 233.
[53] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

Medium[54] user Wannette describes her desolation regarding the power held by what she calls "White fear", after the entirety of her White neighbors employed exaggerated tactics of surveillance following the appearance of a Black person driving their car in the neighborhood:

> I know better than to think I am insulated by class. I know better than to think I am safer in this neighborhood. I understand the concept of double consciousness[55] — the burden of Black people to continuously, for their own safety, perceive how they may be perceived by white people. The white gaze distorts reality, turning ordinary actions into signs of suspicion[56].

White vigilante policing has become a daily occurrence in the United States. The impulse to take on mediator and power-holding roles could be interpreted as a response to the significant and uninterrupted drop in social capital and social trust the country has suffered from following World War II[57]. The typical White middle-class member, struggling to retain relevance in a shifting social hierarchy, tries to emulate authority by bestowing upon himself the role of necessary middleman who must help parties navigate conflict. Such behavior echoes White savior attitudes described earlier. This phenomenon also accounts for the rise of "preventive lawyering": "the lawyer contrives enforceability to supplement the failing supply of reciprocity, moral obligation, and fellow feeling [...] Lawyers contrive to provide 'artificial trust'"[58].

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[54] Medium is a website that allows internet users to publish essays and stories about their life experiences.

[55] Double consciousness is a concept theorized by author W.E.B Du Bois. It positions that marginalized individuals are aware at all times of both their own perception of themselves, as well as society's projection of biased assumptions upon their existence.

[56] Wannette, "Weaponization of White Fear: When Neighborhood Watch Turns to Racial Profiling." *Medium*, 2025, https://wannette.medium.com/weaponization-of-white-fear-when-neighborhood-watch-turns-to-racial-profiling-e214ec80d073

[57] Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American society* (Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[58] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 148.

This decline in both social trust and social capital causes communities to rely on control and security as a response to otherness: "[...] Since the end of slavery in 1865, the prevailing White reaction to Black social and political gains has been an effort to push back those advances and regain social control"[59]. Communities are thus cemented around the idea of control and the actors and institutions that play a role in controlling their surroundings. Among residential communities such as suburban neighborhoods, said institutions are embodied by organizations like HOAS (Homeowners' Associations) or lobbying groups such as NIMBY (Not In My Backyard). The former is "an organization responsible for creating and enforcing rules within a specific community. [and might] impose strict rules regarding property use and appearance"[60], while the latter is described as: "a colloquialism signifying one's opposition to the locating of something considered undesirable in one's neighborhood. [...] The phrase is also used [...] to imply an absence of social conscience expressed by a class-,race-, or disability-based opposition to the location of social-service facilities in neighborhoods[61].

Despite being relative to different aspects of community regulation, each group acts around rather similar interests and instances: they mandate what is or is not acceptable in their communities, decide what profits or disadvantages them, but also dictate who is and who is not allowed to belong: who are the actors within the community? Who has agency over decision-making and regulation? Who can afford to belong? Who rejects those community, or is rejected by them? HOA regulations are often criticized for their harshness and superficial undertones, with policies deemed excessive

[59] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 148.

[60] "What Is a Homeowners Association (HOA)?" *Wynnfield Subdivision Mobile, Alabama*, January 17, 2025, https://wynnfieldmobile.com/what-is-a-homeowners-association-hoa/.

[61] Peter D. Kinder. "NIMBY | Meaning, Examples, & Facts." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 14, 2016, https://www.britannica.com/topic/NIMBY.

frequently being critiqued among homeowners and exterior residents. HOA demands can be as strict as forbidding inhabitants to own certain dog breeds, planting specific plants or trees, parking vehicles outside of garages, or even opposing the display of children's toys in yards[62].

b. Property-owning and national myths

Despite the fact that Homeowners Associations have been around since the 1960s[63], one can note a serious shift in the way said associations handle the treatment of property. Despite the country suffering a significant decline in organized social life in neighborhoods, a serious augmentation of neighborhood watch groups has been observed[64], underlining the heightened consideration of physical capital compared to social capital. This heightened consideration of property appearances echoes a larger phenomenon: the obsession of United-Statesians for property-owning. Since 1975, polls have shown a rise in materialism, which is "attributable to generational replacement, as a cohort who is less concerned about material goods passes from the scene and is replaced by a cohort who gives more priority to a second color TV and really nice clothes"[65]. Then again, I find the latter concept ties to the American Dream, which can be defined as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for

[62]Jennifer Bradley Franklin, "HOA Rules: 9 Common Violations That Can Cost You." *Bankrate,* March 5, 2025, https://www.bankrate.com/real-estate/hoa-homeowners-association-rules/#violations.

[63] "A Complete History of HOAs." https://hub.associaonline.com/blog/a-complete-history-of-hoas.

[64] Elizabeth Joh, "The Rise of Networked Vigilante Surveillance." *New America*. February 17, 2026, https://www.newamerica.org/insights/rise-networked-vigilante-surveillance/.

[65] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 279.

everyone”[66]. Reasonably enough, the preoccupation with property-owning and the romanticization of becoming a property-owner whether it be of a car, a home, or a piece of land, have enhanced logically in relation to the rarity of the occurrence, seeing how both the national and global economies have hindered citizens from successfully buying their own homes. My findings have led me to believe that the value of property-owning is perceived quite uniformly, even considering the age and party affiliation of respondents. For instance, when talking about how they perceive United-Statesian concepts such as being deserving and reaping the fruits of your hard work, D.J and M.S gave rather similar answers, despite M.S being a 63-year-old republican female from Arizona and D.J being a 23-year-old democrat male from New Jersey. D.J stated the following: “If you work hard, you deserve nice things, essentially. Yeah. I think that is also kind of what America is driven on. We're driven by status symbols. You know, like, I have this nice car, so I'm showing you that I worked hard for it”[67], while M.S estimated “We should all get, you know, not to be, you know, socialistic minded or anything. We should all have the freedoms to be able to prosper and do well. And if we work hard, we should reap the benefits of our hard work”[68].

The housing market becoming highly competitive has caused the shared dream of home-owning to collapse for a considerable part of the population: “That reality has left many middle-class families sitting on the sidelines. Those households accounted for

[66] “Commercial Observer: Who Turned the American Dream of Home Ownership Into a Nightmare?” *USC Lusk*, December 11, 2023, https://lusk.usc.edu/index.php/news/commercial-observer-who-turned-american-dream-home-ownership-nightmare.

[67] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

[68] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

49.7% of new homebuyers in 2022, down from 60.1% in 2010"[69]. Property-owning and quality of life have become indivisible, the former ensuring the latter.

Even though the housing crisis is a phenomenon that is detrimental to all working and middle-class citizens, it is particularly crippling for non-White communities, who have historically struggled to obtain leases or mortgages more than their White counterparts: racial discrimination is the second most reported type of housing discrimination after disability-based discrimination[70]. Such high rates of racial discrimination create long-lasting consequences that perpetuate already harmful and unfair repartitions of resources. Said discriminations can take various forms:

> For example, residential segregation, which is almost as high today as it was in the past, is no longer accomplished through overtly discriminatory practices. Instead, covert behaviors such as not showing all the available units, steering minorities and whites into certain neighborhoods, quoting higher rents or prices to minority applicants, or not advertising units at all are the weapons of choice to maintain separate communities[71].

The appeal of HOA-regulated communities, despite the aforementioned downsides, can be explained by a rising desire for security and orderliness, which can be provided by HOA committees. Those interests are also often put forward by NIMBY groups when confronted with new projects that might not fit with what they envision to be safe or acceptable, whether it be prisons, community centers or schools. Homeowners also

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[69] Jasmine Cui, "How You Can Save on Rent: Negotiation, Rewards Programs, More." *NBC News,* October 14, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/data-graphics/middle-class-new-homeowners-cost-burdened-house-poor-rcna163853.

[70] Janelle Brevard,"New Report Reveals Record Number of Housing Discrimination Complaints" *NFHA*, November 30, 2022, https://nationalfairhousing.org/new-report-reveals-record-number-of-housing-discrimination-complaints/.

[71] Bonilla Silva, *Colorblind Racism*, 17.

hold desirable positions social status-wise; statuses that are directly bestowed upon them because of the material reality of owning a home: “because of their greater rootedness, homeowners are substantially more likely to be involved in community affairs than are renters”[72]. One might venture that the decline in property-owning opportunities available thus reduces the amount of community-building impetus powered by individuals. The reality of the real estate market is felt heavily by younger generations, as the following remark from D.J, 23-year-old democrat engineering student, demonstrates:

> Property owning, I don't even want to talk about this one. I, like, I've never... It's a dream, but I would never be able to own a house. Like, not, not how we used to. I'm in the house my parents bought right now, it was $230,000 in 1998 or 7. I don't remember which one. It's worth $900,000 now. Like, are you kidding me? We don't even stand a chance at least to have the same lifestyle for an equivalent like wages or things like that. It's just not equal. It's not equal to how it used to be. And I guess I've come to terms with that. You know, my life is still pretty good, so I, I can't, I can't be too mad. But it does make me sad that I can't get the same lifestyle as my parents for the same amount of hard work. You know, no matter which hard work I put in, it's not going to get me this house[73].

c. Property as an extension of the self

[72] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 208.
[73] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

The heightened perceived worth of property automatically impacts the treatment of property damage crimes, that is to say victimless crime:

> If no one in particular is harmed by the conduct in question, this does not prevent the invocation of a collective victim—'the community' and its 'quality of life'-—that is deemed to suffer the ill-effects that must always flow from prohibited behaviour, however trivial. Public drinking, soft drug use, graffiti, loitering, vagrancy, begging, sleeping rough, being 'uncivil': these cease to be tolerable nuisances or pricks to the middle-class conscience and become the disorderly stuff upon which serious crime feeds. [...]The public's fears and insecurities, its heightened awareness of the problem, its skepticism about liberal policies, its lack of concern for the offenders themselves—all of these have prompted us to find victims where there were once only violations[74].

This perception of property crime encourages intolerant and wary behaviors towards anything or anyone that might be perceived as external elements, fueling the notion of reasonable doubt preposterously. Any external element might be identified as a potential threat to the community, including both the individuals and the property it contains. The behaviors enumerated by Garland, which might be considered antisocial by some, can explain the harsh measures HOAs tend to enforce in the hopes of regulating conducts through the control of appearances and aesthetics. People have come to assimilate offenses committed against their properties as offenses committed against themselves, since it impacts their immediate environment, and thus quality of life.

[74] David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 199.

The assumption that disorder and quality of life are intertwined has become increasingly popular, as societal changes such as the breaking of taboos and the rupture with previous moral inhibitions have started becoming commonplace. The constant need for reassurance concerning control and the apprehension around safety and orderliness are symptomatic of the overwhelming, growing, spreading sentiment of distrust that has become common currency in United-Statesian society: "Our civic culture becomes increasingly less tolerant and inclusive, increasingly less capable of trust"[75].

The interpretation of social disorder as crime can also prompt the involvement of outsider institutions, which also contributes to deepening the gap between inhabitants and generating growing mistrust: "increased use of policing and state intervention in everyday problems hasten the demise of the informal customary relationships that social calm depends on"[76]. Such actions might precede further drastic consequences, ranging from fining to incarceration:

> Prisons and jails are increasingly being used as a *faute de mieux* repository for the mentally ill, drug addicts, and poor, sick people for whom the depleted social services no longer provide adequate accommodation. Most recently, 'zero tolerance' and 'quality of life' policing have begun to extend this coercive zoning, using aggressive arrest practices to exclude 'disorderly' individuals from public spaces wherever they are seen as interfering with commercial interests or the 'quality of life' demanded by more affluent residents.[77]

[75] Garland, *The Culture of Control*, 213.
[76] Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag, 38.
[77] Garland, *The Culture of Control*,196.

d. The decay of socialization

Community is inevitably intertwined with solidarity and bonds of reliance: one's community, beyond their family and close friends, used to be composed of trustworthy neighbors whom one could leave their kids to in case something came up, or nearby residents willing to let one borrow eggs or hardware tools. Solidarity used to be prompted by the fact that people knew their neighbors because they were willing to engage with them and bond around shared values, characteristics, and overall similarities. Nowadays, especially since the COVID-19 global pandemic, people tend to keep to themselves, too crippled by timidity and social anxiety to dare introducing themselves to their neighbors: "The COVID-19 pandemic has led to acute changes in daily routines and lifestyles worldwide, with the social consequences being detrimental to mental health. [...] Enforced social avoidance is likely to exacerbate social anxiety within community and clinical populations"[78].

Detachment from community and lack of communication are interwoven phenomenon. Since less opportunities are offered for shared activities, individualistic tendencies tend to become a substantial component of socialization: "Cooperation falling more rapidly than self-expression [...] may well have encouraged the single-issue blare and declining civility of contemporary political discourse"[79]. This "declining civility of contemporary political discourse" is an occurrence that has been largely observed and

[78] Reuben Kindred and Glen Bates, "The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Anxiety: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20 (3): 2362. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20032362.

[79] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 43.

personally suffered by several of my interviewees. A.T, a 25-year-old Asian-American democrat, stated that "politics are just, as a rule, off the table"[80] in her family. The same goes for 20-year-old political science student W.R: "I wasn't ever really sort of fighting anybody, which is unless it came to certain family reunions every year. And a lot of my family is Southern, so when we would meet up with them, my parents would always [...] tell us before we got there, «your uncle's gonna say some things, let mom and dad handle it"[81]. CH.S, a 20-year-old conservative White woman, declared:

> I think it'll be a tragedy to, like, lose that connection with someone in your family just because you see a little bit differently. Even with my, you know, the people in my family who do vote differently than me, I still love them and I still talk to them and, you know, we make jokes and we just think it's like, it's not like a divisive thing. It's just something we can talk about. [...] It definitely would make a difference if there were two people on the opposite ends of the extremes[82].

Divergence of opinion, to various extents, has become an obstacle to community-making for many. That observation should not come as a surprise, considering the recent reduction in the scope of political discourse in the U.S, aligning with the phenomenon of soft power suicide. The sense of cohesiveness and tolerance that used to be the glue of communities has also been hindered by geographical obstacles: when asked about the state of communities in the United States, W.R estimated that "the idea of the American community is dying". According to her, geographical and technical disadvantages overlap with ideological ones:

[80] Interview conducted on October 10, 2025.
[81] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.
[82] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025.

> [...] The idea of an American community, especially where I live, which is going to be, like I said, in the suburbs, it's just gone. There's nowhere to go without a car, there's nothing to do. And I think in concept that would mean that like, your neighbors band together, but that's just not what happens. It's very... I don't know my next-door neighbors. I don't know their names. [...] And so there's like this real sort of every person for themselves kind of mentality. And a lot of people work in my community. A lot of them work in the cities. They work in the cities and they live in the suburbs. [...] It's not like they commute together or anything. There's no bus or train to catch. Everybody's in a car and everybody's separate. It's just, it's a very separate way of living[83].

The idea that the community-oriented mindset has vanished from American suburbia is rather generalized, and has been an ongoing process since the rise in suburbanization: “people fleeing the city sorted themselves into more and more finely distinguished ‘lifestyle enclaves’. [...] So called white flight was only the most visible form of this movement toward metropolitan differentiation”[84]. White flight is the name given to the process of White people voluntarily segregating themselves by moving from urban neighborhoods to suburban areas in an attempt to escape racially diverse neighborhoods that might expose White families to cultures, habits and individuals considered dubious or deriving from their predefined moral code. White flight was one of the many attempts of mostly upper middle-class Whites to recreate a society that would fit the criteria they had managed to hold for so long. When that did not work, they had to reinvent themselves

[83] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.
[84] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 213.

in other ways, for instance by placing themselves as vital elements of American life: moral guardians.

The White flight phenomenon, which emerged in the fifties and sixties, paved the way for rather stark solutions, as Whites sought to recreate some sort of residential *entre-soi*: "' 'gated communities' began to proliferate, in which private homeowner associations and visible physical barriers manned by guards supplemented the invisible sociological barriers that distinguished each community from its neighbors"[85]. M.S, a 63-year-old White republican, is the only one of my respondents who lived in a gated community. When asked about the time she and her family stayed in the community, she shared the following anecdote:

> And then they decided to put a gate around the community. And as soon as they did that, we had crime. [...] Well, yeah, we had an incident where I put my daughter down to sleep, and my son was already sleeping, and my husband was reading in bed. We had a sliding glass door in our bedroom, and I heard this cat meowing outside and I thought, oh. And I went to the window, the sliding glass door, and I didn't unlock it, thank God. But I looked, I turned on the light and I looked down and this man's shoes were right there in front of me. There was a man standing right there. I was like, I couldn't even talk. [...] You know, I said, my husband's name. And he was panicked too and you know, told the guy to go. It was this black guy. It was in Memphis, you know. It was in the area where there were more population of black people. But... And he left. He said something like he was looking for something. But then the neighbor came home and saw him. She said that he was kind of

[85] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 213.

> wandering around her place too. So anyway, and we called the security and I don't know if they ever found him, but it was frightening. But I thought it was funny that we had never had anything like that until I put the gates.

The immediate resort to surveillance and policing as a response to a person of color setting foot in such a community echoes the principle of "White fear" and its weaponization, which I have both mentioned already at the beginning of this chapter. The hypothesis that this man could have been a neighbor in need did not seem to cross M. S's mind: his skin color immediately ostracized him and conferred the status of threat upon him. Moreover, when reading the first sentences of the transcript of this anecdote, one might imagine that the crimes that will be mentioned will be, to a degree, shocking or chilling. However, the only crime the outsider seemed to have committed was trespassing, which is actually considered a misdemeanor in most states[86]. M.S's reaction should not come as a shock, when one takes into account the fact that "contemporary surveys of racial attitudes among whites indicate that the larger the hypothetical Black population in an area, the more likely white respondents are to express discomfort about living in the same neighborhood"[87]. Whites have the privilege of retreating into a cocoon-like environment which shields them from the racial realities Blacks are confronted with on the daily.

The general atmosphere of unwelcomeness spreading through the country can be traced back to several explanations. According to D.J, a democrat who lives in New

[86] "Criminal Trespass Laws."*Justia*, October 10, 2025, https://www.justia.com/criminal/offenses/other-crimes/criminal-trespass/#:~:text=Trespass%20is%20often%20classified%20as,damage%20personal%20and%20professional%20opportunities.

[87] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, 19.

Jersey, the personal involvement that represents the cost for community is also what might put people off:

> Nobody is willing to maintain their communities because of either, you know, costs or inconveniences, and they'd rather just do it themselves because it's either easier or they don't want to bother anyone or, or it's just like a pride thing, like, oh, I, I don't need someone else to do this. I can do this myself. So that's like what America's built on right now. It's people who believe they need help from others, and as a result of that, they won't help anyone else. They'll be like, oh, you're not helping me. Why? Why would I help you? That is a horrible outlook to have [...] Like a lot of human history was it took a village to help out, you know, and now like I said, we're individualistic to a fault. We will do everything ourselves and do everything without the help of other people, which is insane. And it's not how life is supposed to be. [...] It's a very selfish cycle[88].

CH.S, a 20-year-old white republican from South Louisiana, seems to share the same opinion:

> There was more loving of the neighbor, but nowadays it's like everyone is just trying to become the best person they can be. And it's really just such a me mentality, like how far can I get in life? But it's like loving your neighbor doesn't matter as much, I think. [...] I think that there's a drive like, you know, in every person there's a drive to... maybe everyone has goals, everyone wants more money, everybody wants a nicer car, house or whatever it is, you

[88] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

> know, in the person's life. But it's like everyone is just trying to go up the ladder, whether it's in wealth or like status. So whenever you're so focused on, you know, when you're so inward focused, you just don't see people around you as much and see their needs[89].

One might wonder if the stakes regarding community are perceived in the same way by older respondents. When asked about her neighbors, 63-year-old White republican M.S mentioned one of her particularly community-oriented neighbors:

> He has a nice little garage with a TV in there and he has people coming to visit him. It's like a front porch and he has a little community garage sale where people brought their stuff over to sell there. So he knows people all around this area and I really admire that. But I, you know, I get in my house and then I'll get out and get in my car and go, you know, and then come back and close my garage and come inside. [...] But that's kind of like that and it's nice to see that. So I value that. I just don't. I guess you could say I'm kind of lazy or don't seek it out or, you know, too busy too, you know[90].

M.S's testimony echoes 20-year-old democrat and Maryland resident W. R's remarks on living a separate way of life because of the lack of opportunities for collective commuting:

> [A lot of people in my community] work in the cities and they live in the suburbs. [...] It's not like they commute together or anything. There's no bus or train to catch. Everybody's in a car and everybody's separate. It's just, it's a very separate way of living. [...] There's a community center near me and you can't, you can't... Not only can you not get there without a car, but you

[89] Interview conducted on August 8, 2025.
[90] Interview conducted on February 3, 2025.

> also... There's not much to do there. They don't host any sort of events [...] Our local mall institute, which used to be like a place when I was growing up, like my mom would go drop me off at the mall. Yeah, that was like the thing to do. They instituted a curfew for kids, so anybody under the age of 18 had to be accompanied by an adult. And they couldn't be in groups, bigger than four. And that was... There were some legitimate safety concerns going that sparked that. But it meant that like, my little sister now doesn't go to the mall and there's really nowhere else for her to go anymore. They closed my local skate park, which was also a place where kids in my neighborhood used to hang out. They closed it down. And there's just this idea of paranoia and fear that just sort of rules our communities in a way that it's like "oh, we're scared of, like, violence, or we're scared of, like, gangs of kids, so we're just gonna close it down, and you guys can't do it"[91].

Both of those statements illustrate the reality that "lives are now centered inside the house, rather than on the neighborhood or the community. [...] The social intercourse that used to be the main characteristic of urban life has vanished.... There are few places as desolate and lonely as a suburban street on a hot afternoon"[92].

e. Fragmentation of the nuclear family

My interviews have led me to put forward the hypothesis that declining birth rates in the United States might also be a factor in the decay of community culture in the country.

[91] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.
[92] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 215.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "The general fertility rate in the United States decreased by 3% from 2022, reaching a historic low. [...] From 2014 to 2020, the rate consistently decreased by 2% annually "[93]. It is my understanding that community-building heavily relies around children. The endangering or perversion of children are often brandished as flags for causes opposing or supporting projects surrounding changes near residential or schooling areas. The well-being of children seems to be the main motivation for citizens voicing their concern over what they perceive to be societal issues. An example of that phenomenon was provided through my discussion with M.S, 63-year-old republican Arizona resident:

> They've been trying to desensitize people and children having sex change operations, their children, they don't know any better. And stories of little kids that are 3, 4, 5 years old, and the mom decides that they're a girl, a little boy or something, and dresses them in dresses and starts brainwashing them that they're that way or they think they are because they're believing all this stuff out there. These children need to be protected. That's child abuse. [...] Like here, they had transvestites coming into the libraries and little children there reading story time to them. You know, that's...That's putting their perversion on children[94].

When asked about Trump's policies being possibly harmful to minorities, M.S also stated the following: "I mean, the single black women were given money to support their

[93] "U.S. Fertility Rate Drops to Another Historic Low." *National Center for Health Statistics*, April 25, 2025, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2024/20240525.htm.

[94] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

children, and they were better off without the man. In the house financially, but not for the kids because they needed the father figure"[95].

Despite both tackled issues being extremely different from one another, the well-being of children was brought up as the main argument. As D.J mentioned in our interview, communities have always been children-centered for survival reasons, in the interest of both children and adults. Children were and still are portrayed as the heart of communities since they are the future members and actors of society. The famous phrase "it takes a village" perfectly encapsulates this idea. However, as I have gathered from discussions, providing or finding a village has become an increasingly difficult task for many:

> [T]he village, in many countries today, is dissipated and fragmented and individuals are increasingly isolated and are not eager to ask for, or provide help to, others. Family breakdowns, economic pressures, long working hours and increased mobility have all contributed to families feeling less connected to extended family members and others around them.[96]

According to D.J, recent evolutions in formerly patriarchal familial structures contribute to the disruption of community-building established components:

> The typical system, maybe not for everyone, but one parent works, one parent takes care of the children. But the new generation is going to be: both parents work. [...] They're not, you know, trying to interact with other parents. And the other parents aren't doing that either. They're also working. So, it's

[95] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

[96] Andrea Reupert, Shulamith Lala Straussner, Bente Weimand, and Darryl Maybery. "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Understanding and Expanding the Concept of the 'Village.'" *Frontiers in Public Health* vol. 10, March 11, 2022, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.756066.

just, it's going to be much harder in the future even to maintain that kind of community.

The figure below presents the evolution regarding women's presence among the United-Statesian labor force[97].

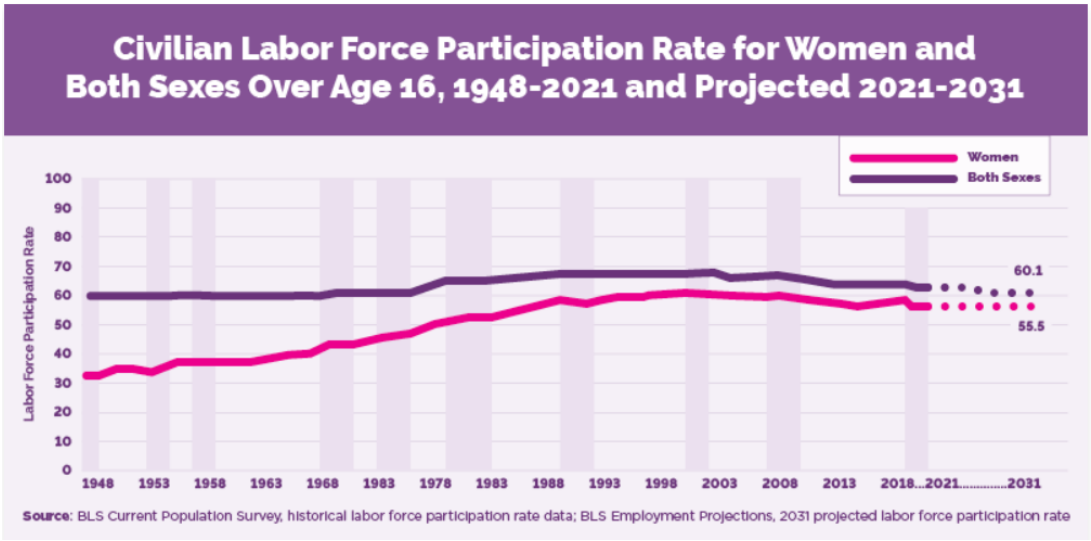


Figure 1: Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate for Women and Both Sexes Over Age 16, 1948-2021 and Projected 2021-2031

Allotting more time to the professional sphere while virtually taking on the same amount of housework has prevented women from being able to keep up with past community-building expectations: "Long-standing gender disparities in the household division of labor [...] have persisted during the pandemic. [...] A majority of women (59%) say they do more household chores than their spouse or partner, while 6% say their spouse or partner does more"[98].

[97] Christine Machovec,"Working Women: Data From the Past, Present and Future." *U.S Department of Labor*, March 15, 2023, https://blog.dol.gov/2023/03/15/working-women-data-from-the-past-present-and-future.

[98] Carrie Blazina, "For American Couples, Gender Gaps in Sharing Household Responsibilities Persist Amid Pandemic." *Pew Research Center*, April 14, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/01/25/for-american-couples-gender-gaps-in-sharing-household-responsibilities-persist-amid-pandemic/.

As a matter of fact, the previous confinement of women to the home and everything home-related ensured that households would communicate with each-other and that a sense of familiarity would emerge in residential areas: "Women are, formally or informally, resource managers"[99]. Home-bound wives and mothers would bond over their shared interests and daily lives, scheduling dinner parties and playdates that allowed all family members to engage with their neighbors. The responsibility for socializing still falls on women for the major part: "Most Americans are less embedded in their neighborhood than they were a generation ago. This is due in part to the fact that women—long the stalwart neighborhood builders—are now much more likely to be away at work during the day than their mothers were"[100].

The workplace has evolved into the nexus of United-Statesians' social lives: "48% of workers call themselves "workaholics", 66% skip one meal per day due to working hours, and 60% of US workers say they don't have boundaries between work responsibilities and life"[101]. This can be explained by several reasons, like the specificity of the United-Statesian work ethic and its inherent ties to social status, a renowned damaging hustle culture, and of course the continent-transcending necessity to face economic hardships and recessions. The replacement of manual industrial labor in favor of "skilled" labor underwent by the country, which led to the complexification of work in general, has also contributed to a decline in social capital: "Many of us nowadays work in large, complex organizations, and attending yet another meeting in the evening is the

[99] Rekha Mehra, "Gender in Community Development and Resource Management: An Overview", *International Center for Research on Women*, 1993. https://www.focusintl.com/GD153-%20Gender%20in%20Community%20Development%20and%20Resource%20Management%20-%20An%20Overview.pdf.

[100] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 317.

[101] Austin Connolly, "Work-Life Balance Statistics for 2024: A Global Perspective." *Hubstaff Blog*, February 24, 2025, https://hubstaff.com/blog/work-life-balance-statistics/#:~:text=Work%2Dlife%20balance%20in%20the%20United%20States&text=48%25%20of%20workers%20call%20themselves,work%20on%20a%20typical%20Saturday.

last thing on our mind"[102]. Moreover, work-related stress is far from being the main issue United-Statesians face daily. The impact of economic hardships on people's mental health is not to be understated: "Financial worries and economic troubles have a profoundly depressing effect on social involvement, both formal and informal"[103]. As a matter of fact, economics -and most notably inflation- have been one of the main concerns during the last presidential election, as demonstrated by a 2024 study conducted by political economist David Steinberg[104]. Their findings led them to draw several conclusions, the first being that people who perceive inflation to be more severe usually share negative opinions about Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party. This belief echoed in several of my respondents' declarations. For instance, S.F, a 22-year-old White republican woman, stated:

> When we were under a Democratic president there was a much more inflation problems. I mean, gosh, right when Biden went into office the gas prices shot up. Groceries were insanely expensive. He did certain things like after COVID; Joe Biden came into office and immediately started the student loan programs again. So we kind of got hit with having to pay a bunch of bills right after COVID that we weren't really prepared for because he wanted to go ahead and get that going. But I think I think Donald Trump is very efficient. [...] I do think a lot has gotten better. Gas prices have gone down, groceries kind of stayed the same[105].

T.F, an 18-year-old republican military recruit, expressed a rather similar opinion:

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[102] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 85.
[103] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 195.
[104] David Steinberg, "The Impact of Inflation on the 2024 Presidential Election." *The Hub*, November 20, 2024, https://hub.jhu.edu/2024/11/20/how-inflation-impacted-2024-election/.
[105] Interview conducted on May 5, 2025.

> In America, under Trump's first term, it was, you know, inflation was not as big of a deal. And then Biden took over, you know, gas prices shot up really bad, like grocery prices went up really high. [...] And the cost of living got way up. So, and then within his first, what, almost six months now, you know, you've seen the gas prices start to come down. You've seen, he [Donald Trump]'s doing, he's proposed a tax plan, which I agree with to a certain extent[106].

S.N, a 26-year-old Caribbean American democrat, was the only democrat among my respondents to mention inflation, and she shared a different opinion:

> It's like every single thing this man [Donald Trump] has done, has not benefited the people that voted for him. Like, it was a lot of poor people from poor states. And they were looking, I don't know what they were looking for. They were looking for gas to be more affordable. There's all that to be more affordable. And all he has done is things that benefit him and the 1% and the rich people. And like the whole tariff things now, like everything's increased. Inflation went up. Like, you know, like, and the thing is, people will say, Oh, well, under Biden's administration, everything was so high. And that was because we were still under Trump's tax thing, like from when he was president, that went into effect[107].

Upon reading those testimonies, one might wonder how such widely different interpretations of the current economic state of the country might coexist. Since Trump's campaign relied heavily on the promise of economic improvements and inflation

[106] Interview conducted on May 23, 2025.
[107] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025.

decrease, as one can see from the following speech extracts, it is no wonder why his constituency believed the cost of living was improving:

> Starting on day one, we will end inflation and make America affordable again, to bring down the prices of all goods. - Donald Trump during his rally in Bozeman (August 9, 2024).
>
> We're going to get the prices down. We have to get them down. It's too much. Groceries, cars, everything. We're going to get the prices down. - Donald Trump in Erie, Pennsylvania, (September 29, 2024).
>
> A vote for Trump means your groceries will be cheaper. - Donald Trump in Pennsylvania (November 4, 2024) [108].

However, Donald Trump's policies have proven not to align with those original claims:

> Trump campaigned on raising tariff rates, which are taxes on imports. Higher tariffs would increase the prices that consumers pay for foreign goods and goods that use imported components. Another signature Trump promise, mass deportations, would likely raise business costs, and those higher costs would be passed along to consumers in the form of higher prices. Finally, Trump wants to cut taxes, which may also worsen inflationary pressures. If inflation continues to trend downwards over the next four years, it is unlikely to be because of Trump's economic policies[109].

Leading a work-devoted life while constantly worrying about financial stability and living paycheck to paycheck weighs heavily on the typical United-Statesian: the combined

[108] "Trump's Economic Promises Timeline." *Congressman Lloyd Doggett*, May 8, 202,. https://doggett.house.gov/issues/trumps-economic-promises-timeline.

[109] Steinberg, "The Impact of Inflation on the 2024 Presidential Election".

mental load of work pressure and economic strain robs citizens of the opportunity of forming meaningful social ties and engaging with their communities.

The evolution of communities characterized by specific regulations and singular practices and habits influenced by both internal and external factors, as well as the simultaneous emergence of Whiteness as a criterion for belonging in those communities, have contributed to the birth of a shared White middle-class conscience. This common conscience has often been mobilized and manipulated in public discourse, whether it be by the media or political institutions. Indeed, the needs, wishes and revendications of such communities are frequently alluded to in speeches, programs and reporting, and weaponized by political institutions to then cater to the influential White middle-class conscience. While this might sound like benign behavior, those methods prove to be extremely damaging as politicians try and meddle with exaggerated and fantasized threats and obstacles. These narratives, such as the perceived menace represented by the growing presence of non-Whites in the United States, are brandished as harmful to the White middle-class.

II. CAPITALIZING ON MORAL PANICS

A. A Tale of Power: The Racialization of Political Discourse Strategies in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries.

a. Competing for constituencies

The Grand Old Party, to this day, upholds its reputation as "the White man's party" with pride. However, many underestimate that this legacy was the hard-earned result of decades of intricate discriminatory strategies designed by both democrat and republican figures. During the sixties, as civil rights issues became prominent in the general discourse, republican leaders and elected officials realized that they needed to take a definite stand on the racial issue if they wanted to ensure their survival as well as their eroded relationship with their constituency's. As a matter of fact, when the democrats started incorporating Black populations within New Deal policies, republicans saw the opportunity to weaponize lower- and middle-class Whites' resentment toward a government that did not prioritize the survival of its perceived first-class citizens:

> Democratic Party elites faced a choice [the 1930s and 1940s]: they could focus on maintaining their traditional white southern electorate or they could reach out to Black voters and others in northern cities supportive of the party's New Deal economic programs [...] America's two political parties switched positions on civil rights. Democrats, formerly the party of the white South, became the party of northern white liberals and Black voters.

> Republicans, once the party of emancipation and Reconstruction, became the party of most southern whites[110].

That phenomenon was notably embodied by Richard Nixon:

> [In] speaking of the need for "law and order," Nixon simultaneously targeted various "law and order" issues: from street crimes such as robbery, theft, assault and rape, to rioting, to civil rights and anti-war demonstrations. These were all spreading, Nixon contended, reflecting moral decadence and causing wider social malaise. [...] Given its racial connotations, Nixon's "law and order" discourse risked alienating black voters. The Nixon camp, however, had scant interest in trying to win blacks over, insofar as doing so seemed both futile and insufficiently worthwhile. According to a memo Buchanan sent to Nixon, for example, blacks were not only "the most committed of Democrats" and "traditionally hostile" to the Republican ticket, but also relatively small in numbers, as a corollary of which their vote was not pivotal. "[T]hey're not our voters; and if we go after them, we'll go down to defeat chasing a receding rainbow," Buchanan concluded. If appealing to blacks offered Nixon little by way of prospective gain, opinion research indicated that there was much he might lose were he to cease targeting blacks through "law and order" [111].

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[110] Steven White, "When Democrats and Republicans were changing positions on civil rights in the 1940s, state-level activists used national conventions to force their hands", *LSE United States Politics and Policy*, May 2, 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2023/05/02/when-democrats-and-republicans-were-changing-positions-on-civil-rights-in-the-1940s-state-level-activists-used-national-conventions-to-force-their-hands/

[111] Leonidas Cheliotis, "Manufacturing concern: inside Richard Nixon's "law and order" campaign. Criminology and Criminal Justice", *The London School of Economy and Political Science*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958241266730, 8-12.

b. The Southern Strategy and dog whistling

George Wallace, then democrat governor of Alabama, planted the seeds of what would come to be known as the Southern Strategy. After losing his first election due to a progressive racial stance that made him appear too soft on the issue, he shifted his political agenda and violently radicalized his projects for Alabama:

> Summarizing his first two campaigns for governor of Alabama, Wallace would later recall, "you know, I started off talking about schools and highways and prisons and taxes—and I couldn't make them listen. Then I began talking about niggers —and they stomped the floor"[112].

Wallace's unexpected backpedaling did not happen because of sheer faith in the belief that African-Americans were innately lesser beings, but because he knew that catering to a largely White and powerful audience would help him access the governor position. However, Wallace quickly realized he needed to tread lightly to secure his narrative. Overtly racial language would make him appear bigoted, simplistic, and uneducated. He needed to intellectualize the discourse and devoid it of clear racial references, while still alluding to his constituency in a language they would understand:

> As a contemporary of Wallace marveled, "he can use all the other issues—law and order, running your own schools, protecting property rights—and never mention race. But people will know he's telling them 'a nigger's trying

[112] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 29.

> to get your job, trying to move into your neighborhood.' What Wallace is doing is talking to them in a kind of shorthand, a kind of code"[113].

That is the exact definition of dog whistling. This practice is often resorted to by politicians to gather support from a targeted group by alluding to a specific coveted issue, often controversial, while camouflaging overt expressions that would risk provoking backlash from adversaries under euphemisms. In the following years, those practices became increasingly popular among nation leaders.

c. Richard Nixon

Said tactics allowed Richard Nixon to run as the law -and-order candidate for the 1968 election, exploiting the unstable nature of the desegregationist era, characterized by increasingly violent civil unrest and a significant rupture within the population. Capitalizing on White bitterness regarding civil rights-prompted social and systemic initiatives, Nixon erected himself as a voice for the run-of-the-mill dissatisfied White citizen protesting racial advancements not out of bigotry but out of sincere worry about the decline of an idealized, traditional, American way of life.

Nixon reinstated to his constituency that he would that he would keep looking out for Whites' best interests by taking a stand against busing. Busing is a practice that promoted integration through the transportation of mostly Black students out of their own neighborhoods into White schools,. Using the insecure political and social climate to his advantage, he followed in his predecessors' footsteps and viciously questioned the

[113] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 32.

credibility of civil rights leaders and protesters, stamping them as mere criminals promoting systemic disobedience:

> Dismissing these protesters as criminals shifted the issue from a defense of white supremacy to a more neutral-seeming concern with "order," while simultaneously stripping the activists of moral stature. Demonstrators were no longer Americans willing to risk beatings and even death for a grand ideal, but rather criminal lowlifes disposed toward antisocial behavior. Ultimately, the language of law and order justified a more "quiet" form of violence in defense of the racial status quo, replacing lynchings with mass arrests for trespassing and delinquency[114].

In an effort to institutionalize civil rights defenders' outlaw status and solidify his persona as peacemaker and order-keeper, Nixon turned away the retribution for protesting White supremacy to systematic large-scale arrests, paving the way for mass incarceration. In 1969, after managing to garner the votes of thousands of conservatives and prejudiced Whites, Nixon won the elections and became the 37th president of the United States. The ideological climate generated by such narratives allowed Nixon to declare, in 1971, the launch of a War On Drugs. Killing two birds with one stone, Nixon managed to focus public scrutiny on two groups that went against the current of his presidency: civil rights groups, as well as anti-Vietnam war protesters, as was revealed by his then advisor John Ehrlichman:

> We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with

[114] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 40.

> heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did[115].

To freeze the advancements of both these groups and frame them as public enemies, Nixon considerably increased the effort for anti-drugs advertisement and control, epitomizing his intent with the creation of the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1973. The gears of the War On Drugs had been turned on, and the serrated wheels of the machine would soon multiply and go on to crush more and more Black and Brown populations into entrapment. The following figures illustrate both the increasing imprisonment for drug offenses compared to other offenses from 1980 to 2022[116], and the growing incarceration of Black people from 1920 to 2010[117].

[115] "Fifty years ago today, President Nixon declared the war on drugs." *Vera Institute of Justice*, July 10, 2025, https://www.vera.org/news/fifty-years-ago-today-president-nixon-declared-the-war-on-drugs

[116] "Mass incarceration trends.", *The Sentencing Project*, May 31, 2024, https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/mass-incarceration-trends/

[117] Morgan Waterman, "Race, Segregation, and Incarceration in the States, 1920-2010.", *Topics in Digital History*, October 31, 2016, https://journeys.dartmouth.edu/censushistory/2

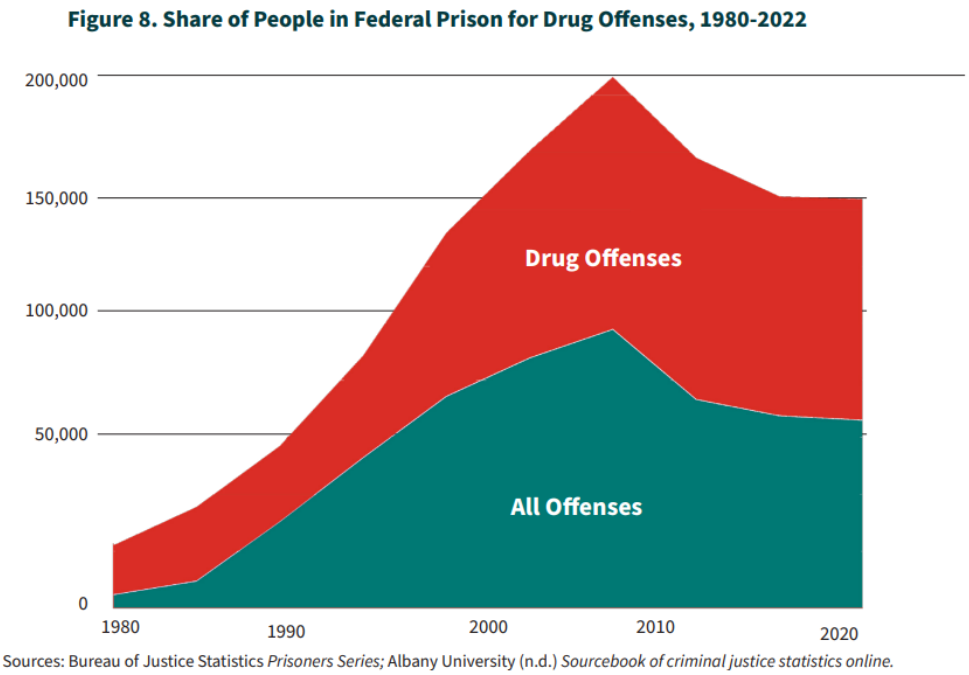


Figure 2: Share of People in Federal Prison for Drug Offenses, 1980-2022.



Figure 3 : Percent of Prison Population by Race from 1920-2010

The similarity in those figures is no coincidence: "5% of illicit drug users are African-American, yet African-Americans represent 29% of those arrested and 33% of those incarcerated for drug offenses"[118].

The influence of such measures was such that "[...] by 1972, attitudes on racial issues rather that socioeconomic status were the primary determinant of voter's political self-identification"[119]. In 2019, a taped phone call dated back to 1971 between Nixon, President of the United States of America at the time and Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, was released to the public by historian Tim Naftali[120]. The conversation regarded negotiations that were happening among the United Nations committee to decide whether the Taiwan-based Republic of China, presided over by Chiang Kai-shek, or the People's Republic of China, led by Mao Zedong, would join the United Nations[121]. The United States pushed for the Republic of China's entry into the organization but the majority, including several representatives from Africa, backed Zedong's People's Republic of China. Reagan, angered and frustrated by the matter, called the President not only to share his approach to the issue but also to comment on the legitimacy of the African delegates in crudely racist terms: "To see those, those monkeys from those African countries—damn them, they're still uncomfortable wearing shoes!". To witness

[118] "Criminal Justice Fact sheet", *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*, November 4, 2022, https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet

[119] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 59.

[120] Isaac Chotiner, "How a historian uncovered Ronald Reagan's racist remarks to Richard Nixon." *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/how-a-historian-uncovered-ronald-reagans-racist-remarks-to-richard-nixon

[121] Mark DeStephano, "People's Republic of China is seated at the United Nations", *EBSCO*, 2023, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/diplomacy-and-international-relations/peoples-republic-china-seated-united

powerful men proclaiming such unbelievably racist ideas so casually and with complete impunity testifies to their core beliefs and intentions, also underlining a rather important point: the use of dog whistling and the Southern Strategist persona were not simply armors and tactics that they employed to increase their popularity. Those men were not above the run-of-the-mill racists, who they aimed their messaging at, as they themselves truly believed to some extent in the racial rhetoric they crafted for their audiences to witness.

d. Ronald Reagan

Emulating his predecessors' tactics, Ronald Reagan breathed a new life into dog whistling and racial pandering. Reagan meticulously programmed each of his campaigns so as to renew his pledge of allegiance to White interests and reassure his constituency and potential voters regarding his racial loyalties. He did so either through conspicuous speeches, like in 1966, when running for California governor, when he declared that "If an individual wants to discriminate against Negroes or others in selling or renting his house, he has a right to do so"; or through the exploitation of symbolically charged landmark locations which he did in 1980, during his campaign for U.S presidency. As a matter of fact, Ronald Reagan launched his presidential campaign in Mississippi, not far from where, 16 years prior, civil rights activists Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney had been killed by Ku Klux Klan members[122]. After burying the bodies

[122] "Black America has overlooked the racist policies of Ronald Reagan", *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, New York, N° 64, (Summer 2009), ProQuest*,

of the young men who had been travelling to encourage and help African-American voters register to vote as part of the Freedom Summer campaign, KKK members hid and torched their car with the help of local law enforcement, including Neshoba County Sheriff Lawrence Rainey[123].

Relying on plausible deniability, Reagan specialized in cajoling his White audience by demonizing racial minorities -predominantly Black populations-under the guise of genuine concern for law and order. The crime wave that arose in the sixties procured the perfect opportunity for aspiring politicians to mobilize the Southern Strategist textbook. Even though the crime wave was caused mostly by "the rise of the 'baby boom' generation- the spike in the number of young men in the fifteen to twenty-four age group, which historically has been responsible for most crimes[124]", politicians were quick to come up with reasons of their own. According to many, the release of formerly geographically confined Blacks into the wild -thanks to the passing of the 1968 Fair Housing Act by Congress, which prohibited racial discrimination in the renting or selling of real estate- could only result in an invasion of tranquil suburbs and city centers by a "Black way of life" which glorified unemployment, idleness, and delinquency.

One of Ronald Reagan's most notable interventions occurred while he was campaigning for the upcoming presidential election, in 1976. During a speech, he denounced welfare cheats who lived off riding good American citizens' coattails, referencing the case of one "welfare queen" in particular. Ronald Reagan introduced the

https://www.proquest.com/docview/195545934?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals

[123] "Famous cases : Mississippi Burning." *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/mississippi-burning

[124] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 52.

"welfare queen" as a Black woman whose case had recently been brought to his attention recently and particularly struck him. She had received $150 000 in welfare benefits and food stamps by falsifying her personal statements and not working a day in her life[125]. Reagan recounted that her daily life consisted of driving around in a luxurious Cadillac and regularly going on trips to Hawaii while hard-working, ordinary citizens struggled to make ends meet and duly paid their taxes, only for those to finance the expensive lifestyle of such characters. Adding fuel to the fire, Reagan further criticized welfare programs, this time focusing on the food stamps system, claiming that "young fellows" ahead of good Americans in line used those to procure luxurious goods such as "T-bone steaks". However, this version of his speech was edulcorated. He had previously considered using the phrase "strapping young bucks" to designate the young men in question. "The epithet "buck" has long been used to conjure the threatening image of a physically powerful Black man, often one who defies White authority and who lusts for White women"[126].

The policies that ensued, such as Reagan's attempt at vetoing the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987[127], which aimed at amending potentially harmful loopholes in civil rights laws, along with the devastating consequences of the War On Drugs, contributed to reshaping the definition and the perception of crime. Remnant myths of the slavery era were reignited, repopularizing theories such as Blacks' biological and cultural allegiance

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[125] Anne Kim, "The tyranny of the welfare Queen." *Washington Monthly*, October 20, 2024, https://washingtonmonthly.com/2024/10/29/the-tyranny-of-the-welfare-queen/

[126] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 80.

[127] "Congressional override of a veto by President Ronald Reagan." *US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives*, https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1951-2000/Congressional-override-of-a-veto-by-President-Ronald-Reagan/

to chaos and criminal behavior. A blanket of insecurity and mistrust had been draped over the middle and lower-class White minds of the nation:

> Politicians of all races and ethnicities merged gang membership, drug use, and habitual criminal activity into a single social scourge, which was then used to explain everything from unruly youth to inner-city homicides to the need for more prisons to isolate wrongdoers. [...] Inner-city residents were, indeed, seeking relief from fearful disorders in their communities, and they, like their suburban counterparts, tended to accept the primary definitions of what crime was and what should be done about it [...][128].

Whites' fears of fantasized crowds of Black criminals and welfare frauds surging into their neighborhoods and assaulting their culture, daily landscape, and bodies remain a godsend for conservative politicians nowadays. In a 2017 survey examining the reasons behind Donald Trump's first election[129], Diana Mutz found that:

> Consequences of exposure to information about impending majority–minority status have included increased conservatism and greater identification with the Republican Party, [...] opposition to diversity, greater explicit and implicit racial bias, and a stronger preference for interacting with one's own race.

[128] Wilson Gilmore, *Golden* Gulag, 131.

[129] Mutz, "Status Threat", 3.

e. Racial pandering within the Democratic Party

However, the Grand Old Party is not the only faction that has undergone extreme transformation and turned to racial pandering for survival. The Democratic Party has indeed suffered successive losses, losing twice to Donald Trump in the presidential elections in the span of the last ten years, and providing a disappointing performance with the election of Joe Biden, as demonstrated through the graph below[130]:

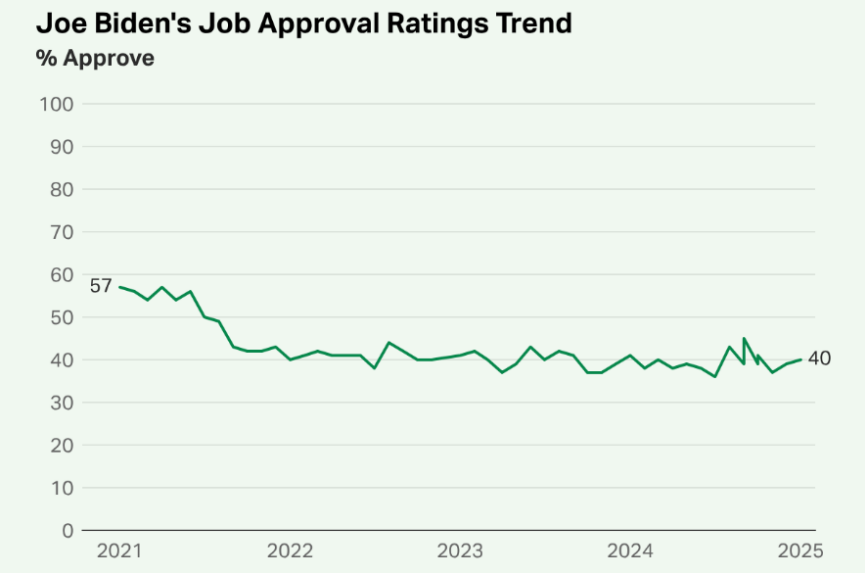


Figure 4: Joe Biden's Job Approval Ratings Trend

[130] "Presidential approval ratings — Joe Biden.", *Gallup*, 2021, February 5, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/329384/presidential-approval-ratings-joe-biden.aspx

Despite encouraging improvements such as a considerable decline in unemployment and wages augmentations during Biden's term, the Democrats remain unpopular. Their inability to consolidate a definite constituency has contributed to the party's declining reputation. What do the Democrats bring to the table? Which values do they uphold? What do they stand for? Those questions seem to remain unanswered to the general public, and this lack of solidity and characterization places them in an uncomfortable position when we consider the Republican stance on those issues. Trump has succeeded in imposing himself as the defendant for White privilege, by appealing to the core identity of his constituency and relying on centuries-old values. He has managed to supplant the Democrats by profiting off their decaying relationship with the working and lower middle-classes. The erosion of unions and the lack of Democrat attempts to revive them have caused a fracture in what used to be a firm partnership, as explained by co-editor of Dissent Magazine Michael Kazin[131]:

> The union's *Aliquippa Steelworker* informed its readers about hunting regulations as well as how to navigate Medicare and reminded them that Republicans in their state and nation were close allies of anti-labor employers. The result, recalled one retiree, was that he "could not go to the steel mill or mine and find a guy who would vote for a Republican. . . . They figure there was not a Republican in the world who took care of a working guy."

Lower and middle-class Whites have, since desegregation, been the first group that had to let go of their privileges and share what little they had by competing for it with Blacks,

[131] Michael Kazin, "The Decline of Union Hall Politics." *Dissent Magazine*, October 18, 2024, https://dissentmagazine.org/article/the-decline-of-union-hall-politics/

whether it be housing or welfare programs. This lit the fires of resentment within the groups that had already been struggling and fighting for whatever scraps the government could spare for them:

> The affluent white liberals who were pressing the legal claims of blacks and other minorities "were often sheltered, in their private lives, and largely immune to the costs of implementing minority claims." This reality made it possible for conservatives to characterize the "liberal Democratic establishment" as being out of touch with ordinary working people—thus resolving one of the central problems facing conservatives: how to persuade poor and working-class voters to join in alliance with corporate interests and the conservative elite[132].

The ongoing perceived disdain of Democrats for lower-class Whites still imposes itself as an obstacle to the party's reunion with its former constituency. W.R, 20-year-old Democratic political science student from Maryland, made that observation when we discussed the Democratic party's positions and projects, sharing a conversation she had with a friend:

> I was just speaking about this with my friend this weekend because she was frustrated because people are now expressing frustration that [Donald Trump's] policies are negatively affecting them. And she was like, "Well, you voted for him. What the hell did you expect?". But what happens when you have narratives like that is that you further alienate these groups. And this election has shown more than ever that we need them way more than they

[132] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 59.

> need us. And so, this sort of northern elite attitude of pointing and laughing at the "idiot farmer" isn't gonna work. It's not gonna work. And so I was like, I understand your frustration, and I think it's 100% valid. But whatever you do, do not post it online, because that was a big one. After the election, I saw a lot of tiktoks about people being like, "people with two GCSEs and three teeth voting for reform, like it's going to help them". And I was like, oh, you're not helping your party's case. Actually, you're fulfilling that sort of argument of like, your party is only for the educated elites. Like, you're proving them right. And that's not helpful. It's a frustrating narrative to see, coming from young liberals especially. I'm kind of like, okay, guys, I need you to put your thinking caps on. And I think I need y'all to realize that this actually sort of pointing and laughing, especially along such stark class divides[133].

The Democrats' lack of clear identity and distinguishable values is also a symptom of the various metamorphoses the party has underwent in its quest for the people's heart. One of the most pivotal points of those metamorphoses remains the era of Bill Clinton's presidency, from 1993 to 2000. Clinton based his campaign -and his presidency as a whole- on elements borrowed from the Republicans' playbook, heavily relying on his portrayal as the law-and-order candidate. Following in the steps of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, Clinton continually pushed for policies that enforced a harsh and lasting impact on the criminal justice system, most notably with the crime bill he passed in 1994. This bill, among other measures, made mandatory the life sentencing of people convicted of a felony after two prior violent offenses, no matter how tame or frivolous the third charge. This law, also known as the three strikes law, is said by many to have

[133] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

seriously contributed to the mass incarceration of minor offenders. The Democrats "relied heavily on the 1994 law to display their tough on crime credentials"[134]. This desire to outpace the Republicans on issues of safety and crime also transpired through striking initiatives led by President Clinton. In 1992, amid the race for the presidential election, Clinton interrupted his campaign activities to travel back to Arkansas, of which he was governor at the time, in order to attend the execution of Ricky Ray Rector. Rector, a mentally disabled African-American male, was convicted after fatally shooting a police officer who came to his home to question him following a shooting which Rector had committed in a nearby restaurant. After killing the police officer, Ricky Ray Rector turned the gun around and shot himself in a suicide attempt. He had to suffer a lobotomy before standing trial, during which he was sentenced to the death penalty even though his mental state indicated he was unable to answer for his actions. Several sources recall that Rector asked for his desert to be saved for later when he left his cell to be executed as a testimony of his mental state at the time. Clinton chose not to pardon Ricky Ray Rector despite several pleas, including some from his own personal circle. Inmates incarcerated with Rector even provided testimonies that described him as troubled, in a constant state of paranoia and anxiety, and very obviously not aware of his situation. "One commentator said it showed Clinton was 'a different sort of Democrat.' As another put it, 'he had someone put to death who only had half a brain. You don't find them any tougher than that'"[135]. Taking the floor after the event, Clinton proudly declared "I can be

[134] Udi Ofer, "How the 1994 Crime Bill Fed the Mass Incarceration Crisis." *American Civil Liberties Union*, February 27, 2023, https://www.aclu.org/news/smart-justice/how-1994-crime-bill-fed-mass-incarceration-crisis

[135] Nathan Robinson, "The death of Ricky Ray Rector." *Jacobin*, November 5, 2016 https://jacobin.com/2016/11/bill-clinton-rickey-rector-death-penalty-execution-crime-racism

nicked on a lot, but no one can say I'm soft on crime"[136]. Drawing on data and observations collected by the Justice Policy Institute, Michelle Alexander reported that "the Clinton Administration's 'tough on crime' policies resulted in the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history"[137].

This behavior has caused the frontiers between democrats and republicans to become muddier, leading the democrats to align with centrist policies devoid of their former commitments and the republicans to pivot further to the right as to maintain their stronghold as the conservative party. W.R, a 20-year-old democratic political science student from Maryland, states:

> I did not like his [Joe Biden] stance on the genocide in Palestine. I had major, major issues with that. And I felt that the Democratic Party was sort of kowtowing or bending a knee to the Israeli state because Israel is sort of an outpost of our empire as a Western nation. And so I had some major issues with the Democrats' inability to sort of confront that in a way that felt genuine. They just weren't...They were doing their Democrat thing, which is very middle, middle of the road. [...] She [Kamala Harris] didn't really cater towards those most more leftist tendencies[...] but I would argue that that was probably strategically the best option, and that if she had leaned any... She was already leaning quite left for what we needed her to do. If she had leaned any more left, she would have lost by a lot more. By a lot more. And so actually, one of the major criticisms that I got from friends here would be

[136] Marc Mauer "Bill Clinton, 'Black Lives' and the Myths of the 1994 Crime Bill." *The Marshall Project*, April 11, 2016, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/04/11/bill-clinton-black-lives-and-the-myths-of-the-1994-crime-bill.

[137] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 70.

> "oh, she's not talking about, like, how she's a woman and how, and more than that, how she's like a mixed woman on stage". And I was like, "that's a good thing". Unfortunately, like, right now, talking about that would be campaign suicide. It has been shown time and time again that identity politics do not poll well, and we need her to poll well. [...] But it, it is frustrating as a leftist that that party refuses to take a further stand on anything. But I do think in terms of specifically Harris's campaign, she didn't have a choice. Yeah, she didn't have a choice. So it's a tough one[138].

This analysis of Harris' position is quite accurate. As the party's evolution aligned with civil rights fights, it has come to be slowed down by its "pro-Black" affiliations, prompting a temperance of the Democrats' policies and discourses in order to remain relevant and not appear as a threat to White United-Statesians[139]. C.S, a 62-year-old White democratic woman from California, seems to share this frustration:

> And they make a mistake: the democrats keep giving us republican light. And what we need is a democrat to the left that will say 'enough of this: climate crisis, top priority'. Biden was working towards that, but that frustrated me too, he had 4 years! And he messed around and tried to do things at the last minute! [...] That's because the democrats are corporate. I call them corporate democrats, you know, we don't have real democrats anymore, and that's why we need a third party. I drove across the country with a guy that was interviewing different people that were Bernie supporters, and I met a lot of um, in Idaho and stuff, all the Trump, I thought they were Trump

[138] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.
[139] Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*.

> supporters, but in fact they went to Trump because they couldn't vote for Clinton, but they liked Bernie Sanders, and if Bernie Sanders had been selected I believe the majority of people would have... yeah.. but see the democrats always scare you and say "No, it's not possible"[140].

D.J, a 23-year-old White democratic man from New Jersey, also believes that when Democrats are in office, no concrete action seems to be taken because they are busy damage-controlling the country: "When a Democrats is in office, they're just trying to keep the peace. So nothing happens. Yeah, when a republican is in office, it's, it goes haywire and everything goes wrong"[141].

In the words of G.P, a 96-year-old White republican man from Colorado, this can be explained by the very nature of Democratic voters, who do not expect real change but rather stability and "hand-outs" from their chosen candidate: "Oh, I think that Republicans are much more inclined to hang onto the old values of the work ethic more. And that the Democrats have become accustomed, really, to the government solving their problems"[142].

According to M.S, a 63-year-old republican woman from Arizona, the Democratic party uses this expectation from their constituency as an advantage to keep them coming back for more:

> He (Donald Trump) got a lot of the Spanish vote and the Black vote as far as communities[143]. He's made their lives better. And when he ran the first time,

[140] Interview conducted on February 3, 2025.
[141] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.
[142] Interview conducted on June 7, 2025.
[143] While one cannot substantially confirm that Trump made minorities' lives better (even if one could venture to disprove that affirmation), it is factually inaccurate that he "got a lot of the Spanish vote and the Black vote". As a matter of fact, according to a PBS News Thread publication posted November 7, 2024 (https://www.threads.com/@newshour/post/DCFlAl8pmGd), only 9 % of Black women and 24% of Black men

> their lives were good. They were given opportunity, whereas the Democrats like to keep them down and keep them reliant on the government[144].

Democrats' unwillingness to pick a side has driven a number of members from their constituency to vote for them solely out of the necessity to stand in the way of Republicans rather than because of genuine faith in the party. At other times, though, traditionally Democratic voters are swept by the Republican party simply because they start to feel like their interests are better represented by conservative elected officials. That is the case for one demographic group in particular: "white voters with no college degree have been moving steadily toward the Republican Party over the past 10 years"[145]. The seeds for this shift have been sowed long ago, as aforementioned through the birth of post-desegregation lower middle-class resentment, and influent Republican figures still enjoy the fruits of the reaping today, most of all when they ascend to the position of president of the United States.

f. Donald Trump

Donald Trump has led two particularly eventful presidencies, the second one not being over yet. Former reality-TV mogul and businessman, positions he easily accessed as heir of the billionaire Trump clan, Donald Trump nonetheless presents himself as a

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voted for Trump, while 38% of Latino women and 47 % of Latino men voted for him, none of those groups reaching even half of voters.

[144] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

[145] Bradley Jones, Jocelyn Kiley, and Caroll Doherty, "Voters rarely switch parties, but recent shifts further educational, racial divergence." *Pew Research Center*, August 4, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/04/voters-rarely-switch-parties-but-recent-shifts-further-educational-racial-divergence/

"self-made man" who built his own fortune and successes out of his abilities as a mastermind entrepreneur, a claim rather easy to dismantle when we take into account the fact that six of Trump's businesses have declared bankruptcy[146]. It might also be worth mentioning the 413 million dollars he acquired from his family, mostly through elaborated tax fraud schemes he bolstered his parents into committing[147], which might have helped him launch his career even as a "political outsider[148]".

Trump's past status of businessman, even as a failed one, still seems to do wonders for his reputation in the eyes of his constituency. When asked what her opinion on the current president was, M.S, 63-year-old Republican White woman from Arizona, stated:

> But to a lot of my friends, I was like, I think Trump's the man. And they're like "Oh, Trump…". Everybody was against Trump during that time. A lot of people, because of his bedside manner, the way he is. But I was like, no, I think he's the one. I think he's a businessman and he will do good for our country. And that's what he did. But I always, I got criticized in that for my friends and Christian friends, too, because a lot of Christians didn't think that he was good because of that. And it's like, he's not a pastor. We're not voting in a pastor. We're voting in someone in who's business minded, who's going to do what's right for our country, you know, and take care of his country. […] I think he's very transparent. He does that. That's a good thing

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[146] Michelle Lee "Fact Check: Has Trump declared bankruptcy four or six times?" *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/live-updates/general-election/real-time-fact-checking-and-analysis-of-the-first-presidential-debate/fact-check-has-trump-declared-bankruptcy-four-or-six-times/

[147] David Barstow, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner "'Self-made' Trump was given $413m in today's money by father." *The Irish Times*, October 3, 2018, https://www.irishtimes.com/business/economy/self-made-trump-was-given-413m-in-today-s-money-by-father-1.3650068

[148] Jason Noble "In Sioux City, Trump says he's 'an outsider fighting for you'." *The Des Moines Register*, November 6, 2016, https://eu.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/politics/2016/11/06/donald-trump-final-visit-to-iowa/93388830/

> to be able to express yourself and, like, little children do things and they can be mean, you know, and say things that are inappropriate and not realize it, but they're just being themselves. [...] if you're constantly stopping yourself up, you can't get the job done that you need to do the outcome that you're trying to convey. [...] So I don't think he's, he's being harmful with what he's doing[149].

S.F, 22-year-old White Republican medical school student from Georgia, said:

> I think he's very very arrogant but efficient. I think his actions speak a lot louder than words, but when he speaks very very loudly it's very hard for people to see that. But I think I think Donald Trump is very efficient. He did a lot of sanctions, like, he did sanctions against Iran and a bunch of different countries. I think some of his actions are harmful, but I don't believe that that's his intention. I think he just wants overall better control over our borders[150].

CH.S, 20-year-old White Republican woman from South Louisiana, estimated that “he's got a strong business mentality, and he just lets others know that like he's not playing around, that he means business. So that's good. I think that people see America as a little bit stronger now”[151]. T.F, 18-year-old Republican military recruit from North Carolina, believes that:

> He’s not the greatest person, like individually, but as a president, I think that he has that he has what it takes to lead a country and to bring America to the

[149] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.
[150] Interview conducted on May 6, 2025.
[151] Interview conducted on August 27, 2025.

> powerhouse that it once was. To not necessarily instill fear across the country, like across other countries. But instill like that, that thought that like, don't poke the bear because if you poke the bear, you know, the bear is going to fight back. And I think that he has the ability to do that. And then he also has the ability to, you know, control the economic standpoint of America in a way that is going to benefit the lower to middle-class [...] I think a lot of a lot of presidents focus more on the upper class, because that's where they are. So they don't want to, they don't want to raise their tax brackets that they screw over the middle-class and the lower class[152].

Factually, Donald Trump's economic policies are in keeping with those presidents T.F describe as upper-class focused and disdainful of middle-class struggles:

> During an interview on Fox News in March 2017, Tucker Carlson told the president that "counties that voted for you, middle-class and working-class counties, would do far less well" under the proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). "Yeah. Oh, I know that. It's very preliminary," Trump replied.[153]

GP, 96-year-old White Republican and former US Navy captain from Colorado, stated the following:

> And if you really listen to what he's saying in his campaign speeches, his philosophy and his message are all about eighth grade level. Okay? There's nothing intellectual about what he says. But he's a hella good businessman and he knows how to bring in the experts, and he lets them guide him. And

[152] Interview conducted on May 23, 2025.
[153] Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness*, 1.

> he knows how to use talent. He recognizes talent when he sees it. He doesn't have it. All he knows is how to get out there and lead the chant[154].

Republican interviewees are not the only ones to show receptiveness toward the carefully crafted persona of Donald Trump. His past as a reality TV personality and his characteristic snarky and sarcastic comments have conferred to Trump a degree of sympathy capital, even to his political opponents, that allows him to be considered almost as a comedian whose "problematic" or "politically incorrect" jokes you can't help but laugh at. Here are some of the opinions Democrat interviewees shared about Trump:

W.R, 20-year-old White woman from Maryland studying political science, described Trump as follows:

> I think there's always the cheap shot and that, like, oh, he's a blundering idiot or he's a fool. But then I think that kind of sometimes denotes or takes away from the fact that he is probably one of the most powerful people in the world right now, and that he's incredibly dangerous as an individual and that he has a lot of power. And so I would describe him as dangerous, I think that would be my main word. And the fact that he just is ridiculous as a person. He's ridiculous. He is. I think that that is kind of what won him the election in 2016. I know my parents thought it was a joke. They're like, "Trump, the guy from that Apprentice show". Everybody was kind of expecting the Clinton sweep. The Clintons are political elites. They're Democrat royalty. Like, they're basically the Kennedys. But I think that only calling him an idiot sometimes takes away from the fact that he's got a lot of power and he's very. He's using

[154] Interview conducted on June 7, 2025.

> it pretty well in terms of following his agenda. Like, he's not completely incompetent in that way, but he is ridiculous as a person and as a political leader. This is really bad because it completely takes away what I just said... but sometimes he's kind of funny. Sometimes he'll stay stuff, and I'll just be kind of like, in another world, man, you would have been a great political commentator. I would listen to you. But I think overall, in terms of politics, his bluntness just comes across as quite childish. And especially when you've been engaging in politics for so long, or even like, when my parents listen to him talk, they're kind of like, he just doesn't really seem to know what it means to be a political leader and what it means to be a politician. And I think that his political bluntness kind of portrays that, especially, like in his most recent meeting with Zelensky. Yeah. Like, demanding, you know, this sort of kiss on the ring from somebody who's come to essentially beg for the lives of his people. Well, it looked childish, and it looked immature. And so I think his bluntness sort of contributes to that in this. That he just looks inexperienced, and you can tell that he's not a career politician. He's a businessman and a show personality, and that's where it really comes out[155].

D.J, a 23-year-old White engineering student from New Jersey, shared a similar position:

> This guy's hilarious. He's so funny. He just shouldn't be the president. Like, this isn't someone who's supposed to be the president. He was a comedian, he was on a comedy show. That's where he belongs. That's why he's so funny. But, you know, he's also the most insane and politically incorrect and stupid president we've ever had [...] He speaks like he's on the couch with

[155] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

> his friends and not the President of the United States. [...] He's an idiot, but he's so funny. I hate him about it[156].

A.T, a 25-year-old Democratic Asian-American woman from Illinois, who worked at the Department of Agriculture before moving to France to enroll in an exchange program, expressed similar views:

> There was this one day where he was talking and like, just the things he says, if they weren't so horrible, they'd actually be like funny, if you just listen to it without context. So like, if it wasn't happening like in my actual life it would be funny but it's actually devastating[157].

S.N, a 26-year-old Caribbean American flight attendant from New York, told me:

> I think he's a quack. I think he's absolutely insane, ridiculous. I think he has no idea what he's doing. [...] Oh my gosh. He's a liar. He's a crook. He's a pedophile. He's, oh my God. And it's embarrassing to have him as a president again. Yeah. I can't believe they voted him into office again[158].

The fact that several democratic interviewees have referred to Donald Trump as funny, or a comedian, goes to show that even to people who are hermetic to, and even actively protesting his policies, the performance that he puts on has an effect. Trump inevitably gains some sort of sympathy from this jester-life attitude that he uses to euphemize his erosive narrative. Whether they are favorable or unfavorable, Donald Trump stirs up strong feelings. His flair for theatrics has allowed him to erect his persona as an assertive, aggressive, and strong leader who will “get things done”, as many interviewees have

[156] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.
[157] Interview conducted on October 10, 2025.
[158] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025.

mentioned: "Trump's time with the *World Wrestling Federation* cemented his style of performance: boisterous, bullying, and crude"[159].

Donald Trump has managed to pique the interest of lower and middle-class Whites by placing them back at the center of his audience:

> Disenchanted with the political status quo, they embraced Trump's promises to improve their lives by renegotiating international trade agreements, bringing manufacturing jobs back to the US, reducing taxes, improving infrastructure, and increasing homeland security—in short, to "Make America Great Again"—but these promises seemed to rest on the prerequisite of keeping some people out of America[160].

Trump and his administration have internalized that it is customary for United Statesians to build and rally around "national myths [which] often exaggerate the role of individual heroes and understate the importance of collective effort"[161]. The average United-Statesian does not necessarily have the time or energy necessary to keep up with political news nor to critically analyze the right-wing rhetoric that is constantly pushed down the public's throat by the current president. However, his outrageous interventions and phrases cling to the public's mind because they are precisely that: hateful, filterless, and shameless hate speech. One could venture that Donald Trump has cultivated his own form of dog whistling: stating things so atrocious no one believes he can actually "mean it like that", as we have observed during M.S's interview for instance: " [little children] can be mean, you know, and say things that are inappropriate and not realize it, but they're

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[159] Scott Lucas and Anoushka Raval "Trump as a performance artist." *University of Birmingham*. https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/trump-as-a-performance-artist

[160] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 54.

[161] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 21.

just being themselves". In the flow of information people are exposed to everyday, Trump's harsh expressions and striking slogans stand out:

> [...] Scandals and war can still rouse our attention, but generally speaking, fewer Americans follow public affairs now than did a quarter century ago. [...] Since their consumers are tuning out from politics, parties have to work harder and spend much more, competing furiously to woo voters, workers, and donations[162].

Nowadays, "roughly 2 in 5 U.S. adults (41%) say they're "extremely" or "very" interested in politics and public affairs. That's a higher level of engagement than we measured at the same point of the past two presidencies"[163]. Speaking scandalously continuously thus allows Trump to maintain his posture on a pedestal among the tsunami that is media coverage. As W.R puts it:

> For somebody else who's working a 9 to 5 or who is like maybe a blue-collar worker or even like a white-collar worker that just doesn't have time for stuff like that every day... I have a certain degree of sympathy for the fact that like all that they're constantly being exposed to is this pipeline because it generates so much engagement[164].

Cultivating the image of an above-average leader, to whom laws that regulate the daily life of ordinary mortals do not apply, and who can bend other "first world" leaders to his will, has ultimately led Trump's most loyal supports to adopt a nearly worshipping attitude, as M.S and S.N have both pointed out:

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[162] Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 33-37.

[163] "Tracking Americans' Interest in Politics and Public Affairs." *Morning Consult*, December 5, 2025, https://pro.morningconsult.com/trackers/americans-interest-in-politics-survey

[164] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

"I do think there are Trump supporters that are over the top. You know, they act like he's God and you know, put all their hope in him"[165]. (M.S)

"Most of the time, he will blatantly lie and he thinks he's correct. And his followers will think he's telling, he's like, oh my God, he's like, he's like God"[166].(S.N)

Trump's "out in the open", proclaimed, and shameless disregard for the previously established expectations of relative neutrality of discourse -even in regard to covert racial appeals- has shattered the political landscape of the country. Commenting on the newfound phone call between Nixon and Reagan we mentioned earlier, historian Tim Naftali discussed the difference in both former presidents' styles with Trump's:

> I am just saying that Nixon, unlike Trump, had this sense of the appropriate public rhetoric for a President. And Trump is a proud disrupter of all Presidential norms. He is not inhabiting the Presidency; the Presidency is inhabiting him. Donald Trump isn't interested in the norms that Nixon publicly tried to adhere to while privately revealing his real self[167].

As a matter of fact, it would not be far-fetched to state that Donald Trump's "combative" -if not outwardly offensive- approach has prompted and encouraged the return of alternative right. The alt-right movement is described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a political current which has at its core the belief that "White identity is under attack", and that political correctness and social justice are tools that "undermine White people and 'their' civilization"[168]. After decades of civil rights relative advancements and popularization of affirmative action and political correctness, it has become generally

[165] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.
[166] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025.
[167] Chotiner, "How a historian uncovered Ronald Reagan's racist remarks to Richard Nixon."
[168] "Alt-right", *Southern Poverty Law Center*, May 22, 2025, https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/alt-right/

socially acceptable for racists to outwardly mourn raging White supremacy without having to come up with excuses or perform remorse and guilt.

g. The 2016 Tea Party

The alternative right phenomenon gained momentum in 2016, as the Tea Party movement underwent a renewal and took center stage in public discourse. Formed in 2007 by Republican citizens, the Tea Party movement gained traction as a growing number of Republicans started protesting the economic policies put in place by President Barack Obama to counter the 2008 stock market crash. The name of the group is a direct reference to the 1773 Boston Tea Party, during which members of the American colonies protested to denounce harsh British economic policies and unfair taxation system. After the costly Seven Years' War, British King George III severely raises trade taxes for the colonies in the hopes of restoring British economy through the 1767 Townshend Act. This decision was met with strong criticism and indignation by members of the colonies, who resented the simultaneous increase in taxes and lack of representation in Parliament. Tea being one of the highest taxable good, colonists pushed for a boycott of the renowned Chinese tea sold by the East India Company. To mitigate the decrease in revenue experience by the EIC, the British Parliament introduces the 1773 Tea Act, which allows the company to sell tea to the colonies without having to pay taxes. This unfair measure provoked the anger of colonists and led protestors to

throw more than 300 chests of EIC tea overboard into the Boston harbor waters. The 2009 protestors campaigned for rather similar actions: lower taxes and more leniency and power for local, state authorities. They also sought to refute Obamacare, the universal health insurance system developed by the Obama administration, claiming it was an unfair way of dilapidating government funds by gleaning money from the pockets of hardworking Americans to accommodate lazy deadbeats. Tea Party supporters rallied quite extremely against Obamacare:

> Even on death's doorstep, Trevor wasn't angry. In fact, he staunchly supported the stance promoted by his elected officials. "Ain't no way I would ever support Obamacare or sign up for it," he told me. "I would rather die." When I asked him why he felt this way even as he faced severe illness, he explained, "We don't need any more government in our lives. And in any case, no way I want my tax dollars paying for Mexicans or welfare queens[169]". [Trevor's deteriorating condition resulted also from the toxic effects of] Dogma that told him that governmental assistance in any form was evil and not to be trusted [...]. Dogma that, as he made abundantly clear, aligned with beliefs about a racial hierarchy that overtly and implicitly aimed to keep white Americans hovering above Mexicans, welfare queens, and other non-White others. Dogma suggesting to Trevor that minority groups received lavish benefits from the state, even though he himself lived and died on a low-income budget with state assistance. Trevor voiced a literal willingness

[169] The reference to the "welfare queen" is quite insightful considering Trevor's political leanings. The welfare queen trope was popularized by Ronald Reagan in the late seventies, antagonizing the exaggerated figure of a Black woman relying on social aid to fund her lavish lifestyle.

> to die for his place in this hierarchy, rather than participate in a system that might put him on the same plane as immigrants or racial minorities[170].

The movement grew so powerful that it enabled the Republican reclaiming of the House of Representatives in the 2010 midterm election. However, it has also received its share of criticism, being deemed an "astroturf" movement, a term that designates a supposedly grassroots and citizen-based initiative which finds its origins in lobbies, sponsors, or interest groups. This statement is corroborated by the strong financial involvement of notorious groups and personalities such as Americans for Posterity, an advocacy group affiliated with the Koch Brothers. Not only have David and Charles Koch acquired tens of billions of dollars from their father, but they have also inherited his radical, far right dispositions. As a matter of fact, the Koch dynasty seems to have developed a habit out of supporting immoderate, reactionist, and conservative ideologies. Fred Koch, Charles and David's father, co-founded the John Birch society, a group ruled since 1958 by members of the United-Statesian elite who campaigned against communists and circulated various conspiracy theories in an attempt to demonize them. For instance, communists were blamed for the government mandated addition of fluoride into public water circuits, and the development of mandatory sex-education classes. Those issues, as well as other key topics at the time, were considered by the society as part of a "larger federal leviathan", as Matthew Dallek, author of the 2023 *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right*, puts it[171]. Logically, the John Birch society also opposed civil rights advancements.

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[170] Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness,* 4.

[171] Terry Gross, "A historian details how a secretive, extremist group radicalized the American right". *NPR*, May 17, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/05/17/1176662608/a-historian-details-how-a-secretive-extremist-group-radicalized-the-american-rig

Following in their father's footsteps, David and Charles allowed the Tea Party movement to gain considerable traction through Americans for Prosperity's support, mostly through financial donations:

> The brothers, their wives and employees have also given directly to Republican candidates for Congress and are the sixth-largest donors to the Senate campaign of Tea Party favourite Marco Rubio. [...] But organisations tracking money in politics say the Kochs' biggest impact in the midterm elections will be from funding and providing logistical support to such groups as Americans for Prosperity (AFP), one of the biggest Tea Party groups[172].

If the Tea Party movement relied heavily on influential billionaires' support, it was also allowed to be fruitful thanks to two other pillars, according to researchers Thesa Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, authors of 2011 *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*. Firstly, an "older, white conservative base, highly motivated against immigration and threatened by the demographic, political and cultural change represented by Barack Obama[173]" acts as a pillar for the movement. Then, said movement is amplified not only thanks to prosperous sponsors, but also through an appropriate and considerable media network willing to propagate harmful and anamorphic ideas to legitimate their discourse and attract possible members.

It is fair to wonder what the exact role the Tea Party movement played in paving the way for both Trump's presidency and the proliferation of alternative right groups. To put it quite plainly, the Tea Party derailed the Republican Party from its orientation and placed

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[172] Suzanne Goldenberg, "Tea Party movement: Billionaire Koch brothers who helped it grow." *The Guardian*, November 26, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/13/tea-party-billionaire-koch-brothers

[173] Vanessa Williamson, "What the Tea Party tells us about the Trump presidency." *Brookings*, November 9, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tea-party-and-trump-presidency/

it on the tracks towards radicalization and extremism. By encouraging considerable member involvement, in ways such as calling local Congressmen, handing out fliers, organizing marches, talks, protests, and holding meetings, Tea Party supporters were able to massively shift Republican voters' political alignments further to the right, thus changing how the party as a whole operated:

> [T]he rightward movement of party elites and partisan supporters was fueled by factional pressure from local Tea Party groups from 2010 to 2014. We find that congressional districts with multiple organized groups of Tea Party activists and at least one Tea Party-aligned primary candidate moved further rightward compared to other districts[174].

If the consensus obtained by the Tea Party moved the Republican Party's orientation further right, what becomes of what was previously considered far-right? It is no longer conceived as outwardly offensive, unfathomable, or unacceptable. Just more opiniated, more concerned, more proactive than the average citizen. Ultimately, the far-right or alt-right movements are awarded a voice, a platform, legitimacy and credibility.

B. Crafting the United-Statesian Informative Landscape: The Role of the Media in the Construction of Coded Racial Appeal

[174] Rachel Blum and Mike Cowburn, "The long shadow of the Tea Party and the Republican Party's shift to the right." *LSE United States Politics and Policy*, June 28, 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2023/06/28/the-long-shadow-of-the-tea-party-and-the-republican-partys-shift-to-the-right/

a. Alt-right activism and social media

Anti-government militia groups thrived around 2009, after Obama was elected and the Tea Party movement started growing exponentially. The Oath Keepers, for example, are a far-right group primarily composed of law-enforcement or military personnel, who claims that the United-Statesian Constitution should be sovereign, and that members should not shy away from disobeying direct orders and resorting to gun violence should they be faced with "unconstitutional" guidelines, according to their own definition of the term[175]. The Three Percenters were also formed around the same time, rallying around far-right, anti-federalist ideologies and an allegiance to firearms, like most of the militia groups which developed around the same time. While the Oath Keepers have not yet reached that status, both the Three Percenters and the Proud Boys are actively considered terrorist organizations by several countries[176]. The Proud Boys are a wannabe militia formed in 2016 by VICE Media co-founder Gavin McInnes. They portray multiculturalism and the U.S's unique "melting pot" culture as White genocide, claiming that progressive or "woke" ideologies are campaigning against Whites, particularly White men, and that it is about time the latter learn to fight back in order to preserve their dignity, their culture, and "their" country[177]. Pushing for exclusive and extreme nationalism, the Proud Boys refuse membership to women but allow non-White men in, provided they acknowledge that White men are not the problem, contrarily to what modern society is

[175] "Armed Extremism Primer: Oath Keepers". *Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund*, July 13, 2023, https://everytownresearch.org/report/armed-extremism-primer-oath-keepers/

[176] "Currently listed entities." *Public Safety Canada*, December 16, 2025, https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx

[177] "The Proud Boys." *The George Washington University; Program on Extremism*, https://extremism.gwu.edu/proud-boys

supposedly claiming[178]. The group has gone as far as creating a new faction within its organization in 2017, an armed wing named the Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights, which is tasked with tactical defense, and the protection of conservative and far-right speakers during events such as speeches or debates. Despite their discriminatory stances on several issues and misleading faction names, the Proud Boys deny all ties to the alternative right movement. However, they embrace the portrayal bestowed upon them by President Trump himself, who, back in September 2020, urged the group to await for commands amidst the Black Lives Matter protest wave following police officer Derek Chauvin's assassination of George Floyd in the following words: "Proud Boys - stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what... somebody's got to do something about antifa and the left because this is not a right-wing problem". When asked to elaborate on his statement and condemn right-wing violence a few weeks later, the President allegedly claimed he did not know who the Proud Boys were[179].

However, a strong sense of loyalty and mutual aid seems to have grown between Donald Trump and the aforementioned militia groups. In early 2020, one event in

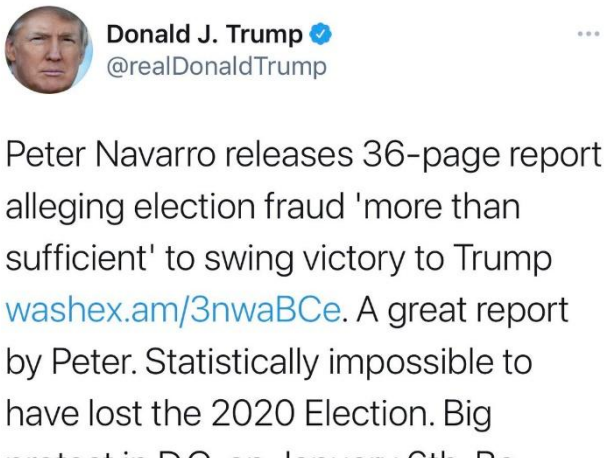


Figure 5 : "January 6 committee reveals how a tweet from Donald Trump and an 'unhinged' meeting at the White House sparked the Capitol riot." *ABC News*, July 13, 2022, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-13/donald-trump-tweet-sparked-capitol-riot-jan-6-

[178] David Love, "Who are the Proud Boys, and why are non-White men joining white supremacist groups?" *Atlanta Black Star*, October 24, 2018, https://atlantablackstar.com/2018/10/24/who-are-the-proud-boys-and-why-are-non-White-men-joining-white-supremacist-groups/

[179] "Trump condemns all white supremacists after Proud Boys row." *BBC News*. October 2, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-54381500

particular cemented this partnership. On December 19 of 2019, Donald Trump posted the following tweet, accusing the Biden-led Democrats of having faked their victory in the presidential election:

Almost immediately, devout Trump supporters started rallying and organizing in preparation of January 6, where a joint Congress session would be tallying Electoral College votes, thus officializing Joe Biden's victory. Around noon on the day of, Donald Trump gave a speech that later become known as the "Stop the Steal" speech, notably claiming:

> If this happened to the Democrats, there'd be hell all over the country going on. There'd be hell all over the country. But just remember this: You're stronger, you're smarter, you've got more going than anybody. And they try and demean everybody having to do with us. And you're the real people, you're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down our nation [...] I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard. [...] And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore. Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun. My fellow Americans, for our movement, for our children, and for our beloved country. And I say this despite all that's happened. The best is yet to come. So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania

> Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give[180].

Rally attendees did not, in fact, march over to the Capitol building peacefully and patriotically. Eight people, five police officers and three protesters, died during the storming of the Capitol as well as after, due to immediate consequences. Four of the police officers committed suicide in the following days or weeks[181]. However, people's lasting perceptions of the storming of the Capitol, seem to have been largely shaped by alt-right retellings which completely strip blame from participants. M.S, a 63-year-old White Republican woman from Arizona, told me:

> Well, I feel that it was a setup. I feel that there were instigators there and they stirred up these people. I've heard stories, though, that people that just stepped foot into the capitol were arrested and thrown in jail. I think that's not right. [...] They've been put in jail in horrible situations worse than the worst of criminals[182]. [...] And I think they were unfairly treated and they were guilty before they were. They were guilty immediately. There was no proving themselves innocent and they just left them to rot in jail. And I think it's the administration that was in that was very wicked and used it as a weapon. [...] You've heard of antifa, right? There are buses of people that came in that were antifa that instigated it and riled up the crowd and, you know, they had the Trump hats and all that, but they were not authentic. I think a lot of Trump supporters are very, they're not over the top. Like they're made out to be, you

[180] Brian Naylor, "Read Trump's Jan. 6 speech, a key part of impeachment trial." *NPR*, February 10, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial

[181] Robert Farley, "How many died as a result of Capitol riot?" *FactCheck.org*, February 5, 2024. https://www.factcheck.org/2021/11/how-many-died-as-a-result-of-capitol-riot/

[182] Factually, those who broke into the Capitol with the intent of interrupting a Congress session through rioting and destroying property fall within the category of criminals.

> know, the extreme right nationalists, right wingers. That's all hyped up. It's the left, I feel, that has really hyped that up and used it and the media has used it as weaponization and painted Trump supporters like that and people who are not, you know, extreme leftists like that, and as you've seen, there's a lot of Democrats that are like, that's not us. You know, we're not that insane. The left has gone insane. [...] Some of the things that they support and want to do [...] like men being able to have relations with young boys, you know, trying to make stuff like that legal. It's just insane. [...] They've been trying to desensitize people and children having sex change operations. [...] That's child abuse[183].

G.P, 96-year-old retired Republican US Navy Captain, summarized the issue in the following terms: "The left-wing press would have us believe that the Republicans instigated the storming of the Capitol. The right-wing press claims that the Democrats infiltrated the demonstrators and caused the riot"[184]. All things considered, the former hypothesis has been investigated and established as a fact, while the latter remains just that; a hypothesis.

Militia members, in particular, rose to the occasion and rejoiced in the opportunity to take up arms to fulfill their hero's commands. Watchdog organization Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) led an investigation into the matter, which led them to conclude the following:

> [M]embers of at least two hate groups, the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers, understood [Trump's rallying cries] to be direct orders. According to CREW's

[183] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.
[184] Interview conducted on June 7, 2025.

> analysis, 18 members of these groups were following perceived instructions from Trump to come to D.C. and attack on January 6th. Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes and his allies repeatedly called for a "violent overthrow" of the government. Proud Boys leader Henry "Enrique" Tarrio coordinated directly with the Trump campaign to have members of the Proud Boy attend the Stop the Steal rally. Both groups have a history of violence and intimidation, and it was apparent that both groups prepared for violence to occur on January 6th. In addition to calling for a violent overthrow of the government, Rhodes shared with Tarrio, Roger Stone, Stop the Steal campaign organizer Ali Alexander and others a "proposal for storming Congress." On January 6th itself, Oath Keeper members staged an "arsenal" of weapons in nearby hotels and came to DC in tactical gear[185].

If militia members were quick to answer Trump's call for chaos, the mobilization was reciprocal. Stewart Rhodes was initially charged with eighteen years in prison for seditious conspiracy[186] among other charges, while Enrique Tarrio was charged with twenty-two years in prison for the same reason. Rhodes' sentence was commuted, and Tarrio, along over 1500 other protestors, was pardoned by Donald Trump the day he stepped back into the oval office after the 2025 election.

Militia group members are not the only citizens Donald Trump explicitly endorsed and recognized. In the late summer of 2025, radical and reactionary right-wing activist and influencer Charlie Kirk was gunned down while "debating" students at Utah Valley

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[185] "'Trump has called all patriots': 210 Jan. 6th criminal defendants say Trump incited them." *Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington*, February 14, 2024, https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-reports/trump-incited-january-6-defendants/

[186] Seditious conspiracy charges usually stem from conspiring against state authority and legitimacy.

University during a Turning Point USA event, a conservative student organization he co-founded in the early 2010s. Kirk's most notable statements included comparing mandatory COVID-19 vaccines to apartheid, deeming abortion evil and stating that should his hypothetical ten-year-old daughter be raped, he would have the baby delivered, declaring that passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which rendered racial discrimination and segregation among public spaces illegal, was a mistake, and claiming "some gun deaths" in the US were "worth it" so "we can have the Second Amendment to protect our other God-given rights"[187]. It is worth noting that 40 000 gun deaths were registered across the United States of America in 2025[188].

On the day of Kirk's death, Trump took to both his own Truth Social account and the official White House X (formerly Twitter) account to pay his respects, before ordering for all American flags be lowered to half mast, as a tribute to the late right-wing extremist:



Figure 6: Screenshot from the official White House Twitter account, posted September 11, 2025

[187] "Some of Charlie Kirk's most controversial takes." *CBC*, September 11, 2025, https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/charlie-kirk-controversies-1.7630859

[188] Chip Brownlee, "Gun violence by the numbers in 2025." *The Trace*, March 2, 2026, https://www.thetrace.org/2025/12/data-shooting-stats-gun-violence-america/



Figure 7: Screenshots from Donald Trump's personal Truth Social account, posted September 10, 2025

Charlie Kirk and Donald Trump had been known to entertain mutual respect and reverence. Both men usually interacted with each other's social media posts regarding controversial current events. Trump notably took inspiration from the way Charlie Kirk called COVID-19 "the Chinese virus" or "China Virus"[189]. After Kirk tweeted the following sentences on March 10, 2020, Trump repeatedly designated the illness as such.



Figure 6: Screenshot from Charlie Kirk's Twitter account, posted March 10, 2020

[189] Katie Rogers, "Inside the Close Alliance Between Trump and Charlie Kirk." *The New York Times*, September 10, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/10/us/politics/trump-charlie-kirk-ally.html

Figure 7: Screenshot from Donald Trump's Twitter account, posted March 18, 2020



On March 18, 2021, a group of researchers published a study in the American Journal of Public Health which reported considerable differences in the racial rhetoric associated with the use of the terms "Chinese Virus" and "Covid-19": "About 20 percent of the nearly 500,000 hashtags with #covid19 showed anti-Asian sentiment, but anti-Asian bias was apparent in half of the more than 775,000 hashtags with #chinesevirus"[190]. Inevitably, the line between free speech and straight up discriminatory discourse is blurred by the President himself, racist permissiveness is bestowed upon citizens. Such racist swerves had already started to reshape the Republican Party in 2016 while the Tea Party movement was at the height of its popularity and momentum:

> Posters of then President Obama photoshopped as an African witch doctor with a feather headdress and a bone through his nose began to appear at

[190] Laura Kurtzman, "Trump's 'Chinese Virus' Tweet Linked to Rise of Anti-Asian Hashtags on Twitter." *University of California San Francisco*, March 18, 2021, https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2021/03/420081/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-linked-rise-anti-asian-hashtags-twitter

> anti-ACA Tea Party rallies [...] the Tea Party Patriots funded Asia-bashing advertisements featuring fictional Chinese executives in suits speaking Mandarin and laughing about how they were able to buy thousands of acres of Missouri farmland[191].

b. Donald Trump's digital communication strategies

Trump's handling of his social media accounts has proven to be a remarkable tool to amplify both his voice, and rally his constituency, as we have seen with the storming of the Capitol case and vilify his enemies. Unlike many presidents and elected officials, Trump's social media accounts are neither polished nor manufactured.

Relying on spontaneity and authenticity has not always served Donald Trump well. Two days after he called for national mobilization against the "stolen election" on X, his account was banned for inciting and glorifying violence. Approximately a year later, the Trump Media and Technology Group released an app called Truth Social. Rather similar to X, Truth Social was quickly enough revendicated as an alt-right safe-space devoid of content-moderating guidelines. Social media researcher Yini Zhang states that "Trump has capitalized on his political and economic power to adapt to the evolving media landscape"[192]. Oftentimes, Trump's Democrat counterparts are the target of his social media rants. Four non-White women in particular have been recurrent preys for the President. As a matter of fact, Democratic Representatives Alexandria Ocasio Cortez,

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[191] Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness*, 8.

[192] Eric W. Dolan, "From Twitter to Truth Social: How Trump's shift in platforms influenced media attention." *Psychology News*, May 2, 2024, https://www.psypost.org/from-twitter-to-truth-social-how-trumps-shift-in-platforms-influenced-media-attention/

Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Ayanna Pressley, have all been personally cited by Trump in the following social media posts:

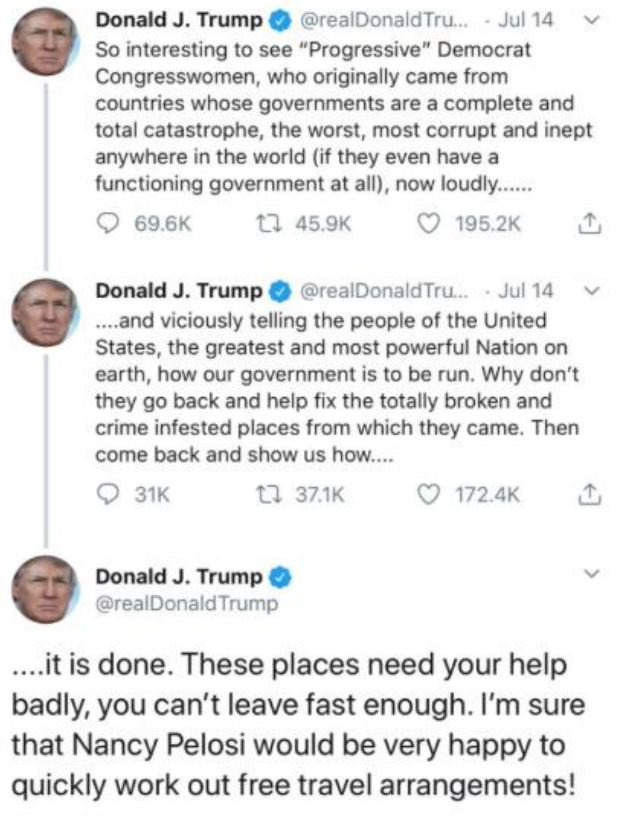


Figure 9: Screenshot from Donald Trump's X account, posted July 14, 2019

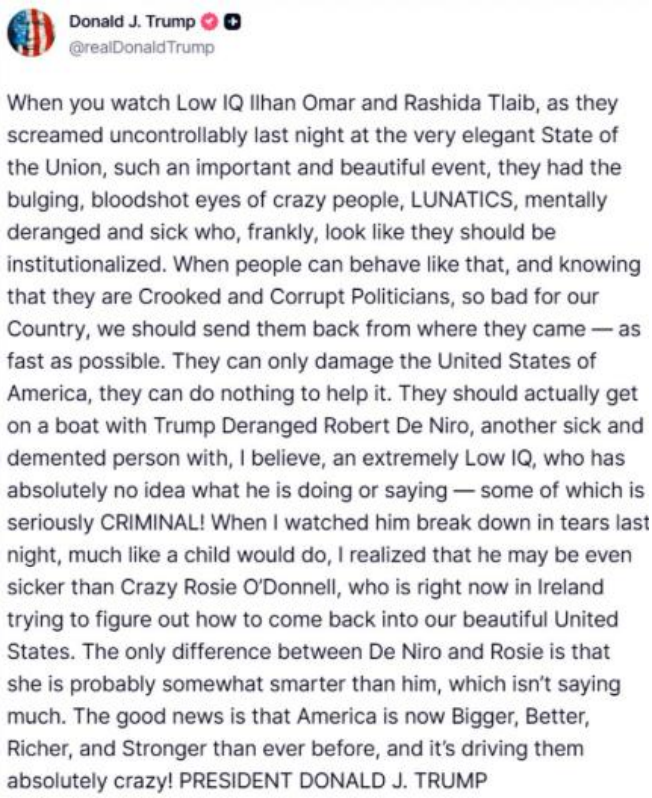


Figure 10: Screenshots from Donald Trump's X account, posted June 29, 2017

In the series of tweets on the left, Trump calls for the four elected officials to "go back to the crime infested places from which they came", a classic racist and White nationalist statement. He is accusing the four women of defaming the government through their criticism of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. This tweet falls in line with other Trump comments regarding immigration into the US from "shithole countries[193]". Out of the four women he invited to return to their home countries, only one was foreign-born.

[193] Daniel Dale, "Almost eight years later, Trump confirms he used the phrase 'shithole countries'." *CNN*, December 10, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/12/10/politics/donald-trump-shithole-countries-phrase

Indeed, Ilhan Omar fled Somalia amid civil war as a child[194]. Over of the years, Omar has become a regular target of Trump's attacks. On the screenshot on the right, Trump is criticizing both Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib for heckling him during his speech to the State of the Union, over the course of which he called undocumented immigrants "illegal aliens" and described Minnesota (which Omar represents)'s Somali community as "pirates"[195]. Trump never seems to tire of calling women crazy, falling within the century-old misogynistic tradition of portraying opiniated women as hysterical[196].

The following tweet, which dates back to 2017, tells us that Trump's weaponization of social media is far from a new phenomenon.

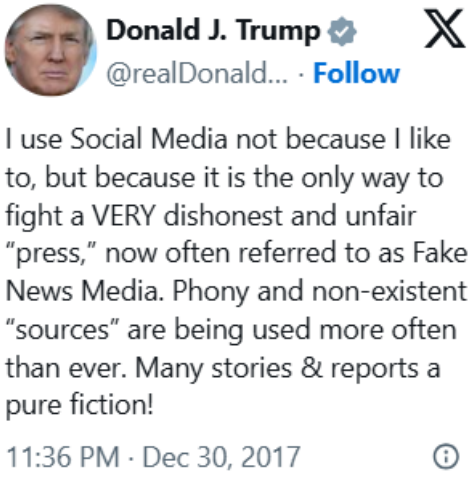


Figure 11: Screenshot from Donald Trump's Twitter (X) account, posted December 30, 2017

[194] Felicia Sonmez and Mike DeBonis, "Trump tells four liberal congresswomen to 'go back' to their countries, prompting Pelosi to defend them." *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-says-four-liberal-congresswomen-should-go-back-to-the-crime-infested-places-from-which-they-came/2019/07/14/b8bf140e-a638-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.htm

[195] Adam Cancryn, " 'You have killed Americans': Ilhan Omar tries to shout down Trump's immigration attacks." *CNN*, February 25, 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/2026/02/24/politics/ilhan-omar-rashida-tlaib-trump-sotu

[196] Amber Madison, "Stop Telling Women They're Crazy." *Refinery29*, September 25, 2014, https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2014/09/75146/stop-women-crazy-emotions-gender

"Fake news" and "fake news media" have become buzzwords of the Trump era of US presidency. Trump shows no reluctance toward the concept of unleashing his raw, unfiltered ideas and reactions, especially when it comes to journalists and media hosts. For instance, he posted a series of inflammatory tweets insulting former collaborators Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, married co-hosts of the Morning Joe news talk show. Scarborough is a former Republican turned Independent Representative, and Brzezinski, the daughter of Lyndon B. Johnson and Jimmy Carter advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski works as a broadcaster and writer. The couple used to be rather close to Trump, who made several appearances on the show over the course of his first presidential campaign[197]. However, when their views started to diverge, Trump posted several harsh rants on X, mocking the show's decrease in popularity as well as the hosts themselves:



Figure 12: Screenshots from Donald Trump's X account, posted June 29, 2017

Trump's animosity and cruel remarks towards journalists have escalated into a much more problematic situation over the years, the "fake news" label shaping a whole new

[197] Patrick Doyle, "Joe Scarborough details Trump falling out: 'He screamed at me'." *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/joe-scarborough-details-trump-falling-out-he-screamed-at-me-204793/

version of United-Statesian informative landscape. As a matter of fact, "traditional media"[198] is not to be outdone as far as political maneuvers are concerned.

c. Journalism in the United States

Professional journalism in the United States of America has always followed the demanding doctrine of objectivity. This dates back to the twentieth century, when journalists and newspapers started disaffiliating themselves from governmental and political parties' authority. The aftermath resulted in media outlets often reporting on the same issues in the same detached manner. Therefore, the informative landscape appeared rather dull to audiences. The established standard met an upheaval in the mid-1990s when what would later be known as the conservative resurgence emerged, propulsed by the development of Conservative Talk Radio (CTR):

> The genre emerged a few years earlier in the wake of the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, a two-prong federal regulation implemented by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which had required radio broadcasters to (1) air debates on controversial issues and (2) present conflicting views [...][199].

Conservative Talk Radio hosts were not journalists, and their position as "peers to the people" allowed them to build a persona that, in the eyes of the audience, painted them in a much better light than traditional journalists. CTR discourse distinguished itself by

[198] As opposed to social media.

[199] Sebastien Mort, "Truth and Partisan Media in the USA: Conservative Talk Radio, Fox News and the Assault on Objectivity." *Revue française d'études américaines*, No 133(3), 97-112. 2022, 102. https://doi.org/10.3917/e.rfea.133.0097.

responding not to the news itself, but to traditional media's handling of the news, often accusing journalists of "inaccuracy, partisanship, and elitism"[200]. This allowed Conservative Talk Radio hosts to not only dent both the credibility and the reputation of traditional media outlets, but also to position themselves as truth-teller Davids fighting information-monopolists Goliaths. This portrayal mainly relies on hosts begin "regular people" akin to audience members, contrarily to out of touch, elite-catering journalists not only unwilling, but unable, to relay the information the run-of-the-mill United-Statesian citizen truly cares about:

> Diffusing the notion that traditional media have a liberal bias therefore legitimates the need for the expression of a conservative perspective in order to maintain ideological balance at the aggregate level of the news media ecology[201].

The infamous Fox News channel is no stranger to this process, since it was incorporated into the framework of Conservative Talk Radio in 1996: "It has contributed to the commonly accepted conception of objective truth as having two starkly polarized political sides, each of equal weight regardless of their correspondence with facts or their legitimacy"[202]. Listeners are "encouraged to believe they are speaking objective truths about issues like immigration to the dismay of the 'politically correct', who either intentionally obscure truth for political gain of have not yet faced up to reality"[203]. Groups who believe their voice have been ignored or replaced due to recent political and social developments -such as White United-Statesians who perceive immigration as a threat-

[200] Mort, "Truth and Partisan Media in the USA", 103.
[201] Mort, "Truth and Partisan Media in the USA", 104.
[202] Mort, "Truth and Partisan Media in the USA", 107.
[203] Jessica Gantt Shafer, "Donald Trump's 'Political Incorrectness': Neoliberalism as Frontstage Racism on Social Media." *Social Media Society*, 2017, 1.

are given the opportunity to turn the narrative around and reclaim the authority they previously held. They frame their concerns as “pragmatic”, denouncing the opposite side’s tendency to let their emotions get the best of them: “There is the sense of urgency to tell the ‘truth’ and ‘keep’ the country, and the condemnation of the naivety and weakness of ‘politically correct’ politicians that threaten national security and subsequently the livelihood of citizens”[204]. This discourse form is ideal for right-wing individuals, because it allows them to promote their racist viewpoint by legitimating them with excuse of national security and logical or rational thinking.

The credibility of the rather extreme rhetoric spewed by conservative media relies on their ability to equate truth, what is factually real, with truthiness, what could be deemed real depending on opinions and stances. Indeed, this “bothsidesism”—which involves treating phenomena that are inherently asymmetrical as symmetrical—lends equal weight and value to dissimilar events.

The impact of conservative resurgence is still felt today and has branched out to develop many more fallacious methods. It notably results in a tabloidization of media coverage, a sensationalist approach to current affairs whose primary interpretative framework is that of conflict, often invoking the specter of the "mean world syndrome", a cognitive bias caused by overexposition to violent media content. By perpetuating this process of enemization through the influence of identity or personality-based reactions, the opposite side is no longer regarded as a legitimate player in the political arena but as an absolute enemy, threatening the very existence and identity of the other group.

[204] Gantt Shafer, “Donald Trump’s ‘Political Incorrectness’.”, 6.

d. Weaponizing the media's coverage of criminal news

Specific racist myths and fictions have emerged in media over the years, to the point where they have become regular tropes. The myth of the "ideal criminal", notably, has settled into the mind of the United Statesian population. In public conscience, the typical criminal is a young Black man[205], and far from trying to correct this misconception, media outlets worsen it: "News media have often reinforced a presumption of guilt and dangerousness assigned to Black people when reporting on crime while devaluing the lives of Black people and the harm they suffer when victimized"[206]. According to a 2021 Equal Justice Initiative study[207], 45% of Black defendants are presented to the public through mugshots, against only 9% of White defendants. Yet 13% of White defendants are shown wearing suits while only 6% of Black defendants are. Finally, 8% of Black defendants are portrayed wearing orange inmate jumpsuits, against zero White defendants. For instance, White defendants are most likely to be depicted as charming, peaceful, run-of-the-mill citizens, often pictured smiling next to their family and friends. Young Black men are never awarded that same empathy. Furthermore, when one Black person is convicted of a crime, they become a catalyst for the demonization of their whole race or ethnic group. Black people, and racial minorities in general, are never allowed to be conceived of as individuals, contrarily to Whites:

> The media upholds the white privilege of not having the most violent people of your race appear as a stereotype of you. And what a difference that makes

[205] Jennifer L. Eberhardt, Phillip Atiba Goff , Valerie J. Purdie and Paul G. Davies, "Seeing Black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing." *Prison Policy Initiative*, 2004, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/Seeing_black.pdf

[206] "Report documents racial bias in coverage of crime by media." *Equal Justice Initiative*, December 16, 2021,https://eji.org/news/report-documents-racial-bias-in-coverage-of-crime-by-media/

[207] "Report documents racial bias in coverage of crime by media." *Equal Justice Initiative*.

– if white people who commit racist violence are just lone wolves, that means we don't have to recognize the fact that they're following a legacy



embedded in our country's violent history[208].

Said "ideal criminals" are demonized through the decontextualization of their crimes -or supposed crimes- by the media, the latter implying that they are incapable of rationality or self-control, pushing the narrative of Black people being inherently violent and threatening. However, White criminals are often given excuses such as difficult social backgrounds, violent and/or traumatic upbringings, bullying, or ostracization from their peers[209]. The montage above perfectly encapsulates this reality, demonstrating how the media shields White offenders from agency and guilt while focusing on the deviant or criminal angles of a Black person's life, even if the latter ends up being a victim[210].

The myth of the "terrible few" takes the ideal criminal trope one step further: "The

Figure 13: Side by side newsflash tweets.

'terrible few' are a statistically insignificant and socially unpredictable handful of the

[208] Maisha Z. Johnson, "8 ways the media upholds white privilege and demonizes people of color." *Everyday Feminism*, August 14, 2020, https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/07/the-media-white-privilege/

[209] MSNBC, "White Criminals Get Excuses While Black Victims Get Villainized | Zerlina." *YouTube*, May 16, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBYFFiReypA.

[210] "Media Portrayal of White Criminals." *Erase Racism New York*, November 15, 2017, https://www.eraseracismny.org/component/content/article/21/659

planet's humans whose psychopathic actions are the stuff of folktales, tabloids (including the evening news and reality television), and emergency legislation"[211]. The formula "terrible few" was coined by Canadian author and prison abolitionist Ruth Morris to name the rhetoric strategy used by politicians -and, consequently, the media- in order to justify harsh punitive state policies and crime control practices, as well as carceral expansion, on the basis that "innocent citizens" would be at direct risk should the powers that be leave such monsters roam around, free to cause harm and mayhem.

For the sake of sensationalism -and perhaps audience ratings- the media does not stray from the fray, embracing controversy, heated debates, and outright public outrage. Such portrayal allows harmful processes such as the "us versus them" mentality, to proliferate, ultimately disintegrating mutual trust and contributing to the decay of community through fearmongering. This generalized wary sense of experiencing the world is also encouraged by the manipulation of crime coverage-related statistics. As the saying goes, "if it bleeds, it leads".

[211] Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 37.

Violent crime is much less common than property crime in the U.S., but Americans see local news about both types of crime with nearly the same frequency. Around a third of Americans (32%) report seeing news about violent crime on a daily or weekly basis. A comparable share (37%) say they see news about property crime with this same frequency[212]. This overexposition to embellished representations of threat and danger inevitably influences people's trust in their surroundings and the way they interact with their vicinity, as represented in the figure below[213]:

Such narratives are allowed to get traction thanks to the media's inherent authority. Said authority stems from one principle in particular: the media's privileged access to reliable individuals, institutions, numbers, and information. Indeed, "media statements are, wherever possible, grounded in 'objective' and 'authoritative' statements from 'accredited' sources»[214]. Those accredited sources can range anywhere from elected officials, government members, activists, lobbying group leaders, police department

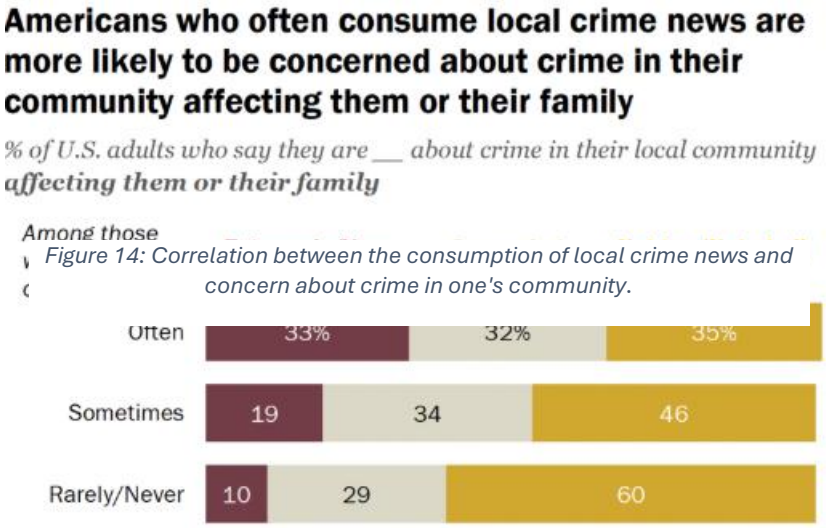


Figure 14: Correlation between the consumption of local crime news and concern about crime in one's community.

[212] John Gramlich and Kirsten Eddy, "Local crime news coverage and concerns about crime." *Pew Research Center*, May 7, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/29/the-link-between-local-news-coverage-and-americans-perceptions-of-crime/

[213] Gramlich and Eddy. "Local crime news coverage and concerns about crime." https://www.pewresearch.org/sho

[214] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 58.

chiefs, experts… They determine, voluntarily or not, what message the media will convey to the masses, and through which angle or point of view that message will be delivered, which makes them the primary definers of information the public has access to. Consequently, the media ecosystem "produce[s] a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions. The media thus tend, faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order"[215].

This is especially relevant when it comes to crime reporting: "In the area of crime news, the media appear to be more heavily dependent on the institutions of crime control for their news stories than in practically any other area"[216]. The police, state courts, the Supreme Court, the Department of Justice, and Homeland Security seem to hold a near-total monopoly over the primary definition of crime coverage in the U.S. The police, contrarily to the other institutions listed above, are the only group who can claim to have both professional and personal experience regarding the issue of crime, which enables them to claim that "[t]his exclusive and particular 'double expertise' seems to give police spokesmen especially authoritative credence"[217]. The police also hold the responsibility of having to "come up" with crime stories, in the sense that it is quite rare for first-hand accounts to be available. The criminals are a silent entity among the whole discussion, despite being one of the actual primary actors within the interaction: "[b]y virtue of being criminals, they have forfeited the right to take part in the negotiation of the consensus about crime"[218]. Criminals are therefore robbed of a voice in the eyes of the public, which leaves plenty of room for both the latter and the media to depict them however they

[215] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 58.
[216] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 68.
[217] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 68.
[218] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 69.

choose, for no counterargument will arise to challenge whatever picture has already been painted: "[t]his framework of beliefs and ideas about how the social order normally works constitutes a sort of folk ideology about crime and punishment in society"[219].

To put it in a nutshell, the media has taken on the role of ventriloquist, dictating what is good or bad, right or wrong, authority-holders have taken on the role of puppeteers. Something as extreme and peculiar as crime becomes regular news, akin to weather updates:

> Crime, then, is 'news' because its treatment evokes threats to but reaffirms, the consensual morality of the society: a modern morality' play place before us in which the 'devil' is both symbolically and physically cast from the society by its guardians -the police and the judiciary[220].

e. The White middle-class as intended audience

[219] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 83
[220] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts. "Policing the Crisis", 66.

Media, then, perfectly fulfills its role as bearer and preacher of authority's word. This dynamic has been more prominent during several episodes -and presidencies- over the last few decades, notably the War on Drug initiated along Nixon's law and order presidency:

> Politicians of all races and ethnicities merged gang membership, drug use, and habitual criminal activity into a single social scourge, which was then used to explain everything from unruly youth to inner-city homicides to the need for more prisons to isolate wrongdoers. The media amplified the message by giving crime reporting top billing [...]. Inner-city residents were, indeed, seeking relief from fearful disorders in their communities, and they, like their suburban counterparts, tended to accept the primary definitions of what crime was and what should be done about it [...][221].

It is no wonder which group elected officials aim at when fueling the media with their insights: the middle-class remains at the center stage of political ambitions. The narrative of the American Dream, which politicians heavily rely on when contemplating the richness of the country's culture and the intensity of its origins, comes alive through the middle-class. Elected officials' credibility and viability rely on the myth on the middle-class fiction: white picket fences, friendly neighbors, a large house with a front porch, a walkable neighborhood, financial stability, book clubs, little league games, consequent social capital, status... Those well-off communities are a pillar for political success:

> In the 2022 midterm elections, 33 percent of eligible voters with a family income below $20,000 voted, compared to 67 percent of eligible voters with

[221] Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag* ,130.

> a family income exceeding $100,000. Higher income voters don't only show up to the polls; they vote with their pocketbook by donating to campaigns[222].

For conservative voters, Trump has managed to bring the middle-class back to its gilded glory, restoring the gleam of a surface that had gone rusty under Democratic leadership in an era of financial hardship: "Trump has centered much of his message on middle-class prosperity around a trio of broad topics — energy, inflation and taxes"[223].

> US President Donald Trump captured the anxiety and anger of a middle-class that no longer felt truly middle-class. Life had become prohibitively expensive due to inflation, and the American dream – owning a home or obtaining a university degree – had become out of reach for much of the younger generation[224].

If Donald Trump seems to stand up for the middle-class ideologically, addressing "The Suburban Housewives of America" to warn them about how "Biden will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it, and make it even better![225]" in a July, 23, 2020 post on his own X account; or calling to White suburbanites in 2020 saying "Your home will go down in value, and crime rates will rapidly rise. People have worked all their lives to get into a community, and now they're going to watch it go to hell. Not going to happen, not while I'm here"[226]; he sure has a peculiar way of proving that concern

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[222] Becky Vlamis, "Why the middle class takes center stage in this (and all) presidential elections." *Shriver Center on Poverty Law*, March 27, 2025, https://www.povertylaw.org/article/middle-class-takes-center-stage/

[223] Lisa Andrew, "3 things Trump has said about helping the middle class move up." *Yahoo Finance*, March 10, 2025, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/3-things-trump-said-helping-130114566.html

[224] Alexis Papachelas, "Waiting for the next populist leader." *kathimerini.gr*, April 27, 2026, https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1301939/waiting-for-the-next-populist-leader/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=facebook

[225] Domenico Montanaro, "Trump tries to appeal to 'Housewives' and white suburbs, but his views seem outdated." *NPR*, July 26, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/07/26/895228366/trumps-trying-to-appeal-to-real-housewives-and-white-suburbs-but-they-re-declini

[226] Philip Bump, "Trump's ham-handed attempt to scare white suburbanites would have worked better 50 years ago." *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/17/trumps-ham-handed-attempt-scare-white-suburbanites-would-have-worked-better-70-years-ago/

through economic policies. The fact of the matter is that middle-class workers are not being assisted by the over-advertised tax cuts promised by President Trump. Quite the opposite, actually, since top earners appear to be the major beneficiaries of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, signed into law in early July 2025.

According to the Joint Economic Committee – Minority, "the combination of President Trump's tariffs and the Republican budget bill will cost the typical firefighter, teacher, truck driver, and other middle-class workers hundreds of dollars next year"[227] while "Trump has also eliminated more than $40 billion over 10 years in funding for IRS tax enforcement that was earmarked specifically for investigating tax evasion by the wealthy"[228].

Those wrongdoings have largely gone unnoticed to the public, most of my Republican interviewees declaring that they felt economic turmoil had stabilized since Trump had regained office. However, recent developments along Donald Trump's presidency have started to raise anxieties considering the blatant manipulation of media coverage to further his administration's interests. Indeed, concern has soared among journalists following the Trump administration's decision to manage which journalists (and consequently, which media outlets) would be allowed within the White House press pool. This means that the President and his team are free to pick which media organization can enjoy the early-access to White House and presidential updates, a privilege that used to belong to White House Correspondents' Association, who have

[227] "NEW: Middle-class Workers Lose, Very Wealthiest Win Under Trump Tax and Tariff Plans." *United States Joint Economic Committee*, June 17, 2025, https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/democrats/2025/6/new-middle-class-workers-lose-very-wealthiest-win-under-trump-tax-and-tariff-plans

[228] Dragan Kovacevic, "Trump's tax cuts give the richest 5% big breaks while everyone else pays more. How the middle-class is being left behind." *Yahoo Finance*, April 17, 2026, https://finance.yahoo.com/economy/policy/articles/trumps-tax-cuts-richest-5-103000993.html

shared that they felt the overriding of their authority "tears at the independence of a free press"[229]. This decision is quite alarming in the sense that it might _and, undoubtedly, will- allow President Trump to grant advantageous access to news outlets that support his administration, thus sabotaging the principle of equal access to information. One outlet in particular, Associated Press, was banned from the pool in what they felt was a retaliatory action to punish them for using the term “Gulf of Mexico” instead of the historically and geographically erroneous Trump-sanctioned “Gulf of America” in a recent article. Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt has declared that this decision would “give the power back to the people”. Leavitt herself has been the target of criticism for various reasons since her appointment as Press Secretary. In October 2025, Leavitt was on the front page of several news outlets for answering a Huffington Post journalists’ question with “Your mom”, before adding:

> It’s funny to me that you actually consider yourself a journal. You are a far-left hack who nobody takes seriously, including your colleagues in the media, they just don’t tell you that to your face. Stop texting me your disingenuous, biased, and bullshit questions[230].

The dramatization of journalism, not only in its substance but also in its form, as we have just observed, has contributed, along with the other factors we have considered above, such as decontextualization of crime coverage, the monopoly of primary definers, and excessive sensationalism of myth criminalizing marginalized communities, to the creation of a disproportionate media landscape.

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[229] Bernd Debusmann Jr, “White House takes control of press pool that covers Trump.” *BBC*, February 26, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce30n52e6p1o

[230] S.V. Dáte, “White House gives wild response to a simple question asked by HuffPost reporter.” *HuffPost*, October 22, 2025, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/white-house-wild-response-to-huffpost-question_n_68f26217e4b0ee732e24eb66

The media ecosystem is not dysfunctional: it was purposefully designed that way to serve political elites' interests. The media, as well as social media, provide tools for politicians to reach their target audiences easily and spew discriminatory narratives more or less unnoticed. It was the case for Nixon with his falsely authentic Richard Nixon Show[231], where pre-selected individuals came to ask Richard Nixon questions before a manufactured frenzied crowd, just as it is the case for Trump, who is able to rally thousands of his henchmen to stage an anti-democratic protest, and not only get away with it but rescue his loyal assault-perpetrators from justice as well. The blatant disrespect for subjectivity in media has mutated into something maybe even more disturbing: disdain and hatred for the plurality of media, yet a pillar of democracy. The presidential -and political as a whole – tradition of capitalizing on moral panics has far from stopped since desegregation and Barry Goldwater's Southern Strategy. Factually, one could venture to argue that the same moral panic has evolved and reinvented itself: from desegregation to the War on Crime, to the War On Drugs, to mass incarceration. This transformation revolves around a singular idea: the continued criminalization and ostracization of racial minorities, primarily African-Americans. But what does truly happen beyond TV screens or newspaper articles to those pretend members of the "terrible few" and "ideal criminals"?

[231] Cheliotis, "Manufacturing concern",10.

III. THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

A. The Oversurveillance of non-Whites and the Uninterrupted Tradition of White Impunity

a. The overpolicing of White moral guardians

The overpolicing of non-Whites - first and foremost of African Americans- has been a crucial part in the creation and evolution of the United States, to the point where a portion of the White population today still believes they are entitled to the supervision of non-Whites. Policing, here, could be defined as controlling one's behavior within public space, and enforcing correction and repression, should said behavior challenge largely accepted norms and regulations. Keeping African-American people in check seems to be the boulder middle-class Whites must relentlessly push uphill. Positioning themselves as moral guardians, they have entrusted their cohort with the mission of shielding their glorious nation from diversity-induced decay:

> Formal segregation ended more than fifty years ago, but the vestiges of this apartheid persist in the continued rejection of Black people in White spaces. And increasingly, the enforcers of this de facto color line are private citizens armed with a cell phone, a grudge, and (often) a gun[232].

When I sat down to talk to 63-year-old White Republican M.S about her time in a gated community, she shared the following anecdote:

[232] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch,* 15.

> We had an incident where I put my daughter down to sleep, and my son was already sleeping, and my husband was reading in bed. We had a sliding glass door in our bedroom and I heard this cat meowing outside and I thought, oh. And I went to the window, the sliding glass door, and I didn't unlock it, thank God. But I looked, I turned on the light and I looked down, and this man's shoes were right there in front of me. There was a man standing right there. I was like, I couldn't even talk. I'm like, ah! You know, I said, my husband's name. [...] And he was panicked too and you know, told the guy to go. It was this black guy. It was in Memphis or was, you know, that it kind of... It was in the area where there were more population of black people. But... And he left. He said something like he was looking for something. But then the neighbor came home and saw him. She said that he was kind of wandering around her place too. So anyway, we called the security and I don't know if they ever found him, but it was frightening[233].

The story shared by M.S underlines a rather salient point: what she gathered from her past as a gated community resident is "I thought it was funny that we had never had anything like that until [they] put a gate up around the community. [...] And as soon as they did that, we had crime". However, no serious crime seems to happen over the course of the anecdote. Trespassing is a misdemeanor, a rather minor offense; far from a felony. Still, M.S registers the presence of a Black person in her designated and privileged space not only as an anomaly, but also as a threat, an immediate danger:

> Clusters of carefully planned neighborhoods are built around cul-de-sacs, marked by a single entrance, and often enclosed by a wall or gate,

[233] Interview conducted on February 26, 2022.

> [minimizing] the likelihood that a stranger might pass through the neighborhood for an innocent reason, giving residents a further basis for believing that an unfamiliar person is out of place or up to no good. Access may be restricted by guards and identification requirements. Many of these communities were built long after legal segregation ended, giving them a sort of post-racial status, but many are still "white spaces" where Black residents and visitors risk being seen as "out of place". These "gated communities churn a vicious cycle by attracting like-minded residents who seek shelter from outsiders and whose physical seclusion then worsens paranoid groupthink against outsiders"[234].

When White people feel uneasy with the presence of non-White bodies, they might resort to two solutions: either handle the situation themselves or call the police. Taking matter into their own hands rarely ends well for the Black or Brown individuals designated as threats by White agents, though the latter rarely get to reap the consequences of the violence they have sowed. Considering the law was -and still is- fabricated with not only Whites' interests, but also the sovereignty of individual freedom and property in mind; Whites -literally and figuratively- stick to their guns when it comes to managing and enforcing justice themselves.

[234] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*,115.

b. The unhindered sanctity of White space

This permissiveness is exemplified through the Stand Your Ground law, also charmingly nicknamed “shoot first law”, which allows individuals to use deadly force for self-defense purposes, which is considered a reasonable enough reason.

In 2007, White 62-year-old Pasadena, Texas resident Joe Horn shot two undocumented Latinx immigrants, Miguel Dejesus and Diego Ortiz, who were attempting to burglarize his neighbor’s house. Said neighbor was away at the time, which led the officers responding to Horn’s 911 call to advise him not to put his life on the life for a simple property theft crime. Over the minutes-long 911 call, police officers asked Horn not to go outside and shoot the two men at least ten times[235]. Joe Horn, seemingly imbued with a vigilante mindset, made the following remarks:

> Horn: “I have a right to protect myself too, sir, and you understand that. And the laws have been changed in this country since September the First and you know it and I know it.” [...]
>
> Dispatcher: "You gonna get yourself shot if you go outside that house with a gun, I don't care what you think."
>
> Horn: "You wanna make a bet?" [...]

On the tape of the 911 call, the shotgun can be heard being cocked while Horn goes outside to confront someone.

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[235] Roger Chartier, “Joe Horn 911 Transcript.” *RC123.com*, 2007, https://www.rc123.com/joe_horn_911_transcript.html

> "Boom! You're dead!" he shouts. A loud bang is heard, then a shotgun being cocked and fired again, and then again[236].

Joe Horn was never indicted for his killing of Miguel Dejesus and Diego Ortiz. Legislation, as well as state customs and political leaning, guaranteed his non-liability: "As Shannon Edmonds, a lobbyist for the Texas District and County Attorneys Association, put it: 'There's an unwritten rule in Texas courthouses: It ain't against the law to kill a son of a bitch'."[237].

The September 1st law Joe Horn was referring to during the call did come into play: "The Castle Doctrine is a term used to refer to [Texas] Senate Bill 378, passed in 2007, that says if you're in your "castle" — home, car or business — any deadly force used is presumed to be reasonable"[238]. The Joe Horn case has sparked polarizing outrage, not only over his positioning as judge, jury, and executioner; but also because it raised the issue of the limitations of the Castle Doctrine, Horn having taken it upon himself to stand guard over his neighbor's own castle:

> These laws expand the scope of the "castle" to any public space, allowing people to use deadly force in public even when a clear and safe alternative is available. [...] Stand Your Ground laws provide cover for White vigilantes intent on defending their castle of White space and attacking as suspicious any Black person who dares step outside the iconic ghetto. And juries abide. When White shooters who kill Black victims assert a Stand Your Ground

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[236] "*Man kills suspects while on phone with 911.*" *CBS News*, November 19, 2007, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/man-kills-suspects-while-on-phone-with-911/

[237] Nathan Thornburg, "Looking Kindly on Vigilante Justice." *Time*, July 3, 2008, https://time.com/archive/6913134/looking-kindly-on-vigilante-justice/

[238] Stacy Fernández, "What Is Texas' Castle Doctrine And What Does It Mean In The Amber Guyger Case?" *Texas Tribune*, September 30, 2019, https://texasstandard.org/stories/what-is-texas-castle-doctrine-and-what-does-it-mean-in-the-amber-guyger-case/#:~:text=The%20Castle%20Doctrine%20is%20a,is%20presumed%20to%20be%20reasonable.

> defense, the resulting homicides are deemed justifiable at least five times more frequently than when the shooter is Black and the victim is White[239].

Perhaps emboldened and exhilarated by the prospect of impunity, Horn-adjacent cases have flourished over the years. Florida, the first of 35 states[240] to pass said Stand Your Ground law as early as 2005, fell under international spotlight in 2012, when neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman shot and killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Trayvon Martin, a Black boy, was headed towards a family member's home, carrying snacks and his cell phone. Zimmerman, growing suspicious of the young man's passing through his neighborhood, called 911 and reported "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something"[241]. Despite police officers' orders not to engage with Trayvon Martin, Zimmerman went ahead and confronted the young boy with a weapon. An altercation ensued and resulted in George Zimmerman fatally shooting Trayvon Martin before the police unit could reach the scene. Zimmerman, originally charged with second-degree murder, was acquitted a year later; and around 200,000 dollars were raised for his defense fund[242].

The Stand Your Ground Law's origins shed a rather insightful light on the influence of lobbying groups in the United States. The law was initially pushed and supported by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a gathering of interest groups such as the National Rifle Association, which also welcomes a significant amount of politicians and elected officials. As of 2016, one fourth of all state legislators figured among the ranks of

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[239] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 86.

[240] "The effects of Stand-Your-Ground Laws." *RAND,* January 29, 2026, https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy/analysis/stand-your-ground.html

[241] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?,* 25.

[242] Kelly Philip Erb, "The Zimmerman Defense Fund, donations and taxes: sorting it all out." *Forbes*, June 14, 2012, https://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2012/06/12/the-zimmerman-defense-fund-donations-and-taxes-sorting-it-all-out/

ALEC. The entanglement of interest groups and eminent policymakers within ALEC provides the perfect opportunity for flourishing partnerships. CoreCivic Inc, previously known as the Correction Corps of America, is a private company which "owns, leases, and operates prisons; jails, including immigration jails; and residential reentry centers in the United States"[243]. The company received heavy criticism after an NPR inquiry revealed that ALEC activists had been campaigning through privileged backchannels for the adoption of Arizona law SB 1070 by the Supreme Court, a decision which would allow police officers to "stop and arrest someone if they believe that he is an undocumented immigrant"[244]. This law, which rendered racial profiling legal, would have allowed the Correction Corps of America to benefit from the consequential influx of detainees and inmates[245]. It is worth mentioning that similarly to the Tea Party movement, the American Legislative Exchange Council is partly funded by the Koch Brothers, which sheds some light on the political leanings of the interest groups gathering.

A similar scheme determined the trajectory of what would become the Stand Your Ground law. Working hand in hand at the dawn of the new millennium, the National Rifle Association and the American Legislative Exchange Council started drafting a series of reforms that would weaken gun ownership regulation and favor the advent of lethal force in the event of self-defense. When the law was first introduced in Florida, the National Rifle Association "argued that laws expanding self-defense were designed to protect women"[246]. This argument falls within the conservative scope of the uninterrupted and

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[243] "CoreCivic Inc." *AFSC Investigate*, September 15, 2024, https://investigate.afsc.org/company/corecivic#:~:text=CoreCivic%20Inc%2C%20formerly%20the%20Corrections,centers%20in%20the%20United%20States.

[244] Amy Howe, "S.B. 1070: In Plain English." *SCOTUS blog*, June 25, 2012, https://www.scotusblog.com/2012/06/s-b-1070-in-plain-english/

[245] Ava DuVernay, dir. *13th*, 2016, Kandoo Films, Forward Movement, *Netflix*.

[246] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*.109.

timeless portrayal of white women as ideal potential victims, leaving little to the imagination concerning who the ideal criminal would be in this equation.

When asked about the Stand Your Ground Law, both Democratic and Republican respondents expressed concern over the need for background checks to be enforced in order to possess firearms. However, while Democrats blame both the lack of regulation and guns for excessive use of gun violence, Republicans seem to be keen on depicting guns as a neutral concept, only to be spoiled by the malicious intent of those who wield them. For instance, White Republican 20-year-old from South Louisiana CH.S stated:

> I think self-defense is super important (...) Well, it's definitely gotten out of hand in America. Way too many people have guns, and guns so often get into the wrong hands. Whether that's people not locking them up securely or guns being sold to people who should not have guns, but the gun itself is not a bad thing. It's just the guns getting into the wrong hands. People who are not responsible, people who have bad intentions[247].

Of course, allegiance to guns is clearly geographically defined. Southern interviewees tend to demonstrate a more personal and passionate attachment to guns, compared to Northern respondents. That is notably the case for SF, 22-year-old White Republican medical student from Georgia, who equates gun ownership with southernness:

> In the South here at least, we are very big on like the right to bear arms, and we're very very southern down here. We love our rights and what we have accessible to us. I do agree with the Stand Your Ground law. I think it needs to be very very closely monitored though, because I

[247] Interview conducted on August 27, 2025.

> would not want anyone to go out there and use that as an excuse for them to do something bad like oh it's just defending myself and in reality, they were doing something much much worse[248].

W.R, White Democrat from Maryland, shares the same opinion from the opposite perspective:

> I've never held a gun. I've never shot a gun. I've never really been in the extended presence of a gun. It's something that I was lucky enough to kind of avoid growing up in a Blue Northern state or Northern-ish? It depends who you ask in Maryland whether we're Northern or Southern, because we're right on the border. But I lived in, like, the area that identified as northern. And so it was never really a conception for me. But I imagine maybe if I was Southern, my answer would be different[249].

The testimony of M.S, White Republican from Arizona, seems to advance the idea that access to guns makes people more prone to exhibiting heroic, policeman-like behavior:

> I think it's important to be able to defend yourself or if you're in a crowd, to be able to stop the threat immediately. If someone's shooting a lot of people, knock that person out, you know, and then no more people will be killed. When it's in the hands of good people, I think it's a good thing. But you're always going to have the people who are going to abuse it. And I, you know, that I did look up a little bit on the Stand Your Ground law and I think that if someone's

[248] Interview conducted on May 6, 2025.
[249] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

> threatening you and then you're home and you feel like you're in danger, you should be able to apply force. I think I might stand my ground in my home. But as far as being out and about, I don't know if I would act like a rookie policeman and go after them[250].

For T.F, an 18-year-old White Republican from North Carolina who enlisted in the army in 2025, guns were never a factor in the gun violence equation, and could even be used as a solution in the event of school shootings:

> My God gave me the second amendment right to carry my firearm and own my firearms. And if, for me, if I'm living in my house [...] off on deployment and somebody's walking on my property, and my wife is home alone or home alone with our kids or whatever the situation is, and somebody's walking on our property... [...] I fully believe in the right that she should be able to walk out on her back porch or whatever and fire off that weapon at that person, whether it's as a warning shot, because I know for the Stand Your Ground law, a lot of states require you to give off a warning shot. At least you're supposed to give off a warning shot to warn the person, but there's also like if you have posted no trespassing signs, that is your warning [...] I believe in it because I think for a home safety aspect, I agree with it. Because there's a lot of times like there's no reason for somebody to be on your property other than for ill intent or if they're, or if they're just wandering through, you give off that warning shot that just says, hey, you're not supposed to be here. And that gives a chance to get off your property before something bad happens [...] I have a very, a very wide idea of gun control, like, I think anybody should

[250] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

> be allowed to buy a gun, as long as they can pass a mental evaluation and a background check. Because me personally, I don't think guns are the problem. I will never think a gun is a problem. [...] And you have, you know, all your school shootings and stuff like they're, it's terrible, but it's not the guns' fault. You know, if you look at these kids while they're on trial [...] if they aren't killed while being apprehended, they get a mental evaluation and a lot of times they came back to them that they were psychotic and they had mental disabilities. [...] And I believe that teachers that have a military or a police background should be able to have a gun in school for the reason of protection [...] God forbid something were to happen[251].

Democratic respondents hold a much stricter view of gun control, denouncing how the lack of regulation around gun-owning regularly leads to tragic events and automatically escalates conflictual situations. S.N, 26-year-old Caribbean-American flight attendant living in New York, argues that protecting oneself should not automatically warrant guns, and worries that this has become the automatic, immediate avenue Americans perceive as an outcome in contentions circumstances.

> I feel like people manipulate that [if] you're feeling threatened, like you can protect yourself without consequence or like retaliation. [...] I feel like it's just a way they can be racist and kill somebody, kill a black kid because they want to, and they know they won't face repercussions for it. So, I feel like it's meant to do good, but I feel like it's doing more harm than good. Because you should be, you know, allowed to feel safe. Like, I'm not against guns. I'm not for taking away

[251] Interview conducted on May 23, 2025.

> your right to have guns. If you want to own a gun, you should have a gun. But I just feel like there should be more gun laws put in place. And it should not be so easily accessible to get a gun. And if you're going to purchase again, you should go to training and you should learn how to do it. You should be certified to have a gun, you know, you should not be able to walk into a Walmart and buy a gun in the Midwest. Um, and so I feel like guns are so accessible and then you can't have your Stand Your Ground laws in places where it's so easily accessible to get a gun, [because] then everybody thinks it's okay to just go around shooting people because they feel threatened[252].

D.J, 23-year-old Democratic White male from New Jersey, summarizes his understanding of the Stand Your Ground laws as follows, underlining the impunity entailed by the unclear justifications behind the reasonability of the killing of perceived intruders:

> This is literally just a law allowing you to kill people, which is crazy. [...] Because you're allowed to kill someone when they are threatening you in your own space. With this Castle Doctrine or the Stand Your Ground law, you're allowed to kill someone anywhere. Yeah. And if there's no cameras or anything, it's someone's word against someone's word. And then this turns into a ridiculous legal battle that someone who kills an innocent person probably gets out of without a punishment[253].

[252] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025.
[253] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

W.R, a White 20-year-old political science Democrat student from Maryland, puts forward the idea that gun legislation has grown to revolve around the notion of the sovereignty of the individual. Said bestowing of authority over one's surroundings furthers the concept that Whites, as moral guardians, are vested with the power to control and police whatever area or group they believe strays from their vision of the norm:

> In America, the individual is the greatest law and order actor that we have. It's sort of this idea that, conceptually, you as a person are the police. And that comes into play in a lot of things in America. Like, in my neighborhood, there's signs for neighborhood watch. We've got an HOA. There's certain elements of life in America that are designed to help people feel like cops. I don't know how else to describe it, but it's... It's specifically to help white people cosplay this level of authority. Yeah. Or promote this level of authority. And so, I think that that just sort of goes back to that Stand Your Ground law. It sounds like it is essentially giving the individual the right to be police or to be a police officer, and the right to sort of enact violence in a way that is reminiscent of police brutality. Like I said, it's shoot first, ask questions later. But it's also this idea of "we" as the individual. You have no responsibility to your community. You have responsibility to yourself and your property to protect it, but you don't have a responsibility to your community to ask, what is this kid doing? Does he need any help? Is he all right? It's this automatic assumption of wrongdoing by virtue of their existence on your property. [...] A lot of American life is militarized. And a lot of American life is individualized. We're navel gazing as a community, as a group. And it's every person for themselves and their property. If you believe

> that your life is in danger, I do think that you should be able to call the police, but, like, they're just gonna come and shoot them, so you might as well just do it yourself. There's this conception of... no matter what, the end result is the same. *What does it matter if it's the individual or the state doing it*? [254].

Policing, when exercised by citizens, can already achieve a great deal of damage and consistently results in deadly circumstances. One can only fear on which scale those deadly consequences are measured when policing is enforced by individuals or institutions who are sanctioned and awarded the necessary means to do so.

When White people are unwilling to deal with such situations themselves, they do not restrain from wielding their privilege to use the police as their personal security detail. In 2018, a White Yale student called the police on one of her Black classmates who was taking a nap in a dorm common area, on the grounds that she was worried the Black girl did not belong here and had intruded the space[255]. In 2020, White Amy Cooper called the cops on an "African-American man who was threatening her life" after Black birdwatcher Christian Cooper asked her to leash her dog in a Central Park area where dog-leashes are mandatory. Christian Cooper filmed the woman with his phone while she was on the phone screaming at a 911 dispatcher and, after encouragements from his loved ones, uploaded the video on social media. Internauts were quick to come up with #BirdwatchingWhileBlack, a hashtag used to share and denounce what enjoying harmless activities could entail as a Black person[256].

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[254] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

[255] Henry Grabar, and Mark Joseph Stern, "If only minorities could feel as comfortable calling the cops as white people do." *Slate Magazine*, May 10, 2018, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/05/in-america-calling-911-is-still-a-privilege-of-being-white.html

[256] Morgans Jerkins, "'She doesn't have the power': Central Park birdwatcher Christian Cooper on why racist 'incident' won't define him." *The Guardian*, June 20, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jun/19/christian-cooper-central-park-birdwatcher-racism

> These callers aren't expecting cops to treat black folks politely, but instead to remind them that the consequences for making white people angry or uncomfortable could be harassment, unfair prosecution or death [...] This highly effective method of racial antagonism represents a growing phenomenon of utilizing law enforcement to exert formal social control over Black people in White spaces[257].

c. The origins of White social control

Such a controlling, condescending, and dehumanizing dynamic, like many others which shape interracial interactions today, stems from the slavery era. At the time, the prospect of rebellion was a constant worry for slave owners. Whites lived in fear of the moment enslaved Blacks would take advantage of their strength in number and lead insurrections that would reverse the power imbalance and shatter the established racial order. This fear motivated the creation of slave patrols. Before then, the policing and disciplining of slaves belonged to slave owners. Slave patrols emerged in the early 18th century through "the deputizing of private vigilantes"[258], who managed where slaves could go and when, as well as what they could wear, and what they could own. Slave patrols followed the same methods policemen use nowadays, notably regularly walking predetermined areas while looking for peculiar or suspicious activity. A quite concerning element to bear in mind is the fact that slave patrols, ultimately, served as a blueprint at

[257] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 5. Fields coined the term "White Caller Crime" as a nod to the criminal qualification of "White collar crime", in order to define the practice of abusing 911 calls as a White person, knowing African-Americans and other racial minorities might encounter harsh and life-threatening consequences.

[258] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 25.

best for the emergence of police forces and crime-fighting institutions as we know them today, and at worst for ultraviolent hate groups:

> This policing of public space fell to all White society. Generally, all Whites, including slave-owning women, were required by law to participate in slave patrols. [...] It was also "a gigantic police system". And that police system was based inherently on a system of private, fear-based racial segregation[259].

The slave patrols evolved into two separate institutions: the law enforcement function was redirected toward southern police forces and the more violently repressive impulses found expression in the Ku Klux Klan. Both institutions promoted the myth of Black violence and criminality to instill White fear and justify a similar mission: the social control of Black people[260].

Another more than reprehensible practice shaped the police trade: convict leasing. As segregation reached its demise near 1865, the 13th Amendment was ratified, granting that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction"[261]. This bill thus rendered slavery illegal, unless it was to be used as a punishment for criminals. Southern states were quick to exploit this loophole, extending the sentences for minor offenses from small fines to jail time and coming up with new behaviors to criminalize. The Black codes were redacted and enforced in -not so- former Confederacy states, compiling regulations that fundamentally made it illegal

[259] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 14.
[260] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 28.
[261] "13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery (1865)." *National Archives*, May 10, 2022, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/13thamendment#:~:text=13th%20Amendment%20to%20the%20U.S.,Slavery%20(1865)%20%7C%20National%20Archives

to be Black in public space. Vagrancy laws, for instance, stripped Blacks of any agency and criminalized their very existence:

> [Vagrancy laws] declared a black to be vagrant if unemployed and without permanent residence; a person so defined could be arrested, fined, and bound out for a term of labor if unable to pay the fine. [...] Some states limited the type of property blacks could own, and in others blacks were excluded from certain businesses or from the skilled trades[262].

In other words, White society crafted a world in which recently freed Blacks could not escape submission and servitude, trapped notably between the impossibility to be employed and the interdiction to be jobless. Black "criminals" were thus sentenced to "work" to serve their sentence and earn their freedom. In order to do so, they were leased to well-off and middle-class Whites like one would rent equipment. Sheriffs and other members of law enforcement usually orchestrated such schemes: "Two Mississippi sheriffs reported making between $20,000 and $30,000 each from the sale of black convicts to white planters in a single year. Measured in today's dollars, this would have been the equivalent of between $263,000 and $394,000"[263]. Convict leasing allowed struggling Southern states to salvage their economy, bridging the gap slavery's free labor had left behind. This system was arguably even more advantageous for former slaveowners, since they could easily replace sick or indisposed workers.

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[262] "Black codes." *Jim Crow Museum*. https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/links/misclink/blackcode.htm#:~:text=There%20were%20vagrancy%20laws%20that,unable%20to%20pay%20the%20fine.

[263] Haney Lopez, Dog Whistle Politics, 57.

Convict leasing was gradually abandoned along the 1920s and 1930s, the concept of renting out human beings and enjoying the profitable enslavement of a racial undercaste seemingly "damaging the nation's credibility as leader of the 'free world'[264]". Simultaneously, Nazi Germany's treatment of Jewish populations, which was eerily similar to the treatment of Blacks in the U.S, was starting to wreak indignation and disgust all over the world.

d. Evolutions within the police: from peace-keepers to crime-fighters

Up until the 1930s, law enforcement agents centered their primary mission around the policing of their vicinity. Divided into smaller, local stations, "Beat cops" patrolled around their neighborhoods, mediating conflict thanks to proximity, routine interactions, and shared values[265]. Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, specific institutions emerged, dedicated solely to dealing with social issues which used to be the police's responsibility. Homeless people, troubled kids, and struggling families were redirected towards social services, leaving the police to focus exclusively on crime-related issues. Policemen's peacekeeping days were over, and crime-fighting had become their sole mission: "to most citizens, officers became unknown people in uniforms driving around in metal boxes"[266]. Government expansion allowed welfare programs to help process offenders in alternative manners, such as rehabilitation or reintegration, rather than systematically resorting to imprisonment. There was born penal welfarism, a criminal justice theory

[264] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 48.
[265] Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, and Roberts, "Policing the Crisis", 46.
[266] Chuck Russo, "The evolution of police: from the 19th century beat cop to today." *Edge*, August 24, 2020, https://amuedge.com/the-evolution-of-police-from-the-19th-century-beat-cop-to-today/

which pushed for case-by-case treatment adapted to offenders' reform avenues. Such a system allowed for the rehabilitation of offenders, restoring individuals' trust in both themselves and the system, but it also prevented from adding fuel to the roaring fire of mass incarceration. Both options contributed to building or restoring secure, trustworthy communities through the continuous collaboration of several of the entities which made up community members' daily landscapes: the police, welfare institutions, and other citizens. This collaboration "concentrates on preventing the convergence of factors that precipitate criminal events"[267]. This transition allowed the police force to diversify its specific missions though all oriented towards the common goal of crime-fighting. Specialization, coupled with rapidly-developing technology, demanded constant efficiency improvement from members of the police force.

However, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the return of the figure of "communal policeman". As welfare budgets declined under the Reagan rule since "the new administration aimed to confine welfare payments to the 'deserving poor' (the aged, children, the permanently disabled, and others who could not be expected to enter the work force)[268]", law enforcement agents found themselves forced to take on a workload they had become accustomed to sharing with welfare workers. Moreover, rising awareness around issues such as domestic violence prompted police officers to breach the nest and engage with citizens in their private sphere[269], paving the way for a renewed form of communal policing rather similar to the one still in place nowadays: "There has been a shift of emphasis away from reactive strategies and '911' policing, towards [...]

[267] Garland, *The Culture of Control*,189.

[268] Albertino Alesina and Geoffrey Carliner, *Politics and economics in the Eighties* (University of Chicago Press, 1991),137.

[269] Sarah Trieu, "History of Intimate Partner Violence Reform." *Columbia University*, 2019, https://freedomandcitizenship.columbia.edu/ipv-history

problem-oriented policing, community policing, order-maintenance policing, quality-of-life policing [...] Policing has become [...] more attuned to local circumstance, more responsive to public pressure [...]"[270].

e. The strife for welfare

The budget cuts imposed on welfare programs in aid of punitive and carceral institutions have since clearly demonstrated which response the United States government sees fit to manage deviant behavior: "national and subnational governments transferred funding, capacity, and legitimacy from their welfare 'left hands' to their carceral 'right hands'"[271]. The government's handling of societal issues thus shifted from a welfare perspective to a penal one, focusing on secluding criminalized individuals rather than treating the root causes behind the committing of said crimes and holding space for rehabilitation. This omnipresence of police among all areas of both public and private life has accounted for a promotion of punitive outcomes rather than restorative strategies. This shift is embodied through the centering of the victim to the detriment of the offender. Offenders are to be strictly contained within the category of dangerous criminals who deserve to be locked up like wild animals, away from decent, respectable members of society who know better than to submit to violent, primal urges. Showing any sign of empathy for those labeled "criminals" is unfathomable. One must either stand with the antisocial wrongdoer or with the defenseless victim who can do no wrong. In-betweenness or nuance are prohibited: "Expressions of concern for the offender and his

[270] Garland, *The Culture of Control*,187.

[271] Brenden Beck, "Do austerity cuts spare police budgets? Welfare-to-carceral realignment during fiscal crises.", *Criminology*, *62*(4), 623–654. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12385, 2024, 2.

needs signal a disregard for the victim"[272]. This "us versus them" mentality feeds into the aforementioned folktales of "ideal criminals" and "terrible few", further ostracizing already marginalized and demonized individuals. The interests of the criminal and those of the population, which used to be concomitant, are now conceptualized as polar opposites that at best cannot coexist and at worst are antinomic.

Worst yet, the Trump administration has been relentlessly orchestrating a crackdown on welfare programs that do work towards the reduction of crime and safer, healthier communities as well as offer alternatives besides incarceration. The Department of Justice has revoked critical amounts of funding from several welfare and social justice programs, such as its own office on Violence Against Women as well as the Vera Institute of Justice, which aims at documenting and bettering the living conditions of inmates[273]. Elon Musk, whose qualifications as multi billionaire businessman and tech mogul apparently made him a great fit as informal head to Trump's Department of Government Efficiency, notably enforced severe budget cuts for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration[274]. Donald Trump's Big Beautiful Bill, signed in early July 2025, while promoting and enforcing tax cuts for high-income earners, cuts "$187 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, often referred to as food stamps, over the next decade. [...] Since the law was enacted last summer, about 3.5 million people have fallen off the SNAP rolls nationwide [...]"[275]. The Medicaid program, which was designed to alleviate health-related costs for lower-income families,

[272] Garland, *The Culture of Control*,198.

[273] "Tracking how the Trump administration is making the criminal legal system worse." *Prison Policy Initiative*, April 7, *2026,* https://www.prisonpolicy.org/federaltracker.html

[274] Brian Mann, "Trump team revokes $11 billion in funding for addiction, mental health care." *NPR*, March 27, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/03/27/nx-s1-5342368/addiction-trump-mental-health-funding

[275] Shannon Pettypiece, "The families going hungry because of Trump's food stamp cuts." *NBC News*, May 12, 2026, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/trump-food-stamp-cuts-children-arizona-hungry-big-beautiful-bill-rcna343922

has been revised within the scope of the Big Beautiful Bill. One trillion dollars will be revoked from the program's funding over the following decade in order to prevent large-scale fraud supposedly "encouraged by the Biden Administration", as one can read on the White House website[276]. This decision will bar a significant percentage of the population from having access to safe and regular medical care: "the Congressional Budget Office estimates that this means that 11.8 million Americans may lose their health insurance"[277].

Welfare programs, suffering from persistent budget cuts and policy changes, have been forced to abandon the populations who used to make up the heart of their activity, instead prioritizing middle-class income earners: "welfare spending [is] inadequate compared with the scale of poverty, and social programs have shifted who they serve, increasingly favoring middle-class workers at the expense of the unemployed poor"[278]. Middle-class members, and especially lower middle-class members, have increasingly come to rely on welfare safety nets: "Two of the main drivers of this shift seem to be [...] Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)". This can be explained by the infamous financial unattainability of medical care in the United States, specifically due to the fact that drugs and healthcare prices are not controlled and stabilized by the State but subjected to market forces. It is also worth considering that "more people file for SNAP benefits during recessions"[279], knowing the COVID-19 epidemic-induced lockdowns, which succeeded one another less than a decade ago,

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[276] "Eliminating waste, fraud, and abuse in Medicaid." *The White House*, June 6, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/eliminating-waste-fraud-and-abuse-in-medicaid/

[277] "What do the looming cuts to Medicaid really mean?" *UC Berkeley Public Health*, July 22, 2025, https://publichealth.berkeley.edu/articles/news/commentary/what-do-cuts-to-medicaid-really-mean

[278] Beck, "Do austerity cuts spare police budgets?", 5.

[279] Drew DeSilver, "What the data says about food stamps in the U.S." *Pew Research Center*, November 19, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/11/14/what-the-data-says-about-food-stamps-in-the-us/#how-has-the-number-of-food-stamp-recipients-changed-over-time

had a long-lasting impact on the global economy. Since citizens' budgets need to be adjusted according to those costs, it makes sense for welfare programs to enlarge eligibility thresholds, leaving the door ajar for an increasing amount of middle-class earners to start filing for benefits[280].

However, as fewer means become available, recipients feel a sense of urgency to access those resources. Politicians show no reluctance towards the idea of weaponizing this competition for benefits that might represent the only chance at survival for many, going as far as pitting groups against each other to arouse support from their preferred constituencies. This strategy was notably adopted by Trump in the summer of 2020, while the whole world was undergoing turmoil following the execution of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Around the same time, the Trump administration repealed the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule, a measure which prevented housing discrimination and segregation. The Department of Housing and Urban Development then authorized "local governments to simply certify that they are 'affirmatively furthering fair housing' without needing to meet more stringent requirements"[281]. Capitalizing on the ensuing moral panics and racial tensions, Trump tweeted the following series of tweets over the summer:

> All of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream... will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low-income housing built in your neighborhood [...] Your housing prices will go up based on the market, and crime will go down.

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[280] Christophe Pulliam and Richard Reeves, "The rise of the middle-class safety net." *Brookings*, September 4, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-rise-of-the-middle-class-safety-net/

[281] Eric Yoo, "HUD ends affirmatively furthering Fair Housing Rule—Again." *The Habitat Group*, March 11, 2025, https://www.thehabitatgroup.com/hud-ends-affirmatively-furthering-fair-housing-rule-again-4/#:~:text=By%20repealing%20the%20rule%2C%20HUD,strong%20opposition%20from%20Democratic%20lawmakers.

> People fight all of their lives to get into the suburbs and have a beautiful home. There will be no more affordable housing forced into the suburbs…It's been going on for years. I've seen conflict for years.[282]
>
> I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low-income housing built in your neighborhood…[283]
>
> The "suburban housewife" will be voting for me. They want safety & are thrilled that I ended the long running program where low-income housing would invade their neighborhood. Biden would reinstall it, in a bigger form […][284].
>
> [To The Suburban Housewives of America] Biden will destroy your neighborhood and your American Dream. I will preserve it, and make it even better![285]

Donald Trump's racist fearmongering operates on several levels here. First, he brandishes the centuries-old figure of the pure and defenseless white woman at the mercy of savage Black men, drawing on the "black beast rapist" stereotype, mobilizing imagery which emerged in the Antebellum era and was popularized in the 1880s[286]. By

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[282] Kristen Holmes, "Fact-check: In repealing Obama-era rule, Trump makes false claims about low-income housing, crime and the suburbs." *CNN*, August 3, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/03/politics/fact-check-trump-low-income-housing-suburbs-crime

[283] Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "I am happy to inform all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low-income housing built in your neighborhood…" *X*, July 29, 2020, (2020, July 29). *X*, https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1288509568578777088

[284] Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "The 'suburban housewife' will be voting for me. They want safety & are thrilled that I ended the long running program where low-income housing would invade their neighborhood. Biden would reinstall it, in a bigger form […]" *X,* August 12, 2020, https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1293517514798960640

[285] Sara Burnett and Michael Rubinkam, "Trump plays on fears in play for the suburbs." *PBS News*, July 25, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-plays-on-fears-in-play-for-the-suburbs

[286] Wiener, "The 'Black Beast Rapist'".

assuming that women living in suburban areas still hold the housewife status, as was the case in the 1940s and 1950s, Trump strips women of the agency they have since obtained and reclaimed, crystalizing an outdated version of the "suburban lifestyle dream" that used to be imbued with American Dream-adjacent values.

The clear equation between Blacks and low-income housing is made evident by the allusions to an unidentified looming threat solely identifiable through "crime": "the appeal to White wealthy homeowners, in the thinly veiled promise to protect them from an 'invasion' of racial minorities, marked a shocking attempt by the President of the United States to assert the integrity of the White space"[287].

B. The Monopoly of Power: Ramifications of State-sanctioned Violence within Law Enforcement

a. Theatralization of law enforcement and mass incarceration

Positioning himself as resurrector of the American Dream and defender of suburban pristineness allows Trump to court suburbanites and middle-class members, a crucial constituency he has yet to seduce:

> White Americans are consistently more likely to view Trump with approval than nonwhites. But white suburbanites are right on the 50 percent mark, about as likely to view Trump positively as negatively. [...] The suburbs' role as swing political territory is reinforced by approval polling. Americans living

[287] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*,114.

> in rural areas have consistently approved of the job Trump's doing, while those in urban areas have viewed him with disapproval. Suburbanites are somewhere in the middle, figuratively and literally[288].

Under the guise of genuine worry for the daily quality of life of suburbanites, and more importantly female suburbanites, Trump signals his unwavering loyalty to Whiteness. Making White citizens wary of a hypothetical risk to be outnumbered or out-statused by non-Whites is the stock in trade of Trump's persona. His antagonistic narrative and campaign strategy relies on Whites' compliance with his racist appeals and calls to favor "true, legitimate Americans":

> Those who felt that the hierarchy was being upended—with whites discriminated against more than blacks, Christians discriminated against more than Muslims, and men discriminated against more than women—were most likely to support Trump. [...] Furthermore, Trump's "us vs. them" rhetoric does little to lead whites and minorities or Americans and foreigners to view one another in less threatening ways, and it calls to whites' attention the fact that they are already doing quite well relative to minority groups and relative to those in the countries that they often find threatening[289].

Through the reinforcement of narratives of competition and threat, be it for status, welfare programs, or a house in a high-end neighborhood, Donald Trump manages to fuel animosity and distrust towards non-Whites, primarily African-American and Latinx populations.

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[288] Bump, "Trump's ham-handed attempt to scare white suburbanites would have worked better 50 years ago."

[289] Mutz, "Status Threat", 9.

The moral panic Trump seems keen on entertaining is also cultivated through symbolism. As recently as April 2026, President Trump requested 152 million dollars from Congress in order to reopen world-famous prison Alcatraz, known for its harsh management and remote location which made it impossible for prisoners to ever seek escape or communication with the outside world. The reignition of such a striking ideological landmark is part of a broader political operation to promote carcerality and mass incarceration as legitimate and desirable responses to otherness, as Donald Trump claimed on his personal Truth Social account: "The reopening of ALCATRAZ will serve as a symbol of Law, Order, and JUSTICE"[290].

The popularity of the former prison, which welcomes approximately 1.6 million visitors per year[291], is not lost on the Trump administration. A detention facility which opened in the Florida Everglades in 2025 under the management of Governor Ron DeSantis earned the nickname of "Alligator Alcatraz"[292]. In other words, the Trump Administration found it marketable and clever to implement a play on words to describe a facility in which undocumented immigrants awaiting judgment or deportation are cooped up in tents and trailers, and subjected to the threat of wild alligators should they even think about fleeing.

The near-omnipresent imagery of prisons, largely advertised as remote locations where non-White invaders are sent off to be caged to guarantee well-off Whites an

[290] Tami Luhby, "Trump wants $152 million to rebuild and reopen Alcatraz as a secure prison." *CNN*, April 3, 2026, https://edition.cnn.com/2026/04/03/politics/alcatraz-reopen-trump-white-house-budget.

[291] Da Lin, "Alcatraz thrives as tourist destination amid talk of reopening as a prison." *CBS News*, May 25, 2025, https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/alcatraz-tourist-destination-amid-talk-of-reopening/

[292] Chelsea Bailey, Isabel Rosales and Alaa Elassar, "'Alligator Alcatraz': What to know about Florida's new controversial migrant detention facility." *CNN*, July 14, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/07/01/us/what-is-alligator-alcatraz-florida

unadulterated and privileged enjoyment of their daily lives, is part of a conscious and ongoing process of dehumanization.

The courting of -mostly- middle-class Whites by politicians through the theatralization of law enforcement and mass incarceration is not a recent development in political strategy. However, those *mises en scène* are not necessarily conscientized by the populations they are addressed to. As a matter of fact, many of my interviewees - including some left-leaning ones - hold a rather positive, or at least neutral, image of the police.

b. Police brutality

When asked what their opinion was on the police and their methods, Republicans and Democrats shared similar opinions about officers occasionally asserting excessive control on status-related grounds. However, Republicans seemingly treated such behavior as one-time swerves from ill-intentioned individuals, whereas Democrats generally tackled a more global approach, denouncing systemic and institutional issues within the police institution which allowed or encouraged erratic behavior. Republicans were also most likely to come up with scenarios in which the non-White victims of police brutality either deserve such treatment or could have prevented it.

M.S, a 63-year-old White Republican from Arizona, offers two rather interesting example in which she projects the experience of a young person of color interacting with the police. In both cases, she systematically depicts this hypothetic non-White individual as guilty or belligerent:

I think there's been a lot of [...] people who are power hungry. I think that you have good police and bad police, and people get in it for the wrong reasons because they're on a power trip. And then people who want to be servants and they want to do good and they're good, you know, but I think a lot of things are corrupt. I think that there is racism and profiling in the corrupt aspect [...]. But, yeah, and I can see how black people can feel, like, fearful of police, but if they... If, you know, like me when I did things, you know, growing up as a teenager or whatever, they shouldn't have been doing and that if I was guilty of something, I would be afraid, you know, but I would pretend like I didn't do anything wrong. But if you're guilty, then you're guilty. You know what I mean? And you should be afraid. If I'm speeding and there's a policeman behind me, I should be afraid. But if I'm driving and I didn't do anything wrong, there should be no fear. But then I can see where a black person might feel the fear because they don't know what kind of policeman they're going to run into. They don't know it's going to be somebody who's power hungry. And that's very sad. I think some of them [the police officers] are just... They act out of fear, or a power trip. Not all of them, though. And then there's good ones too. You know, you just do what you're told. I don't know if you've seen the like YouTube videos where police officer will pull over and a lot of times it'll be like a black lady or something. And they're belligerent and they won't do what they're told. It's just like, can I see your license? And they give the policeman a hard time or, you know, and you just step out of the car and they don't do it. And that's belligerent. And that's. If you obey the law and you do what you're told, you, you shouldn't have any

> problems. And I think that's probably with black people, there's that feeling of being threatened or prejudiced. You know, somebody being prejudiced towards. So there's that pride, too, where they think, you can't tell me what to do, and they take it personally when they shouldn't[293].

G.P, 96-year-old Republican US Navy retiree, aligns with M. S's claim that police brutality is often fair retribution disguised as outrageous racist events by the media:

> Most policemen and women are well trained to do the right thing in potentially deadly situations. Unfortunately, there are a few bad cops who give the professionals who risk their lives every day to keep us safe a bad name. [...] Too often, with the benefit of hindsight, the press will take the side of the bad guy and blame the cop for using too much force. One rotten apple can spoil a whole [bushel]. And I think this [George Floyd's murder by suffocation at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin] was an example of that. We had a bad cop and he mishandled the scene. And at that time there were racial tensions that were high and the press jumped onto it. I have to hold the press responsible sometimes for exaggerating. And when that thing was finally fully investigated, but my conclusion, and that's only an opinion, was simply that we had one bad cop that did a bad thing and the Black Lives Matter organization took advantage of it. And the press jumped in on the side of the bad guy. And really Floyd, did you study his background? He was a bad, bad person. But the press decided to feel sorry for him and the Black Lives Matter made a national issue and exaggerated things. And so, yeah, we have bad cops. You know, you give too much

[293] Interview conducted on February 26, 2025.

> authority to one person, especially a crude person without any morals, and he'll abuse it for his own satisfaction. But that's not the body politic. That's one individual[294].

S.F, a 22-year-old White Republican medical student from Georgia, condemns the lack of training which, according to her, seems to be the cause of regretful, isolated incidents which do not amount to a concrete issue:

> It [the police resorting to unnecessary or excessive methods to fulfill their missions] has happened in the past. Yes. I know, especially with the huge Black Lives Matter movement. And I think a lot of that was also fueled by the COVID shutdown and there was just a lot going on a lot of emotions. I do not think it is a habit. I do not think it's something that's continuously happening every single day to the point where it's like a huge problem. But I think there's always room for improvement and we should always be looking into that. I will say that's one thing that I did not particularly like about Trump's administration. He didn't really put much effort into increasing police training or filtering during the hiring process. So that was one thing I didn't like. I did not like that he didn't really make much effort there. [...] I think it's impossible to have only good people protecting us. There's always going to be bad people or good people that do bad things. But I still feel completely safe around police officers, and I hate that there's people out there that don't feel safe around them. But I think it's just something that we can improve on[295].

[294] Interview conducted on June 7, 2025.
[295] Interview conducted on May 6, 2025.

TF, 18-year-old White Republican army recruit from North Carolina, offers the following explanation, claiming that while the institution might be gangrened by systemic faults, the real issue resides in the media's eagerness to overexpose the few racist police officers who stray from the path of exemplary peacekeeping:

> [If] you line up 100 people in the military or in the police force or whatever. Out of that 100 people, there's probably, we'll say three out of those 100 people are racist or homophobic. You can't put that hat over the entire 100 people, just because of those three people, which I will say, you know, in recent history racism has been a very big problem. But to put an entire group of people under one specific word or one specific ideology, that is kind of wrong because, you know, you do have those cops that are racist or homophobic, but then you have those cops that they understand that their job is to help anybody in need. [...] I think just in the police and the military, it's more out on the media to put a bad light over it, because, you know, especially news outlets, a lot of time they're just trying to get the clicks and the views. So to have be like, oh, a racist cop versus just some, just some random racist person that works in, like out of Walmart is going to draw more clicks and views. [...] But there's definitely some people that let the power get to their head. [...] You do have individuals that are the problem. But then you have the people who are going to, who aren't necessarily in the wrong, but they're not doing anything to stop the wrong, which kind of puts them in the wrong. So then it becomes a systemic issue[296].

[296] Interview conducted on May 23, 2025.

Three bigoted police officers out of a hundred people lineup seems to be a rather generous estimate, considering that as of 2022, Black citizens were arrested by the police at double the rate White people were[297]. However, this estimation should not come as a surprise since T.F is both a member of the forces of order (Two thirds of police officers in a 2016 survey said executions of Black people by members of the police were "isolated incidents and not signs of broader problems between police and the black community") and a Republican (43% of White Republicans say Black people are treated less fairly than Whites by the police against 88% of White Democrats)[298].

S.N, a 26-year-old Caribbean-American flight attendant living in New York, states that while she has not experienced police brutality personally, it is something she is often confronted to on social media. She also puts forward the claim that just because they are part of the police does not mean officers are exempt from racial bias or that they evolve on a higher moral plane. She argues that racist individuals inevitably instill some of their bias in whatever professional activity they practice, but that the consequences of those biases are inevitably documented and condemned, because they are often lethal but also because police officers are supposed to embody protection and justice:

> I do think racial minorities are targeted more with the police. They're a little more like on edge, or like they, they're always just very suspicious of you. Um, I have seen, I've seen like body cam footage of like the Breonna Taylor[299] shooting and, you know, that's very sad. You know, it kind of makes you mad

[297] Emily Widra, "Despite fewer people experiencing police contact, racial disparities in arrests, police misconduct, and police use of force continue.", *Prison Policy Initiative*, December 19, *2024,* https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2024/12/19/policing_survey_2022/

[298] Drew DeSilver, Michael Lipka and Dalia Fahmy, "Race and policing in America: 10 things we know." *Pew Research Center*, April 14, 2024,https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/06/03/10-things-we-know-about-race-and-policing-in-the-u-s/

[299] Breonna Taylor was a young African-American woman who was shot to death in 2020 in her own apartment by police officers who forcibly entered her home on the premise of an investigation into a drug-dealing operation, which ultimately proved to be unfruitful and groundless.

> anytime you see a video like that, because I wouldn't have felt like I was in danger. So why did this cop, that, you know, has all this training, why did he feel like he was in danger and needed to shoot someone? Some cops think they're like vigilantes and they're going to take matters into their own hands, and the power gets to their head. So like, I do believe it happens, but I do believe that could be anyone in any profession, anyone that has access to weapons. [...] But yeah, there are, there are a lot of racist cops out there because there are a lot of racist people out there. You know, but you know, there are a lot of probably racist pilots, racist dentists, racist doctors. You know, it's just, we bring those to light because those are the ones with guns and they're killing people. But um, so, you know, police violence does exist, but um, it exists in a way that violence exists in other professions as well. You know, like it's not police violence. It's like there's violence everywhere. Um, that's not to say it's not an issue [...][300].

DJ, a 23-year-old Democratic White male from New Jersey, estimates that officers who might harbor racial biases meet no resistance within the institution, thus granting them impunity.

> The sad truth is that many people in America are straight up racist. [...] Now it's more encouraged to just talk about it based on the current administration, so they take any opportunity to show that. And one of the ways to show that is police brutality towards racial minorities. And it demonstrates their privilege and their power, and they still don't face any consequences for it. So, they thrive on the fact that they can do whatever

[300] Interview conducted on August 6, 2025.

> they want and get away with it. [Police officers] get off on having a power trip. Yeah, for sure. It's the exact same mind system that an abuser has. So. Yeah, that's not surprising at all. And it's sad that we get those people as our police and not better people. Not all policemen are bad, but, you know, the bad apples are not making the good ones look good, so. [Excessive methods] are always targeted at racial minorities. Like, I guess they assume that, like, a black man they run into will be armed, so they. They use excessive force. They pull out their guns immediately. Even if he wasn't armed at all. They just assumed he had one[301].

W.R, a White 20-year-old political science Democrat student from Maryland, supports the claim that police brutality is not a dysfunctional aspect of the system, but rather a pillar the police institution is banking on to maintain control and authority over marginalized populations:

> I think it's an inherent part of policing in America. And I also don't think that you can be a police officer without engaging in that in some way. Not that all cops set out to be that or think of themselves like that or that is their goal. It's all systemic because that's such an integral part of the system which is built off of this oppression. You can't escape it. And you can't fix it from within. The whole thing is so designed to protect police officers. I think that people that are like, well, I'm gonna fix it from inside. I think you're fooling yourself. I'm like, tell yourself whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night, but do not pretend that you're not contributing to this in some way. I've heard that argument before where it's like, well, if you're guilty, don't run. And I was

[301] Interview conducted on March 21, 2025.

> like, I just don't think that that can be applied to American police officers. They are so shoot first, ask questions later, and then they don't even get fired for that. I don't really think that you should have to engage in the cops if you don't want to. If you are an American and you are an American minority, you have every right to regard every police interaction as hostile, even if you haven't done anything wrong. It's just. It's really. And also, like, there are certain things in the states, like, for example, possession of weed. I would probably get a much lesser charge than somebody who was a black man that was carrying weed. There's this spectrum of wrong as well[302].

The various perspectives offered by recipients allow me to venture the guess that, with few exceptions, the police are largely understood as a lawful, respectable institution whose reputation occasionally suffers from the actions of a few bad apples which stain the pristine image of dedicated individuals that put their lives on the line in the name of law and order. It is thus understandable why the prerogative of self-righteousness in murder trials is not confined to citizens.

The very same Texas Castle Doctrine bill which allowed John Horne to escape prosecution in 2008 was invoked in a criminal trial ten years later, when White police officer Amber Guyger shot Botham Shem Jean, a 26-year-old Black accountant. Thinking she was coming home after her shift, Guyger did not notice she was on the wrong floor and mistakenly entered Jean's apartment instead of her own. Startled, she shot him twice before calling her colleagues. "Prosecutors also asserted that Guyger [...] was more concerned about herself, repeatedly telling a 911 operator she was going to lose her job and texting her partner". When asked why she displayed such promptness instead of

[302] Interview conducted on March 5, 2025.

trying to make sense of the situation -which she logically could have done considering Botham Shem Jean was watching television while eating ice-cream, a rather unthreatening position- she said: "I was scared he was going to kill me"[303]. The jury rejected the Castle Doctrine defense, and Guyger was eventually convicted. It is worth noting that manslaughter charges can technically range anywhere from a few years to life imprisonment, and that Amber Guyger, a seasoned police officer who should have technically been able to handle and de-escalate such a situation, was only charged with ten years in prison for killing an innocent man in his own apartment.

Despite the brevity of the punishment, the Gruyger case remains one of the few notable instances where a police officer was actually indicted, straying from the overwhelming tradition of permissiveness awarded to police officers responsible for the killings of Black individuals. The murder of John Crawford III at the hands of two Beavercreek, Ohio police officers, is another painful reminder of the unlimited power of Whiteness over Black lives:

> [O]n August 5, 2014, a young African American man, John Crawford III, twenty-two, was shot and killed by a police officer at a Walmart store in Beavercreek, Ohio, after a White male shopper called 911, reporting there was a Black man walking around the store with a gun, pointing it at people. When the police arrived on the scene, they opened fire on the unsuspecting Crawford, who, as captured on store video, appeared to be alone in the store aisle talking on his cell phone, casually carrying by his side an unloaded air rifle he had taken from a store shelf, presumably with the intent of

[303] Erin Donaghue, "Amber Guyger verdict: Guilty verdict delivered in ex-Dallas police officer trial today — live updates." *CBS News*, October 1, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amber-guyger-verdict-guilty-verdict-delivered-in-ex-dallas-police-officer-trial-today-live-updates-2019-10-01/

> purchasing it. Within seconds, Crawford was dead. The officers involved in the shooting, Sean Williams and David Darkow, were not charged[304].

c. In-group loyalty within police departments

Facts and figures seem to uphold W. R's claim that "The whole thing is so designed to protect police officers". As a matter of fact, the criminal justice apparatus provides the police with impunity through several processes. Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that the police are policed by the police, with Internal Affairs sections handling most misconduct allegations directed at their peers and colleagues, which might skew their objectivity. Secondly, virtually no transparency is awarded to outsiders in the case of misconduct allegations, as police departments are not required to disclose such information[305]. Thirdly, should a police officer be charged, the information might not circle back to the station he is attached to, prompting the charge to go completely unnoticed, thus granting him the privilege of an unadulterated life exempt of retribution:

> Still, only about half of the total cases ultimately resulted in job loss for the arrested officers. [...] about two-thirds[306] of all the cases originated from arrests made by a police department that didn't employ the officer arrested, meaning, in at least some cases, police departments may not be aware that some of their own officers are committing crimes[307].

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[304] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?,* 28.

[305] Macy Steinlage, Chris W. Bonneau, William Bianco and Nick Clark, "Police Misconduct." *Everything Policy*, July 31, 2024, https://www.everythingpolicy.org/policy-briefs/police-misconduct

[306] The numbers correspond to the study of 6,724 cases involving the arrests of 5,545 sworn officers across the U.S between 2005 and 2011.

[307] Matt Ferner, "Here's how often cops are arrested for breaking the laws they're paid to uphold." *HuffPost*, June 24, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cops-arrested_n_576c2e13e4b0cedfa4b9470f

Fourthly, a considerable portion of crimes committed by police officers is rarely reported due to their privileged status and network. Research dedicated to the existence of police subcultures has found that in-group akinness promotes an omertà which guarantees impunity to its members. Some of the shared values and characteristics across police officers include questionable traits such as:

> [...] loyalty and secrecy among officers, [...] a coercive authority over citizens, or an authoritarian personality; distrust and suspicion of the public including a cynical attitude; a strong emphasis on law enforcement tactics; assessing people and situations in terms of their potential threat; and burnout. All of these features are together known as the monolithic police culture[308].

Such a tight-knit community allows officers to not only feel protected in a line of work which entails constant caution and wariness, but also to stand together against perceived threats. This dynamic has been known to disturb the management of misconduct allegations in the context of officers' professional lives, but also within their private sphere, notably in domestic violence cases: "[...] officer-involved domestic violence is occurring at a much higher rate compared to the general population, yet officers are not held to the same standard of accountability as non-law enforcement offenders". This can be explained by the fact that spousal victims are subjected to various incentives not to denounce their partners, knowing they are "likely contacting someone who knows her/his abuser", that their partners often carry several weapons, but also that

[308] Lindsey Blumenstein, "Domestic Violence Within Law Enforcement Families: The Link Between Traditional Police Subculture and Domestic Violence Among Police." *University of South Florida*, 2009, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/1862/

officers have privileged access to emergency domestic violence establishments and programs, which often prevents this avenue from being an option for survivors[309].

Not only are the police allowed to resort to excessive force or unlawful processes, but they are also squarely awarded the means to do so on larger scales through the ongoing militarization of their equipment and methods.

d. Overmilitarization of the police

The overmilitarization of the United-Statesian police was implemented in 1981, as the government-backed War on Drugs was being waged against non-White communities, primarily directed at African-Americans. Then-President Ronald Reagan pushed for Congress to adopt the Military Cooperation with Law Enforcement Act, which stimulated the sharing of military resources to police forces. Reagan's successors gladly picked up the torch, as Bill Clinton notably campaigned for and funded militarization programs such as the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, as well as the Byrne grant program[310]. Those programs provided not only access to military-grade weaponry, but also specific training which extrapolated the development of Police Paramilitary Units (PPUs). Those units met at the crossroads between conventional police work and traditional military training. The juxtaposition of both ethics created a new form of all-powerful subculture within police departments:

[309] Annelise Mennicke and Katie Ropes, "Estimating the rate of domestic violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers: A review of methods and estimates." *Aggression and Violent Behavior. Science Direct. Volume 31, pp 157-164, ISSN 1359-1789*, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.09.003.

[310] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow,* 95.

> The elite self-perception and status granted to these police units stems from the high-status military special operations groups have in military culture. [...] Training constructs and reinforces the “dangerousness” of the group's work, the importance of feeling and thinking as a team, the belief that this elite team is doing "real" police work [...) and the “pleasure” that comes from playing out "warrior fantasies”[311].

The most notorious Paramilitary Police Unit is probably the Special Weapons And Tactics (SWAT) unit. Originally introduced as an ad hoc solution to terrorism and high-risk situations such as hostage negotiations, SWAT teams quickly became the default response to drug investigation, instilling violent raids or sieges into the police’s daily practices. While citizens are inclined to believe that this shift is the result of heightened serious drug crime, the reality is quite different:

> The Times reported that [in the 1990s], police departments had an extraordinary incentive to use their new equipment for drug enforcement: the extra federal funding the local police departments received was tied to antidrug policing. The size of the disbursements was linked to the number of city or county drug arrests. Each arrest, in theory, would net a given city or county about $153 in state and federal funding. Non-drug-related policing brought no federal dollars, even for violent crime[312].

Police departments also replenished their accounts through the seizure of goods obtained during drug raids or drug-related traffic stops, a procedure which became

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[311] Peter B. Kraska and Victor E. Kappeler, “Militarizing American Police: The Rise and Normalization of Paramilitary Units.” *Social Problems* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.2307/3096870.

[312] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.98.

common practice after the passing of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act in 1970, as a means to deter competitors or aspiring drug-dealers from claiming the goods and taking over the business. However, it only became truly profitable to law enforcement agencies in 1984, when Congress modified the law and made it possible for police to keep up to 80% of the seized goods' value.

> Neither the owner of the property nor anyone else need be charged with a crime, much less found guilty of one. [...] Once the property was seized, the owner had no right of counsel, and the burden was placed on him to prove the property's "innocence." Because those who were targeted were typically poor or of moderate means, they often lacked the resources to hire an attorney or pay the considerable court costs. [...] According to a report commissioned by the Department of Justice, between 1988 and 1992 alone, Byrne-funded drug task forces seized over $1 billion in assets. Remarkably, this figure does not include drug task forces funded by the DEA or other federal agencies[313].

The binding portrayal of Paramilitary Police Unit members as superior heroic leaders, coupled with financial incentives emerging directly from the government, as well as the reaping of material benefits during property seizures inevitably leads most PPUs to "proactively seek out and even manufacture highly dangerous situations"[314].

The overmilitarization of the police has lately proven to embody not only violent crime-response but also repressive State-sanctioned violence. As a matter of fact, a new wave of political repression was prompted as a response to the 2014 murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which occurred a few days after the killing of John Crawford

[313] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 99.
[314] Kraska and Kappeler, "Militarizing American Police",13.

III. Though recollections of the events are contradictory, one element in particular remains striking for all parties involved:

> [The] inhumane treatment of Michael Brown's body, left to lie uncovered in the street where he was slain for four hours, lifelessly baking in the hot summer sun, his parents kept away at gunpoint and with police dogs. [...] When residents spontaneously created a memorial of teddy bears and other mementos at the site of the shooting, a police officer with a canine unit allowed one of the dogs to urinate on it, and later a police cruiser drove by, crushing it and scattering the rose petals Lezley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, had arranged at the site. When she returned the next day, placing a dozen roses at the memorial, a police cruiser again came through and destroyed it[315].

The police's disregard and disrespectful approach to the situation led to an escalation that culminated into the organization of "freedom-ride" adjacent events by Black Lives Matter activists and the rallying of concerned and empathizing citizens to come march along with the Ferguson population in memory of Michael Brown. The police response to the protests and marches was characterized by mass arrets and an overwhelming demonstration of military force, using tanks and other military equipment and tactics, which gave way to heavy criticism from the media:

> In its tactics, appearance, and especially equipment, the security operation looks more like it belongs on a battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan than in the

[315] Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, 29.

> streets of an American suburb. Armored vehicles, tear gas, full combat gear, rifles — what *is* all that?[316]
>
> Following a night of looting, violence and peaceful protests in Ferguson, Mo. -- ending in the arrests of more than 80 people -- several news images have struck a chord online, including a photo that has drawn comparisons to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China.[317]

The flourishing comparisons with warfare zones and historic landmarks which embody a fight for freedom and democracy render a rather telling picture of both the current United-Statesian law enforcement landscape and the enabling capacity of the government.

The overmilitarization of law-enforcement agencies has precipitated the unfolding of a self-fulfilling prophecy that routinely criminalizes mostly Black and Brown populations, through policies and political discourse that promote repressive measures toward aggressive non-White figures erected as criminal myths. Overpolicing, be it perpetrated by actual police forces or White citizenry, has accomplished its function and led to the mass incarceration of non-Whites. Prompted by the War on Drugs, we have entered since the 1970s a new age of marginalization that secludes primarily young Black men away from society, condemning them to bear the weight of society's disapproval for life. Mass incarceration is no less than an heir to the continuum of slavery and Jim Crow eras. The Prison Industrial Complex is the modern shackle White society has placed on African-Americans, and it is a direct reflection of United-Statesian society.

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[316] Amanda Taub, "What was THAT? A guide to the military gear being used against civilians in Ferguson." *Vox*, August 18, 2014, https://www.vox.com/2014/8/18/6003377/ferguson-military-gear

[317] "Is 'tank man' Ferguson's Tiananmen Square?" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 24, 2020, https://www.ajc.com/news/tank-man-ferguson-tiananmen-square/hrRyWfoujHVFTsb1GhrZUJ/

C. The Pillars of Mass Incarceration and the Symbiotic Partnership of White Society and the Prison Industrial Complex

a. Mass incarceration as a remedy to social ills

The Prison Industrial Complex can be described as an array of convergent "bureaucratic, political, and economic interests" which rely on the proliferation of mass incarceration: "The PIC is central in explaining the profit-making aspects of mass imprisonment and the prison boom"[318]. Politicians, private and public corporations which specialize in the building and managing of prisons, as well as economically-challenged municipalities strive to advocate for mass imprisonment in order to further a social hierarchy that places them on top of the stratum pyramid. Alienating discourse from primary definers or seemingly authoritative sources is one of the pillars of the narratives that uphold and promote the necessity of prison expansion.

Distrust for Black men is a belief etched into the United-Statesian mindset through every aspect of daily life, be it policy-making or media tabloidization. I have already covered the racist and conservative undertones baked into the fabric of the "terrible few" and "ideal criminal" phenomena which plague the representation of young and adult Black men. However, another formula popularized by Hillary Clinton in 1996 goes as far as criminalizing Black children. While giving a speech to support her husband's decision to implement the "three strikes" law which would warrant life sentencing for people convicted of a felony after two prior violent offenses, no matter how

[318] John M. Eason, "Prison–Industrial Complex." *SAGE Encyclopedia of Economics and Society*, 1316-17,2015, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452206905.n542.

serious the third charge; Then First Lady to President Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton used the phrase "superpredator"to refer to underage non-White boys who, according to since-discredited academic John J. Dilulio Jr., would grow up to become "young murderers, rapists, and muggers"[319]. The inflammatory narrative played into the dehumanizing portrayal of non-White youth as bestial, conscience-less, and animal-like, criminalizing not only the children, but also their older relatives who had supposedly failed as educators: "He blamed these chronic offenders on 'moral poverty ... the poverty of being without loving, capable, responsible adults who teach you right from wrong'". The hypothetical victims of those to-be offenders were clearly determined by Dilulio, who openly designated Whites as the dehumanized victims of cruel Black kids: "'They place zero value on the lives of their victims, whom they reflexively dehumanize as just so much worthless 'white trash',' he wrote". Instigating and racist overtones aside, the numbers advanced by Dilulio were plainly and simply wrong: "By 2000, when tens of thousands more children were supposed to be out there mugging and killing, juvenile murder arrests had fallen by two-thirds"[320]. Hillary Clinton was not the only politician to lean on the "superpredator" rhetoric: "The concept was used by legislators to justify a host of 'tough on crime' laws at the state and federal levels, including laws that allowed life sentences for juvenile offenders. Nearly two-thirds of juveniles sentenced under these laws were Black"[321]. The intense and uninterrupted promotion of mandatory sentencing laws, such as the Clinton-backed "Three Strikes and You're Out" law which has now been adopted by more than 25 states, has resulted in a large-scale impossibility for judges to

[319] John J. Dilulio Jr, "Arresting Ideas: Tougher law enforcement is driving down urban crime." *Hoover Institution*, September 1, 1995, https://www.hoover.org/research/arresting-ideas

[320] Carroll Bogert and Lynnell Hancock, "'Superpredator': How media coverage affected juvenile justice." *The Marshall Project*, November 20, 2020, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/11/20/superpredator-the-media-myth-that-demonized-a-generation-of-black-youth

[321] Fields, *Neighborhood Watch*, 22.

implement sentencing on a case-by-case basis. Consequently, convict of all walks of crime are lumped into harsher, lengthier sentences: drug-related crimes "are punished more severely and inflexibly than almost any other offense"[322].

Those subjected to said practices are, the crushing majority of the time, Black Americans. While it might be hard to fathom:

> More African Americans 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 mass incarceration of people of color is a big part of the reason that a black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child born during slavery. [...] Thousands of black men have disappeared into prisons and jails, locked away for drug crimes that are largely ignored when committed by whites[323].

b. The school-to-prison pipeline

The singling out and progressive abduction of young Black men out of their communities begins as early as during their school years.

Black children are conditioned -if not predestined, over the course of their academic careers, to conform and respond to carcerality. Indeed, educational facilities have grown to be constituted and handled in the same manner as correctional facilities.

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[322] Jamie Fellner, "Cruel and usual: Disproportionate Sentences for New York Drug Offenders." *Human Rights Watch*, 1997, https://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/usny/#:~:text=Persons%20convicted%20of%20Class%20A,rape%2C%20manslaughter%2C%20and%20robbery.

[323] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 216.

High-schoolers, and non-White high schoolers in particular, are subjected to the same controlled routines as inmates: "[Y]outh of color are more likely to be arrested, detained, formally charged, transferred to adult court, and confined to secure residential facilities than their white counterparts"[324].

The most obvious connection to draw is the presence of correctional officers in both institutions. As a matter of fact, students evolve before their own prison guards every day. School resource officers were introduced in the 1950s in the context of the expansion of community policing, and popularized in the aftermath of the 1999 Columbine school shooting[325]. Though their missions are not clearly defined, their role is principally to deter students from committing crime. While only 1% of schools appointed police officers in 1975, around 45% of schools across the United States do so today, bringing the number of sworn school resource officers to 23, 400 in 2020[326].

The constant presence of armed police officers in a place where young people are actively developing their identity, biases, social capital, and overall representation of the world is grim enough, but it gets even more disturbing when taken into account that "[while] school resource officers are effective at detecting drug-related activity on campus and addressing violent crime related to gang activity in school, [they] do not lower instances of bullying and low-level crime like vandalism and schoolyard fights"[327]. This observation counters the rather logical assumption that school resource officers should address school-related matters. Instead, they replicate the policing methods of

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[324] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*,142.

[325] Kendrick Washington, "School Resource Officers: When the Cure is Worse than the Disease." *American Civil Liberties Union Washington*, May 24, 2021, https://www.aclu-wa.org/news/school-resource-officers-when-cure-worse-disease/

[326] Elizabeth Davis, "School Resource Officers, 2019–2020." *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, May 24, 2021, https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/school-resource-officers-2019-2020

[327] Monic Behnken, "Why school police officers may not be the most effective way to prevent violence." *Iowa State Research*, November 19, 2024, https://research.iastate.edu/2024/11/19/why-school-police-officers-may-not-be-the-most-effective-way-to-prevent-violence/

regular police efforts, except they concentrate their effort on children fourteen to eighteen years old.

Modeling their approach after traditional policing, school resource officers feed into the "school to prison pipeline", a term that describes the training of majorly non-White youth into prison-like drills and conditioning methods which stray students away from proper education and further into criminalization:

> For instance, some students attend schools that are completely gated up and can only enter after first passing through a metal detector. Other schools have law enforcement stationed on their campus by which students have been arrested, pepper sprayed, and randomly searched at school[328].

Students are thus acclimatized to giving up their constitutional rights and enjoined to compromise or altogether abandon their education. School resource officers have been told to consequently impact the likelihood that schools "will report student incidents to law enforcement agencies[329]", further ostracizing young people and shoving them towards the criminal justice system:

> Black students are forced to choose between "acting white" to achieve academic success or maintaining the integrity of their racial and ethnic identities as African Americans, identities that are not rewarded by schools, which have been made in the image of the white middle class[330].

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[328] Mei-Ling Malone, "The School-to-Prison Pipeline: Where Did it Come From? How Do We Stop It?" *Equity Alliance*, 2013, https://equityalliance.stanford.edu/content/blog-school-prison-pipeline-where-did-it-come-how-do-we-stop-it-mei-ling-malone

[329] Michael Heise and Jason P. Nance, "Defund the (School) Police? Bringing Data to Key School-to-Prison Pipeline Claims." *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (Vol. 111), 2021, 3.

[330] Marsha Weissman, *Prelude to Prison: Student Perspectives on School Suspension* (Syracuse University Press, 2015), 26.

In order to navigate misjudgment and denial of their identities, non-White young people have had to develop specific defense mechanisms such as cultural straddlers[331]. Indeed, numerous young people of color have stated that they try and "act White" whenever they find themselves in a conflicting situation with representatives of the law. Acting "White" becomes a synonym for acting lawful, innocent, legitimate. Such coping mechanisms can result in identity fragmentation, preventing young people from exercising their genuine sense of self throughout all areas of their daily life, having them stray from their original self especially at school. Those who refuse to resort to cultural straddlers or comply with "acting White" are punished through imposed negative assumptions about the codes inherent or traditional to their cultures or ethnicities[332].

The judicialization of the handling of young people is likely to result, through "policies such as high stakes testing and zero tolerance disciplinary codes[333]" into them being pushed out of classic education and into alternative schools. Lightened workload and timetables as well as unfit pedagogies often result in a lack of preparedness compared to "mainstream" students, jeopardizing both their return to traditional education and their access to higher education.

The process of sentencing students to suspension or rerailing their schooling towards alternative schools also mirrors that of court hearings:

> Both defendants and students go through judicial or quasi-judicial processes to determine guilt, which involve witnesses and the presentation and refutation of evidence to an authoritative figure who determines

[331] Victor M. Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York University Press, 2011), 145.

[332] Prudence L. Carter, "Straddling Boundaries: Identity, Culture, and School." *Sociology of Education,* Vol. 79, No. 4, 2006, 304-328.

[333] Weissman, Prelude to Prison, 23-24.

> culpability and renders a decision. If found "guilty," both a defendant and a student may receive a sentence that removes them from the normal social environment and places them in a setting designated for others who have been found to violate social or institutional norms[334].

Once the sentence is announced, it is irrevocable, and will permanently alter the course of young African-American students' lives: "By the time they reach their early thirties, 52 percent of young, male, African American high school dropouts have spent some time in jail or prison"[335].

c. Incarceration as a fated life trajectory

The mapping of carcerality proves to be limitless in non-Whites' lives, especially for young Black men. School is not the only area of Black life governed by the threat of imprisonment. Once an inmate is spat out by the carceral complex, they return to their communities lacking the tools necessary for reinsertion. As a matter of fact, half of the inmates who come home after serving their sentence will return to prison within a few years[336]. That is particularly true for individuals from already marginalized backgrounds, who exit prison to return to disadvantaged communities which are often unable to offer the resources necessary for rehabilitation: "Work, social and family support used to be the means whereby ex-prisoners were reintegrated into mainstream society"[337]. Indeed, lack of entry-level jobs, depleted social capital, and exclusion from welfare programs

[334] Weissman, Prelude to Prison, 29.
[335] Weissman, Prelude to Prison, 22.
[336] "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *NAACP*, 2025, https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet.
[337] Garland, *The Culture of Control*,196.

hinder prisoners trying to reclaim civilian status. Disadvantage communities, not unlike schools, become premises for impending (re)incarceration: “Nearly 75% of formerly incarcerated people are still unemployed a year after release. A lack of stable employment increases the likelihood that an individual will return to jail or prison. In fact, research has found that joblessness is the single most important predictor of recidivism”[338].

The recovery from prison is made even harder because of the growing similarity between jails and prisons and those underprivileged “ghetto” communities, resulting in a symbiosis between the two parties: “sweeping economic and political forces have reshaped the mid-century "Black Belt" to *make the ghetto more like a prison;* and the "inmate society" has broken down in ways that *make the prison more like a ghetto”*. Both are plagued with “economic marginality and social disintegration, [...] a *surplus population* devoid of market utility”[339], and are subjected to hypervigilance from the state, in the form of prison guards, police officers, or welfare administrators. Those incapacitating dynamics often push the formerly incarcerated into reiteration, creating a constant influx from prison to community, and community to prison. Once a Black individual from a lower-income background has been sucked into the spiral of incarceration, they are faced with the everlasting threat of reverting to the status of inmate. Those who reside within those disrupted communities, particularly the families and loved ones of inmates, are left to endure the absence of their sons, husbands, and brothers, who endlessly forfeit their freedom to the Prison Industrial Complex.

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[338] “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet.” NAACP.

[339] Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: Rethinking race and imprisonment in twenty-first-century America.” *Boston Review,* April 1, 2002, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/loic-wacquant-deadly-symbiosis/.

Blacks are thus conditioned into incarceration through alienating educational infrastructure and decaying communal infrastructure. Incarceration, in turn, enforces and accentuates society's larger hierarchical socio-racial order: "In prisons and alternative schools alike, those sentenced to prison or sent to alternative school are disproportionately people of color [...] In contrast, the authority figures (wardens and guards in the case of prisons, and principals and teachers in the case of alternative schools) are predominantly white"[340]. Prisons mirror society in the sense that the power imbalances which exist on the outside are inevitably heightened in confined, control-oriented spaces. Entities that hold racial, economic, social, and cultural superiority[341] over marginalized groups who are overrepresented in prisons do not surrender this authority inside the walls of the prison. Inside prisons, control is exercised by various actors on a wide range of levels. It is necessary to address both the immediate interactions which govern the relationships between the White middle-class and mass incarceration, and the various political and economic dynamics which operate on a large-scale magnitude and provoke complex consequences that shape the socio-economic and racial United-Statesian landscape.

I have already discussed how the White middle-class has come to construct itself as a vessel for moral guardianship and an advocate for social decency. Prisons and jails have provided White middle-class members with an opportunity to further their mission: "The professional middle class articulates its own tastes and beliefs in its attempt to reform the social other while at the same time positioning itself hierarchically. [...] The prison projects a mirror image of traditional middle-class values and habits [...] They

[340] Weissman, *Prelude to Prison*, 29.

[341] I use "superiority" to qualify a value that is recognized as bestowing social recognition upon its bearer, not as a way to demean marginalized or minority groups.

stage their moral superiority"[342]. Lawyers, architects, engineers, prison guards, and journalists, all largely middle-class professions, shape both the very fabric and the representation of prisons in the public eye. As such, the Prison Industrial Complex upholds the interests of middle-class Whites through the mental and physical control and exploitation of non-White populations. However, middle-class Whites are not the sole beneficiaries of the Prison Industrial Complex.

d. An opportunity for profit

Managing prisons has become a proper business, and a lucrative one at that. The number of convictions leading to jail sentences has skyrocketed, especially for Black people, since the launch of Nixon's War on Drugs in 1971, sparking an increasing need for more numerous and complex infrastructures. Both interest groups and corporations have risen to the occasion, wagering on "racist structures and ideologies to render mass punishment palatable and profitable"[343]. Politicians, private and public corporations which specialize in the building and managing of prisons, as well as economically-challenged municipalities, strive to advocate for mass imprisonment in order to further a hierarchy that places them on top of the socio-economic pyramid.

Some interest groups, once again falling under the American Legislative Exchange Council lobbying groups gathering, rely on the Prison Industrial Complex for profit. ALEC, which is partly funded by conservative billionaire Koch Brothers, has manufactured

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[342] Magnus Hörnqvist, "Pleasure, punishment and the professional middle class." in *Why Prison?,* ed. David Scott, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 120-122.

[343] Angela Davis, "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex." *History is a weapon*, 2019, https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html.

investments and legislation that guarantee its enrichment at every step of the criminal justice system process. In 2007, ALEC campaigned for the privatization of paroles and the bail bond industry. The bail bond system aims, through the payment of a to-be-reimbursed sum set by a judge, at reducing the low trial appearance rate for convicted individuals. Several solutions might be offered to defendants who do not have the means to post bail. They can, for instance, resort to contracting bail bond agents, who vouch for defendants and pay the sum forward in exchange for reimbursement, interest fees included. Should the defendant be unable to offer a monetary assurance of reliability, they can resort to alternative solutions such as complying to house arrest or ankle monitoring devices. However, those schemes must be managed by private contractors. Knowing the alternative to posting bail or agreeing to house arrest and ankle monitoring is remaining in custody within the trial, unable to work and keep on with one's life, defendants are often faced with the obligation to take up one of the aforementioned options. That is when ALEC becomes operative. The American Bail Coalition, one of the executive members of ALEC's Public Safety and Elections Task Force, would necessarily benefit from such privatization[344]. Moreover, ALEC has also successfully introduced legislation that "require[s] a bond as a condition for early release from prison, [or] make[s] bail mandatory for many nonviolent offenses"[345], dramatically increasing the bounds of bondsmen's reach within the criminal justice system.

The American Legislative Exchange Council's "zeal to privatize prisons has fundamentally altered our criminal justice system, making it very profitable to arrest and lock up more Americans and immigrants and do so for longer. It should be no surprise

[344] Mike Elk and Bob Sloan, "The Hidden History of ALEC and Prison Labor." *The Nation*, August 1, 2011, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hidden-history-alec-and-prison-labor/.

[345] Shane Bauer, "Inside the Wild, Shadowy, and Highly Lucrative Bail Industry." *Mother Jones*, 2014, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/06/bail-bond-prison-industry/.

that the Corrections Corporation of America and Geo Group bankrolled ALEC for years"[346]. I have explained earlier how the Corrections Corporation of America, a company specializing in holding institutions for immigrants, now renamed CoreCivic, gained economic traction through ALEC's campaign for the adoption of Arizona law SB 1070 which grants police officers the ability to stop and arrest people they suspect of being undocumented. That is also the case of GeoGroup, another influential private prison firm, whose immigration processing centers were also filled thanks to ALEC's involvement.

ALEC has also paved the way for the profitable exploitation of inmates through the formulation of the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIE), which would be adopted by Congress in 1979. The act aimed at incorporating inmates into the workforce for their own benefit, structuring their daily life and allowing them to fund their expenses, as well as for the benefit of corporations, providing them with a cheap domestic labor force. Though the act positioned that inmates were to be paid a living wage, a loophole which enabled companies to compensate the workers with microscopic incomes was quick to be exploited. Indeed, certain work qualifications fell under the "service" portion of the act, rendering remuneration unregulated. This ambiguous clause allowed companies such as Martori Farms, produce provider for giant chain store company Walmart, to reward the prisoners with approximately 50 cents per hour in exchange for intense agricultural labor eight hours a day with little to no breaks and insufficient hydration[347]. The fact that the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification

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[346] Rebekah Wilce and Lisa Rachelle Graves, "ALEC Exposed." *American Bar Association*, July 1, 2014, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/resources/human-rights/archive/alec-exposed/.

[347] Sadhbh Walshe, "How US Prison Labour Pads Corporate Profits at Taxpayers' Expense." *The Guardian*, July 6, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/06/prison-labor-pads-corporate-profits-taxpayers-expense.

Program resulted in such mistreatment, sharing disturbing similarities with modern slavery[348], did not seem to alert the American Legislative Exchange Council nor their partners. Far from shying away from developing legislation that would turn prisons into for-profit institutions, ALEC committed to their capitalist and exploitative guiding principles and offered, in 1995, the Prison Industries Act. The passing by Congress of the Prison Industries Act in 1995, was largely understood as a way to regulate "the employment of inmate labor in state correctional institutions and in the private manufacturing of certain products under specific conditions"[349]. The PIE had previously aimed at redirecting a portion of inmates' wages towards the reimbursement of the costs associated with their incarceration, as a way to alleviate the financial toll on taxpayers. The Prison Industries Act pushed for the redirection of this sum towards "private sector prison industry expansion account"[350]. This implied that a budget that previously benefited inmates, even on a relatively minor scale, would now be allocated to the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex, through the construction of new infrastructure and the funding of experimental programs in collaboration with private sector companies.

This deliberate decision to expand prison labor for private industries has caused hundreds of large corporations to turn to inmate labor as a means to reduce the cost of production of their products, thus rewarding themselves with more advantageous sales margins. However, companies such as Revlon, Boeing, or Microsoft, do not rely on prison labor solely for the employment cost. Indeed, not only do inmates differ from traditional

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[348] The comparison between inmate labor and modern slavery is used here to underline a shared characteristic: the impossibility to leave a situation due to legal and physical bounds and coercion.

[349] "Prison Industries Act Exposed", *The Center for Media and Democracy*, October 12, 2017, https://www.alecexposed.org/wiki/Prison_Industries_Act_Exposed

[350] Elk and Sloan, "The Hidden History of ALEC." https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/hidden-history-alec-and-prison-labor/.

workers through their very practice of work, but they are also exempt from workers' rights such as not working on public holidays and forming unions to defend their rights, let alone protesting through strikes[351]. As formerly incarcerated activist and author Shaka Senghor puts it, "Once you've been convicted of a crime, you are in essence a slave of the state"[352].

e. The perception of prisons from neighboring communities

Politicians, interest groups and corporations are far from the only beneficiaries of the Prison Industrial Complex. The construction of prisons within economically challenged communities allows municipalities to foster wealth through the expansion of the job market, prompting the employment of construction personnel in the early stages, as well as administrators and guards in the latter, but also through funding allocated by federal agencies for the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex. However, though inmates are the primary agents impacted by the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex, the communities that surround prisons are also transformed by the punitive landscape: "In such inhospitable places, everybody isolates. And when something disruptive, confusing or undesirable happens, people dial 911. As a result, crime goes up, along with unhappiness [...] prisons wear out places by wearing out people, irrespective of whether they have done time"[353].

The rapid and intense spread of prisons and detainment facilities within United-Statesian territory foster and develop citizens' anxieties regarding race and class, feeding into issues such as white caller crime, which I have explored previously while analyzing

[351] Davis, "Masked Racism."
[352] DuVernay, *13th*.
[353] Wilson-Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 39.

the rise in frivolous 911 calls made by White individuals threatened by the benign presence of Blacks in their vicinity. Increased policing translates into increased incarceration rates, which in turn prompts the construction of new carceral infrastructure, the Prison Industrial Complex endlessly perpetuating a cycle of discrimination, oppression, and ostracization.

f. The stain of incarceration

The inmate status does not disappear as one crosses the threshold of prison doors. The criminal label brands former inmates for life, robbing them of exercising citizenship to its fullest extent. They are notably excluded from the job market, welfare programs, and voting in elections.

Welfare and job applications require seekers who have been formerly incarcerated to check a specific box indicating so. This qualification is reluctant for many employers and administrators: unemployment levels are higher among formerly incarcerated people than they were for the general population when the Great Depression reached its peak unemployment-wise. Once again, Black populations are more impacted by the phenomenon, with Black women ranking as the more affected by post-incarceration unemployment while White men face less obstacles towards their return to civilian life through employment[354].

"Once a person is labeled a felon, he or she is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal"[355]. Taking away felons' voting

[354] Lucius Couloute, Daniel Kopf, "Out of Prison & out of Work: Unemployment among Formerly Incarcerated People." *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 2018, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html.
[355] Alexander, The New Jim Crow, 116.

rights is a practice that originates in English law, when "civil death", which notably enforced disenfranchisement, was considered appropriate punishment. The practice evolved as a means of securing socio-economic elites' political interests through the withdrawing of lower social stratum individuals from voting processes. After the civil war, many Southern states developed edicts allowing disenfranchisement laws to apply primarily to Black offenders. Voter restoration varies wildly from state to state. Currently, in 12 states, individuals convicted of felonies have to forfeit their voting rights perpetually unless they manage to persuade state governments to restore them. In 34 states, people on parole or probation are prohibited from voting[356]:

> As of 2024, 4 million Americans were prohibited from voting due to laws that disenfranchise citizens convicted of felony offenses. The denial of voting rights has a disproportionate impact on communities of color. One of every 22 Black adults is disenfranchised nationally. [...] Nearly half a million Latino citizens are disenfranchised across the United States.[357]

Rehabilitation and reinsertion are thus compromised through an array of legislation which routinely immures the formerly incarcerated into ostracization and helplessness.

Inflammatory political discourses, as well as the tabloidization of criminality by the media, have contributed to the production of generalized racial mistrust directed primarily at Black and Latinx communities. The overpolicing of non-Whites by Whites, and precisely middle-class Whites who have entrusted themselves with moral

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[356] "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *NAACP*, 2025, https://naacp.org/resources/criminal-justice-fact-sheet

[357] Nicole D. Porter and Jean Chung, "Voting Rights in the Era of Mass Incarceration: A Primer." *The Sentencing Project*, July 28, 2021, https://www.sentencingproject.org/policy-brief/voting-rights-in-the-era-of-mass-incarceration-a-primer/.

guardianship, has contributed to robbing non-Whites of their freedom to exist in public space. Whites' entitlement to the enforcement of "justice" is not confined to citizens, as both White civilians and police officers are largely shielded from legislative retribution to their racist attitudes and crimes through Stand Your Ground-like policies crafted *en masse* by interest groups such as the American Legislative Exchange Council. The police's gradual detachment from the communities they used to interact with on the daily, as well as government incentives to increase punitive policies and incarceration rates has provoked a shift within the handling of the institution.

Such evolutions have accompanied the development of the overmilitarization of the police, bestowing military equipment upon officers who adopt in-group separatist tendencies which directly influence the manner in which they deal with the public. Institutions that make up the daily landscape of non-White youth have evolved to reflect the societal expectations imposed upon them, which has translated into the crafting of a tunnel effect in the life trajectories of Black and Latinx youth, ultimately leading them towards incarceration through processes such as the school-to-prison pipeline. The mass incarceration of primarily Black men has turned into a lucrative process which motivates interest groups and corporations to seek its sustainability, endlessly feeding into the Prison Industrial Complex. The Prison Industrial Complex, then, stands as a concentrated reflection of larger society, entertaining similar patterns and fostering identical principles. Both institutions rely on the discrimination and exploitation of non-White individuals whose lives are administered by middle-class Whites who seek to exploit this control for economic gain, social status, and moral superiority.

CONCLUSION

This thesis endeavored to grasp how the White middle-class participates, consciously or unconsciously, in the manufacturing of the Prison Industrial Complex. I have set on to study this relationship with the incorporation of qualitative research through a series of interviews conducted with both republican and democratic United-States residents. White United-Statesians have historically conceived of themselves as White only in relation to Blacks and Native Americans. They have manipulated their race and class so as to avoid resemblance with non-White groups, erecting themselves as diligent and tireless workers, in direct opposition to the perceived carelessness of the former. Drawing on the work of David Roediger as well as Stuart Hall and his colleagues, I have offered an analysis of the contemporary values and principles which make up the fabric of the White middle-class.

Through a study of the loss and consequential redefinition of the concept of a White middle-class community, I have determined that middle-class Whites have experienced an ongoing demotion ever since the sixties. Worldwide evolutions such as deindustrialization and globalization have fueled anxieties regarding socio-economic demotion. Domestic issues like the progression of civil rights and the eventuality that middle-class Whites would not necessarily be able to retain dominance over recently desegregated Black communities in a country in which they have for long exercised social, cultural, racial, and economic control have sparked mistrust and insecurity within the United-Statesian White middle-class. The fear of obsolescence has led them to try and seek relevance in new areas, such as moral guardianship. Conceiving of themselves as vessel for moral superiority has allowed middle-class Whites to position themselves

as critical authorities regarding perceived social issues, namely the infringement of non-Whites on their residential and professional territories.

Scrambling to retain control that was previously inherent to their racial and socio-economic condition, middle-class Whites have become a select target group for elected officials eager to mobilize White resentment for electoral profit. In order to enlighten the process through which politicians resort to fear mongering to elicit mistrust towards non-Whites, I have studied how Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton have appropriated the Southern Strategy as well as dog whistle politics thanks to Ian Haney López's Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class. Drawing on Haney López's work, I have offered a portrayal of Donald Trump's political persona in order to document how his two presidencies have symbolized a rejection of coded racial appeal in favor of overt discriminatory policy-making and political incorrectness. I have also established how the use of social media has contributed to the crafting of said persona, and to Donald Trump's popularity among alt-right movements. The standard set and propagated by elected officials dictates how the media circulates news, and particularly crime-related news typically associated with African-Americans as well as Latinx individuals. Moreover, I have asserted that the doctrine of objectivity, which is central to United-Statesian journalism, has contributed to its evolution towards a conservative norm.

The popularization of harmful and inflammatory national myths categorizing non-Whites as violent offenders that make up anomalies within a disciplined White society has molded public opinion into normalizing the mass incarceration of those perceived societal misfits. The overpolicing of non-Whites by middle-class Whites is a tradition that has been embedded in the country since the slavery era. I posited that since middle-class

Whites are awarded relative immunity through legislation such as the Stand Your Ground law or the castle doctrine, they do not shy away from taking it upon themselves to exercise warped justice which resembles racial retribution. Overpolicing, when exercised by law enforcement, inevitably takes on a much deadlier magnitude. Aided by in-group loyalty, self-reliant decision-making and militarization, police forces are virtually all-powerful in the face of marginalized communities. Seeping through the cracks of law and order, police officers have made their way into schools, a process I have studied through Marsha Weissman's discussion on the life trajectories of non-White youth. I postulate that, conditioning non-White youths into incarceration like one prepares pigs for slaughter, the school-to-prison pipeline swallows primarily Black and Latinx boys, leaving the Prison Industrial Complex to digest them for decades at a time. Thanks to Michelle Alexander and Angela Davis's work on mass incarceration, I have underlined how the Prison Industrial Complex benefits influent organs of society, namely interest groups, corporations, municipalities, and of course, the White middle-class.

Citizenship, and everything it entails, remain uncertain premises for non-White communities in the United-State. Whether through the enforcement of convict disenfranchisement or through the undermining of landmark legislation earned by the literal blood, sweat, and tears of civil rights activists. Namely, the 2026 amendment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, guarantees the dismissal of Black voters in future elections. The uninterrupted crackdown on undocumented immigrants has decimated countless families and contributed to increasingly blatant bigotry and violence nationwide.

In the face of violence and oppression, resistance can take on many forms. Fostering community, raising awareness about social issues as well as media literacy,

and supporting grassroots activism are all opportunities to tackle privilege and nurture solidarity.

ANNEXES

Annexe 1 : Respondents' information

	Gender	Age	Race	State of origin	Occupation	Political affiliation	Interview date
C.S	Female	62	White	California	Retiree	Democrat	03/02/2025
M.S	Female	63	White	Arizona	Hospitality	Republican	26/02/2025
W.R	Female	20	White	Maryland	Student (political science)	Democrat	05/03/2025
D.J	Male	23	White	New Jersey	Student (engineering)	Democrat	21/03/2025
S.F	Female	22	White	Georgia	Student (medical school)	Republican	06/05/2025
T.F	Male	18	White	North Carolina	Military	Republican	23/05/2025
G.P	Male	96	White	Colorado	Retired US Navy Captain	Republican	07/06/2025
S.N	Female	26	Caribbean American	Massachussetts	Flight attendant	Democrat	06/08/2025
CH.S	Female	20	White	South Louisiana	Student (international business and languages)	Republican	27/8/2025
A.T	Female	25	Asian	Illinois	Former employee at the Department of Agriculture, now in a French language exchange program.	Democrat	10/10/2025

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RESUME

Complexe Industriel Carcéral et classe moyenne blanche : le rôle des médias et des politiques dans le façonnage de l'incarcération de masse des non-blancs.

Ce mémoire examine comment la classe moyenne blanche américaine contribue à l'édification du complexe industriel carcéral. Bien que tous les membres de la classe moyenne blanche ne participent pas activement à l'ostracisation et à l'incarcération des populations non-blanches, leurs appartenances socio-économiques et raciales leur confèrent un statut privilégié que les élus exploitent pour servir leurs propres intérêts, souvent au détriment notoire des Afro-Américains. En attisant les angoisses fondées sur la race, les politiciens manipulent l'attachement des Blancs de la classe moyenne à leur mission de gardiens de la morale. La classe moyenne blanche s'est attribué le rôle de protecteur du contrat social afin de faire face au déclin culturel, économique et social qui l'afflige depuis les années 1960, lorsque la déségrégation a conduit les Afro-Américains à se lancer dans la course au rêve américain. Les politiciens, avec le soutien des médias, tentent de séduire la classe moyenne blanche en promouvant des politiques telles que l'augmentation des budgets consacrés aux forces de l'ordre ou l'incarcération de masse, qui garantissent le retrait des non-blancs de leurs quartiers. Des milliers de personnes non-blanches sont ainsi balayées dès leur plus jeune âge dans les mâchoires du Complexe Industriel Carcéral, dans des prisons conçues pour le profit de lobbys, de grandes entreprises, de municipalités et, par-dessus tout, de la classe moyenne blanche.

Mots-clefs : communauté, race, classe, incarcération de masse, Complexe Industriel Carcéral, police

ABSTRACT

Prison Industrial Complex and the White middle-class: the function of the media and politicians in shaping the mass incarceration of non-Whites

This thesis explores how the White United-Statesian middle-class feeds into the manufacturing of the Prison Industrial Complex. While not all White middle-class members actively participate in the ostracization and incarceration of non-White populations, their socio-economic and racial affiliations procure them with a privileged status which elected officials mobilize to further their own interests, often at the notable expense of African-Americans. Through race-based fearmongering, politicians manipulate middle-class Whites' attachment to their quality as moral guardians. The White middle-class has awarded itself the role of ethics enforcers in order to cope with the cultural, economic and social demotion that has plagued their cohort since the 1960s, when desegregation led African-Americans to enter the rush for the American Dream. Politicians, with the support of the media, try and appeal to the White middle-class by promoting policies such as amplified law enforcement budgets or mass incarceration, which guarantee the withdrawal of non-Whites from their vicinities. Thousands of non-White individuals are consequently swept away from an early age into the jaws of the Prison Industrial Complex, in prisons engineered for the profit of interest groups, corporations, municipalities, and ultimately the White middle-class.

Key words: community, race, class, mass incarceration, Prison Industrial Complex, police