



Racial Disparities in the San Francisco Juvenile Justice System: A 21st Century Injustice

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One of the seminal events of the 20th century was the American Civil Rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King's timeless "I Have A Dream" speech, the grace of Rosa Parks, and the images of black students integrating schools under the watchful protection of armed soldiers are all etched into our nation's collective consciousness, and rightfully so. The overt injustices of Jim Crow and the ugly legacy of slavery were left behind in ten tumultuous years, a relatively brief period of time given the gross inequities of the previous hundred fifty. For Americans of the Baby Boomer generation, it was easy to envision a steady march towards Dr. King's dream. However, in 2009, the progress of the Civil Rights movement is difficult to ascertain. While the election of Barack Obama marked a historic first, race relations in America have reached an impasse. With the elimination of affirmative action and many government welfare programs, it is now less acceptable to utilize race as a point of departure in government policy making, as well as in the discourse of the mainstream media. An examination of current socioeconomic indicators, however suggests that minorities continue to trend firmly behind whites. There has been a premature rush to move beyond race as a society—in this politically correct haste, the spirit of justice, recognition, and equality that the Civil Rights movement and other minority power struggles embodied, have been abandoned.

According to a 2008 National Urban League report, the poverty rate among Blacks in America was twice that of the overall rate, and four times that of whites (National Urban League). As of 1997, black students were twice as likely as white students to drop out of high school (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium). Perhaps most disturbingly, blacks were over six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites (Prison Policy Initiative). The trend among socioeconomic indicators is that there clearly continues to be a significant gap in the standard of living between white and black America. This paper will

examine the juvenile justice system in San Francisco, California, as a case study for a critique of post-race America.

Within the juvenile justice system in the city San Francisco, there is an alarming disparity between the rates of incarceration for black and white youth. The greater population of San Francisco is 7.8% black and 49.6% white, according to the 2000 United States Census. Meanwhile, according to the September, 2009 report of the Juvenile Probation Department, the population of incarcerated youth currently in Juvenile Hall is 50.9% black, and 6.6% white. This indicates that it is roughly 50 times more likely for black youth in San Francisco to be incarcerated than white youth.

The ramifications for such an imbalance in incarceration rates are significant. Youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system are five times more likely than their peers to be arrested again as young adults (ages 17-25), and seven times more likely to become dependent on welfare (Youth Transitions Funder's Group). Incarcerated youth are also removed from their peers in school and can become institutionalized, or adjusted to living in custody. Incarceration is also a primary manner in which poverty is passed in cycles from generation to generation; the children of incarcerated parents are five times more likely than their peers to end up behind bars (Simmons).

Why then, is it far more likely for black youth in San Francisco to find themselves in juvenile hall than white youth? The answer is multi-faceted: three crucial contributing factors are neighborhood demographics and entrenched conditions of poverty, the presence of risk in the lives of youth, and institutionalized racism found in the juvenile justice system.

In tracing the history of African Americans in San Francisco, one must go back to World War II, when thousands of blacks migrated from the South to find work in the city's Naval Shipyard, located in Hunter's Point. As the shipyard flourished in the 1950s, the area became a vibrant working class community flush with black owned small businesses, San Francisco was 20% African-American (McCormack). Because of increasing property values tied to the dot-com boom of the 1990s and into the 21st century middle class black families were forced out of the city and into less expensive suburbs. Those that stayed often did so not out of choice but out of dependence on public housing and welfare. While San Francisco as a whole became more affluent, the poverty rate for blacks in San Francisco increased to three times that of the rest of the city. In the 1990s alone, the city lost more than 1 in 7 black residents—the highest rate of decline of the nation's 50 most populous cities (McCormack, "Census"). San Francisco

is now 7% African American. The only neighborhood in San Francisco which is populated primarily by African Americans, according to the City of San Francisco demographic profile, is Hunter's Point (Mayor's Office on Community Development).

Hunter's Point represents an anomaly in a city with one of the highest costs of living in the country. Located in the geographically isolated southeast corner of San Francisco, it was cited in a 2004 San Francisco Chronicle article as being beset with "violent crime, drugs, slum housing, a dearth of grocery stores, a lack of political clout...and industrial pollutants" (McCormack). The relative isolation of Hunter's Point contributes to its high unemployment rate, which in turn has led to many families becoming completely dependent on public assistance (McCormack). These neighborhood attributes constitute the conditions which amount to a higher presence of risk in the lives of its youth.

Risk factors such as household welfare states, poverty family disruption, and parent criminality, as stated in result in a report prepared for the Oklahoma Office of Juvenile Affairs, result in a higher rate of incarceration for youth (Charish, Davis, and Damphousse 13). Furthermore, "as the number of families evidencing family risk factors increases or decreases within a neighborhood, the neighborhood itself can mitigate for or against the occurrence of juvenile crime... The strength of the relationship between neighborhood residency and crime has been shown to be dependent on: (1) the proportion of families in a neighborhood having family risk factors; and, (2) the ability and empowerment of adults in a neighborhood to influence their living conditions, including the behavior of neighborhood adolescents" (Charish, Davis, and Damphousse 17). Hunter's Point carries all of the requisite attributes of a neighborhood in high risk; therefore, the fact that its youth are arrested and incarcerated at a higher rate than the rest of San Francisco can be seen as an expected outcome.

Compounding these factors is the presence of institutionalized racism within the juvenile justice system. These prejudices occur from the moment a police officer makes contact with a juvenile. Charish, Davis, and Damphousse found that "white youth were more likely than minority youth to be informally dispositioned by immediate release or diversion. They found that officers based their decisions on a number of legal and extralegal factors, including stereotypical beliefs about minority racial groups" (18). Once in the court system, there is a vast discrepancy in the quality of legal representation given to the youth. Those who come from families in poverty, or broken families, receive only the minimal level of counsel provided by a public defender. This disparity is reflected in sentencing: "for youths charged with violent offenses, the national average length of incarceration is 193 days for whites, and 254 for African-Americans" (Building Blocks

for Youth). There are also unequal sentencing structures in place in many jurisdictions which disproportionately punish youth of color. Two examples of unequal sentencing measures are mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses, which are more likely to be committed by black than white youth, and harsher penalties for gang offenders who are primarily youths of color. These instances of systemic inequality found within the juvenile justice system led the Annie E. Casey Foundation to conclude that "African American and Latino/a youth experience stereotyping and consequent discrimination at every step of the intake and adjudication process, including disproportionate arrest...harmful labeling, and disparate risk determinations" (Race Matters).

The combined forces of living in neighborhoods of high crime and risk, dependence on public housing and assistance, and institutionalized racism found in policing and sentencing, have created the conditions that have resulted in black youth being incarcerated at a rate of fifty times their white peers in San Francisco. These conditions, left unchecked, amount to a systemic oppression of these young people.

With such a disproportionate amount of African American youth incarcerated in San Francisco, one might expect a critical mass of outrage coming from one of the most liberal and progressive regions of the country: there is currently no such call for justice. In fact, the only substantive debate regarding juvenile justice being held in the mainstream media or in political circles is under which circumstances juveniles should be tried as adults. The silence is deafening, particularly when one considers that the youth involved in the juvenile justice system become far more likely to fall into poverty or become incarcerated as adults. Given the history of racial injustice in America, this is an unacceptable trend.

Why then, is race being largely ignored as an important issue within the juvenile justice system, and in a wider context, the entire contemporary American sociopolitical discourse? The answer may be found in the fact that race, as conceived through any critical lens, is a communal issue. American society focuses on the individual as the primary entity of importance. Since it is no longer written into law that blacks and whites are to be segregated or treated differently many people consider any discussion of race to be outside their personal sphere of concern. This common attitude is summarized in the Annie E. Casey foundation's publication, *'Race Matters'*: "To the extent that racial inequality exists, then, it is a by-product of the inability/unwillingness of individuals to properly adhere to basic American values like hard-work and personal responsibility" (Race Matters).

This attitude, however, presupposes an equal playing field, that everyone born in America, regardless of race and class, has an equal chance to accomplish what they may in life. It

ignores centuries of overt racism and oppression that led many black Americans from slavery, and dismisses the overwhelming statistical evidence that black America continues to live at a standard far below their white peers. It also dismisses the viewpoint of many African Americans who feel the weight of racial disparities on a daily basis, a perspective eloquently stated in Maud Sutter's poem, "As A Black Woman": "As a black woman, every act is a personal act / Every act is a political act" (Sutter).

Therefore, at this point in American history with historical oppression and institutionalized imbalances left unaddressed, it is not only disingenuous, but an unconcealed injustice to remove race from any sector of society especially one such as the juvenile justice system—a justice system that holds so much influence over our future. The current level of discourse which advocates a "post-racial" view of America leaves a multitude of inequalities left to fester which will ultimately manifest in continued tension along race and class lines. It will also manifest in the cycle of incarceration, broken families, and poverty being passed along from generation to generation in the poorest neighborhoods of America, such as Hunter's Point.

A more appropriate form of discourse would take into account both historical and contemporary circumstances. It must be the voice of individuals who are not clamoring for their own self-interests, the voice of a society concerned with how best to move forward in a manner befitting the loftiest ideals of our nation. Such discourse cannot be afraid to tell the truth about where we stand as a nation, and where we may stagnate until the following is acknowledged: that race matters, to our history, and to our future, not necessarily as a source of conflict, shame, or pride, but as a crucial and fundamental characteristic of American life. If race is addressed in an honest and rational manner, it can be used to cultivate a greater sense of empathy ethics, and community in civic life. It is undoubtedly our responsibility as a society, especially given the specific events which have led us to this point in history, to create the conditions which will allow us to arrive at a place of justice, and peace, for all American citizens.

In the context of the juvenile justice system in San Francisco, the following actions should be taken preemptively. Police and probation officers should be made aware of the continuing disparity in arrest rates amongst juveniles, and should take steps to ensure that the conditions of poverty and neighborhood risk are not punished blindly. Youth who are growing up under higher circumstances of risk must be provided with resources and opportunities before they become involved with the juvenile justice system. Juveniles who do enter the court system should be treated with compassion, opportunities for rehabilitation, and full freedom over their lives being an ultimate goal. In neighborhoods of high poverty and

risk, a greater investment in public education and community development is crucial. Role models and supportive figures in the lives of these youth must recognize the potential dangers associated with growing up in conditions of risk, and must provide added support and structure in a culturally competent manner. People should not avoid poverty stricken neighborhoods or merely conceive of them as unsafe areas, but should contribute time and energy towards improving them. Finally, advocates for social justice must win back the language of political discourse, meaning, issues such as race and class must be openly discussed and acknowledged.

Ultimately this requires a more communal mindset and a willingness of people to invest in the legacy of the Civil Rights era, as well a vision for what the future might hold. In particular the generation of Americans born after the Civil Rights era cannot be satisfied to sit idly as disengaged individuals. Without bold and decisive action, the institutionalized and internalized levers of oppression take further hold. Issues of social justice must be owned by the very people whose lives they impact, and since every citizen has an investment in their country, it is imperative that every American continue to push towards a more equitable and just society. To quote the former President of the Southern Poverty Law Center Julian Bond: "Civil rights didn't begin in Montgomery and it didn't end in the 1960s. It continues on to this very minute."

And indeed to actively and compassionately address racial inequality as it exists in the 21st century, in areas such as the juvenile justice system in not only San Francisco but throughout America, is to properly pay homage to the great honor and struggle of the Civil Rights movement. In embracing the responsibility of fighting for social justice, we connect the difficult, but also heroic and beautiful, history of America, with a vision for a more hopeful and equitable future.

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The Chinese Minority in Indonesia

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The financial crisis in 1997 devastated the economy of Southeast Asian countries, causing a slump in their currencies and the devaluation of stock markets. Indonesia was one of the several countries in Southeast Asia that was hit hard by the crisis. The inflation of the Indonesian *rupiah* and the sharp increase in prices triggered a widespread riot in the capital city of Jakarta forcing President Suharto to step down after he had been in power for more than 30 years. Though many Indonesians suffered from the country's economic breakdown, the Chinese minority group was the most affected group of all people in Indonesian urban areas who became the target of violence for the sole reason that many of them were controlling businesses, both at the local and national economic levels. The Chinese minority has actively been involved in the Indonesian economy since the early establishment of the Republic, albeit, facing various political and racial discriminations from time to time.

The Chinese ethnic minority is one of several minority groups in Indonesia that has maintained its presence in the archipelago since before the Dutch arrived. According to Wirth (1941), the concept "minority" refers to a group of people or individuals who regard themselves as not being part of a larger group and because of their physical, social, and cultural exclusiveness, they are treated differently from others (p.415). The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia can be grouped into this category, as their Chinese heritage and traditions differentiate them from the majority of Indonesians. However, the different treatment that was given to this group of people has been varied. From privileges and favorable government policy to discrimination and political persecution, the ethnic Chinese have been categorized as the one of the controversial minority groups in Indonesia due to their economic dominance.

The evolution of the economic activity in the Chinese minority in Indonesia to what it is now has its own history. It is related back to the Dutch political and economic interest to maintain their control over today's Indonesian islands. The population was categorized into three stratification levels, according to race, in which the Europeans were the first, then followed by other foreigners from the east, dominated by the Chinese, and then the natives as the third class ethnic group

(Yau, 2007, para.8). The colonial rule then divided the Chinese into two groups known as *Totok* and *Peranakan* (Suryadinata, 2001, p.502). According to Suryadinata (2001), the first group refers to those who migrated from China to the colony and had no marital contact with the locals while the later were those who were born in East Indie to a Chinese father or by a Chinese mother to her indigenous husband (p.502-503). This essay will simply refer to the groups as Chinese, since both *Totok* and *Peranakan* have interchangeably played important roles in the Indonesian economy, ever since the Dutch colonial era.

For the most part, the Chinese had such a strong economic position that they could not be disregarded even by Dutch colonial rule. Kahin (1946) stated that in order to facilitate the trade with the local indigenous people, the Dutch depended largely on the middlemen and retailers, whose jobs were occupied by the Chinese (p. 327). Being aware of their importance to the trade, the Dutch granted the Chinese not only political privileges, but also extensive economic rights, which later become a burden on local commerce to an irreparable level despite a later gradual adjustment and finally abolishment (Kahin, 1946, p.327). One of the economic privileges was the monopoly lease system known in Dutch as *Pachtstelsel*, by which the Chinese were granted authority to lease large areas of land in Java (Kahin, 1946, p.327). Kahin (1946) argues that the system brought suffering to the native population, due to the fact that after the payment for the lease to the Dutch, the Chinese, aware of the Dutch support, exploited profits from the locals as much as they could (p.327). The situation at some point forced the peasant natives to depend on the Chinese who had control on the local agriculture in the so-called "debtor-creditor relationship" (Kahin, 1946, p.327).

The Chinese economic control continued to grow after the Independence of Indonesia in 1945. Besides the hard effort and political battle to find their identity in Indonesian nation-building, the Chinese were involved in a relatively large percentage of the country's business and trade. Siregar (1969) noted that in the province of North Sumatra, thirty-four point five percent of the industrial operations belonged to the Chinese, and thirty-five percent were owned by Indonesians, while the rest 0.5 percent belonged to other foreigners (p.344). In East Sumatra, seventy-two percent of the businesses were owned by Chinese, while in West Java, almost eighty percent of the motor transport enterprises were Chinese-owned (Siregar 1969, p.345). Chua (2003) illustrated that with only 3 percent of the Indonesian population by 1998, the Chinese dominated

the country's economy disproportionately (p. 43). In the same year, 70% of Indonesian private businesses were controlled by the Chinese (Chua, 2003, p. 43)

The continued growth of economic control did not come with the full participation of Chinese in Indonesian social and political life. Yau (2008) considered this situation as a paradox, where the Chinese were granted privileges to operate their business, but were halted in their access to social and political participation (para.11). The Chinese economic dominance was largely seen as a national problem (Yau, 2008, para. 11). Yau (2008) blames the Dutch for generating the seeds of hatred and stereotypes among Indonesians based on race (Para.9). The Dutch provided certain privileges to the Chinese by granting them control over some profitable businesses, but at the same time restricted them from interacting with the natives, specifically by limiting their movements out of urban ghettos (Yau, 2008, para. 9).

However, there was a time when ethnic Chinese in Indonesia did enjoy relatively less discriminative policies. This was during the early period of Indonesian independence, though they were still considered non-indigenous. Under the presidency of Sukarno and the parliamentary democracy system (1949-1958), the Chinese were allowed to establish organizations that could participate in cultural, social and political activities and even schools where instruction were given in Chinese (Suryadinata, 2001, p.504). A well known ethnic Chinese institution focusing in sociopolitical matter was established following the merging of several small Chinese organizations. The organization, known as *Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia (BAPERKI)* or Indonesian citizenship consultative body set its goal based on the idea of promoting equality among the citizens, regardless of ethnic origin, and they specifically fought for the Chinese minority's cultural rights (Suryadinata, 2001, p.504).

The relatively free environment for the ethnic Chinese as a distinguished minority group ended as new political power emerged. Suryadinata (2001) posited that the downfall of President Sukarno after a failed alleged coup by *Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI)*, or Indonesian Communist Party led to the closure of *BAPERKI*, which had been in support of both *PKI* and the President (p.505). Lieutenant-General Suharto, who led the army operation to hunt down the members of *PKI* and its affiliates due to their role in the alleged coup soon became the next President with the support from the right wing group in the military (Suryadinata, 2001, p.505). Besides the millions of alleged communist supporters that died, tens of thousands of Chinese were also killed during the hunt-down operation (Johnston, 2005, para. 9).

The allegiance of a well-known Chinese organization to the former regime and the Communist Party created a distance

between the new government and ethnic Chinese. Fuelled by the accusation of being supportive to the Communists, the Chinese faced harshly discriminative policies during President Suharto's rule. During the period known as New Order (1966-1998), the ethnic Chinese were literally categorized as *non-pribumi*, separating them from the native *pribumi* (Yau, 2008, para.10). As *non-pribumi*, the Chinese were subject to assimilation measures, which included giving up their ethnic identity, enrolling in Indonesian schools, and changing their names (Yau, 2008, para.11). Groups and institutions affiliated with Chinese were suppressed if not banned, including Chinese languages, culture, and religion (Yau, 2008, para.12). Although some top Chinese became friends of Suharto and subsequently became the richest men in Southeast Asia, the New Order regime in fact was a tragedy for the relatively large number of ordinary Chinese (Johnston, 2005, para. 13-14).

In spite of the harsh assimilation efforts, the Chinese are still seen as "aliens" to the indigenous Indonesians. The failure of the efforts exploded in a large-scale anti-Chinese riot in 1998. President Suharto's resignation in May 1998, was accompanied by anti Chinese violence where for more than three days of violence, the rioters looted Chinese shops and gang raped more than 150 Chinese women (Chua, 2003, p.44-45). Chua (2003) reported that not only were thousands of people dead, but the mayhem also resulted in \$40 to \$60 billions of capital confiscation, most of which was controlled by Chinese, causing a huge economic crisis from which the country is still struggling to recover (Chua, p.45).

Since the Reformation Era, starting with the downfall of Suharto in 1998, the Indonesian government has taken several significant measures to address the issue of ethnic Chinese. Chinese Indonesians can now celebrate the Chinese New Year and use their Chinese name and symbols (Johnston, 2005, para.26). Since then, they are actively involved in political activities (Suryadinata, 2001, p.509-510). In terms of the civil society participation, ethnic Chinese communities are able to express themselves publically (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 522). Moreover, Confucianism was recognized as one of the official beliefs in Indonesia along with the other five major religions. Meanwhile, some Chinese *Totok* are able to reestablish their clan relationships (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 522). In another example, Suryadinata (2001) reported that the former President Abdurahman Wahid, a.k.a Gus Dur, was invited to deliver a speech during the opening of Indonesian Hakka association in Jakarta, in 2000, where the former president praised the ethnic Chinese, and pledged their support to continue to invest and help in the Indonesian economic recovery effort. It was during the presidency of Gus Dur that many of the discriminatory laws against the ethnic Chinese were revoked (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 521). The president also appointed a nationalist ethnic Chinese,

Kwik Kian Gie, to the position of coordinating minister for finance and industry, the highest cabinet post ever for an ethnic Chinese in the country's history (Suryadinata, 2001, p. 521).

However, reforms by the government seem to hardly penetrate to the bottom of ordinary ethnic Chinese. Many Chinese Indonesians still find it very difficult to enter public universities or become members of the military or police forces (Johnston, 2005, para. 34). Johnston (2005) also reported that it is still relatively very expensive for a Chinese Indonesian to go to school, to buy land or to get a passport where the required citizenship letter might cost up to 7 million rupiah to be processed (para.35). In addition, intermarriage between the ethnic Chinese community and local Indonesians rarely occurs, due to the fact that neither group is willing to encourage such marital relationships (Johnston, 2005, para. 36)

All the events and cases mentioned above conclude that the economic dominance of the Chinese minority in Indonesia has hardly been going in line with their social and political freedom. Albeit, facing various discriminations, the Chinese still maintain their economic dominance. I would say that the limited access to the cultural, social and political life of the majority have forced the ethnic Chinese to concentrate on commerce and trade, and hence, increases their ability in terms of entrepreneurship and business networking to a point that is relatively higher than that of the majority of people. Consequently the Chinese minority often become the target of social jealousy due to their well-established economic lives compared to the majority of Indonesians, a situation which can easily be manipulated to create chaos in society despite the fact that not all the ethnic Chinese are rich. The barely implemented assimilation policy by the New Order regime failed to achieve its aim and even created large resentment among the majority Indonesians towards the Chinese minority group. Without neglecting the complexity of the issue, it is a good idea to consider a different approach toward the relations between the ethnic Chinese and the Indonesians. Instead of considering the ethnic Chinese as foreigners who need to be assimilated to the local cultures, Indonesians also need to see the matter from the diversity point of view, where the ethnic Chinese must be considered equally as the other different ethnic groups that are spread throughout the archipelago with the rights to fully participate every aspect of the country's life. Likewise, not only do the Indonesians have to change their way of thinking about the Chinese, but also the ethnic Chinese themselves have to voluntarily give up certain degrees of their exclusiveness in order to meet the qualities demanded by the majority group.

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