

Ongoing US State Violence Against Black Women of African Descent

Overview

Recommendations from the prior Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the United States called attention to the urgent need to address racial discrimination against Black communities. In this stakeholder submission to the UPR 4th Cycle, we highlight the stark failure of the US government to address recommendations on anti-Black racial discrimination and present new evidence for worsening and compounding US state violence against Black women of African descent.

We conclude with new recommendations intended to (1) end ongoing US state violence against Black women, (2) redress the impacts of US state violence on Black women and communities, and (3) preserve the integrity and meaningfulness of the UPR and other OHCHR processes by escalating international action to hold the US accountable.

Ongoing State Violence Against Black Women

Black women of African descent in the US face severe, ongoing, mass-scale state violence. The foremost form of such violence, the forcible separation of Black women from their children and families, has continued unabated and unredressed for centuries.

Under chattel slavery, Black women were forcibly separated from their partners, children, and other family members as a matter of course. In many US jurisdictions, contemporary publicly funded police forces grew directly out of historical, publicly funded slave patrols. These patrols physically enforced the captivity of Black women. The violent enforcement of enslavement by such patrols enabled outnumbered enslavers not only to exploit Black women's physical labor (as they did Black men's) but also to impose a gendered regime of repeat sexual assault, forced pregnancy, and forcible separation from any and all children they carried and raised under this regime.ⁱ

Today, the targeted surveillance and punishment of Black communities continues to make the forcible separation of Black women from their children and families a matter of government routine. Most Black women (65%) have had a close family member jailed or imprisoned at some point in their lives, and almost half of Black women (44%) currently has at least one family member in prison.ⁱⁱ

Compounding Physical, Economic, and Political Impacts on Black Women

The mass-scale separation of Black women from their families by incarceration exacts an immense, ever-compounding toll on Black women's physical and economic well-being. In a society and a world that systematically undervalues Black women of African descent and underestimates the burdens they carry, these damages have remained unaccounted-for and unredressed.

The mass-scale jailing and imprisonment of Black men,ⁱⁱⁱ combined with the gendered imposition of family care work, means that the tremendous burden and fallout of sustaining Black families and communities through state-imposed separation falls overwhelmingly to Black women. The forced separation of Black families by the state takes a serious toll on Black women's health. Family member incarceration puts Black women at steeply elevated risk for stress-related health conditions.^{iv} For Black mothers, the incarceration of a son diminishes both physical and psychological health.^v Partner or co-parent incarceration exposes Black women to higher risk for cardiovascular events,^{vi} major depression and other behavioral health conditions,^{vii} and HIV.^{viii}

The forced separation of Black families also drains economic resources from Black women, families, and communities on a massive scale. Black women play a primary role in supporting incarcerated family members, commonly incurring five-figure debt to cover legal bills, prison telephone calling cards, visitation, care packages, and putting funds on the prison accounts of incarcerated family members.^{ix} Women supporting incarcerated loved ones report paying an average of \$13,607 for their loved one's fines and legal fees, close to one year of household income, and two-thirds struggle to meet their own household's basic subsistence needs as a result.^x In the absence of a public safety net for those returning from incarceration, Black women often invest hundreds or even thousands of unpaid hours to assist loved ones in finding employment, connect to health care and insurance, rebuild relationships, and recover from the psychological impact of incarceration.^{xi} Finally, the reality of racially targeted incarceration means that Black mothers must make do with lesser (or no) financial contribution from their children's fathers during and after incarceration.^{xii}

New evidence from rigorous social scientific research indicates that the economic value of these and other damages imposed on Black women, families, and communities through state violence is tremendous. In 2025 US dollars, these costs include:

- \$5.29 trillion in damages associated with the widespread criminalization of Black children and an additional \$452 billion in lost educational opportunity among

Black children of incarcerated parents

- \$1.29 trillion in damages associated with reduced lifelong earnings (and thus, reduced household support) among formerly incarcerated Black men
- \$532 billion in damages associated with coerced, unpaid labor and stress-related health conditions among the mothers and partners of incarcerated Black men
- \$890 billion in damages associated with increased Black infant mortality and diminished life expectancy for Black women

Together, the economic damages from US state violence against Black women, families, and communities from less than fifty years of mass incarceration total \$8.76 trillion.^{xiii}

Recommendations

We offer three recommendations to bring an end to ongoing US state violence against Black women and correct its economically catastrophic and politically repressive impacts.

First, the US must abolish jailing, imprisonment, juvenile detention, immigration detention, and all other forms and institutions of human captivity. These apparatuses of state violence have been developed and deployed for the political and economic repression of Black people of African descent and their ongoing impacts on Black women are unspeakable. These systems cannot be repurposed for ends other than the ones they were built to serve. They must be replaced with institutions truly capable of promoting safety—and especially of protecting Black women, girls, and gender nonconforming people of African descent, whose safety has never been a priority for the institutions we know.

Second, the US federal government must begin a program of economic, political, and cultural redress for historical and contemporary state violence against Black women, girls, gender non-conforming people, and Black communities at large. Such a program must center the needs and perspectives of Black women of African descent and must be sufficient to fully correct the known and measurable physical, economic, and political impact of anti-Black state violence on Black women and communities.

Third (and most globally), the US must no longer be permitted to ignore UPR recommendations and reject or flagrantly neglect its human rights treaty obligations. The human rights vision articulated in the Durban Declaration cannot be realized without US action and full cooperation. The lack of progress on prior UPR recommendations is powerful indication that the international community must escalate

its approach to enlisting US cooperation and ensuring international human rights accountability for the US by any and all available means.

References

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