

Structural Racism: Possible Examples¹

[W]e define structural racism as “the silent opportunity killer. It is the blind interaction between institutions, policies, and practices that inevitably perpetuates barriers to opportunities and racial disparities. ...[S]tructural racism feeds on the unconscious. Public and private institutions and individuals each build a wall. They do not necessarily build a wall to hurt people of color, but one wall is joined by another until they construct a labyrinth from which few can escape.”²

While a lyric definition, I am not altogether sure what this means in concrete, and not theoretical, terms. Drawing upon two recent reports and their headlines and some other examples, here is my effort to describe some instances of “structural” and/or “institutional” racism. I would welcome others.

Further, three quarters of a century ago, Richard Wright also offered one both lyric and concrete, which constituted the tragedy of his novel, with the narrative being its inevitable unfolding.

Study Finds Blacks and Hispanics Need Much Higher Incomes than Whites To Live in Middle-Class or Affluent Neighborhoods.³

Why might this be structural racism? While not the only reason⁴, one reason simply is related to historical disadvantage and structural racism – that even when Blacks and Hispanics have

¹ Serendipitously, I received, in the same week, emails about the Public Policy Associates report, the neighborhood income analysis, and the Economic Policy Institute report. They provided both the question (“what is structural racism?”) and a couple of pretty good examples. Too often, I think, we create a word that sounds good – like structural racism – but then leave it to others to define and, in particular, move from the general to the specific. One of my favorite movie scenes is in *Steelyard Blues* and an exchange between a character played by Donald Southerland, Valdini, and a character played by Jane Fonda, “Iris.” Valdini: “I’m not a criminal, Iris, I’m an outlaw.” Iris: “What’s the difference, Valdini?” Valdini: “I don’t know.” Thanks to my Dad for impressing upon me the need to define what one is talking about carefully (even if I do not always achieve that myself).

² Public Policy Associates, Inc. (2015). *Considerations for Conducting Evaluation: Using a Culturally Responsive and Racial Equity Lens*.

³ Reardon, Sean, Lindsay Fox, and Joseph Townsend (2015). “Neighborhood Income Composition by Household Race and Income 1990-2009. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

⁴ There are many examples of other prior federal programs that produced segregation and inequities in access to housing: The Homestead Act, 1862 gave 160 acres of free land to every white settler who could live there for at least five years as part of the United States’ westward expansion (but not to people of color); The National Housing Act, 1934 in effect “redlined” certain neighborhoods—predominantly Black, Latino, Asian, and Jewish ones—as ineligible to receive financing; the GI bill, 1944 offered access to both higher education and home ownership to returning WWII veterans, but excluded Latino and black veterans from those benefits. In addition, people of color often have continued to be discriminated against when seeking housing or applying for loans; banks targeted minority neighborhoods for higher-interest loans (subprime and predatory); foreclosure practices and rates were highest among communities of color; and banks stopped maintaining foreclosed homes in many neighborhoods of color which help create a downward spiral in housing prices in those areas.

comparable income to whites, they are much less likely to have the net worth needed to make a down payment – and they are much less likely to have parents or relatives who have such net worth to help them.

They are then more likely to end up living in poorer neighborhoods, with poorer schools and fewer amenities that support raising their own kids to be able to succeed and themselves move to more middle-class and affluent neighborhoods.

Study Finds Large Differences in Teacher and Parent Perceptions of Kindergartners' Non-Cognitive Skills by Race – Most Pronounced for Black Boys.⁵

Why might this be structural racism? Clearly, there is a difference between the culture of the school and the culture of the community (to borrow from James Comer) in what behaviors and dispositions young black children have in terms of their “self control,” “approaches to learning,” “persistence in completing tasks, and “eagerness to learn.” Teachers who have been through the schooling process have learned what to expect as “acceptable” behaviors of children and these differ profoundly with those of parents of young children. One result is much greater tracking of black students (boys in particular) into special education settings for behavioral reasons, a much greater risk of black students not feeling that school and schooling is for them, and much more likelihood that black students will be referred for disciplinary reasons and experience suspension or expulsion.⁶

Study Finds Many Entry-Level Jobs Require Clean Criminal Records and High School Diplomas and Therefore Exclude Half of All Black Men from Employment.⁷

Why might this be structural racism? Most of these jobs likely are not ones for which writing bad checks or many actions that would lead to criminal records should constitute a reason that applicants cannot do the work, and the vast majority do not require high school diplomas to perform at that entry level. These criteria at best serve as very imperfect markers for the “soft skills” that such entry-level positions do require, and they also are a way that employers can better ensure that those who do apply are more homogenous in their own personal views and perspectives. In the end, if there are not pathways through entry-level positions into higher wage ones, applicants will be discouraged and are more likely to explore illicit employment as an opportunity to get by and get ahead.

State Request for Proposal for a Center on Disproportionate Minority Confinement of Juveniles Attracts No Minority Applicants Meeting Minimum Application Requirements.⁸

⁵ Garcia, Emma (2015). *Inequalities at the Starting Gate*. Economic Policy Institute. See also: Perry, Theresa (2003). “Up From the Parched Earth: Toward a Theory of African American Achievement,” in *Young, Gifted, and Black*. Beacon Press: Boston.

⁶ This includes pronounced disparities in treatment and punishment between white youth and youth of color for similar infractions. Skiba, R, Arredondo M, and Rausch, M. (2014). “New and Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline,” *Discipline Disparities: A Research-to-Practice Collaborative*. Equity Project at Indiana University.

⁷ Author’s estimate from analyses in Des Moines, Iowa.

⁸ Author’s experience from Iowa.

Why might this be structural racism? In this instance, the requirement that an applicant have experience conducting large, statewide workshops or have certain levels of liability coverage or years of experience in the field may preclude virtually all organizations that have the most direct contact and connections at the community level with youth, particularly those who have been subject to confinement. When such requirements represent general “standards” for state procurement, those with the most experiential expertise are likely to be disadvantaged, in favor of those with professional credentials and experience.

Excerpt from Beginning of *Native Son*

A weaving motion in the sky made him turn his eyes upward; he saw a slender streak of billowing white blooming against the deep blue. The plane was writing high up in the air.

“Look!” Bigger said.

“What?”

“That plane writing up there,” Bigger said, pointing.

“Them white boys sure can fly,” Gus said.

“Yeah, Bigger said wistfully. “They get a chance to do everything. I could fly one of them things if I had a chance.”

Gus pulled down the corners of his lips, stepped out from the wall, squared his shoulders, doffed his cap, bowed low and spoke with mock deference:

“Yessuh.”

“I could fly a plane if I had a chance,” Bigger said.

“If you wasn’t black and you had some money and if they’s let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane,” Gus said.

For a moment, Bigger contemplated all the “ifs” that Gus had mentioned. Then both boys broke out into hard laughter, looking at each other through squinted eyes.

“It’s funny how the white folks treat us, ain’t it.”

“It better be funny,” Gus said.

“Maybe they right in not wanting us to fly,” Bigger said. “Cause if I took a plane up I’d take a couple of bombs along and drop ‘em sure as hell. ...”⁹

⁹ Wright, Richard (1940). *Native Son*. New York: Harper and Brothers.