

# Anti-Black Racism and the Legacies of Slavery

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Partway through the year 2020, people around the world began to engage in conversations on anti-Black racism actively. It wasn't that anti-Black racism was new to 2020; rather, Black people and many others had been decrying this relentless reality of racism for generations. But, in 2020, racial injustice suddenly became a rallying cry for people and corporations, protests erupted around the world, and people proclaimed that "Black Lives Matter." Some even moved to a deeper understanding that anti-Black racism was not necessarily about the overt racist actions of individuals, nor was it about whether individual Black people are poor or in prison or have "succeeded." Rather, it was a system of oppressions that particularly impacted people of African descent.

The racial injustice is so prevalent that United Nations has named the years 2015–2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent, "recognizing that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected."

As part of the Decade, working groups of the United Nations travelled to various countries to report on the current realities faced by Black people in those particular countries. In Canada, for example, the working group named that, as a whole, Black people experience higher levels of poverty, poorer health, attain lower education, and experience overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. It reports that "the particular history of anti-Black racism in Canada, which is traceable to slavery and its legacy, through specific laws and practices enforcing segregation in education, residential accommodation, employment and other economic opportunities."

Similarly, in the United States "due partially to the legacy of slavery, racism and discrimination, African Americans have had economic, social and educational disadvantages, as well as challenges to the enjoyment of basic human rights."

The realities of these racial inequalities have taken their toll on Black people's physical and mental health. The City of Toronto in Ontario, Canada, declared its first Black Mental Health Day on March 2, 2020. A news release stated that for Black people, "experiencing systemic discrimination and microaggressions are social stressors that increase the risk of negative physical and mental health including anxiety, depression, suicide or suicidal thoughts, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, high blood pressure and premature mortality" (<https://www.toronto.ca/home/media-room/news-releases-media-advisories/?nrkey=B3A26CC64D14B6FD8525851D00724346>).

Summarized: for Black people, the direct results of racism are making people physically sick, affecting their mental health, and killing them early.

These racial realities are linked to the legacies of slavery, and it is a global phenomenon. The Council for World Mission – a global ecumenical organization – actively engaged a multi-year project called the Legacies of Slavery Project. Through this, they noted some contemporary manifestations include economic injustice, where former

colonial powers have economic advantages; persisting racism and Afrophobia; White privilege; colonizing mission and faith; criminalization of "blackness" and disaffection amongst children and youth; deficits in the achievement, prosperity, and presence of African and African descendent people; complicit churches.

By the time the 400-year-long abhorrent system of slavery ended in the 1900s, an estimated 12 million Black people had been stolen from their homelands and moved from Africa to the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe. When slavery ended, lands were often returned to the White slave owners, and Black people were left with nothing. When slavery ended, White people grew richer, and Black people grew poorer.

A World Council of Churches document names some of the legacies of slavery clearly:

"White European ancestry, whether they were anti- or pro-slavery, benefited from the entitlements accruing to them by virtue of being White-skinned peoples. For example, in the late 1800s, in Brazil and many other colonies, although Black peoples were being emancipated from legal slavery, they were not given land, and had to pay high rent for tools and other resources; at the same time, White European immigrants were given incentives such as land and other resources. Thus, people of White European ancestry who had no direct involvement in the slavery or the slave trade became nevertheless beneficiaries of the enslavement system" (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/racism/abolished-but-not-destroyed-slavery-in-the-21st-century>).

The impacts of the enslavement system are felt today. The United Nations has "acknowledged that people of African descent were victims of slavery, the slave trade and colonialism, and continue to be victims of their consequences" (<https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent/background>). The impact has been an inter-generational and contemporary one. One tangible legacy: anti-Black racism.

So how then do we live? One way might be by becoming informed and taking tangible action for change. The Season of Lent provides a few opportunities to focus specifically on the legacies of slavery and their contemporary manifestations: in some countries, February is Black History Month (or African Heritage Month); March 21 is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; March 25 is International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Throughout the Lenten season, there are references to the Hebrew people remembering their time of enslavement in Egypt and their liberation. Might this be a time to make reference to the legacies of slavery today and actively commit to challenging anti-Black racism and discrimination in all its forms?

