



CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY



True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality

Discussion Questions

For those who may choose to divide their group discussions into sections or hold a series of discussions, these slides can be quickly referenced according to the specific topic.

The topical summaries preceding each set of accompanying questions may be either read by participants prior to watching the film or serve as background information for engaging in the group discussion.

Discussion Topics



Race and Systemic Racism

Economics and Poverty

Education and Employment

Truth and Reconciliation

Race and Systemic Racism

It has been often said America's original sin is *racism*. The idea of race is a relatively new phenomenon in the course of human history. Whereas early civilizations made social distinctions, recorded accounts strongly suggest these lines were primarily drawn along **language, religion, geography, and economic status**. Categorizing people according to skin color began soon after Europeans pillaged land inhabited by Indigenous peoples and sought to justify the enslavement of Africans during America's colonial period. Race is socially constructed and has no genetic or scientific basis.

Systemic racism is both a theoretical concept and a reality. As a theory, it is premised on the research-supported claim that the United States was founded as a racist society, that racism is thus embedded in all social institutions, structures, and social relations within our society. Rooted in a racist foundation, systemic racism today is composed of intersecting, overlapping, and codependent racist institutions, policies, practices, ideas, and behaviors that give an unjust portion of resources, rights, and power to white people while denying the same to people of color. This notion has given rise to a pervasive white supremacy culture in America (Golash-Boza, 2017).

White supremacy is a term used to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist; 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society; 3) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures; 4) white people are genetically superior to other people. Most white supremacists today further believe that the white race is in danger of extinction due to a rising "flood" of non-whites, who are controlled and manipulated by Jews, and that imminent action is need to "save" the white race. (Anti-Defamation League)

Blacks make up 13% of the U.S. population, yet comprise 40% of the prison population. If an African American and a white person each commit a crime, the Black person has a better chance of being arrested. It's also true that, once arrested, Black people are convicted more often than white people. And for many years, laws assigned much harsher for using or possessing crack, for example, compared to cocaine. Finally, when Black people are convicted, they are about 20% more likely to be sentenced to jail time, and typically see sentences 20% longer than those for whites who were convicted of similar crimes. Unfortunately, a felony conviction means, in many states, that you lose your right to vote. Currently in America, almost 7.5% of the adult African American population is disenfranchised (compared to 1.8% of the non-African American population). According to EJI, American history begins with the creation of a myth to absolve white settlers of the genocide of Native Americans: the false belief that nonwhite people are less human than white people. This belief in racial hierarchy survived slavery's abolition, fueled racial terror lynching, demanded legally codified segregation, and spawned our mass incarceration crisis.



Race & Systemic Racism

Stevenson refers to what Europeans did to Native/Indigenous Peoples as to why America is still today a "post-genocide" society, what does he mean and what are the social implications?

Some say electing an African American president shows America is in a post-racial era, do you agree, why or why not?

What were the five (5) reasons Mr. Anthony Hinton was told by police that he would most likely be convicted of a crime he did not commit?

Oftentimes lynchings were witnessed by white children, what impact might such an experience have on their psyche and racial identity?

How and why did white supremacy begin and what are present-day manifestations of white supremacy culture in faith and religious institutions?

Economics and Poverty

Prisons are Big Business. The prison privatization boom began in the 1980s, under the governments of Ronald Reagan and Bush Sr., but reached its height in 1990 under William Clinton when Wall Street stocks were soaring. Clinton's program for cutting the federal workforce resulted in the Justice Department's contracting of private prison corporations for the incarceration of undocumented workers and high-security inmates. Private prisons are the biggest business in the prison industry complex. About 18 corporations guard 10,000 prisoners in 27 states. The two largest are Correctional Corporation of America (CCA) and Wackenhut, which together control 75%.

Private prisons receive a guaranteed amount of money for each prisoner, independent of what it costs to maintain each one. The Brookings Institution found that only 49 percent of incarcerated men were employed in the three years prior to incarceration and their median annual earnings were \$6,250; just 13 percent earned more than \$15,000. Further findings in the Brookings study reveal a pattern: These individuals are not just more likely to be poor and unemployed, but they were also more likely to grow up in poverty and in neighborhoods with high unemployment. The likelihood that a boy from a family in the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution will end up in prison in his thirties is 20 times greater than that of a boy from a family in the top 10 percent. Individuals are also nearly twice as likely to be imprisoned if they grow up in single-parent homes, even after accounting for differences in income. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to have developmental issues, which inhibit impulse control, cause low self-esteem, and reduce educational achievements, each of which may contribute to the likelihood of committing a crime.

Poverty and drug use perpetuate each other and often inhibit escape from the cycles of addiction and poverty; substance abuse may result from poverty as a person uses drugs or alcohol to cope with their financial stresses, and alternatively, poverty can be a result of chronic and expensive drug abuse that leads to overwhelming debt. In 2016, drug and alcohol use cost an estimated \$1.45 trillion, including \$578 billion in economic loss and \$874 billion in societal harm from reduced quality of life. And each year, we lose \$87 billion in GDP due to mass incarceration.

According to data from the National Household Survey of Drug Abuse (NHSDA) and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, drug use is associated with greater poverty because of its effects on education level, human capital investments, and family composition. Drug use, particularly chronic drug use, lowers productivity, reduces earnings, adversely affects educational attainment, and ultimately increases the likelihood of poverty. Ninety-seven percent of 125,000 federal inmates have been convicted of non-violent crimes. It is believed that more than half of the 623,000 inmates in municipal or county jails are innocent of the crimes they are accused of. Of these, the majority are awaiting trial. Two-thirds of the one million state prisoners have committed non-violent offenses. Sixteen percent of the country's 2 million prisoners suffer from mental illness.



Economics & Poverty

What does the film say about why mass incarceration is profitable or financially beneficial to certain people or companies?

How does the federal government benefit from large prison populations, and does this have any burden to taxpayers?

What can faith-based organizations do to provide support for formerly incarcerated people to help prevent them from returning to jail/prison?

By 2045 non-whites will be a numeric majority in America, what implications does this have for the justice system and public policy?

Why do most anti-poverty programs fail, and what can be done differently to get better outcomes?

Education and Employment

There are several reasons that inmates are less likely to have been educated, but a primary factor may be found in the fact that prisoners have a disproportionately high rate of learning disabilities. Among those who had not completed high school or the GED in the national study, 59 percent had a speech disability, and 69 percent had a learning disability. Using prisons to deal with poverty and mental illness makes these problems worse. People leave overcrowded and violent jails and prisons more traumatized, mentally ill, and physically battered than they went in (Equal Justice Institute).

Another huge issue is the social and economic inequality that contributes to fewer quality educational opportunities being available to prisoners, pre-incarceration. According to a Prison Policy study, before they went to prison, incarcerated citizens had a median annual income over 40 percent less than the median income for non-incarcerated people in their age group. Living in a poor area often means access to lower-quality schooling. The U.S. Department of Education reports that over 40 percent of low-income schools don't get a fair share of state and national educational funding, meaning that they get less money to spend on supplies, infrastructure and teachers.

After leaving school, the chances of incarceration increase drastically, and there are many reasons for this. Primarily, it can be challenging to find a steady job after dropping out of school. Due to the lack of job experience and the lack of academic skills, over half of high-school dropouts are unemployed. Since the average yearly earnings of high school dropouts is just over half of the earnings of high school graduates, leaving school can either put people into poverty or perpetuate the poverty in which they were already living. From here, the profiling and criminalization of homelessness and poverty cement the relationship between poverty and imprisonment. The result of these factors is that high school dropouts are 47 times more likely to be incarcerated than similarly aged peers with a four-year college degree (Institute for Policy Studies).

Following the cycle from poverty to lower-quality education to incarceration, people from certain communities of color are disproportionately impacted at every step of the way. First, certain communities of color are significantly more likely to live in poorer areas. Studies have tracked neighborhoods by ethnicity and found that white and Asian neighborhoods have a much higher median income than other races. And the median wealth of white neighborhoods was 13 times the median wealth of Black neighborhoods as recently as 2013. Since Black and Brown people are more likely to live in low-income areas and low-income areas tend to have lower-quality education, this means that access to education is highly racialized. Additionally, students of color are more likely to be held back, drop out or be suspended or expelled, all of which push students out of the school system. (Source: Caitlin Curley, 2016)

Education & Employment

“The land of opportunity--people who work hard and get a good education can live the American dream”, is it that simple?

How is the American education system contributing to the mass incarceration problem and what needs to change in school discipline practices?

Given the inherent racial inequities in convictions and sentencing, particularly affecting young Black men, should capital punishment be abolished?

More than 4.5 million Americans can't vote because of a past conviction, how does this disenfranchisement in the political process threaten democracy?

Stevenson says more grace is granted to the rich and guilty than the poor and innocent in our criminal justice system, how does this get fixed?



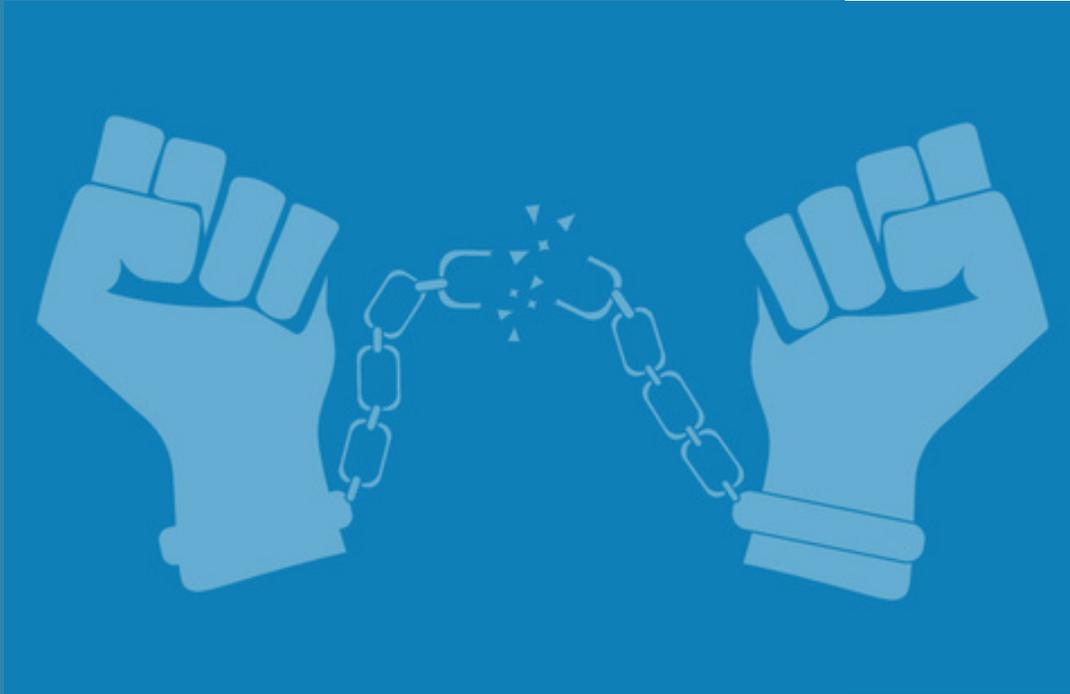
Truth and Reconciliation

When enslaved people became Christian, it challenged the justification for slavery, which was religious difference, i.e., it was considered legal to enslave “heathens” but not to enslave Christians. When enslaved Christians met for worship, White colonists feared they were plotting slave rebellion. A 1709 law clarified that a “white” person could have “no extract” from “a Negro,” thereby establishing the “one-drop rule” as the definition of whiteness and laying a new foundation for slavery and social oppression that made race seem like a natural category—innate. Thus, the codification of whiteness as a legal category was specifically intended to exclude free Black Christians from the full rights of citizenship. It becomes assumed that race is a biological reality when it is really a political category. Slaveholding politicians actively created the category of “whiteness” as a political strategy to protect slave ownership and restrict the voting rights of free Blacks. Whiteness, rather than religious difference, became the new way to justify and enforce slavery.

Protestant supremacy became the forerunner to white supremacy. English slave owners thought of Christianity—and especially Protestantism—as a religion for free people, and they worried that a baptized slave would demand freedom and possibly rebel. As a result, they excluded most enslaved people from Protestant churches. Colonists didn’t call themselves “White”; they called themselves “Christians.” Protestant slave owners constructed a caste system based on Christian status, in which “heathen” slaves were afforded no rights or privileges while Catholics, Jews, and nonconforming Protestants were viewed with suspicion and distrust but granted more protections (Smedley). Founded in 1865, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) extended into almost every southern state by 1870 and became a vehicle for white southern resistance to the Republican Party’s Reconstruction-era policies aimed at establishing political and economic equality for Black Americans. Its members waged an underground campaign of intimidation and violence directed at white and Black Republican leaders. Though Congress passed legislation designed to curb Klan terrorism, the organization saw its primary goal—the reestablishment of white supremacy—fulfilled through Democratic victories in state legislatures across the South in the 1870s.

The 1920s saw a revival of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) nationally, but especially in Indiana where David Curtis “D.C.” Stephenson was Grand Dragon of infamous influence. Stephenson originally settled in Evansville, where he was successful at recruiting thousands of KKK members. He then moved to Indianapolis, living in a mansion in Irvington. Stephenson spread the Klan’s anti-Catholic message through its newspaper and accused Catholics of being behind secret plots to overthrow the government and exterminate Protestants. Jews were also criticized and, to a lesser extent, Blacks. Stephenson was so successful that, between July 1922 and July 1923, almost 2,000 new members were added each week. Membership grew to 250,000, or about one-third of all white males in the state, the largest membership in the country. In 1923, he severed his ties with the national organization, which had supported Democrats, and threw his support to the Republicans who then controlled Indiana’s government. Republican politicians joined the Klan because they learned that Klan endorsement was necessary to win office. By 1925, over half of the members of the Indiana General Assembly, the governor of Indiana, and most other high-ranking officials in local and state government were KKK members (Madison, 2015).

After a period of decline, white Protestant nativist groups revived the Klan in the early 20th century, burning crosses and staging rallies, parades and marches denouncing immigrants, Catholics, Jews, African Americans and organized labor. The civil rights movement of the 1960s also saw a surge of Ku Klux Klan activity, including bombings of Black schools and churches and violence against Black and white activists in the South. Members of white supremacy groups and/or share white supremacy ideology today are overwhelmingly comprised of individuals who also self-identify as Christian and/or Christian-Evangelical.



Truth & Reconciliation

Why can't we agree on America's history and how has the dominant historical narrative glorified certain groups and devalued other ones?

What does the fundamentals of your faith teach about justice and how to respond to marginalized and vulnerable people?

U.S. congregations have become more racially and ethnically diverse than ever, is this a trend, or would you say, by and large, they remain racially segregated?

Stevenson talks about those who have oppressed not ever offering an apology, how can your organization be about racial healing for past societal misdeeds?

What can be learned from South Africa's Truth & Reconciliation Commission and similar efforts occurring in some U.S. communities to help spur a nationwide movement?