**What was Jim Crow?**

Jim Crow was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism. Beliefs of the day, from religious to political to “scientific,” supported the idea that whites were legitimately superior to blacks. Newspaper and magazine writers routinely referred to blacks as niggers, coons, and darkies; and worse, their articles reinforced anti-black stereotypes. Even children's games portrayed blacks as inferior beings. All major societal institutions reflected and supported the oppression of blacks.

The Jim Crow system was undergirded by the following beliefs or rationalizations: whites were superior to blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior; sexual relations between blacks and whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America; treating blacks as equals would encourage interracial sexual unions; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial sexual relations; if necessary, violence must be used to keep blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

Stetson Kennedy, the author of *Jim Crow Guide* (1990), offered these simple rules that blacks were supposed to observe in conversing with whites:

1. Never assert or even intimate that a white person is lying.
2. Never impute dishonorable intentions to a white person.
3. Never suggest that a white person is from an inferior class.
4. Never lay claim to, or overly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.
5. Never curse a white person.
6. Never laugh derisively at a white person.
7. Never comment upon the appearance of a white female.

Jim Crow etiquette operated in conjunction with Jim Crow laws (black codes). When most people think of Jim Crow they think of laws (not the Jim Crow etiquette) which excluded blacks from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and neighborhoods.

Blacks were denied the right to vote by grandfather clauses (laws that restricted the right to vote to people whose ancestors had voted before the Civil War), poll taxes (fees charged to poor blacks), white primaries (only Democrats could vote, only whites could be Democrats), and literacy tests ("Name all the Vice Presidents and Supreme Court Justices throughout America's history").

Jim Crow states passed statutes severely regulating social interactions between the races. Jim Crow signs were placed above water fountains, door entrances and exits, and in front of public facilities. There were separate hospitals for blacks and whites, separate prisons, separate public and private schools, separate churches, separate cemeteries, separate public restrooms, and separate public accommodations. In most instances, the black facilities were grossly inferior -- generally, older, less-well-kept. In other cases, there were no black facilities -- no Colored public restroom, no public beach, no place to sit or eat. Plessy gave Jim Crow states a legal way to ignore their constitutional obligations to their black citizens.

The Jim Crow laws and system of etiquette were undergirded by violence, real and threatened. Blacks who violated Jim Crow norms, for example, drinking from the white water fountain or trying to vote, risked their homes, their jobs, even their lives. Whites could physically beat blacks with impunity. Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all-white: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison officials. Violence was instrumental for Jim Crow. It was a method of social control. The most extreme forms of Jim Crow violence were lynchings.

**Lynchings** were public, often sadistic, murders carried out by mobs. Between 1882, when the first reliable data were collected, and 1968, when lynchings had become rare, there were 4,730 known lynchings, including 3,440 black men and women. Most of the victims of Lynch Law were hanged or shot, but some were burned at the stake, castrated, beaten with clubs, or dismembered. In the mid-1800s, whites constituted the majority of victims (and perpetrators); however, by the period of Radical Reconstruction, blacks became the most frequent lynching victims. This is an early indication that lynching was used as an intimidation tool to keep blacks, in this case the newly freed people, "in their places." The great majority of lynchings occurred in southern and border states, where the resentment against blacks ran deepest. According to the social economist Gunnar Myrdal (1994): "The southern states account for nine-tenths of the lynchings. More than two thirds of the remaining one-tenth occurred in the six states which immediately border the South" (pp. 560-561).

Many whites claimed that although lynchings were distasteful, they were necessary supplements to the criminal justice system. Arthur Raper investigated nearly a century of lynchings and concluded that approximately one-third of all the victims were falsely accused (Myrdal, 1994, p. 561).

Under Jim Crow any and all sexual interactions between black men and white women was illegal, illicit, socially repugnant, and within the Jim Crow definition of rape. Although only 19.2 percent of the lynching victims between 1882 to 1951 were even accused of rape, lynch law was often supported on the popular belief that lynchings were necessary to protect white women from black rapists. Most blacks were lynched for demanding civil rights, violating Jim Crow etiquette or laws, or in the aftermath of race riots.

Lynchings were most common in small and middle-sized towns where blacks often were economic competitors to the local whites. Lynchers were seldomly arrested, and if arrested, rarely convicted. Raper (1933) estimated that "at least one-half of the lynchings are carried out with police officers participating, and that in nine-tenths of the others the officers either condone or wink at the mob action" (pp. 13-14).

Lynch mobs directed their hatred against one (sometimes several) victims. The victim was an example of what happened to a black man who tried to vote, or who looked at a white woman, or who tried to get a white man's job. Unfortunately, sometimes the mob was not satisfied to murder a single or several victims. Instead, the mobs went into black communities and destroyed additional lives and property. These actions are often referred to as riots; however, Gunnar Myrdal (1944) was right when he described these "riots" as "a terrorization or massacre...a mass lynching" (p. 566). Interestingly, these mass lynchings were primarily urban phenomena, whereas the lynching of single victims was primarily a rural phenomena.

The riots of 1919 were not the first or last "mass lynchings" of blacks, as evidenced by the race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); Springfield, Illinois (1908); East St. Louis, Illinois (1917); Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); and Detroit, Michigan (1943). Joseph Boskin, author of Urban Racial Violence (1976), claimed that the riots of the 1900s had the following traits:

1. In each of the race riots, with few exceptions, it was white people that sparked the incident.
2. In the majority of the riots, some extraordinary social condition prevailed at the time of the riot: prewar social changes, wartime mobility, post-war adjustment, or economic depression.
3. The majority of the riots occurred during the hot summer months.
4. Rumor played an extremely important role in causing many riots. Rumors of some criminal activity by blacks against whites perpetuated the actions of the white mobs.
5. The police force, more than any other institution, was invariably involved as a precipitating cause or perpetuating factor in the riots. In almost every one of the riots, the police sided with the attackers, either by actually participating in, or by failing to quell the attack.
6. In almost every instance, the fighting occurred within the black community. (pp. 14-15)

Many blacks resisted the indignities of Jim Crow, and, far too often, they paid for their bravery with their lives.

© Dr. David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology
Ferris State University
Sept., 2000
Edited 2012

**References**

Boskin, J. (1976). *Urban racial violence in the twentieth century* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe Press.

Dubois, W. E. B. (1986). *Writings*. N. Huggins, (Ed.). New York NY: Literary Classics of the United States.

Kennedy, S. (1959/1990). *Jim Crow guide: The way it was*. Boca Raton, FL: Florida Atlantic University Press.

Myrdal, G. (1944). *An American dilemma: the Negro problem and modern democracy*. New York, NY: Harper.

Raper, A. F. (1933). *The tragedy of lynching*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.