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In order to fully understand the current conditions of black people in America, it is essential to investigate their history as a formerly enslaved population. The first Africans to set foot into the New World were kidnapped from their respective nations in Africa and sold off into plantations where they worked until their lives came to an end. They had the title of “slaves” forced upon them and were made to live, obeying their white “masters”. It was in this era of African enslavement that a hierarchy based on an arbitrary classification of race came to be. This concept of racial superiority is still extremely prevalent in modern day society and plagues many aspects of black communities such as the instability of black family structures. Current day African American families have not been able to operate as a stable unit and set solid foundations for their youth because of the harsh treatment their ancestors endured throughout their history in the United States. This inability can be attributed to many developments in history such as black slavery in the New World, the Great Migration, and the mass incarceration of black individuals.

From the beginning of African American history, black Americans have been at a disadvantage that was primarily caused by the enslavement of their people in Africa. Slavery has played a major role in stunting the development of black nuclear families. Historians believe slavery in America began in 1619 when a Dutch ship enslaved 20 Africans and took them to Jamestown, Virginia, the first British colony in the New World (Slavery in America, 2018). This

marked the beginning of an institution that lasted approximately 250 years, where Africans were used as a labor source in order to develop America's economy. As enslaved people, Africans were not provided education, separate housing, nor other necessary systems to create a stable family structure. In contrast, White Americans had a distinct family structure that typically consisted of a mother, father and children whom all lived in the same household and were given proper education and care from a young age. African American families were not able to achieve this for many reasons, including regulations on legalizing family status, the lack of autonomy in raising children in their own way and the practice of selling slaves on auction blocks.

Black couples were not able to legally marry in any American colony up until the 1830s, when a few Northern states began allowing it. Since African individuals were viewed as property and did not have the right to enter a legal contract, legalizing their marital status was prohibited (Williams, 2010). The lack of recognition of the couple's marriage allowed others to undermine the relationship and the existing family they may have created. The lack of respect that white slave masters had for their slaves greatly impacted the way in which Black Americans raised their children. They did not have full control over their child's development and were not able to pass down many of their values, as one would normally do to their children.

Auction blocks also played a major role in normalizing the dismantling of black families for the following generations. Slave masters often hosted auction blocks in which the black individuals were sold off regardless of the fact that their remaining family members lived on the plantation. In the case of the master of the household passing away and their inheritance being divided, it is very likely that black families get separated in the process (Williams, 2010). This practice of separating black nuclear families became an ordinary, everyday happening, and a threat to the black population who forced to face the possibility every day. The separation of

these formal family units began setting into place the idea that both parents were not necessary for black households to function. From the beginning of black history in America, the idea of an African American family was not seen as a longstanding structure, but often very meaningless to slave masters. This mindset did not cease in unison with the end of the era of slavery.

The desensitization towards the separation of black families then seeped through the minds of incoming generations and made it necessary for survival. After the abolishment of slavery, black families faced a lot of discrimination regardless of the “equality” that was promised to them after the Civil War. They were forced to endure political, social, and economic inequality, which was undeniably worse in the Southern regions of the United States. The “legalized disenfranchisement and segregation accompanied by an escalation of lynching and racial violence” made the lives of black citizens increasingly dangerous and dehumanizing (Stewart, p.45). In order to escape these insufferable conditions, African Americans traveled North, seeking better jobs and better lives for their families. In these situations, it was normal to send the father figure to the Northern states, while the rest of the family remained in the South. The trend of men moving to the North was seen as a “disruption of black families” and concerned many people because they believed the women and children were being left behind in a dangerous environment without any protection (Stewart, p.54). Men also used migration as an opportunity to escape negative relationships, payment of alimony or family obligations, and women left to escape the holds of an abusive husband (Stewart, p.54). Although there were many reasons that Black Americans migrated, the separation of black families was becoming more normalized and increasingly viewed as a characteristic of the African American family system.

The system of deconstructing Black American families is still exhibited in modern day households. In the past 400 years, black people have been forced to disassemble their families

due to social, economic, and natural forces but nowadays, families are being ripped apart by the systems our government has put into place. Presidents Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton all played a large role in increasing the number of African Americans incarcerated in the latter half of the 20th century. Presidents Nixon and Reagan launched and applied the War on Crime and War on Drugs programs that aimed to decrease crime and drug activities in the United States. When attempting to enact this objective, black communities were disproportionately impacted and the rates of incarceration exponentially increased. The War on Drugs initiative criminalized crack, which is significantly cheaper than cocaine as it is made by mixing powdered cocaine with water and sodium bicarbonate, also known as baking soda. Due to its cheaper price, crack is found in communities with high populations of blacks and Latinos (DuVerities to jail for the possession of this drug while powdered cocaine, which is found in more affluent, white neighborhoods had a much shorter sentence and a lighter punishment overall (DuVernay, 13th).

By 2000, prison admissions for African Americans increased by 26 times the amount imprisoned in 1983 while the prison admission of White Americans has only increased eight times the amount since 1983(Alexander, p.98). The policies set in place seemingly work towards imprisoning black men at a higher rate than any other demographic and play a major role in dismantling black families. The era of War on Drugs increased the amount of black men being taken away from their families and sent into jail for minor offenses. This demographic faces a higher rate of incarceration for drug related crimes although white individuals engage in illegal drug dealing and consumption at higher rates than black people (Alexander, p.99). The judicial system targets black men much more when it comes to drug offenses and continues the nation's trend in working to break apart black families. Children in predominantly black neighborhoods are then sometimes raised in a single parent household with one individual working to handle

financial and domestic responsibilities on their own. This leads to a lowered performance in the child's school and personal life as it is difficult for one parent to handle supporting the household on their own (Morsy and Rothstein, 2016).

Black Americans were targeted by laws set forth by not only Presidents Nixon and Reagan but also President Bill Clinton. President Clinton passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act which was one of the most significant laws when it came to increasing the amount of families that were broken apart. Clinton's bill placed 100,000 new police out on the streets, turned 60 offenses into crimes that were worthy of capital punishment, and created the system of mandatory minimums (DuVernay, 13th). Mandatory minimums are "a vessel through which the legislature is able to prescribe compulsory prison terms for certain criminals" which means that the judges and juries have very little say in the amount of time criminals spend in jail. (McNeils, 2017). The act also established the 3-strike rule stating that if you had 2 previous offenses, regardless of the intensity of the crime, a third offense would land you in jail for an extended period of time. Clinton allotted \$9.7 billion to fund the creation and expansion of new prisons (Lussenhop, 2016). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act also put \$6.1 billion into the creation of preventive programs that were "designed with significant input from experienced police officers"(Lussenhop, 2016). The problem with these programs is that instead of providing rehabilitation to affected communities or helping them develop preventive skills, they worked towards throwing offenders in jail to prevent them from committing criminal acts after release. These punitive tactics expanded the prison system and exponentially increased the amount of black men that were being imprisoned. Much like the War on Drugs, Clinton's 1994 bill separated black men from their families and continued the trend of dismantling Black American households.

The breaking apart of black families can be recognized at almost any point in American history. Whether it be because of lack of social autonomy or political policies, Black Americans have faced many obstacles when trying to uphold a stable family structure. The enslavement of their people, the need to participate in the Great Migration, and the mass incarceration of their population are all contributing factors. The failure of defeating these obstacles leads to the creation of a household in which the youth cannot prosper. In *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, she speaks on Tupac's personal meaning of "THUG LIFE". These two words stand for "the hate u give little infants f---s everybody" which in this case means the institutionalized dismantling of black families will eventually come back to harm our society in the form of youth that were raised in unstable households (Thomas, p.17). When lacking the support of either a mother or a father, children may possibly turn to a life of gang violence or drugs in search of the "family" and "protection" they have always desired. The long-standing practice of breaking apart black families not only impacts the black population negatively, it also increases gang violence, distribution of drugs, and rates of incarceration among other things. In order to build a nation that ensures the prosperity of all its citizens, it is important to consider the impact that history has on the current youth and work towards creating avenues to help them succeed.

**Word Count: 1,855**