

# The Delray Democrat

## White Privilege<sup>1</sup>

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I was pulled over for speeding a few years ago on Lake Ida Road. My immediate concerns were how long I'd be delayed and how much it would cost me. That I might pay with my life never crossed my mind.

That's just one of the many examples of how White<sup>2</sup> people are advantaged in America. When Peggy McIntosh wrote [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) more than three decades ago, she did not include the privilege of not being murdered by a police officer during a routine traffic stop.

She also did not note that White people are far less likely to live next to toxic wastes and landfills than are Black people or that White women are three times less likely to die in childbirth than Black women or that White people have longer lifespans, or that White people are less likely to die of COVID and more likely to receive vaccines than Black people. But that is where we are today.

And yet many White people continue to bristle upon hearing the term White Privilege. It does not mean that if you are White you are a racist or that everything you have achieved in life was unearned. As Cory Collins notes in his essay [What Is White Privilege, Really?](#), "most white people who have reached a high level of success worked extremely hard to get there. Instead, white privilege should be viewed as a built-in advantage, separate from one's level of income or effort."

Moreover, there are other forms of privilege, such as being born into a middle- or upper-middle-class family that emphasizes education, as Gina Crosley-Corcoran notes in [Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person](#): "one can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others." When someone referred to her as privileged, she responded, "I came from the kind of Poor that people don't want to believe still exists in this country."

Yet upon reflection, Crosley-Corcoran came to the realization that "It's impossible to deny that being born with white skin in America affords people certain unearned privileges in life that people of another skin color simply are not afforded." She then went on to [explain](#):

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<sup>1</sup> *The Delray Democrat*, April 2021, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Media organizations and style guides are at odds on whether to capitalize both "Black" and "White," only "Black," or neither. The National Association of Black Journalists style guide capitalizes both. NYU professor of philosophy and law Kwame Anthony Appiah also argues for capitalizing both terms notwithstanding the fact that doing so would lend support to white supremacist websites that use an uppercase "W": "You could argue that it's the other way round: If the capitalization of white became standard among anti-racists, the supremacists' gesture would no longer be a provocative defiance of the norm and would lose all force."

It's not your fault you were born with white skin and experience these privileges. *But* whether you realize it or not, you *do* benefit from it, and it *is* your fault if you don't maintain awareness of that fact.

Unfortunately, structural racism so permeates American society that being aware of one's White Privilege is only a first baby step to eliminating it, as Michelle Alexander points out in her carefully researched and footnoted book, *The New Jim Crow*:

The widespread and mistaken belief that racial animus is necessary for the creation and maintenance of racialized systems of social control is the most important reason that we, as a nation, have remained in deep denial . . . The unfortunate reality we must face is that racism manifests itself not only in individual attitudes and stereotypes, but also in the basic structure of society.

For example, structural racism helps account for the fact that Black families possess roughly 10% of the wealth of White families. Homeownership is the top contributor to household wealth, and while the G.I. Bill and the Federal Housing Administration made homeownership possible for White veterans, racist zoning laws and redlining by banks and the FHA barred Black veterans from acquiring homes in neighborhoods where wealth would accumulate.

Alexander rigorously documents how Blacks are treated far more severely by the criminal "justice" system. They are more likely to be searched for drugs but less likely to have them. They are more likely to be subjected to selective prosecution, that is, to being charged under federal drug laws, which are more severe than state drug laws. And they are more likely to be sentenced to death or life in prison than White defendants charged with similar crimes.

One study found that prosecutors sought the death penalty in 70% of cases involving a White victim and a Black defendant but only in 19% of cases involving a Black victim and a White defendant. In another case, defense attorneys submitted evidence that 98.4% of persons sentenced to life imprisonment under Georgia's "Two Strikes and You're Out" drug law were Black. Georgia's district attorneys invoked the law against 1% of White defendants but 16% of Black defendants.

Structural racism inhabits our judicial system as well. When the Supreme Court had the opportunity to review the death penalty statistics cited above, they demanded that the defendant submit evidence of overt racial bias against him personally. It then went on to note that "If we accepted McCleskey's claim that racial bias has impermissibly tainted the capital sentencing decision, we could soon be faced with similar claims as to other types of penalty." In dissent, Justice William Brennan pointedly observed that, "Taken on its face, such a statement seems to suggest a fear of too much justice."

It seems to me that those of us who benefit from White Privilege have a responsibility to help in the difficult process of dismantling it. It begins with educating ourselves and others, working to defeat racist politicians and overturn racist laws, and perhaps above all listening to the victims.