Racial segregation during the Jim Crow era was a system that relegated African Americans to the position of second class citizens, lasting between 1877 and the mid-1960s. The most common types of segregation mandated that public institutions and business owners keep blacks and whites separated. Intermarriage was also forbidden. Here is one example of a state law enforcing segregation in Alabama: “No person or corporation shall require any white female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which negro [sic] men are placed.” In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in Plessy v. Ferguson that state laws enforcing racial segregation in private businesses was constitutional under the principle that segregation was legal so long as blacks and whites were granted equal public accommodations (the “separate but equal” doctrine).

However, blacks and whites were not granted equal treatment. Blacks were denied jobs, access to good schools, and were forced to sit behind whites in public transport facilities. In addition to legal separation, racial segregation included a set of beliefs that whites were superior to blacks in terms of intelligence and morality. Violence was often used to keep blacks beneath whites in the racial hierarchy. To give a few examples of Jim Crow etiquette: blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together, but if they did, whites were to be served first; a black male was not supposed to offer his hand to a white male, because that implied social equality; blacks were always supposed to be introduced to whites, and not vice versa. Racial segregation did not only exist in the South, but was a national phenomenon. For example, the United States Armed Forces remained segregated until the 1950s—white and black units were kept separate, and black units were led by white officers. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that segregation in education was inherently unequal, thus overturning the longstanding Plessy doctrine. Civil rights legislation in the 1960s outlawed discrimination in employment, education and housing. Despite these laws, de facto segregation remains a powerful force in American life. For example, in 2005, there was estimated to be a smaller proportion of black students currently enrolled at majority white public schools than at any time since 1968. While racial segregation is no longer legally acceptable, its adverse effects continue to be felt—and further perpetuate racial inequality—in the United States today.

Costs and Effects of Segregation

Subjected to discriminatory laws and segregation for over eighty years (1877-1960s), African Americans' political and economic rights and opportunities were severely disadvantaged and negatively impacted by Jim Crow. Many of these effects are still felt today.

Housing and Property

Racial segregation in housing was the result of local, state, and federal laws and policies, restrictive covenants, and overt discrimination against blacks. For example, government acts such as the G.I. Bill of 1944 provided low-cost mortgages, but denied all grants to red-lined, “high risk” areas, where African-Americans lived. Because blacks were prevented from moving into white neighborhoods due to discriminatory real estate practices and restrictive covenants which prohibited the sale of real estate to blacks, they were effectively limited to poor urban neighborhoods. Segregated housing directly affected the education and employment opportunities, health outcomes, and economic status of African-Americans.

Education

Segregated schools were more often than not unequal. Black students in black schools often had substandard curricula, less resources and lower quality teachers and facilities. In some rural areas, most black schools offered a shortened school term so that children could be let off earlier to help weed and pick the cotton fields. At the college level, segregation led to the development of black private and public colleges in the South, often
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supported by the federal government. Some of these higher education institutions taught curricula at the secondary level because no public high schools for black children existed. Although successful black high schools and excellent black colleges produced many African-American leaders, segregated education in general severely curtailed the economic opportunities of blacks.

Health

Racial segregation has been linked to lower health outcomes for African Americans. Research has shown that segregated black communities are located in highly toxic environments not well-served by public services, lack adequate medical services, and have higher housing costs and cost of living. These factors are compounded by poverty, lower employment rates, and lower quality education. For example, the following findings—among others—have been made: the rate of infant mortality for African-Americans was significantly higher than for whites, the death rate for southern blacks was much higher than for whites, and only cancer and diabetes, among the leading causes of death, killed more whites than blacks.

Voting, Prisons, and Employment

Many Southern states imposed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other methods to disenfranchise the black population. Significant numbers of African-American men were also disenfranchised and exploited by way of the criminal justice system. For example, it was common for blacks to be arrested, often guilty of no crime, and released under parole into custody of land-holders to work as farm-hands without pay. As a result of their incarceration, former prisoners were legally disenfranchised and legally discriminated against in employment, housing, education, and public benefits. Segregation in employment, in addition to the significant effects of a segregated education and employment implications of having a criminal record, also produced higher rates of unemployment and lower wages for African-Americans compared to whites.

Origins of Jim Crow, Plessy v. Ferguson, and “Separate but Equal”

The term “Jim Crow” originated in a minstrel show in the 1830s depicting a negative caricature of a black person, and became a popular stereotype of black inferiority in U.S. culture by the 1850s. By the end of the 19th century, Jim Crow represented the system of racist laws that relegated African Americans to the status of second class citizens from 1877 to the mid-1960s.

The Reconstruction era began shortly after the Civil War ended when the federal government passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the two Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875 in an effort to protect the civil rights of African Americans. Southern whites reacted by terrorizing and killing blacks, led by the Ku Klux Klan. Despite initial efforts, the federal government abandoned its efforts to protect African Americans’ civil rights in the South in exchange for Republican Rutherford B. Hayes receiving the presidency in the Compromise of 1877. The withdrawal of a federal presence in the South and the federal government’s promise not to interfere with state practices regarding blacks led to Jim Crow.

Although segregation had been established before 1896, the Supreme Court validated the practice in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). In Plessy, Homer Plessy challenged a Louisiana law that required separate accommodations for blacks and whites in railway cars, arguing that it violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the opinion of the Court, Justice Brown stated that the Act did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment because state-mandated racial segregation was constitutional so long as the separate accommodations for blacks were equal to those for whites—the “separate but equal” doctrine. The Court went on to say that the Fourteenth Amendment did not guarantee social equality, but rather only political equality before the law.
Following the Court's validation of “separate but equal” laws, the remaining Southern state passed laws mandating segregation on railroads. Racial segregation spread to all aspects of life, including education in primary, secondary schools and colleges, employment, housing, the military, public transportation, and public places. African Americans were severely disenfranchised and prohibited from marrying interracially. In addition to laws and practices, Jim Crow also subjected African Americans to a set of social rules based on and meant to uphold white superiority. For example, whites were to be served before blacks if they ate together, a black male was not supposed to offer his hand to a white male, and blacks were always supposed to be introduced to whites and not vice versa. Under Jim Crow and until the 1930s, violence against African Americans increased in the form of lynchings and mob violence. Such lynchings often were committed as capital punishment without the sanction of law for crimes that were fabricated or exaggerated. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the era of segregation gave way to the Civil Rights Movement.
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![Image of a segregated drinking fountain sign]

Montgomery, Ala.
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