

Jim Crow and Structural Violence in the United States

Introduction

This essay will examine Jim Crow¹ as an example of structural violence within the United States. Jim Crow was a set of laws and social practises that segregated Black and white Americans along racial lines, denying Black Americans equal rights and access to education, employment, housing, voting, healthcare, transport, and public services.

As I understand it, Johan Galtung's² idea of structural violence is when laws, institutions, and social structures place certain groups at a disadvantage and prevent them from meeting their basic needs. Jim Crow is a clear example because it reveals the racial inequality that was supported by laws and powerful groups.

This essay will assess how Jim Crow affected Black Americans and why it can be seen as structural violence. It will look at the policies surrounding *Brown v. Board of Education*³, the Civil Rights Act of 1964⁴, the Voting Rights Act of 1965⁵, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.⁶

The essay will assess the success of these measures, identify additional policy options, and provide recommendations.

Jim Crow and Structural Violence

Jim Crow developed in the southern United States after the Civil War and the end of slavery in 1865. Southern states passed laws that segregated Black and White people and restricted Black Americans' rights. These laws and practices affected almost every aspect of public life, including schools, transport, restaurants, hospitals, parks, toilets, and drinking fountains. The Library of Congress⁷ states that Black Americans were forced to use separate facilities, usually inferior to those provided for White Americans.

¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow.*, 3rd revised ed. (Oxford University Press, 1974).

² Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA), 6.3 (1969), pp. 167–91, doi:10.1177/002234336900600301.

³ Terbeek, Calvin, 2021. "Clocks Must Always Be Turned Back": Brown v. Board of Education and the Racial Origins of Constitutional Originalism', *The American Political Science Review* (New York, USA), 115.3, pp. 821–34, doi:10.1017/S0003055421000095

⁴ Judy L. Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964 : An End to Racial Segregation*, Milestones in American History (Chelsea House, 2007).

⁵ *Voting Rights Act of 1965*, (Great Neck Publishing, 2017).

⁶ Edward G. Goetz, 'The Fight for Fair Housing: Causes, Consequences, and Future Implications of the 1968 Federal Fair Housing Act The Fight for Fair Housing: Causes, Consequences, and Future Implications of the 1968 Federal Fair Housing Act', Edited by Gregory D. Squires, New York, Routledge, 2018', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 41.8 (2019), doi:10.1080/07352166.2019.1588575.

⁷ Library of Congress, 'Jim Crow and Segregation', *Classroom Materials* <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/jim-crow-segregation/>, [accessed 30 June 2026].

Supporters of segregation claimed that Black and White people were being treated equally, but this was not true in everyday life. White Americans usually had better schools, better public services, more job opportunities, and greater political protection.

The Supreme Court upheld segregation in the 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.⁸ The Court allowed separate amenities for black and white people under the 'separate but equal' doctrine.⁹ In my opinion, this decision gave legal support to discrimination and allowed segregation to continue for many years.

Jim Crow was a form of structural violence because discrimination was built into law and politics, even when no physical attack took place. It led to underfunded schools, fewer job opportunities, and limits on where Black Americans could live. Physical violence also helped maintain the system, as threats, arrests, beatings, and lynching discouraged people from challenging it. This shows how direct and structural violence often worked together.

According to the National Archives¹⁰, voting restrictions were another important part of Jim Crow. Although the Fifteenth Amendment had given Black men the right to vote, southern states introduced literacy tests, poll taxes, intimidation, and other barriers to voting. These restrictions reduced the political power of Black Americans and made it much harder for them to challenge unfair laws or influence the people making them. This created a sequence of inequality because Black communities had very little say over governments that continued to support discrimination. In my view, this clearly shows how power and inequality were closely linked under Jim Crow. The groups controlling political power were able to shape laws and policies in ways that protected their own position.

Jim Crow also limited economic opportunities. Many Black Americans were pushed into low-paid jobs and had fewer opportunities to access a good education, start businesses, own property, or improve their living conditions. Housing discrimination also prevented many Black families from moving into areas with better schools, public services, employment, and safer neighbourhoods.

These problems often carried on from parents to their children. A Black family that was stopped from buying a home had less money and property to pass on. This meant that the effects of Jim Crow continued even after segregation became illegal.

⁸ Christopher Riches and Jan Palmowski, 'Plessey v. Ferguson ((USA, 1896))', 5th ed., preprint, Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁹ National Archives, 'Plessy v. Ferguson (1896)', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson>, [accessed 30 June 2026].

¹⁰ National Archives, 'Voting Rights Act (1965)', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act>, [accessed 30 June 2026].

According to Federal Reserve¹¹ research, the wealth gap between Black and white families remains partly linked to past restrictions on property ownership, housing, and economic opportunities.

Changes Made to End Jim Crow

Brown v Board of Education

One of the challenges to Jim Crow was the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v Board of Education*.¹² The Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, stating that 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal'.¹³

I believe this decision was important because it rejected the premise that separate schools could provide genuine equality. It recognised that segregation harmed Black children and denied them equal protection under the law. But the decision did not immediately end school segregation. Many southern states resisted integration, delayed change, or closed schools rather than allow Black and White children to attend together. This shows that changing the law does not always change society straight away. In my view, *Brown v Board of Education* weakened the legal foundation of segregation, but it needed stronger enforcement. Court decisions were important, but government action and continued pressure from civil-rights campaigners were also necessary.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was another major policy introduced to challenge segregation. The Act¹⁴ prohibited racial discrimination in public places and employment and gave the federal government greater authority to act against discrimination.

The Law brought an end to legal segregation and made racial employment discrimination illegal, standing up to Jim Crow laws. It removed many obvious signs of separation; businesses couldn't refuse service based on race, and job adverts couldn't be 'whites only.' But even with this act, discrimination still persisted in discreet ways, making it harder to detect and prove. Employers and landlords could

¹¹ Aditya Aladangady and Akila Forde, 'Wealth Inequality and the Racial Wealth Gap', *FEDS Notes*, 22 October 2021 <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/notes/feds-notes/wealth-inequality-and-the-racial-wealth-gap-20211022.html> , [accessed 01 July 2026].

¹² 'Brown vs. Board of Education: May 17, 1954', *Jet*, 90.1 (1996), p. 20.

¹³ National Archives, 'Brown v Board of Education(1954)', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education> , [accessed 05 July 2026].

¹⁴ National Archives, 'The Civil Rights Act 1964', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/civil-rights-1964/civil-rights-act-1964.html> , [accessed 12 July 2026]

give other reasons for turning away Black applicants, highlighting how important proper enforcement is to truly make a difference.

The Voting Rights Act 1965

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was introduced to address voting discrimination. The Act¹⁵ gave the federal government stronger powers to act in places where Black Americans were being prevented from registering or voting.

This Law stands out as one of the most effective policies because voting was important for the survival of Jim Crow. Without the ability to vote, Black Americans had limited influence over lawmakers who shaped education, housing, policing, and employment policies. The Act significantly boosted Black voter registration and political engagement, allowing Black Americans to elect representatives who better understood their struggles and concerns. But it highlights the ongoing need to protect voting rights, as regulations on voter ID, registration, polling places, and voting districts can disproportionately affect certain groups. I believe that even if a right is written into law, it's not very helpful if obstacles still make it hard to exercise it.

The Fair Housing Act of 1968

Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 was the Fair Housing Act. The Act¹⁶ made racial discrimination illegal in the sale, rental, and financing of housing. It aimed to protect people when buying or renting property, applying for mortgages, or seeking housing help.

The policy was important because housing affects many parts of life. Where people live affects their children's schools, access to jobs and public services, and property values. The Act protected black families legally, but inequality still persisted. Earlier periods of discrimination shaped neighbourhoods, property values, and wealth, with consequences that outlasted the law. The Fair Housing Act was vital but was only partly effective. It reduced obvious discrimination but couldn't instantly undo decades of exclusion from homeownership and mortgages.

Stronger Enforcement of Civil Rights Law

My first policy option to make a positive difference is to improve the use of existing civil rights laws. Federal and state agencies can take a more active role in investigating discrimination and imposing stronger penalties. The advantage of this option is that the legal protections already exist. With better enforcement, employers, landlords, Banks, schools, and authorities may be more likely to act fairly and respond more seriously when discrimination is reported. The disadvantage is that investigations can be costly and time-consuming. Discrimination is not always easy

¹⁵ National Archives, 'The Voting Rights Act 1965', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/voting-rights-1965/vra.html>, [accessed 12 July 2026]

¹⁶ National Archives, 'The Fair Housing Act 1968', *Milestone Documents*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/investigations/fbi/classifications/177-housing-discrimination.html>, [accessed 12 July 2026]

to prove, and organisations may conceal the treatment behind rules that appear fair. Strong enforcement would therefore require trained staff, clear evidence, and adequate funding.

Greater Investment in Education

A second policy option is to invest more money in schools serving poorer, often underprivileged communities. This could include more teachers, improved buildings, better technology, school meals, counselling, and support for students applying to university.

The main benefit of this policy is that education can improve employment, income, and opportunity in the long term. Better-funded schools could help reduce some of the inequality caused by segregation and unequal funding.

Education on its own cannot solve every form of inequality. A person may receive a good education but still face discrimination in housing or employment. Also, increased funding may be contentious if some groups believe resources are being distributed unfairly.

Housing and Homeownership Support

A third option is to support communities affected by earlier discrimination through affordable housing, housing deposit support, investment, and fairer enforcement of lending. Homeownership can build wealth and pass on assets, helping to address the long-term effects of Jim Crow. Implementing these measures requires funding, and if they're not thoughtfully designed, they might raise house prices without truly benefiting the most vulnerable in our communities.

Other policies are stronger protections for voting access, easier registration, more polling stations, and greater scrutiny of rules that affect racial groups. Voting empowers communities, but elections are managed locally, so federal rules may seem meddling, and differences over issues could occur.

My recommendation is stricter enforcement of civil rights laws with money going to education, housing, and voting access. Enforcement should be stronger and sufficiently resourced. Education and housing affect lifelong opportunities; better schools and housing offer stability and increased income opportunities. Protecting voting access allows communities to influence decisions on important issues, which is essential for reform.

This is costly and may face opposition; some argue that Jim Crow ended long ago and that today's generation shouldn't be responsible.

I believe structural inequality can persist even after laws are repealed, and that government policies should address ongoing differences not by punishing individuals today but by correcting the conditions created by past laws and institutions.

Conclusion

I believe Jim Crow was a clear example of structural violence because racial inequality was entrenched in the law, government, education, employment, housing, and voting. Black Americans suffered not only from direct violence but also from institutions that restricted their rights and opportunities.

Policies such as Brown v. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act helped end legal segregation and strengthen civil rights protections. They did not remove all the effects of Jim Crow. Inequalities in wealth, education, housing, and political representation persisted even after the laws changed.

In my view, the best way forward is to strengthen enforcement of civil rights law, combined with greater investment in education, housing, and voting access. This approach would protect legal equality while addressing the deeper social and economic conditions that allow inequality to persist.

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