“Can We Fix It?” Reality of the Glamorization of NYC Through the Sociological Perspective and Systems of Inequality

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Abstract: Income inequality disproportionately impacts intersectional identities compared to white Americans. In the United States—and more specifically, in New York City—income inequality is closely correlated with race. It affects access to education, housing, food security, and resources, and contributes to homelessness. This paper aims to examine the urban experience from both sociological and psychological perspectives, focusing on disparities related to race and gender.

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Income inequality exists in every aspect of Americans' everyday lives. It is present in housing, food, and healthcare. Discrepancies in wages, worker conditions, and access to resources are particularly evident in New York City. America thrives on income inequality by maintaining systems that keep the poor poorer and the rich richer. These disparities are explored through my documentary, "*Can We Fix It?"* and this accompanying paper.

Income inequality is seen nationally in contemporary America and has been rising since 1980. We see it on a state-to-state basis, especially in New York, more specifically New York City. Income inequality impacts the opportunities and access to resources one recieves. It is a circular cycle through generations, to see how income inequality impacts housing, schools, environments, food security, funding, shelter, and so much more. Income inequality intersects in various aspects of individual lives and varies significantly based on race and gender.

Intersectionality plays a crucial role in income distribution. According to the NYC Comptroller's report *The Racial Wealth Gap in New York* (2021), "White New Yorkers have a median household net worth of $276,900, which is nearly 15 times (or 1,400%) greater than the median household net worth of Black New Yorkers, which is $18,870." This statistic highlights the disparities in wealth among New Yorkers. What Black individuals systemically experience a bigger wage and wealth gap compared to white individuals. Further, when educational attainment is similar, racial inequality still persists. For example, with only a high school diploma, the white median household net worth is $101,200, compared to $18,070 for Black households. Among those with a bachelor's degree, the gap widens dramatically: $443,619 for white graduates versus $32,000 for Black graduates (NYC Comptroller, 2021). Even with comparable credentials, people of color face disproportionate financial challenges, indicating that

race continues to be a defining factor in income inequality. There is a major income and wealth gap when taking into consideration race.

Income inequality also impacts homeownership, 63% of white New Yorkers own their homes, compared to just 24% of Black New Yorkers. White individuals are also more likely to retire comfortably and carry less debt. Reducing racial inequality and increasing Black wealth would help foster equity for all New Yorkers. Regarding income disparities, the New York City Council's 2024 report shows that "employees in the municipal workforce who identify as Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Other Race/Ethnicities (ABHLO) earn $0.84 for every $1 paid to white city employees." This highlights both racial and gender pay disparities. ABHLO individuals are earning significantly less than their white counterparts. Additionally, due to the increase in property taxes, people of color, who have bought their homes, struggle to keep up with the property taxes and end up having to sell their homes. Especially due to the discrepancies in wages and pay in race, it is difficult to achieve an equitable paying job to keep up with these taxes. Which results in people of color more likely to deal with housing insecurity rather than white individuals.

Income inequality is also reflected in the unequal distribution of resources. Housing inequality in New York City is a critical issue. According to Nonprofit Robin Hood (2022), at least two million people in NYC live in poverty. Racial disparities in housing access are significant: 26% of the impoverished population identifies as Latino, 24% as Black, 23% as Asian, and 13% as white. People of color are more likely to experience homelessness due to systemic financial disadvantages. Additionally, income inequality impacts access to social services like food assistance and often requires stable housing. As shown in the *Sidewalk* documentary counterpart to the book created by Sociologist Mitchell Duneier (2010), individuals without housing may be denied welfare benefits, perpetuating a cycle of oppression for those in

lower socioeconomic statuses. Homelessness is often criminalized, rather than addressed with compassion or systemic reform. For instance, in San Jose, the mayor proposed the arrest of homeless people who refuse shelter, even though shelter conditions at times are inhumane. This criminalization of homelessness ignores the larger context of systemic inequality. In my documentary, government authorities are seen destroying tents and makeshift shelters of unhoused individuals, rather than offering support or housing when housing should be a human right.

Redlining is another historic and ongoing barrier to housing equity for people of color. Redlining refers to the practice of denying home loans to borrowers in communities of color and poorer neighborhoods based on perceived financial risk. Historically, neighborhoods were color-coded: green for white neighborhoods, blue for "declining," yellow for caution, and red for predominantly Black communities labeled as "unsafe." These redlined areas faced restricted access to mortgages and investments. Additionally, in NYC, public school zoning is based on residential addresses. Therefore, children in low-income neighborhoods are less likely to attend high-performing schools, reinforcing educational and economic inequalities.

Gentrification has also intensified income inequality by leading to evictions and displacement. Since people of color are more likely to earn lower incomes, they are disproportionately affected by rising rents and housing instability. Gentrification displaces the people who have long lived in these neighborhoods. For centuries, the phenomenon of white flight has existed—when people of color move into a predominantly white neighborhood, white residents often move out, a pattern rooted in systemic racism in America. As a result, white people leave these areas, and unfortunately, both race and income continue to influence a neighborhood's access to resources. This is because neighborhoods that receive more funding are typically safer due to greater access to resources such as increased police presence, better food

options, stronger education systems, access to books, and larger supermarkets. However, these well-funded neighborhoods are often predominantly white. Which again results in the endless cycle of system suffrage.

Environmental inequality is another consequence of income disparities. New York City processes over 12,000 tons of waste daily. A 2020 study by the NYC Department of Sanitation revealed a positive correlation between household income and the number of litter bins in a neighborhood. In wealthier areas, which typically correlate with white neighborhoods, streets are cleaner due to better access to sanitation resources. Meanwhile, poorer neighborhoods, often still suffering from the legacy of redlining, have fewer bins and more waste accumulation.

In totality, income inequality—viewed through the lens of systemic inequality—results in injustices in access to housing, food, healthcare, and other necessities. Centuries of racism, sexism, and systemic injustice have created deep cracks that continue to impact marginalized communities. The rich are praised, while the poor are demonized and criminalized. Addressing systemic inequality means confronting disparities in race, gender, and class. Housing and food should be human rights. No group should have more access to life-sustaining resources than another—nor should anyone be penalized for merely trying to survive

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