

Jim Crow: Not Just Laws, but a Way of Life

Jim Crow was the name of the [racial segregation](#) system, which operated mostly in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of strict anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were given the status of second-class citizens. Jim Crow helped to make anti-black [racism](#) appear right. Many Christian ministers taught that whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Many scientists and teachers at every educational level, supported the belief that blacks were intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. Pro-segregation politicians gave persuasive speeches on the great danger of integration: the destruction of the purity of the white race. Newspaper and magazine writers routinely referred to blacks as niggers, coons, and darkies; and worse, their articles reinforced anti-black images and ideas. Even children's games portrayed blacks as [inferior](#) beings.

The Jim Crow system was based on the following beliefs: whites were superior to blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior; relationships between blacks and whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America; treating blacks as equals would encourage interracial relationships between men and women; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial relations; if necessary, violence must be used to keep blacks at the bottom racial level. The following Jim Crow etiquette norms show how [inclusive](#) and [pervasive](#) these norms were:

1. A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it [implied](#) being socially equal. Obviously, a black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman because it was not acceptable for him to touch a white woman.
2. Blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.
3. Under no circumstance was a black male to offer to light the cigarette of a white female--that gesture implied [intimacy](#).
4. Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended whites.
5. Jim Crow [etiquette](#) required that blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks. For example: "Mr. Peters (the white person), this is Charlie (the black person), that I spoke to you about."
6. Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.
7. If a black person rode in a car driven by a white person, the black person sat in the back seat or the back of a truck.
8. White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.



The "Jim Crow" figure was a fixture of the minstrel shows that toured the South; a white man made up as a black man sang and mimicked stereotypical behavior in the name of comedy.

Stetson Kennedy, the author of *Jim Crow Guide*, offered these simple rules that blacks were supposed to observe in conversing with whites:

1. Never assert or even intimate (imply or insinuate) that a white person is lying.
2. Never **impute** dishonorable intentions to a white person.
3. Never suggest that a white person is from an inferior class.
4. Never lay claim to, or overly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.
5. Never curse a white person.
6. Never laugh derisively at a white person.
7. Never comment upon the appearance of a white female. (1)

Jim Crow etiquette operated together with Jim Crow laws (Black Codes). When most people think of Jim Crow, they think of laws (not the Jim Crow etiquette), which excluded blacks from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and neighborhoods. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had granted blacks the same legal protections as whites. However, after 1877, and the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, southern and border states began restricting the liberties of blacks. Unfortunately for blacks, the Supreme Court helped to ignore the Constitutional rights of blacks with the **notorious** *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, which supported Jim Crow laws and the Jim Crow way of life.

In 1890, Louisiana passed the "Separate Car Law," which claimed to aid passenger comfort by creating "equal but separate" cars for blacks and whites. This was not true. No public **accommodations**, including railway travel, provided blacks with equal facilities. The Louisiana law made it illegal for blacks to sit in coach seats reserved for whites, and whites could not sit in seats reserved for blacks. In 1891, a group of blacks decided to test the Jim Crow law. They had Homer A. Plessy, who was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black (therefore, black), sit in the white-only railroad coach. He was arrested. Plessy's lawyer

argued that Louisiana did not have the right to label one citizen as white and another black for the purposes of restricting their rights and privileges. The Supreme Court decided that, so long as state governments provided [legal freedoms](#) for blacks, equal to those of whites, they could maintain [separate but equal](#) accommodations to [facilitate](#) these rights. The Court, by a seven to two vote, upheld the Louisiana law, declaring that racial separation did not necessarily do away with equality.

The Plessy decision sent this message to southern and border states: [Discrimination](#) against blacks is acceptable.



Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 1939: "Colored" water fountains were fixtures throughout the South during the Jim Crow era. Photo by Russell Lee

Jim Crow laws touched every aspect of everyday life. For example, in 1935, Oklahoma [prohibited](#) blacks and whites from boating together. Boating [implied](#) social [equality](#). In 1905, Georgia established separate parks for blacks and whites. In 1930, Birmingham, Alabama, made it illegal for blacks and whites to play checkers or dominoes together. Here are some of the typical Jim Crow laws, as compiled by the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site interpretive staff:

1. Barbers. No colored barber shall serve as a barber (to) white girls or women (GA).
2. Blind Wards. The board of trustees shall ... maintain a separate building ... on separate ground for the admission, care, instruction, and support of all blind persons of the colored or black race (LA).
3. Burial. The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons (GA).
4. Buses. All passenger stations in this State operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (AL).
5. Child Custody. It shall be unlawful for any parent, relative, or other white person in this State, having the control or custody of any white child, by right of guardianship, natural or acquired, or otherwise, to dispose of, give or surrender such white child permanently into the custody, control, maintenance, or support, of a Negro (SC).
6. Education. The schools for white children and the schools for Negro children shall be [conducted](#) separately (FL).

7. Libraries. The State librarian is directed to fit up and maintain a separate place for the use of the colored people who may come to the library for the purpose of reading books or periodicals (NC).
8. Mental Hospitals. The Board of Control shall see that proper and distinct apartments are arranged for said patients, so that in no case shall Negroes and white persons be together (GA).
9. Militia. The white and colored militia shall be separately enrolled, and shall never be **compelled** to serve in the same organization. No organization of colored troops shall be permitted where white troops are available and where whites are permitted to be organized, colored troops shall be under the command of white officers (NC).
10. Nurses. 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 men are placed (AL).
11. Prisons. The warden shall see that the white convicts shall have separate apartments for both eating and sleeping from the Negro convicts (MS).
12. Reform Schools. The children of white and colored races committed to the houses of reform shall be kept entirely separate from each other (KY).
13. Teaching. Any instructor who shall teach in any school, college or institution where members of the white and colored race are received and enrolled as pupils for instruction shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined... (OK).
14. Wine and Beer. All persons licensed to conduct the business of selling beer or wine ... shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room at any time (GA).



Colored waiting room, 1952.
“Those signs in downtown Dallas, the signs over the water fountains and in the bus stations, came down in 1955 or '56, and a couple of years later they began to adhere to the Supreme Court decision.”--R. C. Hickman

The Jim Crow laws and system of etiquette were enforced by violence, real and threatened. Blacks who violated Jim Crow norms by, for example, drinking from the white water fountain or trying to vote, risked their homes, their jobs, even their lives. Whites could physically beat blacks with impunity (without fear of punishment). Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all white: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison officials. Violence was instrumental for Jim Crow. It was a method of social control. The most extreme form of Jim Crow violence was lynching

Lynchings were public murders carried out by mobs. Between 1882, when the first reliable data were collected, and 1968, when lynchings had become rare, there were 4,730 known lynchings, including 3,440 black men and women. Most of the victims of Lynch-Law were hanged or shot, but some were burned at the stake, [mutilated](#), beaten with clubs, or [dismembered](#). Arthur Raper investigated nearly a century of lynchings and concluded that approximately one-third of all the victims were falsely accused.

James Weldon Johnson, the famous black writer, labeled 1919 "The Red Summer." It was red from racial tension; it was red from bloodletting. During the summer of 1919, there were race riots in Chicago, Illinois; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee; Charleston, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska; and two dozen other cities. W.E.B. Du Bois, the black [social scientist](#) and [civil rights activist](#), wrote:

During that year 77 Negroes were lynched, of whom one was a woman and eleven were soldiers; of these, 14 were publicly burned, eleven of them being burned alive. That year there were race riots large and small in 26 American cities including 38 killed in a Chicago riot of August; from 25 to 50 in Phillips County, Arkansas; and six killed in Washington.

Lynching represented ... a way of using fear and terror to check 'dangerous' tendencies in a black community considered to be ineffectively regimented or supervised. As such it constituted a confession that the regular institutions of a segregated society provided an inadequate measure of day-to-day control.

Many blacks resisted the indignities of Jim Crow, and, far too often, they paid for their bravery with their lives.



"The Agony of Lynching" by Laurence Foy. Block print originally published in the 1920s.

Questions on Jim Crow

1. How was the “Jim Crow” way of life taught to Whites?
2. **Summarize** some of the etiquette of Jim Crow. DO NOT RESTATE.
3. How did Jim Crow laws enforce the ideas of “Separate but Equal”?
4. How did the violence towards blacks enforce the ideas of white superiority?
5. How did the Jim Crow Laws take away rights Blacks gained after the Civil War?