**Chapter 03 African Americans and the Criminal Justice System**

**Summary**

This chapter has explored the historical experience of African Americans in the United States and how this group has found itself in a disadvantaged position for some time. From the early days of slavery to discrimination as they fought in world conflict to the civil rights movement, the African American has played an important role in the history of the United States. Reconstruction also played a role in the current position of African Americans as many formal and informal norms and laws were created to distance African Americans from Whites, even when they were forced to live in close proximity to one another. The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and the denial of equal protection under the law, as found in U.S. Supreme Court cases, has fundamentally shaped the position of African Americans in the U.S. A byproduct of this treatment and legacy of slavery is seen in the disproportionate representation of African Americans in the criminal justice system.

While the topic remains controversial, there can be little doubt that African Americans are overrepresented in crime statistics. This is true despite the fact that there is a growing Black middle-class of educated, professional, and politically savvy African Americans. Whether it involves arrest, use of force, searches, convictions, sentences, or executions, Blacks are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system. Not only do Blacks have different experiences with the criminal justice system than do Whites, there is a general sense of mistrust of the system and of the police in particular.

In many low-income neighborhoods, there is a significant amount of tension between African Americans and the police. Part of the reason for this mutual mistrust is due to the fact that police officers intervene into the lives of many African Americans perhaps more so than they do into the lives of Whites living in suburban neighborhoods. As a result, not only do African Americans perceive the police as intrusive; this frequent contact can also make it more likely that they become involved in the criminal justice system.

The reasons for the overrepresentation of African Americans in the criminal justice system range from individualistic theories, which contend that African Americans commit more crimes, get caught, and are punished, to structural explanations, which suggest there are factors outside the control of the individual which result in their involvement in the system. Finally, as Wilbanks points out, there also exists a debate concerning the racism embedded in the criminal justice system itself.