



The Power of Words

By Tom Z

Speak every word you say in life as though it were your last. Words can be spoken by everyone. The way we use words, however, differs. People should not be limited in expressing their ideas. If everyone speaks up about mass incarceration in the United States and underprivileged black people, we will soon see an evolution.

The documentary “13th” explores the history of racial inequality in the United States, focusing on the fact that the nation's prisons are disproportionately filled with African Americans. This movie motivates viewers to take a stand and speak out against racial injustice. An oppressive system is built around the ideology of the superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks. Incarceration in the United States is one of the main forms of punishment for the commission of a felony.

In an excerpt of “The New Jim Crow” by Michelle Alexander, she reveals that although Jim Crow laws are now off the books, millions of blacks arrested for minor crimes remain marginalized and disenfranchised. African Americans are trapped by a criminal justice system that has forever branded them as felons and denied them basic rights and opportunities that would allow them to become productive, law-abiding citizens. An unforgettable argument was that “we have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.” Her writing has spawned a whole generation of criminal justice reform activists and organizations.

To sum up, what we say and write on paper shapes society in several beneficial ways. Words are powerful if used correctly. Both the film “13th” and “The New Jim Crow” show essential voices that motivate others to bring changes.



Words Make an Impression: Choose Them Wisely

By Sabiha M.

An infant learns to say his first word from the people he grew up with. It is a cycle of life; we learn to say words from childhood and keep learning until we die. We have freedom in what we say, but what matters the most is *how* we say things and to whom we say them. Poor word choice not only exists today but it also existed during slavery, Jim Crow laws, and in the time of racial discrimination.

Beginning with slavery, the slaves were called names by their owners. The name-calling not only resulted in the loss of respect of the slave owners, but they also earned a lot of hatred. Even after the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment the KKK spread throughout America and terrorized former slaves. African Americans were discriminated from attaining their many fundamental rights, were injured and even killed. In the documentary *13th*, people of color were in jail for any crime. They were known as "dangerous," "criminals," "rapists," "murders," "drug addicts," and "dealers," but the important thing was that most of them were young African Americans which influenced the future generation to be similarly labeled after them.

Words can be expressed in many ways. During the Jim Crow Laws, there were signs out on the streets that were labeled for white and black people. But the main difference was that just because the black people had labeled things, it hurt them just like words because it separated them. In the article, *Unpacking the Racially-Charged Term "Superpredators"*, Ellen C. Caldwell portrays the "Central Park Five" case, where the teenagers, people of color, served their time in jail after being wrongly convicted, and called by names such as "wolfpack," "wildings," and "animals" by the accusers. Words have such powers that we don't realize that, and after it is said, there is nothing one could do to fix that mistake.

Some people believe that we have the freedom of speech, and we should use it, ignoring the fact that it might hurt someone else. Although we have the freedom to express ourselves, there should be a limit to it and consideration to whom it is said. In the video, *The Superpredator Scare* by Retro Report, New York Times portrayed how John DiIulio came up with a name for them as "Superpredators," which not only focused on the young criminals, but it was mostly focused on people of color. As time passed, DiIulio realized his mistake and tried to apologize to people of color. The panic DiIulio spread about the "Superpredator" still scares people leaving the discrimination unchanged.

Words are powerful. They serve as gifts in certain moments and as weapons in others. It depends on the person how they want to use it. But once it is said, it cannot be taken back.



Words Have Impacted History Over Time

By Marlin M.

The use—and mis-use—of words has had a vital impact throughout history. An example of a significant leader that has had a positive empowering effect is Gandhi who used his words to convey nonviolence. He spoke out in favor of protests because this was a nonviolent method to gain liberty from British rule. His words gave the Indians hope for independence and every nonviolent action in which they partook, benefited the Indian people, giving them hope each time to trust Gandhi's words. But not all leaders have had a positive outcome. As an example of a very different situation this demonstrated by Hitler, a dictator in Germany who, through his words, was able to make everyone believe that the Jewish were at fault for their economic worries, eventually persuading all Germans so far to his side that he was able to torture the Jews and place them in concentration camps.

Although other people may contradict that words have no role in the impact of history and that words have no power, another example, according to CNN Politics, was captured in the simple phrase, "I don't believe it." Trump told reporters this regarding climate change on August 9, 2017, adding that he had read "some" of the report. His decision on speaking out about global warming and using ignorant words explaining how he is not going to take action affects us because according to the scientific study the world can end in 2050. Without the action to stop this issue future generations would not have a pleasing fate. Words throughout the history of time have and continue to impact what life is today.



False Protectors By Maria S.

Americans have relied on the press to understand and keep up with current events. Yet, by reporting sensationalized stories to incite a reaction, news media has created fear which has led to the criminalization and mass incarceration of black males making them the victim of assumptions and stereotypes.

News outlets use dramatic scenarios instead of scientific information, making isolated events seem like trends. The overreporting of crime has stirred fear although crime rates have been dropping steadily since the 1990s. According to the “Center for American Progress,” 88% of Americans believe that crime is a “major problem” on a national level while only 52% feel that way about their own communities. This statistical disparity demonstrates how putting information out about violent crime in a disproportionately high frequency causes the public to overestimate crime.

Overrepresentation of crimes done by black males leads the public to develop a false perception of black males as being dangerous and causes them to be suspected of crimes more than white men. According to the “Center for American Progress,” a study about late night news in New York City in 2014 showed cases about black males being suspects for murder, theft, and assault at a rate that far exceeded their actual arrest rates for these crimes. Additionally, black suspects are presented as more threatening than their white counterparts as their mugshots are more frequently shown. Black male offenders receive sentences that are 19.1% longer than their white male counterparts. According to *13th*, 40.2% of US prisoners are black males while they’re only 6.5% of the US population. Black males are more often the victims than the perpetrators as they are subject to harsher sentences and treatments than white males.

The word choice of news media has cost African Americans the price of being criminalized and excessively incarcerated. Fear has been stirred in the public allowing leaders and reporters to create a false need for protection from black males. In reality, the real offenders are those pretending to be the protectors.



A New Perspective on Word Choice

By Kelsey S.

Words are very powerful because what we say and write can shape society. In an excerpt from, *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander and the documentary, *13th*, by Ava DuVernay, we learn that the meaning of words can cause drastic issues happening in our world today. Both sources refer to how phrases and terms affect racism towards people of color.

To begin, the movie, *13th*, discusses the racial inequality of mass incarceration in the United States. Over the course of history, there was an increase of police facilities filled with African Americans and statistics prove the proportion is very uneven. African Americans are placed in jail because of biases and beliefs that they are criminals. Hence, mass incarceration of people of color is the modern version of slavery.

Additionally, the reading, *The New Jim Crow*, entails that the criminal justice system broadly refers to African Americans as “criminals.” This connotation has affected the evolution of racial exclusion and discrimination. During the Jim Crow era, when a person of color was referred to as a “criminal,” it degraded them from earning opportunities and respect. Mass incarceration has increased over time because African Americans are frequently stereotyped for being part of “the War on Drugs.” This term created a negative effect on communities of color because they are most likely to be accused of drug offenses.

Furthermore, both sources declare most actions taken by the criminal justice system can be unjust. Many of the words people use against people of color are stereotypes because as *The New Jim Crow* states black communities are often seen as poor with many drug dealers. In the film, *13th*, there are cases where discrimination and racial stereotyping can lead to decision-making processes with devastating consequences.

Overall, *13th* and *The New Jim Crow*, emphasize that words must be taken into consideration of how it could affect society. Those who employ harmful words towards others should be held responsible for their actions.



It Is Time for a Change in Our Society

By Karen V.

We have the right of freedom of expression, but we abuse it. The term “superpredator,” is mostly used in cases describing a young African American committing violent crimes. Words are spoken freely, but it’s the context in which we use the word that affects people, we put labels on African Americans and discriminate against them.

Police brutality has increased, and more force is being used with African Americans than with whites. The documentary *13th* shows white officers on top of an African American who kept saying he couldn’t breathe, but officers never acknowledged that and just continued using more force. Furthermore, the Central Park jogger case was about a white woman getting raped while she was on her jog, officers randomly picked four African Americans and one Latino and falsely accused them of raping the woman. This happened because of the stereotypes in society, it is believable to say that “black people” are dangerous. People would use the First Amendment as support when labeling African Americans. They have freedom of expression, but there are some restrictions on this right.

We still live in the beliefs of the past and because of this we will never be equally united. The way we use these words will cost us because our society will never change. Not all African Americans are violent and dangerous as some people believe based on inhumane stereotypes. It is an absurdity when people declare discrimination against African Americans is fine because they were discriminated against in the past.



The Connotations of Words

By Jose G.

Poor word choice can cost a person figuratively and literally to the point of changing lives. Usually, poor word choice would figuratively cost you such as an infamous 1996 speech still reverberates to this day.

In 1996, Hillary Clinton received an abundance of bad publicity due to using the term “Superpredator” in her campaign speech in New Hampshire. “Superpredator” defines a person who repeatedly commits violent crimes. Clinton’s usage of this term was taken out of context when the public media connected it back to an aged racial insult. Many people were outraged at Hillary Clinton for using a disgusting racial term in her speech; ultimately, her poor choice of words continued to haunt her during her failed 2016 presidential run.

The Era of Colorblindness as stated in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander, refers to an era in which it is no longer socially justifiable to use race for discrimination. *The War on Drugs* was a term used as an excuse for racial stereotyping such as the assumption that African American men are drug dealers who are smuggling addictive drugs into the United States. This would ultimately lead to an increased US prison population all because negative word choice.

Others might state that word choice does not hold any significance, such as using text abbreviations or posting online. For example, director James Gunn was signed on to direct the third “Guardians of the Galaxy” film. However, poorly aged tweets were brought up and were seen as offensive in the eyes of the public media. As a result, Disney fired James Gunn as director and delayed the film; all due to several ten-year-old tweets. Poor word choice could have lasting consequences no matter the situation.



Words Have Power

By Erika T.

Words have power. One single word can dehumanize an entire race. Individuals in America belittle people of color, because of their race and the color of their skin. They are made into slaves and treated like objects. Although the Thirteenth Amendment abolished this, racial slurs are still used today. Teenaged people of color (POC) are viewed as animals, as beasts. When it comes to a crime, the black person is always blamed.

In the article “Unpacking the Racially-Charged Term ‘Superpredators’” they write that because of racial bias, black teens are more likely to get arrested and falsely accused of a crime. For example, five teens were accused of a brutal rape, and incarcerated although they were innocent. Because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time, they were interrogated for a crime they didn't commit, and later coerced to plead guilty. They were sentenced to 5-15 years in prison without evidence, no fair trial. They were referred to as “wild,” a “wolfpack,” and “animals” to label the accused as non-human, predatory entities, in news articles about the incident.

Later on, teens all around were referred to these slurs for the act of “horseplay.” As stated in the article, “In the ‘90s, the term “superpredators” conjured similarly dangerous, threatening imagery and the widely used term caused moral panic, resulting in the Crime Bill.” (Caldwell) This reveals the power of words, fueling hatred, ignorance, and racism, dehumanizing an entire race.

Words are used in a negative manner when it comes to defending oneself and are thought to be justified. They are meant to hurt the individual. As stated in the article, “For the Record: ‘SuperPredators’ Is Absolutely a Racist Term,” the term “superpredator” was “specifically deployed to stereotype and target black youth in the 1990s with the intention of locking them up to protect terrified white people from “bad [black] dudes” (Savali).

It is evident that the use of racial slurs was thought to be ethical. White individuals believe they have justification when it comes to using the terms so confidently, even when knowing how they are making the individuals feel. Racism and racial bias have remained as ongoing issues that do not seem to come to an end.



The 150-Year-Old Cost of an Awful Word

By Emir D.

“Words are free. It’s how you use them that may cost you,” is an important idea by having the power to affect someone, in good and bad ways. Throughout history, we see the use of the “N-word,” notably used during slavery, to describe African Americans as worthless, lazy, and below standard in one word. After countless unjust actions followed the abuse of this word toward African Americans, we are now paying the highest price.

“13th” reminds us about the abolishment of slavery 150 years ago. However, the racial tension is still present. The liberties of innocent African Americans are taken away every day during traffic stops and “random searches.” Even our former president, Barack Obama, had to speak up over this controversial topic, pointing out the minority of the American population, African Americans, are the majority of the prison population. African Americans are not just sitting in prison, but they are also laborers for for-profit companies while they are in prison. This situation shows America’s true colors. Even with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, equality between races is still absent.

African Americans are viewed as a threat to society 200 years later. Professor John DiIulio theorized during the age of “Superpredators,” the number of juvenile African American boys will skyrocket in burglary, rape, and murder. This caused fear among many Americans. DiIulio’s predictions were eventually proven wrong with a marked drop in violence among African American juveniles. But the fact that DiIulio predicted the rise, within the African American community, shocked many people. A white man predicting a community of African Americans will rise in violence only adding onto a 500-year-old problem.

As you can see, words come at a price, and we are still paying this large price at the moment. The innocent lives that are lost every day along with the negative outlook some still have on African Americans can be seen far too clearly.



Words Impact...Well, Everything
By Briana D.

Words have the power to influence something or someone positively or negatively. In this case, negatively due to how Michael B. Jordan—who plays Erik Killmonger in the film *Black Panther*—is made a super-villain in use of words that make his character appear as the personification of “Black Rage.” In the article “Erik Killmonger Is Not a Supervillain, He Is a Super-Victim of Systematic Oppression” by Ameer Hasan Loggins, he states “I refuse to see Killmonger as a super-villain. I see him as a super-victim of systemically oppressive forces, forces that forced him into a hyper-awareness of his dueled unwanted status in Wakanda and in America, due to having the blood of his mother, who was a descendant of black folks forced into the United States via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.” His description of Killmonger’s character goes into detail about why he is a victim of systematic oppression by the way he is portrayed in *Black Panther*.

However, In the article “For the Record: ‘Superpredators’ Is Absolutely a Racist Term” by Kirsten West Savali, she states, “There is no room for interpretation here, only this: “Superpredators” was unambiguously a term meant to malign, stereotype and target black and Latino youths. It was not about raceless, faceless “drug cartels,” the Clintons knew exactly whom they were going after, and they did just that—just as Richard Nixon, George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan did before them.” This shows the use of Super Predator was commonly used by presidents and presidential candidates, as a racist term, intended to be harmful.

Black people have been made the target of the many stereotypes that leave false impressions in their path. In “The Coming of The Superpredators” by John DiIulio, it states crime, like all serious crime, is predominantly intra-racial, not interracial. This is what the various false stereotypes on black teens is derived from. In conclusion, words have the power to be used to have a positive or negative influence on a certain topic.