

Edith Lane, 1st Place
Region 1, U32 Middle School

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The United States Does Not Honor Inalienable Rights for the LGBTQ+ Community

Our founding fathers wrote that every person has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Inclusive in theory, in practice, this didn't apply to everyone and still doesn't today. A prime example of this is the LGBTQ+ community's decades-long fight for equality. While there have been gains in recent years, this community still faces a lot of discrimination.

One damaging form of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community is conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a practice where LGBTQ+ people are forced to conform to heterosexual norms. More than 700,000 LGBTQ+ individuals have experienced conversion therapy as of 2018. In 2020, 10% of LGBTQ+ youth reported being forced to undergo conversion therapy; 78% were under 18. Studies show this practice is ineffective, damaging to mental health, and violent. Those subjected to this "therapy" are three times more likely to develop depression and twice as likely to attempt suicide. Despite its dangers, conversion therapy is still legal in 30 states. Denying someone the right to be their authentic self denies them life and liberty.

The right to same-sex marriage was a long, hard fight defined by protests, legislative proposals, and court cases. When same-sex marriage was legalized nationally on June 26, 2015, the momentous decision allowed couples who had been together for years to finally marry. Yet, in 2020, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas asserted that the same-sex marriage ruling infringed on the religious liberties and branded those opposing it as bigots. This statement caused outrage among civil rights activists. If *everyone* is supposed to have these inalienable rights, how could one group be excluded? Over time, public opinion has evolved. In 2001, 57% of the U.S. population opposed same-sex marriage, while 25% supported it. By 2019, it flipped, with 61% supporting it and only 31% opposing it. This shift offers hope that all people will have the right to pursue happiness and love freely.

The transgender community faces continuous discrimination. Military service is one example. In 2019, President Trump signed an executive order banning transgender individuals from serving in the military or forcing them to serve under their assigned sex. Thankfully, President Biden reversed this order in January 2021, but many worry it could be changed by the next administration. Inalienable rights cannot be taken away. Basing decisions solely on gender identity is discrimination and violates these rights.

Education is the first step to guaranteeing inclusivity. To ensure that the LGBTQ+ community feels seen and heard, we must teach about LGBTQ+ issues in schools to dismantle biases and stereotypes. Ninety percent of LGBTQ+ teens report suffering academically because of bullying. Data shows that schools that include LGBTQ+ issues in their curriculums have safer learning environments and decreased bullying. Education promotes perspective-taking, which combats continuing homophobia. Through education, we can make our country a safe place for the LGBTQ+ community. When each of us is free to be who we truly are, our nation will be closer to achieving inalienable rights for all.

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Penelope deRosset, 1st Place
Region 2, Edmunds Middle School

Penelope deRosset, 1st Place, Region 2, Edmunds Middle School

Are American Ideals Upheld in its Justice System?

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

— Nelson Mandela

If America was judged just on its justice system, how would it hold up? Are we continuing to uphold the values our nation was built on when it comes to our “lowest citizens?” No. The US justice system as it stands is definitive proof of how our country does not honor the ideal that all people have the right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Inmates’ treatment in prisons is an example of the failure to uphold American ideals. Common practices such as solitary confinement inflict severe psychological damage on inmates who experience it.¹ These are violations of these citizens’ rights to life and the pursuit of happiness because a right to life promises the right not only to be alive, but to live a life worth living.

An obvious violation of the ideals set by the Declaration of Independence is the death penalty. The state taking a life is the definition of not honoring a citizen’s right to life. And the state has taken many lives. 1532 people have been executed in the United States since the 1970s.² The mere existence of the death penalty suggests the state believes that not all have the right to life.

Perhaps worst of all is mass incarceration. The justice system has taken away black people’s liberty, with a higher percentage of the black population in prisons than white people by far. Data from the prison policy initiative shows that in 2010, the number of people incarcerated per 100,000 was 2,306, while for whites it was 450.³ The Declaration of Independence said all men are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,”⁴ Black people also have the right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. The justice system seems to believe that they do not.

If America were to redesign its justice system to better uphold its values, its prisons might look like Norway’s. Norway’s prisons are freer and more humane, focusing more on rehabilitation than punishment. There is no death penalty, in fact, the most dangerous criminals can only be sentenced up to 30 years. But does this system work? The numbers show, yes. Bastøy prison, 75 kilometers from Oslo, has recidivism rates that have reached as low as 16%,⁵ drastically lower than America’s.⁶ If America changed its system to be more like Norway’s, we could truthfully say we are the land of the free.

The evidence is clear. The ideal that all have the unalienable right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness is not honored by the US justice system. If we were judged purely based on

how we treat our lowest citizens, the world would regard us with contempt for our failure to uphold our fundamental values.

Endnotes

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⁶“Bureau of Justice Statistics Reentry Trends in the U.S.: Recidivism.” *Bjs.Gov*, 2021, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/recidivism.cfm>.

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Sienna Halstead, 1st Place
Region 3, The Dorset School

Racial Inequality In America

America is founded on the ideal that all people have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Sadly, the wealth gap between Black and White Americans, police brutality targeted at Black people, and racial inequalities in the education systems all show how systemic racism still frustrates this ideal.

The wealth gap between Black and White Americans is evident, and it is a result of White privilege and systematic racism in America. While the median wealth for a White family went up 30% since 1983 from \$110,160 to \$146,984, the median wealth for a Black family continued to stay low, with a record high of \$12,000 in 1995 and a record low of \$1,700 in 2013¹. Redlining and racist real estate practices often caused Black families to be trapped in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Currently, only 44% of Black families own their homes compared to 72% of White families.

Over the last few years, the Black Lives Matter movement has illuminated the fact that innocent Black people are being killed and mistreated at the hands of police. There were only 18 days in 2020 where police did not kill someone, and 28% of the people killed were Black, despite Black people making up only 13% of the US population². Black people are 3 times as likely to be killed by police than White people, even though they are 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed than White people. Tamir Rice was killed for having a toy gun, George Floyd was killed for allegedly using a counterfeit bill, and Ahmaud Arbery was killed while on a run by an off duty officer. These innocent people died because of the color of their skin.

Though segregation in schools was abolished years ago, racism in the school system is still substantial. Students of color are suspended at much higher rates than their White classmates, and on average do worse on standardized tests. Two thirds of minority students will attend schools that are made up mostly of other minorities, and these schools receive significantly less funding. A report by EdBuild showed that nonwhite schools districts receive on average \$23 billion less in funding than white districts, despite having the same number of students, and "for every student enrolled, the average nonwhite school district receives \$2,226 less per student than a white school district."³.

While systemic racism is widespread, there is much that we can do as a nation to combat it. First, we can better support low cost housing and mixed urban housing zones to reduce geographic segregation. Second, we should put more funds into our education system, and specifically target school districts with lots of minority students. Third, we should be reimagining our public safety by training police more adequately in de-escalation tactics, implementing proven community policing programs, and investing in social services. With these steps, we can fight for the ideals of equality of opportunity on which our nation was founded and that we all deserve.

Endnotes:

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Owen Parker, 1st Place
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Owen Parker, 1st Place, Region 4, Hartford Memorial Middle School

The Uphill Battle for Transgender Equality

The Declaration of Independence promises three unalienable rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. LGBTQ+ people, and especially those who are transgender have struggled to achieve these basic human rights. Recently, the Biden Administration signed an executive order to prevent discrimination against the transgender minority on the basis of gender identity which is helping our nation achieve the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. This action reversed much of the previous administration's efforts but more permanent legislation is necessary to protect their unalienable rights. Sports, military service, and healthcare are examples of the uphill battles still being fought for the transgender community.

Cisgender children all around the United States are allowed to participate in sports with others that identify as the same gender as them. Biden's new executive order would allow transgender children to play the sports they love as their identified gender. This policy has been met with backlash from many southern states who say that it would ruin the integrity of women's sports. How can we promise the pursuit of happiness and not let all children play sports as their identified gender? Transgender children have to be openly supported by all before progress can truly be made.

Transgender people have always had to fight to be themselves but certain workplaces such as the military deny them equality. During the Trump presidency, all openly transgender service members were said to be unfit to serve in any military capacity based solely on their gender identity. These heroes were faced with the possibility of involuntary discharge just for being who they are. With the coming of the Biden era this issue was improved but transgender service members have still not reached full equality amongst their peers.

Healthcare is a continual battle for the average American but is even harder for transgender people. President Trump's actions against transgender people allowed healthcare providers to stop offering essential services to one of the most at-risk populations. It also took the right to life and the pursuit of happiness from the transgender minority seeking healthcare. The Biden team is now working to stop this discrimination with their executive order that calls for equality. Without laws this work may not be a permanent protection against discrimination.

Our great nation needs to continue working on providing equality to the transgender community. The most obvious solution to stop this discrimination is to erase the stigma surrounding this group with education. We need to teach children at a young age that there is nothing wrong with letting people be themselves. Legislation needs to be passed to fix these issues rather than reversible executive orders. As a nation we need to continue chasing equality for not just members of the LGBTQ+ community but for everyone. We have to continue this uphill battle for equality and never let this battle cease until all discrimination is gone.

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