

Fugitive Slave Act and The Criminal Justice System Blog Post

The Fugitive Slave Law or “Act” was created on September 18th, 1850, as way to appease southern lawmakers. The Southerners had written a law that required for slaves who had escaped to other states, to be returned to their “owners.” Congress then passed that law making it legal for people to capture escaped slaves from the North, and bring them back to the South to be sold again. In 1840 more slaves pursued escaping than ever before. African Americans would run away to the North in groups, working together and forming “The Underground Railroad.”

The compromise of 1850 then abolished the slave trade, but created the new “Draconian Fugitive Slave Law.” This act made it so anyone who harbored fugitive slaves or helped them at all with their escape would face severe criminal penalties. This act also brought fugitive slaves into court and questioned them about their identity. If the fugitive was discovered to be an escaped slave, the most common situation would be sold again and brought back to the South. This act caused random citizens to be forced to participate in capturing runaway slaves.

The first arrest to ever take place because of the fugitive slave act took place in New York City on September 26th, 1850, eight days after the bill was passed. Thus started the Fugitive slave act and many other African Americans were captured after that. The fugitive named Hamlet was then put in jail for being identified as a slave by his owner. Hamlet insisted that he had been set free but was still put in prison for previously being a slave. Hamlet’s freedom was allowed to be purchased for \$800, and within a week, Hamlet was a free man because of two thousand people donating money for Hamlet’s freedom. Many other people were in Hamlet’s situation but weren’t so lucky, while many more are in similar situations today and are treated unfairly in our criminal justice system.

Meek Mill is an African American rapper who has recently been sentenced to 2-4 years in prison for violating his probation, was in a fight at a St. Louis airport, was caught carrying a gun while shopping at a grocery store, doing a wheelie on his motorcycle, and for smoking marijuana. Meek Mill is in prison at the moment and has denied bail. His legal team is doing everything they can to get Meek out of prison, but for now, Meek is stuck in prison because he was treated unfairly by our criminal justice system, just like many others are. Jay Z spoke out about Meek’s sentence with this quote: “The sentence handed down by the Judge -- against the recommendation of the Assistant District Attorney and Probation Officer -- is unjust and heavy handed. We will always stand by and support Meek Mill, both as he attempts to right this wrongful sentence and then in returning to his musical career.” Jay Z and other celebrities are speaking out about our unfair criminal justice system.

In our criminal justice system, 1 in 4 African American men go to jail at some point in their lives, while only 1 in every 17 White men go to jail in their lifetime. Sound fair to you? No. Even court judges like Peter Herbert in his article: "As a judge, I can see the racism embedded in the system." People in power involved in the criminal justice system have admitted that the system treats people of color differently than white people, but then why hasn't the system changed? Having a criminal justice system filled with racists is not going to be fair.

When I was driving through the harshly burned fire areas of Santa Rosa, I noticed that a whole bunch of orange-jumpsuit-wearing men clearing out the burned areas. I later found out they were prisoners doing free labor while doing their prison sentence. Personally, I thought that was a little weird for a person to be doing free labor that wasn't even something they were choosing to do. If they didn't cooperate, their prison sentence would probably be lengthened, and none of them want that. Prisoners should be paid for their work while they are in prison, so when they get out, they have a solid foundation to work with and can improve their lives and hopefully not ending up in prison again. Doing harsh labor you don't want to do for free seems very similar to slavery to me.

In 1850 when the fugitive slave act was passed, making it legal to capture and sell escaped slaves. Now, it is legal to put a "criminal" on probation where they aren't even allowed to leave their houses, and have many rules for what they are allowed to do. Any minor infraction, and the convict will be sent back to prison, kind of like capturing fugitive slaves. Slavery has affected the U.S. by causing racism to be passed down along generations, and some people still believe that african americans are inferior to the white race. This is all because of how slavery impacted our world. That is why Meek was treated unfairly by the criminal justice system, just like Hamlet.

Hamlet's story is very similar to Meek's because they both had unfair prison sentences, both were african american, both faced our unfair justice system, and were both offered bail. Although, Hamlet accepted his bail, while Meek did not. Slavery has shaped our criminal justice system from the start of it, making it racist and distorted. Maybe one day an african american man and a white man will get the same fair hearing.

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