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*Black, White, or somewhere in between? Employment and Crime in The Hate U Give*

The choice between going hungry and selling drugs isn't a simple one, as Angie Thomas demonstrates in *The Hate U Give*. Thomas explores systemic injustice through economic oppression, showing how limited employment opportunities lead to crime and violence in underprivileged communities. The novel illustrates the cycle between unemployment, incarceration, and crime, featuring characters like Maverick, Khalil, and DeVante. This cycle is mirrored in evidence showing the relationship between poverty, systemic barriers, and criminal behavior. Additionally, *The Hate U Give* delves into ethical concepts like moral relativism and ethical egoism, prompting readers to consider whether illegal actions can be justified in response to systemic oppression. To break this cycle, contemporary movements such as Ban the Box aim to dismantle employment barriers and foster a more equitable society. By examining the ethical dilemmas faced by characters in *The Hate U Give*, the socioeconomic conditions influencing their actions, and the potential solutions proposed by reform movements, we gain insight into the struggle between incarceration, employment, and justice, finding that the line between crime and a justified response to oppression is blurred.

The cyclical relationship between unemployment, crime, and incarceration is central to *The Hate U Give*, as characters like Maverick, Khalil, and DeVante navigate a world with scarce opportunities and generational consequences. Khalil's experience shows how limited opportunities push individuals toward illegal activities. As Khalil explains, "And that li'l minimum-wage job your pops gave me didn't make nothing happen. I got tired of choosing between lights and food." (Thomas 18) This sentiment is echoed throughout Garden Heights, where unemployment and poverty drive many young people toward crime. Maverick also highlights this issue, telling Starr, "Corporate America don't bring jobs to our communities, and they damn sure ain't quick to hire us." (Thomas 169) This lack of opportunity forces individuals like Khalil into illegal means to support themselves, reflecting the findings of Chiricos and Bales (1991), who observed that unemployment significantly increases the likelihood of incarceration, especially for marginalized groups. Maverick's conversation with Starr emphasizes that these barriers are not just individual failings but broader societal problems. DeVante, like Khalil, also faces a similar dilemma, joining the King Lords to support himself. His decision mirrors the pressures faced by

many in deprived communities, where gang affiliation appears to be the only way to gain financial stability. This aligns with Chiricos and Bales' conclusions on how unemployment drives individuals toward criminal networks, perpetuating cycles of crime and punishment.

Ethical dilemmas are at the heart of *The Hate U Give*, with characters rationalizing their actions through moral relativism and ethical egoism, challenging our understanding of right and wrong within oppressive systems. Moral relativism and ethical egoism justify Khalil's and DeVante's illegal activities as necessary responses to their limited options. Maverick explains systemic oppression to Starr, stating, "You got folks like Brenda, who think they need them to survive, and then you got the Khalils, who think they need to sell them to survive...a system designed against us. That's Thug Life." (Thomas 170) Here, Maverick highlights that both users and sellers are trapped in systemic failure, underlining the futility of individual blame when faced with societal barriers. Empirical evidence from Chiricos and Bales (1991) supports this narrative, showing that unemployment increases the likelihood of crime, particularly for marginalized groups deprived of opportunities. DeVante, similarly, is influenced by systemic barriers, ultimately joining the King Lords as a means of providing for himself. This ethical framing challenges the reader to reconsider notions of crime and morality within the context of systemic oppression, urging a deeper understanding of how individuals rationalize their actions in environments designed to suppress them. Through these lenses, readers may begin to see crime not simply as an individual failing but as a manifestation of structural inequalities that leave marginalized communities with limited choices. It raises the question of whether morality can truly be objective in situations where survival is at stake and forces readers to empathize with individuals who make morally questionable decisions because the alternative is severe deprivation or even death. This perspective invites a critical examination of the criminal justice system itself, prompting readers to consider whether punishment is an appropriate response to actions driven by systemic violence.

The Ban the Box movement seeks to address the cyclical relationship between incarceration and unemployment, providing a contemporary framework to alleviate a few of the challenges faced by characters like Khalil and Maverick. Ban the Box is an initiative that aims to reduce employment barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals by removing questions about criminal history from initial job applications. Delaying when an applicant's criminal record is considered increases the likelihood that individuals are judged on their skills and experience rather than being filtered out before they even have a chance. Craigie's study (2019) demonstrates that Ban the Box policies have significantly increased employment rates among those with criminal records, particularly in public sector jobs. This kind of reform not only reflects

a critical solution to the barriers that Maverick and Khalil face in *The Hate U Give*, but it also exemplifies how systemic changes can play a role in disrupting the cycle of economic disenfranchisement that traps individuals post-incarceration. These individuals, who are often eager to work and support their families, face immense challenges due to the stigma of a criminal record. If Maverick had encountered such reforms, his ability to support his family might not have been hindered, and Khalil's turn to drug dealing could potentially have been avoided. Access to employment is key to breaking cycles of poverty and crime, providing stability that prevents reoffending. Ban the Box addresses both recidivism and systemic inequities, offering marginalized individuals a chance to reintegrate and achieve stability. Communities like Garden Heights would benefit from such reforms.

By focusing on the intersection of socioeconomic barriers and systemic racism, *The Hate U Give* challenges readers to consider the ethical implications of systemic change. Khalil and DeVante's struggles show how systemic solutions, such as the Ban the Box initiative, could have significantly altered their paths. Craigie's study (2019) shows that removing criminal history from job applications leads to higher employment rates for formerly incarcerated individuals, offering people like Khalil and Maverick a chance to find meaningful work. Khalil's turn to drug dealing, framed through moral relativism and ethical egoism, becomes understandable as a means of survival rather than a simple moral failing. Chiricos and Bales (1991) demonstrate that unemployment significantly increases the likelihood of harsher sentencing, particularly for marginalized groups, reinforcing the systemic barriers Khalil faces. DeVante's decision to join the King Lords also emerges from his acute need for survival amidst limited options. These choices prompt readers to question the fairness of criminalizing survival strategies when the system itself provides no viable alternatives. The ethical dilemmas faced by Khalil and DeVante underscore the need for systemic reform—reforms that provide employment opportunities and dismantle structural inequities. Their stories reflect the moral cost of economic inequality, showing both the consequences of inaction and the potential impact of reform. Thomas illustrates how society punishes individuals for conditions it imposes on them, urging a shift to rehabilitative solutions. By engaging with concepts like moral relativism and ethical egoism, the novel urges readers to empathize with those forced into ethical gray areas and see systemic reform as the path to true justice.

*The Hate U Give* serves as a powerful reflection on how systemic barriers to employment perpetuate a cycle of crime and violence, forcing individuals into ethical dilemmas where illegal choices appear justifiable under moral relativism and ethical egoism. By portraying the struggles of characters like Maverick, Khalil, and DeVante, Angie Thomas underscores the

urgent need for systemic reform. Movements such as Ban the Box represent a practical approach to breaking these cycles, offering a hopeful vision of how targeted reforms can help create a more equitable society. The studies by Chiricos and Bales (1991) and Craigie (2019) provide empirical backing to these narratives, demonstrating how reducing employment barriers can directly address the root causes of crime. By discovering how unemployment, crime, and incarceration cyclically affect each other, I've found that my personal views toward crime have become more tolerant. Through Khalil's story in *The Hate U Give* and empirical evidence confirming his narrative, I'm able to see that judgment of crime is a secondary concern, and rather, society must focus on rehabilitation and mitigation of the structural violence that perpetuates these harms. Ultimately, *The Hate U Give* is not just a narrative of struggle but also a call to action—highlighting both the need for ethical reflection and the potential for systemic change to uplift marginalized communities.