

Beyond the Headlines: Professor Douglas Flowe on Race, Crime, and American Cities

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Media often portrays crime through a racial lens, contributing to a disproportionate representation of Black or Hispanic individuals as perpetrators and white individuals as victims. Dr. Douglas Flowe explores the societal and racial factors behind instances like these and how they influence communities today.

Flowe is an Associate Professor of History, an author, and a Dean's Fellow of Inclusive Excellence. He studies how criminality, masculinity, and race shape the landscape of American cities and the way people understand and experience crime. Flowe's interest in these topics originated from what he witnessed growing up in two unique environments. "As a person who grew up in New York City and also in Orlando, Florida...I wanted to understand how those communities became that way, and what forces were pushing people to make decisions about their lives in those places," Flowe explained.

His father worked as a police officer in New York, and during Flowe's time in Orlando, he was exposed to heavily policed and underserved communities. Having inhabited both worlds gave him a perspective few researchers share. These early experiences fuel Flowe's desire to explore beyond surface-level understandings of crime. "I was interested in criminal justice, but from the perspective of people affected by it," Flowe clarified.

While writing his first book, *Uncontrollable Blackness*, Flowe explored the connection between imprisoned individuals, community surveillance, and the justice system. To make sense of what he found, Flowe developed a theoretical framework he coined, "The Crucible of Black Criminality." This framework examines how historical factors, such as racial

violence, economic inequality, and cultural narratives, worked together to entrench stereotypes about Black men. Many of these misconceptions, rooted in slavery and reinforced during the Jim Crow era, persist in modern media and culture through subtler but deliberate methods. Flowe's current project, a new book, develops this model further by focusing more directly on Black male imprisonment within the New York prison system and what happens to the communities left behind.

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This research led Flowe to a concept French historian Michel Foucault calls "carceral archipelagos." Carceral archipelagos refer to the way carceral systems extend their reach beyond prison walls and into everyday community life, especially communities heavily affected by incarceration. "Not only is the person incarcerated under scrutiny," Flowe explained, "but their community, their families, public and private institutions end up getting surveyed too." Parole requirements alone can subject entire households to state inspection, binding families to the carceral system even after a loved one's release.

Beyond his current work, Flowe has

several projects taking form. Among them is a study of how Disney World's development reshaped the urban design and economic structure of Orlando. In fact, growing up in a Black community near the Disney area, Flowe personally experienced how large-scale corporations can condition the lives of entire communities. Disney wasn't just an entertainment company. Rather, Flowe argues, it was furtively "one of the city's biggest lobbyists, for how space would be used, where the airport would be located, and where the highways would run." Flowe's proximity also allowed him to see firsthand how jobs, infrastructure, and resources were unevenly distributed. "I want to understand how Disney shaped the space of the city," Flowe said, "and how race was taken into account as the city was being shaped and reshaped over the course of the second half of the 20th century."

Across all his projects, the throughline is the same: Who shapes the spaces people live in, and who pays the price. For Flowe, that question has never been purely academic. As he puts it, his work benefits from having inhabited these two worlds; it gives him the perspective that continues to shape the questions that he asks as a historian. For Flowe, these questions he asks are the same ones he's been asking his entire life. ■