

EJI's Racial Justice Project

This report is part of EJI's racial justice project, which examines the history of racial injustice in America and the impact of structural poverty on a range of issues. We invite you to join us in our work on the legacy of racial inequality. For copies of this report and other materials from EJI, please visit www.eji.org. EJI is a private, nonprofit organization. Individual donations are greatly appreciated and tax deductible.

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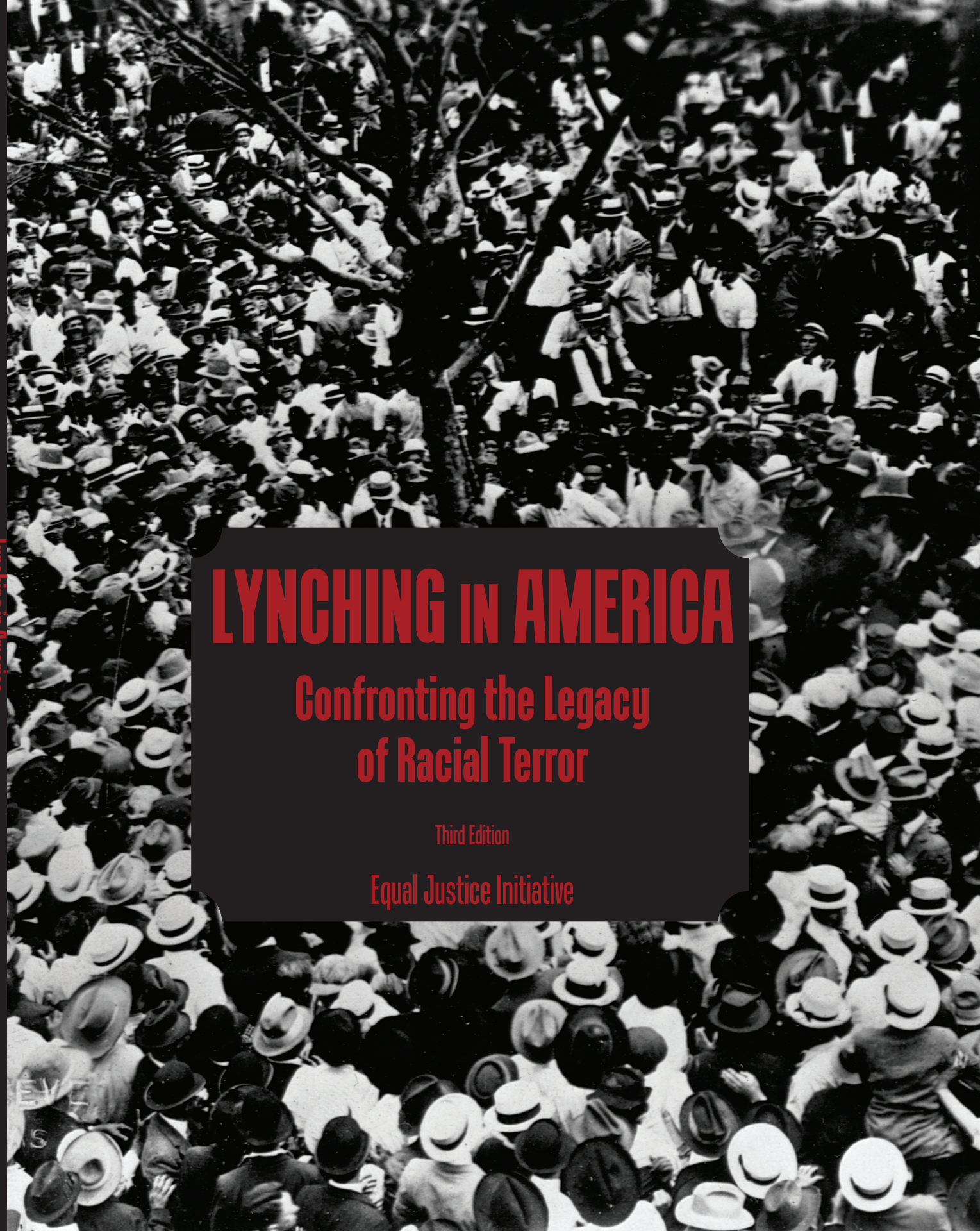
Lynching in America

LYNCHING IN AMERICA

Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror

Third Edition

Equal Justice Initiative



In 1940, Jesse Thornton was lynched in Luverne, Alabama, for referring to a white police officer by his name without the title of “mister.”¹⁵⁰ In 1918, Private Charles Lewis was lynched in Hickman, Kentucky, after he refused to empty his pockets while wearing his Army uniform.¹⁵¹ Richard Wilkerson was lynched in Manchester, Tennessee, in 1934 for allegedly slapping a white man who had assaulted a black woman at an African American dance;¹⁵² white men lynched Jeff Brown in 1916 in Cedarbluff, Mississippi, for accidentally bumping into a white girl as he ran to catch a train;¹⁵³ and in 1917, Sam Cates was lynched for the offense of “annoying white girls” in England, Arkansas.¹⁵⁴

Law-abiding African Americans lived at risk of arbitrary and deadly mob violence. These lynchings and the threat of falling victim to the mobs who committed them sought to keep the African American community terrorized and in a constant state of fear.

Lynchings Based on Allegations of Crime

More than half of the lynching victims EJI documented were killed under accusation of committing murder or rape. The deep racial hostility that permeated Southern society during this time period often served to focus suspicion on black communities after a crime was discovered, whether evidence supported that suspicion or not. This was especially true in cases of violent crime against white victims.

It is dubious to claim that all or even most individuals lynched for violent offenses had committed them, considering that whites’ accusations of rape or murder were rarely subject to serious scrutiny when lodged against black people. In a strictly maintained racial caste system, the mere suggestion of black-on-white violence could spark outrage, mob violence, and murder before the judicial system could act. In this society, white lives held heightened value, while the lives of black people held little or none.

Of the hundreds of black people lynched under accusation of rape and murder, nearly every one was brutally killed without being legally convicted of any offense. When Berry Noyse was accused of killing the local sheriff in Lexington, Tennessee, in 1918, an angry mob lynched him in the courthouse square, then dragged his body through the streets of town, shot it dozens of times, and burned the body in the middle of the street below hung banners that read, “This is the way we do our bit.”¹⁵⁵

Some lynching victims were demonstrably innocent of the serious crimes alleged. After a white woman was raped in Lewiston, North Carolina, in 1918, a black man named Peter Bazemore was accused of the crime and lynched by a mob before an investigation revealed that the real perpetrator had been a white man wearing black makeup.¹⁵⁶

Race, rather than the alleged offense, sealed lynching victims’ fates. Lynching, a statement of racial terror and white supremacy, was largely reserved for black suspects. White people accused of murder or rape during this era were much more likely to be tried, convicted, and punished by the legal system than by a mob.¹⁵⁷ In Thomasville, Georgia, in 1930, a black man named William Kirkland was arrested for the alleged rape of a nine-year-old white girl, and before a trial could be held, a mob of between fifty and seventy-five white men seized him from the jail, hung his body from a tree, riddled it with bullets, and then dragged the corpse through town behind a truck before depositing it on the courthouse lawn.¹⁵⁸ Just three days after Mr. Kirkland’s lynching, an African American man named Lacy Mitchell was lynched in Thomasville for testifying against a white man accused of raping an African American woman. Mr. Mitchell, a key witness, was shot in his home by four white men and died; the white defendant was acquitted and released.¹⁵⁹

Public Spectacle Lynchings

Public spectacle lynchings were those in which large crowds of white people, often numbering in the thousands, gathered to witness pre-planned, heinous killings that featured prolonged torture, mutilation, dismemberment, and/or burning of the victim.¹⁶⁰ Many were carnival-like events, with vendors selling food, printers producing postcards featuring photographs of the lynching and corpse, and the victim’s body parts collected as souvenirs.¹⁶¹

In 1904, after Luther Holbert allegedly killed a local white landowner, he and a black woman believed to be his wife were captured by a mob and taken to Daddsville, Mississippi, to be lynched before hundreds of white spectators.¹⁶² Both victims were tied to a tree and forced to hold out their hands while members of the mob methodically chopped off their fingers and distributed them as souvenirs. Next, their ears were cut off. Mr. Holbert was then beaten

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so severely that his skull was fractured and one of his eyes was left hanging from its socket. Members of the mob used a large corkscrew to bore holes into the victims’ bodies and pull out large chunks of “quivering flesh,” after which both victims were thrown onto a raging fire and burned. The white men, women, and children present watched the horrific murders while enjoying deviled eggs, lemonade, and whiskey in a picnic-like atmosphere.¹⁶³



Lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, on February 1, 1893. (Library of Congress/Getty Images.)