February is Black History Month, a time for the nation to reflect on the contributions black Americans have made to the founding, economic prosperity, innovation and culture of America. While this month is a celebration, it also is an opportunity to take a critical look at where black Americans fare at this very moment.

Black Americans continue to experience some of the worst health outcomes of any racial group. Black women have the highest maternal mortality rates; black babies have the highest infant mortality rates, and black men have the shortest life expectancy among groups in America.

One of the most damaging and glaringly obvious areas where black Americans have felt the brutal onslaught of the structural legacy of slavery, racism, displacement, disenfranchisement and segregation is in our criminal justice system. Nationally, black Americans make up 13% of the population but 34% of the prison population. If black Americans and Latinos were incarcerated at the same rates as whites, prison and jail populations would decline by almost 40%.

Blacks and Latinos make up 22% of Rhode Islanders. However, the Rhode Island Department of Corrections reports in 2019 that 45% of entrants and 54% of those sentenced were Black and Latino.

While we have seen a decrease in the total number of individuals incarcerated at the Adult Correctional Institution, we have seen consistent numbers of individuals cycling in and out. Additionally, Rhode Island has one of the highest probation rates in the nation for persons of color, with one in six black men on supervision.

Mental health disorders as well as drug and alcohol abuse and addiction are highly prevalent in the incarcerated population. A conviction and/or incarceration can exacerbate challenges in accessing care for individuals with behavioral and physical health issues; create and further entrench housing instability and homelessness; thus, leading to a high risk of return to incarceration.

Other collateral consequences of a conviction such as fines and fees can be nearly impossible for some to pay back considering that a conviction and/or incarceration can lead to the loss of and inability to
access family-sustaining employment.

Some progress has been made, but there is much more work to be done. There are still pervasive racial disparities in state imprisonment and despite greater awareness among the public of mass incarceration and modest successes at de-incarceration and early release, racial and ethnic disparities are still one of the most shameful features of our criminal justice system.

The impact of structural disadvantage begins early in life and has created a pipeline in which youth of color transition from the community to incarceration at exceedingly elevated rates as compared to their white peers.

Nationally, black American children represent 32% of children who are arrested, 42% of children who are detained, and 52% of children whose cases are sent to criminal court. As we celebrate this month, let us not forget that the ideals of an equal nation that black American leaders and allies fought and died for are not yet realized.

*Mavis Nimoh is the executive director of the Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights, at Miriam Hospital, in Providence.*