

Muna Barry

Professor Jones

WRT for Social Justice

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Prison and criminal justice reform

The American prison system has the highest inmate population in the world. There are an estimated 2.3 million people incarcerated in the U.S. According to *The Vera Institute of Justice*, the state prison population has grown by 700% since the 1970s. Each year we spend \$128 billion locking people up. Rather than confining these prisoners to release them and see them again within a few months or years, we educated and rehabilitated them. This could put an end not only to mass incarceration but: lower the U.S. recidivism rate, lower the crime rate, restore humanity, and keep civilians safer. What change can genuinely occur by incarcerating hundreds of thousands of people each year to solely ensure they are off the street? Through education, counseling, and wellness/community rehabilitation, we can break the cycle of repeat offenses, turn former inmates into law-abiding citizens, strengthen our economy, and keep our communities safe. Throughout this essay, I will analyze various statistical data and research that will effectively support the need for reformation of the American prison and criminal justice system.

The primary goal of rehabilitation is to reduce the recidivism rate. There is no one size fits all solution; different people will require different solutions; however, rehabilitation has been proved to lower the number of inmates who return significantly. The U.S. recidivism rate is almost 50%, and in some states, it can be as high as nearly 70%. These numbers are terrifying. If we have the resources to help criminals stay out of the system and help them thrive in society, we

should put more effort into educating and helping them, not just for them but also for the betterment of our society.

Before further examining prison reform, we must consider preliminary issues. A fundamental problem that has led to mass incarceration and our flawed prison system is over-policing. All over the country, we see police misconduct, brutality, and abuse of power. In the past months, we have seen the increased support from all over the world regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement has heavily grown in response to police killings and misconduct in the U.S. As a result, departments have implemented more sensitivity training and programs that educate officers on how to handle and de-escalate situations without resorting to their weapons. According to the *Washington Post*, "For many, the belief that police don't value black lives was reinforced in 2012, when police in Sanford, Fla., did not immediately arrest neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman after he shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a black 17-year-old, as he walked home from a store. Zimmerman was later arrested and charged, but his acquittal in 2013 planted the seeds of the Black Lives Matter movement. The next year, a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black man, in Ferguson, Mo., sparking years of national demonstrations against the alleged police mistreatment of black men and women." (Lowery et al.) In addition, following the unjust death of George Floyd, Americans all over the country vocalized and demanded the need for accountability and limiting police power. The momentum of this movement and protests that have occurred worldwide have spread the voices of this platform.

The U.S. policing and justice system requires great reform. This means changing the infrastructure of the justice system. Meaning decriminalizing people who are arrested due to overdosing/addiction and homelessness. These are societal issues that should be handled by mental health professionals, not trained police who are intended to arrest criminals. There are several other ways we can fix our currently broken policing system, including creating new codes, improving training, and the hiring process. We must also change common police tactics that further escalate situations and increase the risk of a civilian being harmed. This means eliminating chokeholds, decreasing the use of no-knock warrants, correctly handling people with mental deficiencies, and implementing other education and training means. In addition, people rely on the police too much. We need to minimize the scope of incidents they handle and instead use other resources to address specific situations. According to the *Washington Post*, this would look like "investing more in mental health care and housing, and expanding the use of community mediation and violence interruption programs." (Lopez) These implementations control police power, reduce their responsibilities, and defer them to better-equipped professionals to tend to the given situation.

This is an issue that goes beyond solely reforming prisons and policing but also targeting other social problems. We must prioritize funding of resources for underprivileged civilians that will significantly assist them. According to *The Atlantic*, "...the country spends roughly double on police, prisons, and courts what it spends on food stamps, welfare, and income supplements. It spends twice as much on the Pentagon as on assistance programs at the federal level and eight times as much on defense as on education. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will ultimately cost something like \$6 trillion and policing costs \$100 billion a year. But proposals to end homelessness (\$20 billion a year), create a universal prekindergarten program (\$26 billion a

year), reduce the racial wealth gap through baby bonds (\$60 billion a year), and eliminate poverty among families with children (\$70 billion a year) somehow never get financed" (Lopez). These are all proposals that we, as a democracy, should want to pass and enact. We have the power to influence law-makers, legislators, and politicians. If we can eliminate and decrease these socioeconomic issues. As a result, there will be less crime, i.e., less demand for law enforcement. People living in poverty are three times more likely to live to be arrested. Not only is there an evident school-to-prison pipeline, but there is also the poverty-to-prison pipeline that significantly affects low-income neighborhoods and plagues them with street crime, drugs, and violence. It puts these communities, especially the juveniles who occupy them, at a disadvantage since they are exposed to the system early on and are surrounded by violence and illegal activity.

The Black community is greatly disadvantaged in the eyes of the law and criminal justice system. There has always been a rift between police and communities mostly occupied by minorities. The war on drugs in the 70s had a significant impact on this relationship and saw Blacks become victims of mass incarceration. In the documentary *American Denial*, Vincent Brown, a historian and African-American studies professor at Harvard, points out the hypocrisy of America's core values being built upon equality, freedom, and justice. He explores the contrast between American values propagandizing fairness and justice with our society's reality (which was established on racial domination). We must not forget that the origins of today's police derive from slave patrol. In *American Denial*, Michelle Alexander, a civil rights activist, states, "There was a system of racial and social control that permeated every aspect of life." (Alexander) From a systematic perspective, biases against Black people are ingrained in our justice system. This structural racism is still plaguing our country today, which is evident in recent racially motivated events that have occurred.

In the 1990s, private prisons began to increase in population rapidly. The focus has always been on profit rather than the inmates who occupy these prisons. These facilities cost billions of dollars each year to operate, yet the state and quality of these correctional facilities do not reflect this high cost, nor does their inmates' treatment. With all these funds going into prisons, we have the means to allocate these funds and put more money into rehabilitation programs. The estimated cost per inmate can vary from \$16,000 to almost \$70,000, depending on the state. It is us, the taxpayers, who are contributing to the funding of these institutions. Knowing that we will use our money towards a great cause, i.e., helping rehabilitate inmates and providing them with the resources they need to be counseled, is a better use of our money, and it will be positively reflected in these facilities.

Currently, in some prisons, rehabilitation methods have been adopted and proven effective. One educational program showed that 43% of inmates were less likely to return within three years compared to those who did not participate in the program. Given that 83% of criminals re-offend within nine years, this number shows that these programs can effectively help reform prisons. Many inmate education programs cover skills that will extensively help inmates once they return or attempt to return to everyday civilian life. For example, inmates who participate in job-related skills training, such as computer training, keyboarding, etc., are at a significant advantage since they can quickly adapt to the current workforce and are not as behind. There are prison work programs that help prepare inmates to prepare for the workforce. "During prison, many inmates are given an opportunity to participate in work programs. These programs offer a consistent way to prepare for work in society. Punctuality, responsibility, deadlines, accountability, and other skills are learned through taking part." (ConnectNetwork). Not only do these programs help the inmates become well-rounded individuals and prepare them,

but it also gives them something to look forward to once they get out and provides them with a stable foundation to pursue employment.

We must adjust to a more progressive system that allows us to rethink and reform our criminal justice system. It is necessary that we steer away from "surveillance and punishment, and toward fostering equitable, healthy, and safe communities" (Lowery). This starts by reforming the current infrastructure. With the reformation of prisons, we can integrate programs that educate, counsel, and support inmates. Suppose we can allocate the billions of dollars we put into these facilities every year. In that case, we can effectively change the American prison system and give people the chance to turn their lives around and transform into law-abiding citizens. As the inmate population continues to rise, we must adapt to new methods of "punishment" and rehabilitation that are effective and humanizing strategies.

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