

Psychosocial Implications of Mass Incarceration

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Consequences of Custody on the Individual

The environment has a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of people, and the psyche may be severely impacted when subjected to long durations of stress. The United States prison population has exploded since the 1970s, and overcrowding has become an unprecedented crisis. Sadly, America's prison infrastructure cannot maintain the inmate population in a humane way, and that creates a situation wherein an inordinate degree of suffering must be endured by those in custody. Years spent surviving such an austere and hostile environment impacts the psychology of a person, and makes reintegration with the mainstream society a significant difficulty.

Isolated from normalized culture, fellow prisoners often are a significant source of torment for one another. According to a Rutgers University study, around 20% of inmates reported being assaulted by another inmate at some point during their period of incarceration. And while it may seem shocking that upwards of one in five inmates report claims of assault, the true numbers are likely much higher. Additionally, inmates face abuse not only from each other, but also from corrections officers. One study found that over twenty-one percent of prisoners claimed they had been assaulted by prison staff. And according to the United States Department of Justice, approximately 4,000 deaths occur in prison annually.

Prison has been shown to cause or exacerbate symptoms of depression, suicidal tendencies, aggression, delusions, paranoia, and substance-abuse; moreover, it is not uncommon for those who have endured prison or jail to develop post-traumatic stress

disorder. Prison facilities generally lack the means to adequately provide psychological support for those who require it. However, research has shown that it is not necessarily the living conditions of prison that is the most psychologically damaging aspect of the experience. Rather, it is the isolation from friends, family, and community that is most detrimental. Through isolation and degradation, inmates are psychologically conditioned into deviant modes of behavior—and then released back into society.

Upon release, people face several significant challenges to reintegration with mainstream America, including: *employment limitations, social stigma, financial obstacles, legal issues, and restricted access to housing*. Not only do ex-convicts face serious marginalization upon release, but very few public mental health resources are available to help them cope with these harsh realities. The plight of people reintegrating with society after being incarcerated is generally misunderstood, and the population is consequently inadequately supported. Moreover, in 2014, thirty-seven percent of young men in custody self-reported their education level as none. No high school diploma, no GED... nothing! That means our inmates not only face general restrictions to work opportunities and social acceptance upon release; but these folks also typically have extremely limited education. Under those circumstances, it is understandable why nearly seventy percent of ex-convicts are arrested within thirty-six month of release. With no social support, or future prospects, what is to prevent these folks from getting into trouble?

Social Costs of Mass Incarceration

The United States has the largest prison population in the world. There are more than two million people behind bars today. Corrections can exceed \$80 billion fiscally, and the emotional cost of mass incarceration is nearly incalculable. Since 1978, there have been nearly 13.5 million new admissions to prison. That cost expands out to the millions and millions of friends and family that suffer; as well as countless communities. Of course those same people are also disproportionately victims of crime—both crime and punishment are densely concentrated around specific geographic areas. It is estimated that between 12 and 14 million ex-convicts are living and working in the United States; and according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, roughly one in fifteen working-age Americans is a felon. These figure have been normalized in America, and we have come to accept our bloated penal institutions. But it is worth considering whether complacency is warranted when so many Americans are harmed by this paradigm.

Over the past two decades, state spending on penal institutions has generally grown faster than any other budget item. But this vast spending has neither improved prison conditions nor reduced recidivism. So, why are state legislatures still throwing piles of flaming taxpayer dollars into penal institutions? The answer is a bit more sinister than you might expect.

The Correction Officer Unions are among the most powerful (and least discussed) political voices in the criminal justice system. And private, for-profit prisons have

proliferated across America. Both the unions and corporations are concerned with only one thing: money! And they want more of it. Private prisons spent more than \$1.6 million in campaign contributions in the 2016 election cycle; the Correction Officers Benevolent Association (a major correction officers union) spent more than \$183,000 on lobbying that same year. But what are these entities spending all this money on?

Back in 2012, Republican leaders from New York state received an excess of \$88,000 from private-prison interest groups and correction officers unions. That year, those same Republican leaders banded together to quash legislation that would have decriminalized the public display of up to 25 grams of marijuana. The law would have prevented a person from being charged with displaying marijuana publicly if an officer asks them to empty their pockets—effectively reducing the number of annual arrests and decreasing the jail time at sentencing. The lobbying efforts exerted were conducted to ensure the corporate bottom line; these organizations pushed for tough on crime measures because it is good for their business.

The prison industrial complex in the United States is a for-profit business that drains billions, if not trillions from our society annually. Moreover, the fiscal cost does not account for the vast social implications of mass incarceration. Millions of families are torn apart by inordinately long prison sentences (the average male in state prison is serving 12.5 years); and countless communities are impacted by the emotional fallout caused by severing a person from their social network. While prisons may be an ugly necessity in modern society, there is no morally palatable justification for expanding the prison population in order to enhance profit.

At [Wasatch Defense Lawyers](#) we fight against the corruption of the prison industrial complex by fighting for the rights of our clients!