



What is Mass Incarceration?

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It is a pleasure and an honor to be here at Wheaton College on such an important topic, the topic of none other than mass incarceration. It's really a pleasure to be your first speaker to help frame the topic. I did not choose this title, What is Mass Incarceration? But, it was forced on me, and then I thought, "Well, how would I answer that?"

Looking up mass in a dictionary, there's lots of different definitions, but one is, effects a large portion of people, individuals, or populations. That definitely applies here. Mass, huge, large, voluminous, colossal, that's what we're talking about here in the context of incarceration. But, like all things, size is relative.

So, how do you know when the right amount of people have been incarcerated? Some might argue that any incarceration is too much. Let's compare the US to some other countries in the world.

And look what we see. Shameful, quite frankly. The United States exceeds all other countries in the world in its rates of incarceration. It's exceedingly high, and this is a story that's long in the making. So, if you look at these trends over time, this leads us up through 2015, you'll see that in the United States the population of people who are behind bars has grown considerable, tremendously over time. And, you'll see two segments of this graph. One shows ... The blue is the growth in people who are behind bars at any given time, and the other are as the volume of people who are under some form of correctional control, as we call it.

So, they might be on probation. They might be on parole. They might be on what's called pretrial release pending the results of their trial or their sentence disposition. This is a lot, a lot, a lot of people who are subject to the criminal justice system in the United States.

What has caused this massive growth? Well, a lot of things. There's been a shift in philosophies in incarceration and punishment, back and forth for decades. Prisons have been in use since the birth of this country, but originally they were used sparingly, and for rehabilitation purposes. And then, that pendulum shifted at some point in time. Some people put it in the 70s, or late 80s, mid to later 80s, and there was just a change in philosophy where there was a sense that nothing really worked, in terms of rehabilitation. There was some notable scholars who did

some research and came to that conclusion. In retrospect, we look back at that research, and we question some of the methodology, but at the time that was taken as truth.

And so, people thought, "Well, if you can rehabilitate people, let's just lock them all up," and that happened. There was politics. And that exists today, of course, but back in the 80s or so there was a lot of use of fear of crime to help win election campaigns. So, there's many famous cases, Willy Horton is perhaps the most well known one of political candidates who their downfall is because they were a governor, or in some elected office when someone is released from prison on parole, perhaps early, and ends up committing a serious crime. And so, then that is not just the fault of one individual, but that afflicts the entire criminal justice system, and leads people to say, "Well, we shouldn't let anybody out." So, that was the philosophy back then, and some would argue it's reemerging today. So that's something to be thinking about as this afternoon progresses.

There were a lot of changes in sentencing policy that went along with these changes in politics, and I won't go into them in too much detail, but things like mandatory minimums. So, if you committed a certain crime, or had a certain number of convictions then you had to get a prison term, and you had to serve a certain period of that term. Also, just longer terms in general.

When you look back, historically, you'll see that even as little as two decades ago more people than not were not ending up getting prison terms for their crimes. And now, that's flipped in most states, and certainly in the federal system.

So, all this leads to mass incarceration, large, large volumes of people behind bars. There's been some changes afoot. There have been reforms at the state level. There's been seeds of reform on the federal level. We'll see whether those take hold, because there's a growing recognition of a number of things. One, is that incarceration is expensive. Also, it's an expense that doesn't seem to yield a very good return on investment, because looking at the history of incarceration, whether the rates are high or low it does not seem to have any impact on the recidivism rate on the degree to which people end up re offending.

It's also the case that incarceration disproportionately affects certain people, certain populations, certainly, communities of color. And then, I think for this audience in particular, there's just an issue of what is humane? What is right? And incarceration is typically not the answer.

So, let's look a little bit about the impact of incarceration. Incarceration certainly affects the person who's experiencing it, but it also affects families, and it effects communities, and it even affects the nation overall. But, just looking a little bit about the impact of incarceration on individuals. There are so many impacts, and at the Urban Institute we've been studying this for many years. And yes, we did some of the typical research studies where we're just in our offices, and we're grabbing data, and we're analyzing it. But, much more importantly is the research we've done on this topic when we reach and get inside prisons, and interview people, and capture that lived experience.

So, for example, several years ago we launched the largest longitudinal study of the process of reintegration from prison into communities that has been conducted to date. It was in four states. We interviewed people behind bars. We followed them over the course of a year after their release, interviewing them two to three times after their release. We asked them to nominate family members, or people that they considered family in their lives, and we interviewed them. We conducted focus groups in communities that were most likely to experience intensive incarceration, where just large volumes of mostly their adult men were taken away and incarcerated for periods of time, and they were experiencing, also, massive returns of people into their communities, and we learned a lot, and we continue to learn. We continue to build that lived experience into our work.

So, we learn a lot about the first person experience of incarceration, and what it does to a human, and their psyche, and their self-confidence, and their self-worth, and their future value in society. And among those, and these are just a few, but one is when you're incarcerated, when you're told when you can eat, when lights are out, where you need to be at any given time, it really diminishes your autonomy, your agency, your decision making abilities. Yes, you might say that's a part of the punishment, and that's the whole purpose, perhaps, but when you consider how that restriction and agency affects people when they're released. That's not setting them up for success on the outside.

The present culture, also breeds aggression, and we have this quote from someone we spoke with who had spent a very, very long term behind bars, and said that, "When I first entered prison I just pretended to be a tough guy," and that was a thing you did to protect yourself. "After pretending for a little while, and then longer, and longer, it became so natural that it became real. I just ran with it for about 25 years," is what he said.

So, this is breeding a culture of aggression. And again, people ultimately end up exiting prison, so they're exiting prison with these learned ways of survival that are not conducive to being successful in free society.

Obviously, when you're deprived of your liberty, when you're taken away from your family and friends, you're going to experience social withdrawal. You're gonna experience depression, isolation. These are some of the more punitive aspects of incarceration, that and being removed from your family, your loved ones. And we learned from folks we spoke with is that many just had to forget what they knew they were missing on the outside. They just had to forget it in order to survive behind bars.

We know that a lot of people end up in prison because they've experienced trauma on the outside. Maybe as kids they were in abusive families. A lot of trauma in this population, and then they end up behind bars, which arguably is trauma in and of itself, and that's only further harmed.

And then, I referenced being removed from families and loved ones. In the study, we did recently on long sentences we heard some really harrowing stories about all the life events that

people missed, because they were incarcerated for 12, 15, 20, sometimes 25 years. If you can imagine being behind bars and not being able to see the birth of your child, or see your kid graduate, or be there when your parent passes, be there for the funeral. This is really very, very punitive indeed.

But, it also has impact on families, and families that may have nothing to do with the crime that got the individual incarcerated in the first place. Even if someone's incarcerated who might only have part time work, they were a breadwinner typically of some kind for their household, and their family. So, that results in a lot of financial instability and economic stress for the families that are left behind. Some end up moving a lot. There's a lot of disruption to kids when they're moving from one school to the other. Sometimes, they're at school entirely. Sometimes, they end up homeless. There's just so much stress involved with having a loved one behind bars, and you wanna stay in touch with them, and phone calls are exorbitantly expensive, and trips are often for long distances, and expensive in terms of gas and lodging. And, sometimes you travel all the way to visit a loved one only to find out the facility's on lockdown, and you can't even see them. Visiting hours aren't always happening. Some facilities they only let you see family members every other weekend. That might now comport with a family member's job schedule.

And then, there's huge, huge impacts on children. So, more than 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent. That's at any given time, 2.7 million children. About 10 million children have experienced parental incarceration during some period of time from the ages zero to 18, and roughly half of them who have parent's incarcerated are under 10 years of age. These are just kids. These are the future of our country, and we're depriving them of their parents.

Unfortunately, the trends in mass incarceration that I showed you earlier with a large increase in the volume of people behind bars, is mirrored in the impact on kids, and not surprisingly right. So, with more people behind bars, more parents are behind bars, and more kids are experiencing that on the outside.

And, as I referenced earlier, there are tremendous disparities in who ends up behind bars, with people of color much more likely to be incarcerated, and therefore children of color much more likely to experience the loss of a parent due to incarceration as you can see from this graph.

There a little bit more about the effects of parental incarceration on children, because there are many. And i don't know, let me just ask you, how many of you out there are parents? A fair volume. So, you think about it. Your kids might be grown. Congratulations if they are. My boys are in high school right now. They might be grown and out and successfully launched, but we all remember the time when our kids were young, and you think about how most of the kids who have parent behind bars are under the age of 10, what it's like to have a parent that's missing. It can cause all kinds of stress and anxiety. Research finds that girls whose parents are incarcerated are more likely to turn in on themselves, maybe engage in self-harm, have serious self-esteem issues. Boys tend to lash out. They end up having behavioral problems in schools. Certainly it

disrupts the relationship between parent and child. I already mentioned the disruptions in the stability of the household, the finances.

Kids of incarcerated parents are more likely to be placed in foster care. They're more likely to experience the separation or divorce of their parents. I don't know that I need to read through this whole long list, but I think you get the message. It has a tremendous impact.

But, incarceration also impact communities. I referenced earlier the focus groups that did in communities that were most likely to experience both mass incarceration and large returns of people following their terms of incarceration. It certainly diminishes human capital. If you look at some of these neighborhoods, and the volume of mostly young men, mostly African American men who are removed from their families and communities. These people who could under other circumstances be earning jobs, contributing to the community there, paying taxes, contributing ... Maybe, one day, owning a home. Off of these things relate to the local economy, to real estate values, to business development, and of course, to burdens on social services. So, there are really impacts, even stepping apart from the person who's experiencing incarceration, and their families.

So, now I'm gonna turn a little bit to something different, and I wanna talk a little bit about the recommendations from the Charles Colson task force on federal corrections.

Now, I'm not just taking about this because the gentlemen, one, two, three, four from your right happens to be none other than Professor David Iglesias here at Wheaton College, who is in the audience somewhere. There he is. Who was one of the task force members, and who I came to know well, and admire tremendously. But, because this is a point of pride for me professionally, and I think for everyone who participated in this task force. It was a congressionally mandated blue ribbon, bipartisan taskforce to study the federal correction system, and to make recommendations for reform. And you couldn't have brought together a more principled, open minded, intelligent group of collaborative people. All leaders in their own right. All people who are arguable could have tremendous egos. Well, if they did, and perhaps they do, they left them at the door. They came in. They were willing to listen and learn.

And actually, we observed later that, I think there were three clergy among them, which is a pretty high percentage for just nine taskforce members. They brought their faith with them. They brought their hearts with them, and they came up with recommendations that are so principled, and really could apply not just to the federal system, but anywhere. So, I thought I'd just go over those principles a little bit.

So, one thing ... And, bare in mind, these are folks on the right and the left, all kinds of philosophies that they've brought with them into the room. Together, after learning with each other, after visiting a federal prison, after conducting focus groups with people behind bars, and hearing their experiences and stories, came to believe that prison should be used extremely, extremely sparingly. It's because it's a really tough punishment, and because it yields so many harm beyond the impact to the individuals who are experiencing it.

But, something that's often overlooked in reform efforts is, what's happening behind bars? So, if there's a certain number of people that society decides they have committed such serious crimes that they should be incarcerated at all, what happens behind bars? What's the culture? Is it a safe place to be, because if it doesn't feel safe, it's not gonna be conducive to engaging in education, engaging in programs, engaging in treatment. So, that culture of safety and rehabilitation has to be an important part of the correctional system.

There's also the taskforce observed that often it's helpful to incentivize people to take part in programming and treatment. That's not that they might not ultimately care, but that sometimes they might not understand the promise that program can offer them. Maybe they've been so discouraged by the sheer fact of being incarcerated that they don't feel motivated to do anything. Maybe their terms are so long, and in the federal system they can be upwards of 20 years, that they feel like what's the point in engaging in self betterment?

But, research has found that participation in all manner of prison programming can be really impactful, can help people on the outside, but what this taskforce also recognized is that self-betterment is important, even if someone is never going to be released. That's still contributing to a great good.

They also acknowledged the importance of support programs and treatment, that evidence, that research suggests are impactful, and not all of them are. And they were very committed to this concept of accountability and transparency. So, that the federal system should be held accountable for ... For example, whether they're improving on recidivism rates, or whether they're delivering programs as intended, whether they're housing people safely and securely, and so forth.

And that, ultimately, the recommendations they made for changes using, for example, mandatory minimums that are very common in the federal system extremely sparingly, and a bunch of other changes would result in, actually, a considerable cost savings to the federal Government.

So, where should those savings go? The taskforce recommended that they should go back into supporting programs that will help people succeed, both behind bars and in the community.

So, I just wanna end with a question that you may have asked yourself already. And that is, what can faith communities do to help people in the process of when they're incarcerated, and also when they're released from prison. And these are just a few examples. You may have others.

One is, you can all advocate. You can all be advocates for reform, and there's plenty of room for more people from all walks of life who raise awareness of the issue and the harms of mass incarceration.

You can also use what we call person-first language. Now, what do I mean by that? I'm actually gonna give you an example. A friend of mine did this at a conference recently. It was very powerful, but he's also incredibly charismatic, but I'm gonna try it anyway.

Okay. I'm gonna ask you to close your eyes, and think about the worst thing you've ever done in your life. Okay, now imagine if you were defined by that for the rest of your life. That's what it's like when you carry with you a criminal record when you've been behind bars, and everyone continues to call you a convict, a prisoner, sometimes even worse names. We at the Urban Institute, we as part of the Colson taskforce made a deliberate decision to use what we call people-first language in our reports, and in our speeches, our communications. And that means they're people, they're people first like we all are. They're just people who ended up doing something bad, and ending up behind bars. Getting caught, not all of us do.

So, that's something you can do. You can hire people who have experienced the criminal justice system. Importantly, in our field, a lot of folks focus on the needs, and the risks, this person is riskier than that. This person has all these needs, and those needs, and they don't focus enough on the assets, what gifts people have, and everyone has gifts. So, more focused on gifts is a really important thing that we can all do.

You can do in reach. You can go into facilities. You can help provide services, mentorships, support. You can forge partnerships with services on the outside. You can help be that conduit so that people aren't just released rudderless. You do smaller things that are still meaningful. You can do it in your churches, in your schools, like doing collections for toiletries and hygiene products that are often things folks don't have at the time of release, or struggle with when they're trying to make their way.

And, certainly, you can volunteer to work with a reentry organization, or be a mentor through a reentry, or faith based organization.

So, I wanna thank you for listening. Again, it's been a delight to share this knowledge with you, and I hope we have a productive afternoon and evening. Thank you.