

On the Path to Equality

Lilliana V. Sandoval

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The United States has 5% of the world's population, yet roughly 25% of that population is incarcerated.¹ Mass incarceration has and continues to, disproportionately impact the poor and people of color. Other governments have found far more efficient ways to lower crime rates. That means spending less on the criminal justice system and imprisoning far fewer people. So why can't we? Some have tried, but very few have succeeded. What systems in place allow for mass incarceration to stay in place?²

Roadmap

As a consequence of our winter break trip to Montgomery, Alabama,³ I became more interested in taking a deeper look into racial bias in the justice system. More specifically ways to lower the rates of mass incarceration and turn towards a future which involves restorative justice rather than justice through punishment. Looking into the objective of the Equal Justice Initiative and how we, as a society, change the world in a deficit of justice and create solutions.⁴ Although we don't have the same laws that were in place fifty to a hundred years ago, many of the laws which form the structure of our justice system are similar to the old Jim Crow Laws. I'm focused on these points because I want to find out how we as individuals and communities can help to change the way detention centers function. In addition to seeing what programs would be most beneficial to marginalized communities in order to avoid mass incarceration, such as educational opportunities and youth engagement. Also, questioning, why do we treat inmates and ex-convicts

¹ Cullen, "The United States Is (Very) Slowly Reducing Incarceration."

² Artz, "RACIAL DISPARITIES STUDIED."

³ Where we visited the Memorial site and the Equal Justice Initiative Museum. It was an emotional time for many students and made me look into my own community and I could draw many comparisons between those impacted by racial bias and our Davidson community as well.

⁴ Stevenson, "*Just Mercy: a Story of Justice and Redemption.*"

differently, or as second class citizens? Overall, my goal is to help others understand how marginalized communities are targeted; why people of color have a harder time getting opportunities and most importantly ways we can break the cycle.

Connection to Course

It should be noted that Unit 1 with Professor Quillen is when I started to think about some of these ideas. There was an ongoing question of “What makes us human?”. When many of our courses papers were written it was in a time filled with racial discrimination and bias. Yet comparing those times to now there are many parallels. For example, Arthur C. Brooks discussed how demographic and experiential “branding” has become very common.⁵ Today, society often brands people by the color of their skin or life experiences, in this case the justice system treats ex-convicts as second class citizens. Later in the passage, Brooks had questioned “how we break the discrimination and bring people of different races together?” The key idea was to be more humane and immerse yourself in their community. I see this as an important step in assisting marginalized communities today. Furthermore, in Unit 4 Professor Wills made me wonder what civil rights, or liberties, have been taken? Mary Church Terrell describes how a person’s life experiences can be different when they are a person of color.⁶ It was more of a challenge for her to be accepted, because Jim Crow laws kept people of color in a lower position compared to white people.⁷ These ideals are still maintained under our current “justice system” because many opportunities and liberties are taken away when someone is an inmate or an ex-convict. Despite their talents, ambition and character.

⁵ “Brooks Power and Peril of Identity.Pdf.”

⁶ “Terrell_What_It_Means.Pdf.”

⁷ “Terrell_What_It_Means.Pdf.”

Other Scholars Input

Undoubtedly, our nation enforces a dual-justice system. By that I mean : the criminal justice system has helped to maintain the economic and social hierarchy in America. ⁸ The cause of hyperincarceration is society's choice to inflict punishment, rather than restorative justice. This is why many communities, such as Richmond, San Francisco, Sacramento and several others, have started nonprofits to create solutions and programs that build skills while inmates serve time. So that the rate of re-entry is lowered, although there has been much success in recent years there is still a long way to go for them to reach their goal. The controversial part about the dual justice system is that society demands to get tough on crime but at the same time they demand to retain civil liberties, such as freedom of speech. ⁹Yet, crime was tied to race or religion, while the majority of society get a pass on punishment because they aren't people of color. There is a controversy surrounding protests, stating that they are "un-American".¹⁰ However, within American History rebellion has always been used to defend liberty. So in today's society, how should the oppressed respond to their oppressor? In recent weeks both peaceful protests and violent riots have broken out as a result of ongoing police brutality. The protestors have been labeled as looters and thugs, why are they not seen as revolutionaries? Because -"Freedom through violence is a privilege possessed only by whites."¹¹ The only thing worse than a rebellion is the thing that causes it. Robynn J.A. Cox said- "At the same time, many communities attempted to benefit economically from mass incarceration by using prisons as a

⁸ "Where Do We Go from Here? Mass Incarceration and the Struggle for Civil Rights" n.d.

⁹ "Where Do We Go from Here? Mass Incarceration and the Struggle for Civil Rights" n.d.

¹⁰ Jackson, "The Double Standard of the American Riot."

¹¹ Jackson, "The Double Standard of the American Riot."

strategy for economic growth, making the incarceration system eerily similar to the system of slavery.”¹²

Not only does mass incarceration disproportionately affect people of color but it also is a “well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.”¹³ Mass incarceration takes away people's civil liberties and many struggle to re-enter society. Michelle Alexander asserts that we use our criminal-justice system to pair criminality with people of color. Then employ prejudiced practices that were meant to be left behind in the Jim Crow era.¹⁴ Something new I learned from these scholars is that some of the challenges of re-entry to society include employment discrimination, denial of right to vote, and exclusion from jury service. Furthermore, during times of Coronavirus, times have become much more difficult for those reentering society. These include: jobs are hard to come by, to receive food stamps you need an ID, office for IDs are closed, homeless shelters are shut down, parents- need a job to provide food and shelter for kids, without it they can't regain custody.¹⁵ “As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights and arguably less respect than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow.”¹⁶ Does that comparison not startle you?

Where I stand

Although many scholars have analyzed how the justice system is flawed very few have actually presented any solid solutions. I believe it's important for us to look at what changes we

¹² “Where Do We Go from Here? Mass Incarceration and the Struggle for Civil Rights” n.d.

¹³ Alexander, “The New Jim Crow.”

¹⁴ Alexander, “The New Jim Crow.”

¹⁵ Stillman, “Will the Coronavirus Make Us Rethink Mass Incarceration?”

¹⁶ Alexander, “The New Jim Crow.”

can make within ourselves, our communities and within our states detention facilities. I'd like to ask what you as an individual can do. How can we better support these marginalized communities within society? What work programs should be offered within detention centers and prisons in order to help inmates gain valuable skills and assist them in re-entering society.

Proof of this were the solutions offered by Bryan Stevenson when he visited Davidson he asserted that in order for outsiders looking in to understand one's situation they must get proximate with those who suffer, namely people who are poor, neglected and marginalized.¹⁷ This means getting uncomfortable and pushing past your boundaries. In fact, Stevenson's grandmother had inspired him to do so. This can be seen as hugging someone, it is a way to affirm their humanity and dignity. It is the small actions that make an immense impact. This impact can go either way, positive or negative, and we as individuals have the power to decide which way the pendulum swings. For example, crime is governed by fear and anger which are the ingredients of injustice. The United States already has a long history of racial injustice that is not talked about. That is why it may be scary for some to get proximate and uncomfortable, because it means admitting to one's role in maintaining the racial caste system. For instance, at Davidson College there are several microaggressions that occur each day. Even though there are good students and faculty, who are faithful and kind- we, as people of color, will still face harsh situations.¹⁸ In these instances hope is our superpower and each of us must do whatever we can in our power to fight against this injustice.

¹⁷ Bryan Stevenson's talk at Davidson really offered some good steps in moving towards equality.

¹⁸ Although my first year at Davidson was wonderful, it was the first time I had to deal with racial bias and microaggressions. If one does not have a good support system, these cases of racial prejudice will definitely take a toll on one's mental health.

Especially in today's day, it is key to keep hope alive and actively work to be an ally to those suffering from racial caste system . In light of current events, involving police brutality, any have taken to the streets to protest. However there are other things that people can do to support this fight for equality. Individuals can take action by signing petitions, people who are privileged with wealth should donate funds to bail funds and go fund me projects to help the families who have lost their loved ones due to our flawed justice system. Although these steps are vital for each of us to take, I believe that the most important step to spread awareness is to have those uncomfortable conversations. Whether it be with your peers, professors, or even family members. It is important to look within ourselves, our discomfort and our learned anti-blackness. When we witness this, we must address it! Too often does it go ignored.

Moreover, this is something that must be taken into consideration within our communities, such as the residential areas and especially in our educational systems (both big and small). Corporations and institutions alike should become more open taking on hires of all backgrounds. The environment which is set in these workplaces is also key, because they may not always be inclusive. If more businesses opened up to ex-convicts or there were programs which allowed them to gain skills there would be more opportunities for those re-entering society- however that is a discussion for later. For example, Davidson Microaggressions project not only works with cases involving students but also those among professors (I believe). Therefore if we apply the steps mentioned earlier , within an individual's responsibility to combat the system , and then apply it to the offices; we can create a supportive and inclusive environment .

Similarly, the same steps should be taken in the classroom. Use your power as a teacher to keep your students informed. As well as students sharing their views on the fight for justice and allowing there to be a safe space for them to speak on their experiences. I feel that that is key, especially because Davidson College has had so many incidents which target students of color. Too often do these cases of microaggressions go unaddressed by the faculty.

Furthermore educational opportunities should be more present in marginalized communities. Rather than wait until more youth in these communities be pulled into detention centers, precautionary steps must be taken. This means creating an environment which fosters growth, one scholar suggested taking out police officers from school high school campuses. Oftentimes this gives the impression that they are detained or expected to rebel. This had been the case for my high school in Antioch, California. Another pattern seen within public high schools like mine is military recruitment, which plays into the idea that people of color are second class citizens. I know this may sound controversial, but think about your kids constantly getting recruited to join the military, something which encourages violence and risks their lives.¹⁹ This is teaching the youth that they are dispensable. Oftentimes students from low income families take this route because it is all they can afford to do with their lives; with no money for college and lack of a supportive community. That is why programs like Students Rising Above , and those like it, are so vital.²⁰

¹⁹ I am by no means degrading our service members, they risk their lives for this country and should be commended.

²⁰ Students Rising Above (SRA) is a non profit organization created to help low income students apply and get through college. They provide advisors to help small groups of students throughout their college careers, help guide them with the process of paperwork and if needed help financially.

Importantly, there must be reform within the detention centers and prisons. There needs to be more programs offered within these facilities to foster growth as an individual, help inmates and ex-convicts gain work skills, and focus more on restorative justice. Restorative justice is a theory of justice which emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior.²¹ Even though someone is an inmate, or ex-convict, you can not dismiss the fact that they too are still human. We are not our worst mistakes.²²

The Bigger Picture

Although it may not be a solution to the dual justice system or the racial caste system that is maintained within the United States it is a vital first step that we should all take as individuals and as a community. In light of recent events with the Black Lives Matter and fight for equality, these steps are not just suggestions but something we all must do in order to reach a common ground. Too many lives are lost due to the injustices in which the dual justice system and racial caste system are based off of. Whether it was someone losing their life at a hand of a police officer or because they can no longer stay afloat because they have lost their civil liberties; because someone's slip up caused them to become labeled as a second class citizen. This is more than just a paper, this is a plea for people to take action! How many more lives must be ruined until our communities can be treated as equals and get justice?

²¹“Lesson 1: What Is Restorative Justice? | Restorative Justice.”

²² One of the quotes from Stevenson's talk at Davidson which resonated with me.

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