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... and We Keep on Building Prisons: Racism, Poverty, and Challenges to the Welfare State

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. . . and We Keep on Building Prisons:
Racism, Poverty, and
Challenges to the Welfare State

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Prison-building is argued to be an intervention of last resort when a nation loses faith in the social welfare enterprise. Recent proposals for more punitive regulations for means-tested benefits, along with the recent dramatic growth in the construction of prisons and in the size of the inmate population, indicate that we are moving as a society toward heightened levels of scapegoating and victim-blaming as a response to troubles generated by significant structural shifts in the economy. This paper analyzes the connections between poverty, punishment, and prisons, with particular emphasis on the scapegoating of people of color. The role of racism in the production of poverty and in policy debates surrounding its alleviation is highlighted.

Given that so few social workers are actually employed by or interact directly with prisons, why did I choose the title, "And We Keep on Building Prisons," for this talk to the Council on Social Work Education? In truth, this is not for the most part about prisons, but hopefully by focusing some attention on this extreme social institution, we can arrive at a better understanding of current challenges both to the welfare state and to growing numbers of our people, especially people of color, and African-Americans and Latinos in particular. We all recognize that prisons are material forms of social control. It should become clear that they are also symbolic expressions of societal values and policy preferences. Furthermore, and regrettably, prisons are all too often metaphors for how we conduct our lives in isolation from one another.

Why is it that we keep on building prisons? Why is it that, among industrialized nations around the globe, the United States has now surpassed South Africa to become first in the

rate at which we imprison our people? During the 1980s the male prison population increased 112%, and the female prison population increased 202%. These figures reflect the fact that more people were being arrested and that arrests were leading to imprisonment at a rate 68% higher by the end of the 1980s than at the beginning of the decade. By 1989 nearly 4 million adults, the majority of whom have low incomes, were subjected to corrections agencies of one sort or another (Greenfield and Minor-Harper, 1991). Furthermore, despite a flurry of prison-building, by 1990 state prisons were operating at 122% capacity, and federal prisons were operating at 146% capacity (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993a, Table 6.66), meaning that overcrowding remained a serious and ongoing problem. Why do we keep on building prisons that confine more and more members of our population? And how are these issues related to our interest in social welfare and poverty?

There are three main points to this paper: (1) When levels of social assistance are inadequate, some members of the population may be unable to conduct their lives within the usual legitimized opportunity structures. Under these circumstances, social control measures become the state's last resort for protection of the status quo. (2) The simultaneous trends toward more punitive regulations for means-tested welfare benefits and the dramatic growth in the rate of imprisonment are not unrelated dynamics. (3) Racism plays a significant role in the dynamics described in points 1 and 2.

Before pursuing those points, there are potential misunderstandings to avoid. First, nothing in this paper should be taken to mean that we should not work to reduce crime. To be sure, poor people are the economic group most heavily victimized by crime and are the least protected members of our population in terms of police response. We need policies that will ensure their safety and well-being. But I do not think that present policies of heightened social control will necessarily do that over the long run.

Second, nothing in this paper should be taken to mean that we should not hold people accountable for their actions, no matter how limited their choices. Rather, my emphasis is that we must also hold policy-makers accountable for the social forces

their decisions set in motion. It would be unscientific and, at least in my value system, politically dangerous to act as if people make choices in a vacuum and thus to ignore the social forces that impinge upon their lives. Professor Billingsley has remarked that families cannot be strong in isolation; he identified economic, political, educational, and social factors that produce stable families and stable communities (Billingsley, 1994). Similarly, I wish to argue that individuals cannot make optimal life choices without these same factors. To focus on individuals' actions apart from these contexts is to grossly simplify human life and to set the stage for some very wrong-headed social policies.

Third, I am appreciative of the continual need to recognize and build upon the strengths of individuals and their families. As Dr. Billingsley reminds us, the real miracle of African-American communities is not that some people have fallen but that so many still stand. Today as I focus on the nature of problems that many people overcome but give emphasis to the reality that some have not, I hope that my comments will be understood within the context of the real miracle.

To put flesh and blood onto the claims I will make, I wish to describe a family that is actually a composite profile of families served by an Atlanta community agency, Aid to Imprisoned Mothers, or AIM, on whose Board of Directors I have the privilege of serving. The scenario draws upon commonalities across a host of families but avoids describing any specific family in order to protect client identities. Approximately 95% of families receiving assistance from AIM are African-American. This percentage reflects a combination of factors, including the disproportionate imprisonment to which African-Americans are subjected, AIM's location in a city with a majority African-American population, and the reluctance stemming from the racism of European-American families with incarcerated mothers to utilize our agency services that are staffed fully by African-American professionals. Here is a typical family story from AIM's clientele.

Ms. Sanders (a pseudonym) is a 27-year-old head of household with two children, Alicia (a pseudonym), age 9, and Brandon (a pseudonym), age 4. With a high school diploma but limited employment skills, she has been unable to locate work

that would allow her to support her family. After trying to juggle part-time jobs for a few years during hours when her sister could watch the children, Ms. Sanders finally applied for AFDC and food stamps so that she would have a steady flow of resources. Eventually she had to quit her part-time job because no one was available to stay with the children and she could not afford to pay someone to do so.

Ms. Sanders frequently ran out of money before the end of the month and had difficulty paying her bills. She and the children often wished for things they could not afford, such as adequate school supplies for Alicia and properly-fitting shoes for Brandon. One day Ms. Sanders shoplifted some jewelry at a local store and sold it on the street to make some extra money. The next time she tried to steal electronics equipment that she could sell for more money, but this time she was caught, arrested, and jailed.

When Ms. Sanders went to jail, she called her mother, Ms. Yancey (a pseudonym), to pick up Alicia and Brandon and care for them until she could get out of jail. Ms. Yancey had often taken care of her grandchildren for short periods of time, but not indefinitely. Due to the heavy backlog of cases at the city jail, Ms. Sanders' case was not heard for four months, and then she was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. There being no other family alternative, Ms. Yancey cared for Alicia and Brandon for the full three years that their mother served her sentence.

Once Ms. Sanders was jailed, her AFDC and food stamps were terminated. And since the children's grandmother lives in the next county, whose computers do not interface with those in Ms. Sanders' county, it took Ms. Yancey over two months before she received any benefits for her grandchildren.

Ms. Yancey is a woman of 60 without a high school diploma. She has labored throughout her adult life in minimum wage jobs. At the time she was a cook in a hospital cafeteria, but she worried how much longer she could continue there because of a recently aggravated chronic back injury. Yet it was imperative that she work.

Having two grandchildren to look after—in addition to having two of her own adult children staying with her from time

to time — produced severe financial strains on Ms. Yancey, and she quickly fell behind on her bills. First her lights were cut off for non-payment, and were it not for emergency rental aid from a service agency, she would have been evicted from her apartment. Furthermore, Ms. Yancey continually had to patch together child care from a shifting pool of caretakers. When nothing else could be arranged, 9-year-old Alicia was left in charge. Such financial and childcare crises characterized the entire three years that Ms. Yancey kept her grandchildren.

When Ms. Sanders was released from prison, she had nowhere to live, so she moved in with her mother, her children, and her brother and sister. Ms. Sanders hoped that she would be fortunate to find work paying wages with which she could support her family. In the meantime, she sought to reestablish herself as household head and get welfare benefits on her own. Two months lapsed between the time Ms. Yancey's benefits stopped and Ms. Sanders' began. The first check contained retrospective benefits for the two month lapse. By this time, however, Ms. Yancey's household utilities had all been disconnected for nonpayment. The first check barely covered the cost of paying overdue bills and new deposits to reconnect the water, electricity, gas, and telephone. Neither Ms. Sanders nor Ms. Yancey was certain how they would be able to pay the rent that month or any other bills. The same desperate feelings that led Ms. Sanders to shoplift the first time were coming back again.

The Political Economic Context of Social Control and Social Assistance

It is important to consider the Sanders-Yancey family situation within a broad political economic framework. Political economists and other social scientists whose work focuses on the macro-dynamics of stratification provide us with powerful schemas for understanding the intersection of race and class, and in this case also gender. The work of political economists undergirds my first main point, that: When levels of social assistance are inadequate, some members of the population are unable to conduct their lives within the usual legitimized opportunity structures. Under these circumstances, social control

measures become the state's last resort for protection of the status quo. Put another way, prison-building is an intervention of last resort when a nation loses faith in the social welfare enterprise.

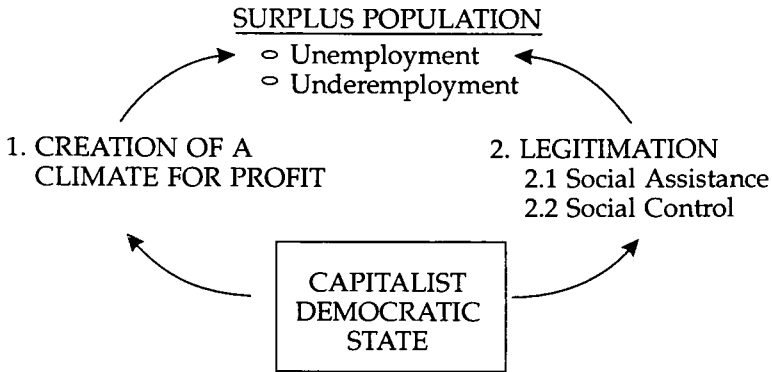
Figure 1 represents a model of the U.S. political economy that I have synthesized from the work of O'Connor (1973) and others. The logic of the model starts with the recognition that a capitalist democracy like the United States has two primary state functions. The first and foremost is the creation of a climate for the production of profit, which is a core requirement of the capitalist engine. The logic of profit-focused dynamics produces certain predictable outcomes for our nation and its workers. Within the logic of capitalism, work necessarily becomes more capital-intensive and efficient. For example, increased use of technology reduces the amount of human labor required to sustain productivity. Also within the logic of capitalism, production continually migrates to sources of cheaper labor (witness the ongoing regional shifts of jobs within the United States and the outmigration of jobs from the United States to peripheral nations).

Thus, a fully predictable consequence of these dynamics is the generation of what political economists call a surplus population. This phrase simply means that a portion of the population is not required for maximal capitalist productivity and thus it experiences unemployment and economic marginalization. Another logical feature of capitalism is the production of profit via the lowest wages and least expensive work arrangements possible. From this feature, a fully predictable consequence of our economy is the phenomenon of underemployment, which includes year-round work that pays non-livable wages and part-time work when full-time employment is needed. Put simply and directly, unchecked capitalist dynamics create poor people, both through unemployment and underemployment.

Vulnerability to membership in the surplus population is not random, however. This is where racism and sexism come in. Because of historical and contemporary expressions of racism and sexism in educational systems and labor markets (whose dynamics are too extensive to detail here), women and men of color and majority group women have been, and continue to

Figure 1

Model of US Political Economy



be, disproportionately vulnerable to becoming members of the surplus population. Statistics on unemployment, underemployment, and poverty are the most direct evidence for this claim. At the risk of repeating what you already know, African-Americans and Latinos endure an unemployment rate at least double that of European-Americans, and the disparities are even worse for Native Americans; men of color and women of all groups receive lesser returns on their human capital and are more susceptible to part-time employment than majority group males; and poverty rates for families of color and female-headed households are the highest of any categories of the population (Current Population Reports, 1990). These outcomes are not random; the social forces producing them, then, cannot be random.

Just as political economists describe how capitalism by its very logic produces poverty, they simultaneously point out that capitalist democratic states have a second essential function which is inevitably connected to creating a climate for profit. The second key state function is legitimation of the state itself, a task which is necessary precisely because the existence

of a surplus population represents the potential for political unrest. In order to reduce the likelihood of political challenge from an economically alienated segment of the population, the state introduces various forms of social assistance to enable the poor to participate marginally in the economy. Levels of social assistance, however, cannot interfere with the other key state function of creating a climate for profit; thus, the state necessarily provides social assistance below the equivalent of minimum wage so as not to discourage people from working for the lowest prevailing wages. At the same time the state subsidizes the private sector through mechanisms like the Earned Income Tax Credit so that private employers do not have to impact their profits by offering livable wages.

The other means by which the state undertakes legitimation is through its main apparatus of social control: police and prisons. These are last resort back-up systems that are expected to manage any consequences of political economic dynamics that produce acts of economic desperation or violence by impoverished individuals. (We should keep in mind, by the way, that interpersonal violence is largely directed within one's own community (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993b, p.15). Fanon (1963) views such acts as self-oppression when people who are already oppressed direct their rage and frustration horizontally.) Table 1 demonstrates that people of color and/or those who are economically marginalized represent the bulk of individuals subjected to the most extreme means of state social control. Sixty percent of people locked up in local jails, and 65% of inmates in state prisons are people of color. Over half of all prisoners in these sites (54% and 65%, respectively) and almost half (46%) of all federal prisoners did not earn a high school diploma. Fully 78% of jailed individuals and 70% of state prisoners had incomes of less than \$15,000 annually.

Returning now to Figure 1, how does the model of the political economy capture the experiences of the Sanders-Yancey family, who are indeed members of the surplus population? What we recall about Ms. Sanders is that initially she was underemployed in part-time work, which she eventually had to quit because of difficulty finding adequate and reliable child care arrangements. The AFDC and food stamp assistance from

Table 1
Race/Ethnicity and Class of U.S. Inmate Population

	# of Facilities	# of Inmates	% Anglo American	% African-American	% Hispanic	Total %, Persons of Color	Education: % <High School Diploma	Income: % <\$15,000 Annually
Local Jails, 1989 ¹	3,000+	395,554	39	41	17	60	54	78
State Prisons, 1991 ²	1,239	711,643	35	46	17	65	65	70
Federal Prisons, 1989 ³	80 (1990) ⁴	30,578	73	25	N/A	27	46	N/A

Sources:

1. Beck, 1991.
2. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993b.
3. Perkins, 1992.
4. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993a.

the state was inadequate to maintain her family, leading her to shoplift and then sell the stolen goods to supplement her income. The state had not provided for her adequately through social assistance; but her desperate, illegal behavior brought the state social control apparatus to bear on her. In fact, the state ended up spending \$20,000 per year to keep Ms. Sanders in prison and had recently spent \$53,000 per bed to build another medium security prison to confine people like Ms. Sanders. Yet the state had spent only about \$7000 per year for Ms. Sanders and her children when she was out. Think of the enormous changes that could be made if the \$73,000 per inmate were to be rededicated to avenues of empowerment rather than imprisonment, to family support rather than family separation. Furthermore, when Ms. Sanders was released from prison, she was in no better position to compete in the labor market, nor was the labor market any more expansive, than when she went into prison. Thus, the likelihood of her recidivism appears high, unless her circumstances change extraordinarily and miraculously.

Parenthetically, it should be pointed out that most inmates work during their confinement, so that prisons in effect operate their own form of workfare. Sixty-nine percent of state prison inmates have work assignments, typically janitorial work, food preparation, maintenance and repair, groundskeeping, and other services, none of which significantly improves an inmate's human capital. Of the two-thirds of prison jobs that are accompanied by wages, the average rate of pay is 56 cents per hour, or \$22.40 for a full 40-hour work week (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993b, p.27). At this pay scale, it is not surprising that private managers of prison industries realize significant profits from these operations. For example, the company that controls and manages all of Florida's prison industries, which is a subsidiary of Eckerd drugstores, reported a \$4 million profit from prison industries in 1988 (Richey Mann, 1993). In effect, even on the social control dimension of state functions, a climate for private profit-making is created by the state-sanctioned coercion of labor from the very people who were sloughed off from the economy outside of prison. Jeffrey Reiman's book title, *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison* (1990), is an apt description

of the dynamics of the full political economy generally and of prison industries in particular.

We need only look at the growing expenditures for prisons and police alongside the current challenges to meager and virtually stagnant levels of welfare expenditure to conclude that societal values and policy preferences are shifting toward more punitive approaches toward the surplus population. Table 2 compares trends in selected federal social assistance and social control expenditures. What we see in these data is a growing commitment to social control, whose budget is proposed to increase 21% in the next fiscal year and has increased 48% in the past five years. Compare these figures to the stagnation of federal expenditures for AFDC, which is proposed to increase only 2% in the next fiscal year and has increased 27% in the past five years. Note that these smaller percentages are figured on a smaller base, thereby reflecting an even larger actual dollar gap. Furthermore, the Clinton administration is proposing only token gestures toward full employment via an 18% increase for the coming year in employment and training programs (*Budget . . .*, 1994).

The political rhetoric of the FY95 budget message from the President signalled these comparative fiscal commitments. The President referred simultaneously to the increasing threat of crime and violence (which can easily be viewed as a state responsibility to contain) and the need for more responsibility from welfare recipients (which rhetorically shifts responsibility away from the state and onto the individual). Thus, it is also important to consider the ideological context of social assistance and social control.

The Ideological Context of Social Assistance and Social Control

Attention to the rhetoric around the politics of social control and social assistance leads me to my second main point: The simultaneous trends toward more punitive regulations for means-tested welfare benefits and the dramatic growth in the rate of imprisonment are not unrelated dynamics.

Table 2
Comparative Federal Expenditures for Social Control and Social Assistance

	(in billions)					
	1990	1993	1994	(proposed) 1995	% Change 1994-95	% Change 1990-95
Crime Control	12.4	14.6	15.1	18.3	21%	48%
AFDC	10.1	12.6	12.7	12.9	2%	27%
Employment & Training Programs	-	5.0	5.5	6.5	18%	-

Source: Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 1995.

We are all familiar with the concept of blaming the victim, which was popularized by William Ryan (1976). His point was that frequently discourse about, and policy around, inequality blame the victims of structurally-generated inequalities for those inequalities. The process through which this happens is that people subjected to inequities are first defined as somehow different; that personalized difference is viewed as the cause of their inequity; then policies and programs are developed to correct that presumed personal difference rather than to correct the structural conditions which produced the inequities. My colleagues and I have found it useful to think about victim-blaming as a layered phenomenon (Dressel et.al., 1994). We talk about first-order victim-blaming when it arises in debate about how to approach fundamental social problems such as poverty or discrimination. This is the victim-blaming on which Ryan focused. Second-order victim-blaming focuses not on the presenting problem but rather on the interventions which were designed to alleviate the presenting problem. Second-order victim-blaming argues that if the interventions have not worked, it must be because of the participants, not because of the features of the programs themselves or broader changes going on in society. In this discourse, issues such as the general state of the economy, inadequate policy design, poor program implementation, underfunding, or any combination thereof are sidestepped.

I wish to suggest that much political discourse around welfare reform engages in second-order victim-blaming. This process sets the poor, more precisely poor persons of color, apart from others and thereby enables the consideration of punitive measures and diverse forms of social control. I will illustrate this claim by focusing first on proposed welfare reforms and then on the phenomenon of the so-called underclass. Next I will link these issues to the growth of prisons and inmate populations. Finally, on this point, I wish to consider the dangerous path that accumulated victim-blaming travels in terms of its logical consequences.

First, consider how some of the most widely discussed AFDC reform measures engage in victim-blaming of the second order; again, I refer to it as second-order because it explains programmatic shortcomings by placing the blame on program

recipients. Table 3 identifies three typical approaches to welfare reform and the underlying victim-blaming assumptions about recipients on which they are based. First, proposals for the elimination of AFDC increments when recipients give birth to additional children is premised on the victim-blaming assumption that such cash increments encourage pregnancy and larger families. Second, proposals to eliminate all assistance after a specific time period assume, in victim-blaming form, that the ongoing availability of assistance encourages welfare dependency. Third, the requirement that a larger number of AFDC recipients must participate in training and employment programs is premised on the victim-blaming assumption that recipients lack economic initiative.

Table 3

Victim-Blaming Assumptions Underlying Welfare Reform Proposals

<i>Proposals</i>	<i>Underlying Victim-Blaming Assumption</i>
1. Eliminate AFDC increments for recipients giving birth to additional children.	Cash increments for additional children encourage women on AFDC to get pregnant and have more children.
2. Eliminate all assistance after a specified time period.	Ongoing availability of assistance encourages welfare dependency.
3. Require a larger proportion of AFDC recipients to participate in training and employment programs.	Recipients lack economic initiative.

Yet, in each case systematic studies challenge these assumptions and in turn call the wisdom of the proposals into question. With regard to the first assumption, we know, on the contrary, that single-parent families receiving AFDC average only 1.8 children (Abramovitz and Davis, 1992). We also know empirically

that recipients' fertility rates are not affected significantly by either welfare receipt or benefit levels (Ellwood and Bane, 1984; Wilson and Neckerman, 1986). Furthermore, a large study has shown that the longer a woman is on welfare, the less likely she is to bear a child (Rank, 1989). Research related to the second assumption has consistently demonstrated that AFDC recipients do not lack motivation to work. Rather, they lack skills for jobs that pay livable wages, and they lack affordable childcare and work-based health benefits that would enable them to accept available work (Goodwin, 1983; Duncan, 1984; Gilbert, 1993). The third assumption is misguided in several ways. First, a major reason for low participation in workfare is the lack of space in available programs. Second, a singular focus on the supply side of employment without comparable focus on the creation of jobs only partially addresses unemployment problems (Marmor et al., 1990). Without attention to the demand side of the need for more jobs, the Urban Institute estimates that a full national workfare program would reduce welfare reliance by 5% at the most (cited in Walsh, 1988).

Clearly, then, political debate is not always guided by empirical reality. What does seem to drive the current debate around welfare reform? I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that much of that debate is driven by racist stereotypes and scapegoating that are embedded in a skewed, almost frenzied, concentration on the so-called urban underclass. The victim-blaming assumptions I have just outlined are features, among other negative traits, that are said to characterize this population. It is telling that the term underclass was used by Myrdal thirty years ago purely as an economic term. Today that meaning has been almost fully transformed. Today, instead, the term underclass is used in a way that links the urban African-American poor by definition to issues of crime, drug abuse, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock birth, and illegal economies (Dressel and Porterfield, 1993).

The terminological shifts that we have seen with the concept underclass are occasioned moreso by political forces than by empirical findings. Morris (1989) argues that three significant shifts in emphasis occurred in the 1980s with the term underclass. These shifts in thinking entail blaming welfare programs and recipients for economic dependency, focusing specifically on

racial/ethnic minority groups, and assuming that the economic marginalization of millions of our people will only worsen.

These changing emphases are not surprising in that the 1980s saw diminished federal commitment both to welfare programs and to racial equality. The rhetorical shifts have arisen in conjunction with a vulnerable national economy and an increasingly competitive international marketplace. How politically convenient it is, then, to find embedded in the very conceptualization of poverty the messages that welfare actually harms people, that poor people—especially people of color—create their own disadvantages, and that the public should not expect much improvement in the lives of the very poor (Dressel and Porterfield, 1993).

Gans (1990) and others have raised concern that this shifted political rhetoric reifies low-income, urban, largely African-American and Latino citizens as the singular causal agents of their circumstances. Insofar as this rhetoric sustains the illusion that these groups are fundamentally different from everyone else, ideological space will have been opened up to shift policies from those of social assistance to those of social control. I submit that this is precisely what is happening, as evidenced by the punitive, victim-blaming nature of certain proposed welfare reforms and the growing inclination to incarcerate poor people.

Seldom does a week go by without my seeing proposals for the utilization of harsh and extraordinary forms of social control, all of which are premised on creating an otherness and a differentness for people, largely people of color, who are poor. For example, here in Atlanta city officials have developed what they call a hospitality zone, so that you and other conventioners and tourists and those of us who work downtown will not have to encounter Atlanta's growing homeless population, which now numbers about 22,000 people. Within the so-called hospitality zone police are able to arrest people for loitering, panhandling, and public drunkenness. Two of these three behaviors, loitering and public drunkenness, are quite typical of conventioners and tourists and even some of us who work downtown, but the policy has disproportionately produced the arrest of homeless people, because it is only they who are seen as different. And if rhetoric is unable to sustain the illusion

of differentness, then a proposal being discussed in California would concretize the concept of differentness. Petitions are being circulated there for a referendum that would require violent felons to wear identification numbers implanted on their faces upon release from prison ("Facial ID Implants?" 1994). A supremely ironic feature of the proposal is the provision that it would be a misdemeanor to taunt or harass anyone who had such a facial implant! If Ms. Sanders, about whom I talked earlier, had been carrying a gun when she shoplifted those items in the store, she would be one of the candidates for a facial implant if this plan succeeds. Imagine how easy it would be for her then to find a job with livable wages.

The foregoing proposals assume a certain intractability of individuals and social situations. Gan's (1990) key concern is that underclass conceptualization is a linguistic strategy to prepare the public for permanently economically marginalized groups—a caste, if you will. If such a scenario unfolds, and if some people are set off as essentially different, usual constraints around treatment or intervention could disappear. Efforts toward change may be abandoned altogether, and proposals for segregation are more likely to appear (Dressel et.al., 1994). President Clinton signed an executive order soon after he took office that allows for homeless people to be moved to underutilized or abandoned military reservations. Such a policy, regardless of whatever merits it might have, paves the way for both the physical and the symbolic isolation of those who are defined as different.

Before leaving this point, I wish to say a few more words about the implications of second-order victim-blaming for social policy. So long as we allow program recipients to bear full blame for policy and program shortcomings, we serve to deflect emphasis from structural questions of societal changes, policy design, and programmatic features. Furthermore, we strengthen what Goffman (1963) called the spoiled identities of those who are blamed by institutionalizing the notion of differentness in social policies.

Victim-blaming is a layered process that may have particularly severe consequences when next-order forms are built upon already existing forms. Each successive layer or form presents people as increasingly troublesome and intractable. These

potentially cumulative processes are represented on the horizontal axis in Figure 2. Some people will have personal, interpersonal, and material resources that will enable them to deflect the stigma of victim-blaming, but others will not. This variable is represented on the vertical axis of Figure 2. The diagonal line represents the increasing perception of intractability and the increasing mobilization of these stigmatized perceptions. The shaded area of the diagram suggests that the likely outcome of limited layers of victim-blaming and reasonable levels of exchange resources is simple scapegoating. However, when reduced levels of exchange resources are combined with multiple layers of victim-blaming whereby individuals' problems are perceived as intractable and/or victim-blaming is broadly institutionalized, the most severe forms of social control are more likely to result. These include isolation such as imprisonment and other forms of segregation and either direct genocide or the more protracted forms of genocide that come from avoidance and neglect (Dressel et.al., 1994). Given the hypotheses reflected in this model, there is ample reason to be concerned over second-order victim-blaming as it is occurring in current debates about welfare reform. Figure 2 suggests that welfare and other forms of social assistance are not unrelated to matters of prisons and other forms of social control.

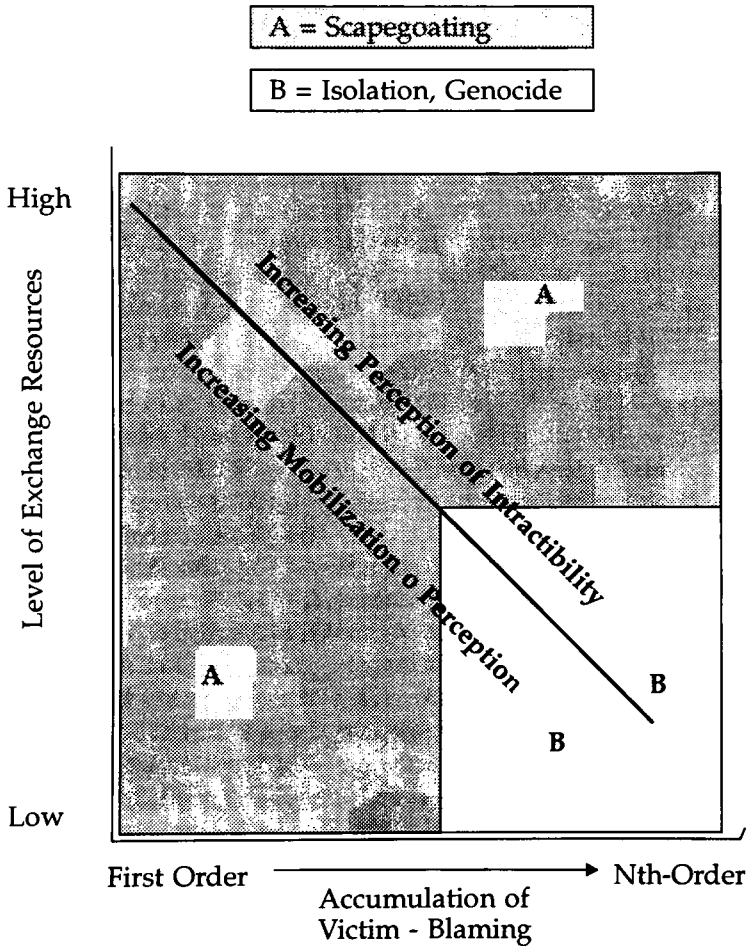
At the beginning I mentioned that prisons are symbolic expressions of social values and policy preferences as well as metaphors for how we conduct our lives in isolation from one another. I hope that the intervening remarks have given substance to those claims. To capsulize the point, to the extent that we are willing to conceptualize persons who are poor, again, especially persons of color, as different, we are choosing to imprison ourselves in exclusionary thinking and choosing to spend our tax dollars for facilities and activities that guarantee the mental and physical segregation of people by class and color.

The Role of Racism

My final point is this: Racism plays a significant role in the dynamics I have just described. Racism is a key factor in the production of poverty and in policy debates surrounding

Figure 2

Hypothesized Implications of Accumulated Victim Blaming



Source: Dressel et al., 1994.

the alleviation of poverty. Discussions of poverty reduction are necessarily incomplete unless they simultaneously take into account the complex ways in which racist ideologies and practices operate. The elimination of racist stereotypes that surround the welfare system and its recipients would also benefit the 21 million poor whites who comprise the largest racial/ethnic group among those citizens who are economically marginalized.

Jacqueline Jones (1992) has written a compelling historical and contemporary overview of the many groups who have been dispossessed in this country. She describes the diversity of today's economically marginalized populations, which include "jobless coal miners in Appalachia, displaced Midwestern factory workers, Haitian and Cambodian immigrant migrant laborers, and the chronically unemployed" (p.1) in the nation's central cities. She points out that, despite this diversity across groups and over time, "middle-class Americans in general and public policymakers in particular (persist) in defining the nature of social distress in purely racial terms" (p.1). She refers to this distortion as "the idea of black distinctiveness" and believes that because we are a society "conceived in slavery" this ideology is "rooted in the national consciousness" (p.292).

To the extent that this ideology finds its way into political discourse, social policies, and the popular culture, many people stand to lose. To be sure, the people who are rendered as "Others," especially impoverished African-Americans, are the most immediately and pervasively threatened by virtue of having been rendered convenient scapegoats for difficulties created by global and national economic forces. Others who are poor will also be negatively affected to the extent that the rhetoric of scapegoating diminishes public will for meaningful reform of social assistance policies for all people in need. Furthermore, groups as yet shielded from the harshest economic changes, who are disproportionately European-Americans, may possess a false sense of security (and superiority) if they believe themselves to be too different from those who currently find themselves in need.

We have not yet seen the full impact for our nation of a globalized economy. Indeed, Ellwood (cited in U.S. House of Representatives, 1991, Table 33) estimates that almost 2/3 of

first-time AFDC recipients will have worked in the two years prior to the experience of needing social assistance. This means that today's workers are not necessarily safe from future need. Just yesterday the *New York Times* carried an article about the 35th year reunion of Harvard graduates, all white men with elite educations (Uchitelle, 1994). Among that group 10 to 20 percent had lost jobs, and the article profiled one who was being assisted with food stamps. Jacqueline Jones is both descriptive and prescriptive when she writes that "Poverty abides no line drawn by color or culture" (p.1) While color and culture inform vulnerability to poverty, as I have argued here, by no means do they exclusively determine who will face economic need across the course of their lives.

Conclusion

I began by claiming that prison-building is an intervention of last resort when a nation loses faith in the social welfare enterprise. I want to argue strongly that we must back away from an emphasis on measures of social control. If we are willing to do that, at the same time we will be backing away from allowing racist ideologies and practices to dominate political debate and action.

Just recently two new voices have courageously called for us to back away. One is President Clinton's former Deputy Attorney General Philip Heymann, who sharply criticized the Clinton administration and Congress for responding to political pressure by supporting a host of anti-crime measures that he described as shortsighted, wasteful, and counterproductive ("Justice official . . .," 1994). The second voice is that of Senior U.S. District Court Judge Clyde Cahill, who ruled that federal penalties against crack cocaine are unconstitutional because they are undergirded by "unconscious racism" (Rankin, 1994). What he is referring to is a 1986 law that effectively penalizes those in possession of only 1 gram of crack just as harshly as it does those in possession of 100 grams of cocaine powder. Why is one gram of crack considered as dangerous or threatening as 100 times the amount of powder? Apparently because it is likely to be found in the possession of a Black or Latino male.

In 1992 97% of defendants sentenced under this law for selling crack were Black or Hispanic (Rankin, 1994). Clearly Judge Cahill recognizes that the determination of penalties was driven far more by racist ideology, the so-called underclass threat, than by any sense of comparable justice. Whatever else might be said about it, the war on drugs being waged in our cities is also in part a war on poor people, especially impoverished Black and Latino men (and increasingly Black and Latino women as well).

Are there any new voices courageously calling for us to back away from equally misguided, scapegoat-driven welfare reform measures? I hope so. Courageous voices that challenge divisive political rhetoric around both social assistance and social control seek to legitimate the state through measures of opportunity and empowerment. To me, this is far more productive both in the short term and in the long run than the pursuit of state legitimation through coercion and intimidation, in whatever ideological or material forms these might find expression. I am not ready to give up on the potential of Ms. Sanders, her children, and her mother, whom I described earlier, or the millions of families like them around this nation. Nor am I ready to give up on my belief that we can become a much fairer nation than our policies currently suggest we are.

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