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### The Paradox of Incarceration

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Increasing the rate of incarceration is policy choice city governments often make in an effort to combat crime. However, putting more criminals in prison does not necessarily reduce crime. The repercussions of increased jailing often create more problems for cities than solutions, such as poverty among residents, raised unemployment rates, social and class tensions, weak city money supplies, and racism. These problems can even mold a city's environment to be more vulnerable to criminal activity. The particular effects of raising incarceration rates are difficult to measure, though, as policing looks different for every city, and each one has its own unique set of insecurities and strengths. In a few cities it does appear to lower the crime rates, but this effect is one of the only measurable ones, and it is not at all consistent. So, I have researched the effects of raising incarceration rates in cities in order to get an idea of what the trends are, why it does not always lower crime rates, and whether those findings can uncover a more effective and consistent way to keep cities safe.

In 2021, the Prison Policy Initiative published an article analyzing data of jail detention rates across US cities. The study was intended to discover a correlation between cities' incarceration and crime rates, but they found that there is none. Violent crime rates, local police budgets, and local jail budgets have not been able to explain discrepancies between different cities. These inconsistencies are highlighted by the Prison Policy Initiative,

“For example, Charleston, S.C., has some of the highest jail detention and pretrial detention rates, yet its violent crime and total crime rates rank among the lowest of these cities. On the other end of the spectrum, Detroit boasts very low detention rates, but has a relatively high violent crime rate.”

The article concluded that these variations mean that your chances of being put in jail can depend on something as arbitrary as the city you live in. This goes to show how rates of incarceration in cities are impacted by the lack of organization and intentionality of their local criminal justice systems. While the study does not directly explain the effects of incarceration on cities, it does offer an explanation as to why it is so hard to understand such, showing that when cities increase jailing, they do not have the evidence to back that decision up as an effective form of crime prevention.

In a UChicago Magazine article examining the effects of crime control on contemporary city life, Professor Reuben Miller explains how the current incarceration rates – currently the highest ever in the US – have given us a chance to see how having a criminal record changes the nature of social life for the urban poor. To do so, he focuses on recidivism. He finds that,

“When their loved ones are still in prison, family and friends strain financially to cover the costs of regular collect calls and commissary funds, and travel for hours to visit. When prisoners are released, and members of their support system offer them housing, they may find themselves facing eviction.”

So, being incarcerated is also a punishment in the form of long-term financial strain on oneself and family. This burden is worsened by the added difficulty of finding a job that will employ someone with a criminal record. Having many former criminals being impoverished also creates social tension between a city's economic classes by demonizing the poor. As Miller poignantly stated, “this new social arrangement blurs the lines between guilt and innocence, as well as what it means to be in or out of a jail or prison cell.” One mistake could leave your family a lifetime of

struggle and social ostracism. In this way, cities' decision to use incarceration to protect urban life often runs counter to their stated intentions of promoting safety and justice. Instead, it increases poverty and creates mistrust among communities and between city governments and dwellers.

This increase in poverty, as an effect of mass incarceration, can often have the effect of increasing crime rates rather than lowering them. Kostadis Papaioannou, the research head of the Department of Rural and Environmental History in London, investigated the relationship between poverty and crime in cities. His findings could be summarized by his quote, "Hunger makes a thief of any man." His data showed that poverty is the key and underlying cause of crimes involving theft or property. Now, when cities see this increase in crime, their instinct is to increase policing. Scholars Bruce Western and Christopher Muller break this down in their article about Mass Incarceration and Macrosociology, increasing the rate of incarceration in a city leads to lower employment rates, more single parent households, and, therefore, more poverty. Not only because it is difficult to get a job after being released from prison, but also because those imprisoned are taken out of society while their spouses are forced to stay home to parent their kids, the city's employment rate goes down as a result of incarceration. So, rather than solving the issue of inflated crime rates, increased incarceration only exacerbates the issue of poverty, leading to more people resorting to crime to stay afloat.

Western and Muller's study also touches on the issue of racism within the criminal justice system, and how inequality stemming from both poverty and racism combine to worsen the societal effects of incarceration. Having disproportionately more black victims of incarceration creates racial tensions in a similar manner to class tensions. And, as we have seen over the course of US history, both gentrification and the criminalization of black people already makes it more difficult for them to find jobs, housing, proper education, and stability. So, black people who are impoverished are extremely vulnerable to arrest and the negative effects of social stratification. Western and Muller found that,

"The inequalities of race and class combine to produce astonishing rates of penal confinement among black men with little schooling. Chances that a black man with no college education would serve time in prison were about 12% in the late 1970s, compared to 35% today."

Since more poor black men are being arrested compared to other demographics, increasing incarceration deepens the racial and economic divides in cities, creating a less healthy and more hostile urban environment.

In an assembly at my high school, the Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, Bryan Stevenson, spoke about his book *Just Mercy* and presented his theory about the US criminal justice system being an extension of slavery. He said that it was through slavery that we learned to fear and punish black people, and it was through the invention of a criminal justice system that we figured out how to do the same, post-emancipation. Stevenson explained that there can be no such thing as equal justice in a system that is created to target one specific race. And so, increasing incarceration does not protect a city from crime, it protects a city from black people. In his talk, he also mentioned how police brutality is further evidence of the system being created to punish black people. How can increasing policing make a city safer when the officers themselves are a threat? This raises the question of who the city is trying to protect. In his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson explains that, especially in southern cities and ones that have historical roots in racism, black people fear the police and so the white people fear the black people. When such cities increase incarceration, perhaps crime levels do not decrease because the system is

only targeting a fraction of the population. And, by doing so, they are also releasing crime statistics of the city that misrepresent the reality of the criminal activity distribution, furthering racial tensions. This might explain why southern states are doing little to nothing to address the decriminalization of drugs. Because the criminalization of drugs like marijuana has been used as a tool to attack the black community for decades. In his book about the history of marijuana, senior fellow in Governance Studies John Hudak said,

“U.S. government officials first painted cannabis as an insidious substance flowing across the border like immigrants from Mexico. Next, the government described cannabis as a drug for the inner city and for Blacks, while also lying about it leading to murder, rape, and insanity”

So, incarceration has always particularly targeted minority communities in U.S. cities, rather than crime in general.

Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative released an article that explains the problem with using incarceration to improve cities from a more general and economic perspective. It does so by describing the prison paradox, which is that, since 2000, the nationwide increase in incarceration accounted for nearly zero percent of the overall reduction in crime. The report concludes that,

“Policymakers can reduce crime without continuing to increase the social, cultural, and political costs of mass incarceration by investing in more effective and efficient crime reduction strategies that seek to engage the community, provide needed services to those who are criminally involved, and begin to address the underlying causes of crime.”

Incarceration eats away at cities’ money supplies giving them less to spend on strategies that could actually improve the cities and more effectively lower crime rates. But if incarceration is not the answer to the problem of crime, then what is?

Well, the article continues, saying that over the past twenty years, nineteen states have used crime prevention, alternative-to-incarceration, and community corrections approaches to successfully decrease both imprisonment and crime rates. These approaches more effectively improve public safety and are proven to do so at a fraction of the cost. For example,

“Place-based problem-oriented policing approaches that involve carefully analyzing crime and disorder in a small area and devising tailor-made solutions, from repairing fences and improving lighting to removing graffiti and nuisance abatement, have been shown to significantly reduce crime rates. [...] Law enforcement-led diversion programs that divert individuals at the point of arrest and prosecution-led diversion programs that divert individuals either pre-charge or defer prosecution post-charge have been shown to reduce future criminal activity of program participants.”

In addition to these strategies, several community corrections approaches provide services and supervision to convicted individuals to reduce criminal activity without the use of incarceration.

Some of the cities implementing these alternative strategies for crime reduction are Dallas, New York, Washington D.C., and Baltimore. A Dallas magazine article on the subject describes how the city is increasingly understanding that incarceration is ineffective in reducing crime, and they are resorting to alternatives like the non-profit “Youth Advocate Programs.” The programs also adopted a “violence interrupter” model in cities like Baltimore and Washington D.C., where “violence interrupters are hired from within certain neighborhoods to serve as ‘credible messengers’ who can defuse conflicts before they happen.” The Dallas city council approved a contract to bring these programs to the city, allocating \$800,000 a year from the

general fund to hire twelve violence interrupters to work in four of its neighborhoods. In a similar style, although more grounded in the goal of reducing incarceration for reasons of overcrowding, New York is attempting its own “Alternative to Incarceration,” or ATI, plans. The Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice released an article explaining the action they have taken, starting when Mayor de Blasio took office. At first, “the city funded ATI programs that diverted approximately 4,000 people from jail,” then, “in 2017, the City increased its investment in ATI programs to serve approximately 5,500 people, as well as to provide additional behavioral health services to ATI participants and housing resources for women enrolled in ATI programs” So, some of the country's biggest and most influential cities are now adopting alternatives to incarceration for more affordable and sustainable crime prevention.

The prison paradox, which is consistent with the Prison Policy Initiative’s data, reveals that increasing jailing rates does not reduce crime rates. As I have covered, the reasons why are vast, involving economics, systemic racism, and the ways we treat each other in our communities. Incarceration diminishes city money supplies, burning funds that could be allocated to more useful crime prevention strategies. City governments need to be more intentional and progressive. The history of the US criminal justice system is also a major root of the paradox. It was created to reimpose control over black Americans, and it continues to disproportionately target people of color. The system is not effective because it is inherently biased, so incarceration will not be an effective system of protection until the greater system it is within changes. That connects to the deep racial and economic divisions that are also caused by increased incarceration in cities. Such city tensions make it harder for those with a criminal record to get a job, exacerbating the issue of poverty in many cities and lowering employment rates. Since poverty can lead to more crime in cities, incarceration can even paradoxically raise crime rates. So, rather than increasing incarceration, to lower crime rates cities need to adopt new strategies that are less corrupt and invasive.

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