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The Faces of Crime: How Municipal Police Department Presence on Social Media Influences the Lives of Incarcerated Americans

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<u>The Faces of Crime:</u>
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This photographic exposé and the complimentary research was designed to highlight the impact of municipal police department presence on social media and the consequences it has on those who are featured on the pages. As social media became a centerpoint of social life, police departments sought to utilize social media in a way that uplifted the department; however, in doing so, incarcerated members of the community were simultaneously being publicly humiliated. Their mugshots and alleged charges were published onto the department social media pages, allowing their family and peers to comment and share freely. These individuals report difficulty finding a place of employment, issues in their family relationships, and significant depreciation in their self-worth after the publication. These individuals have been dubbed "the faces of crime".

police, social media, emotional impact of incarceration, police department social medias, life after incarceration, honors thesis
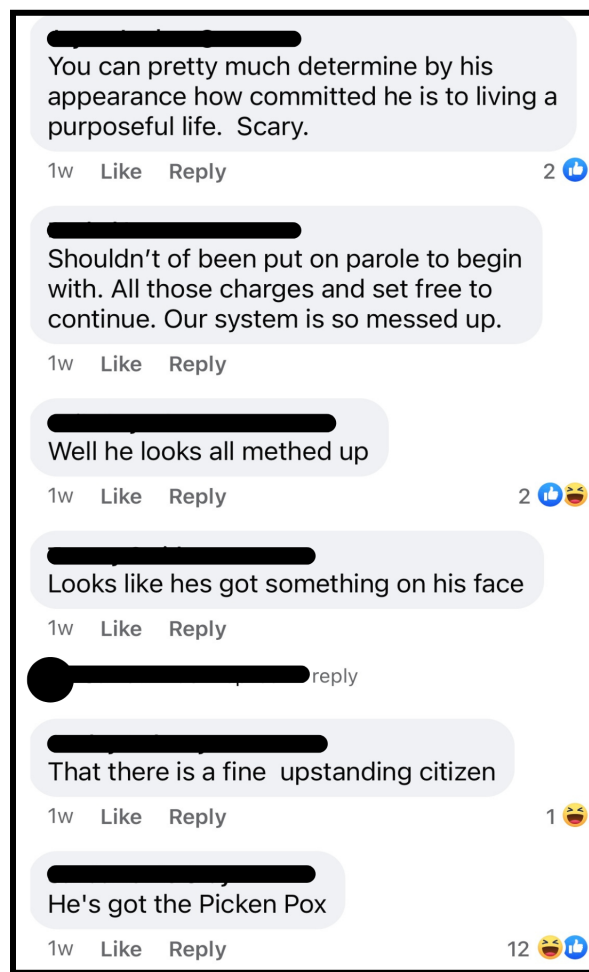
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Image #1 and Image #2 - Comments pulled from a public post made by a local police department. Names and faces have been removed for privacy purposes.

> The sheriff can put them in jail but how long will the courts keep them in there
>
> 1h   Like   Reply   2 👍❤️
>
> WELL DONE GREAT JOB SHERIFF ▆▆▆ ▆▆ AND THE ▆▆▆▆ SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT AND SHERIFFS OFFICERS KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK AND GOD BLESS YOU ALL
>
> 2h   Like   Reply   2 👍
>
> Good Job, funny how they all look alike. Nothing more makes my happy than to see these people put away and off the streets.
>
> 16m   Like   Reply
>
> Excellent news...
>
> 47m   Like   Reply
>
> Great job 💙💙💙
>
> 1h   Like   Reply   1 👍

> You can pretty much determine by his appearance how committed he is to living a purposeful life. Scary.
>
> 1w   Like   Reply   2 👍
>
> Shouldn't of been put on parole to begin with. All those charges and set free to continue. Our system is so messed up.
>
> 1w   Like   Reply
>
> Well he looks all methed up
>
> 1w   Like   Reply   2 👍😆
>
> Looks like hes got something on his face
>
> 1w   Like   Reply
>
> ⬤▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆ reply
>
> That there is a fine upstanding citizen
>
> 1w   Like   Reply   1 😆
>
> He's got the Picken Pox
>
> 1w   Like   Reply   12 😆👍

(Image #1 - September 2022)   (Image #2 - March 2023

Image #3 - Creative Project Jane Doe #1

Image #4 - Creative Project Jane Doe #2
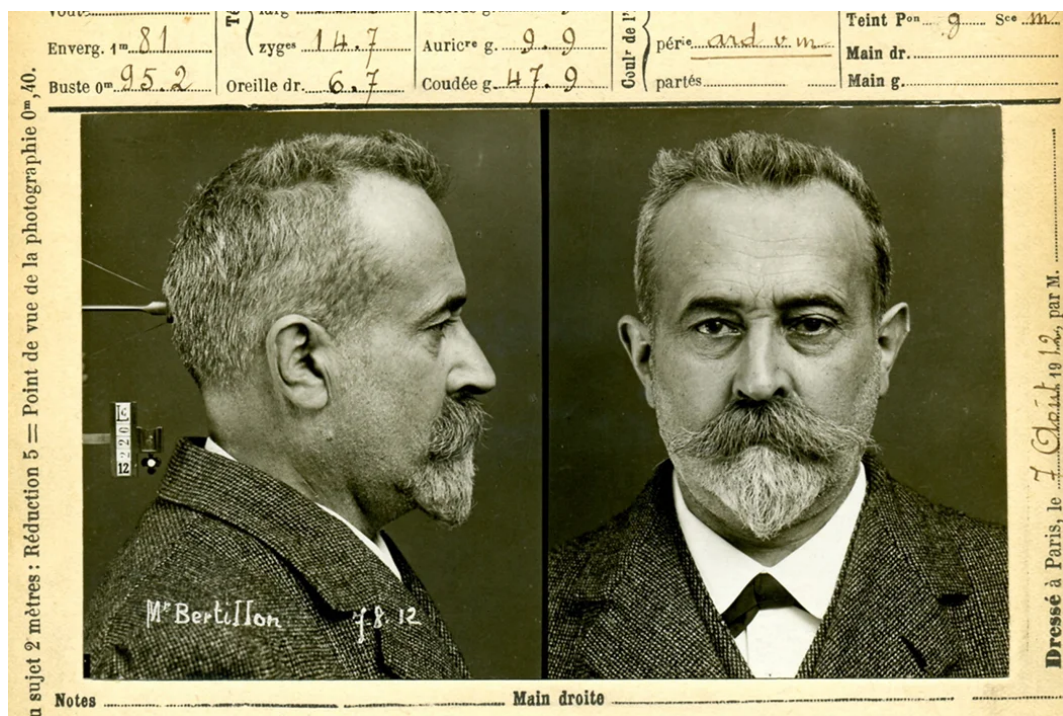
Image #5 - Creative Project John Doe #1

Image #6 - Creative Project John Doe #2
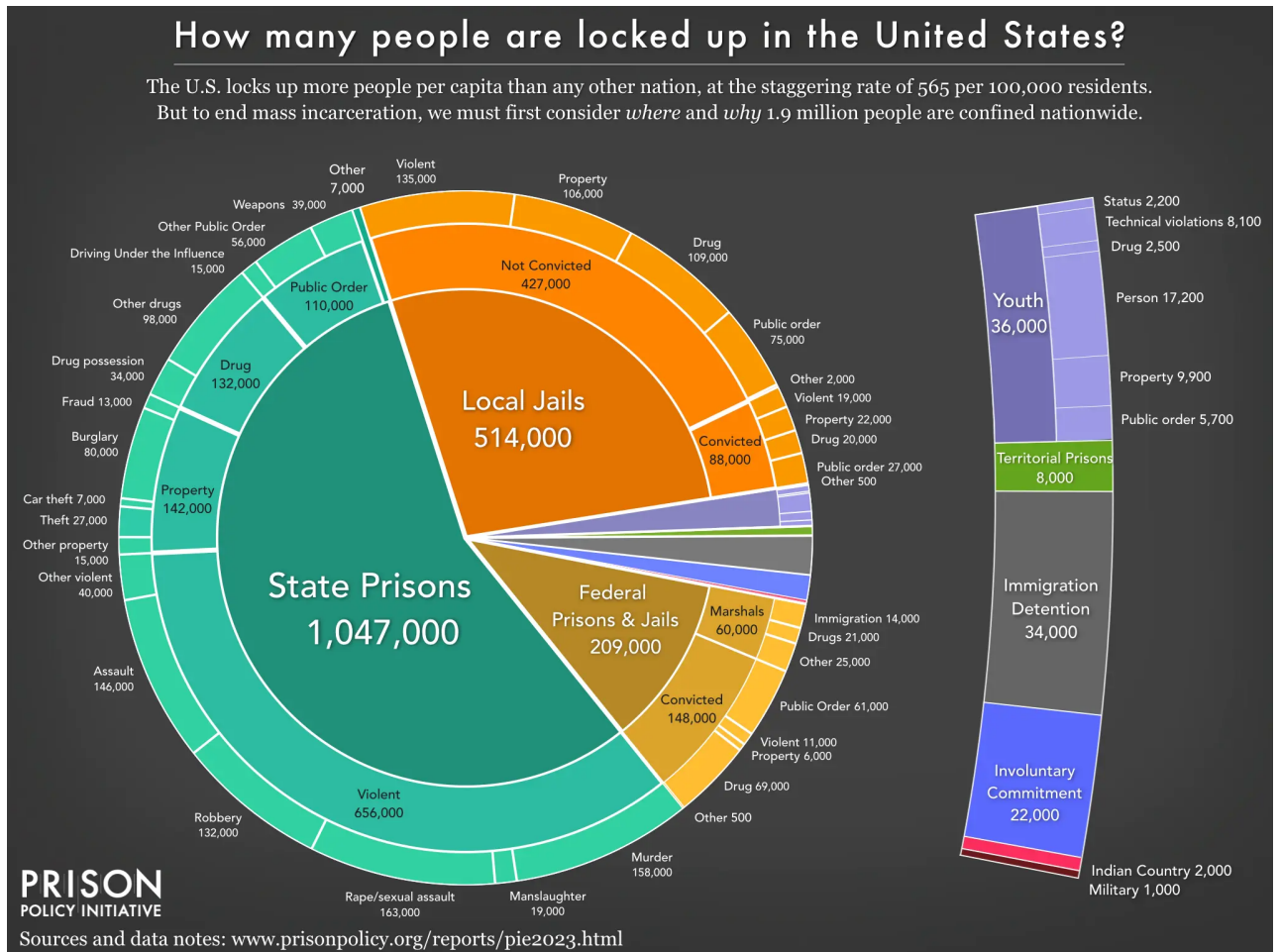
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How many people are locked up in the United States?

The U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other nation, at the staggering rate of 565 per 100,000 residents. But to end mass incarceration, we must first consider *where* and *why* 1.9 million people are confined nationwide.

PRISON
POLICY INITIATIVE

Sources and data notes: www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2023.html

Acknowledgments

There are several individuals to whom I owe a great thanks for aiding me in bringing my ideas to life within this project:

First, my mentor Dr. Judah Schept worked with me weekly to see that my ideas were being expressed to the fullest. Dr. Schept encouraged me, challenged me, and without his assistance, this project would not have been possible.

I would also like to recognize the Honors Program, most notably Dr. Dave Coleman, who worked with me through the beginnings and saw it through to the end. The Honors Program is what allowed me to take part in this project and gave me a voice. Also, Dr. Erik Lidell, who ensured that the presentation of this research was successful.

I would also like to thank my sister, Tara, who has proofread countless papers in my underground years and provided a helping hand no matter the situation.

Finally, I would like to thank my Mom, Charlotte. She worked tirelessly to provide for me so that I had everything I ever needed and wanted, despite being a single mom. She is the epitome of hard work, dedication, strength, and unconditional love. When asked what my dream is, I always said to become a lawyer; however, I have found that my biggest dream is to become someone like my mom, she is my hero.

Creative Process Statement

When this project was initially created, it was done so with the intent of being a traditional research project; however, overtime, it became clear that this project did not conform to the traditional format of research and would be a good candidate for a creative edge. It was because of this that I ultimately adapted the project to include both traditional research elements, as well as creative portions that exemplify the emotional capacity of the topic. I did so by contacting local previously-incarcerated individuals, attaining a photo-release from them, and photographing them in a way that allowed their face to remain hidden.

The photos are meant to encapsulate the feelings of isolation, anger, negative self-image, and hopelessness. Each photo represents a different individual in the present day, holding a cellphone that is swiped to their past mugshots, which were published to social media by local police departments. The cellphone, and therefore the mugshot, is hiding their face. This artistic choice was made to

represent how these individuals feel hopeless following the publication of their mugshots; moreover, the images convey how these individuals feel that they might never be able to create a life after the posting of their arrest. This feeling of hopelessness and negative self-image is exacerbated by the fact that their family, friends, and peers bear witness to their public shaming on social media. Comments can be made by any individual, as shown in Images #1 and #2.
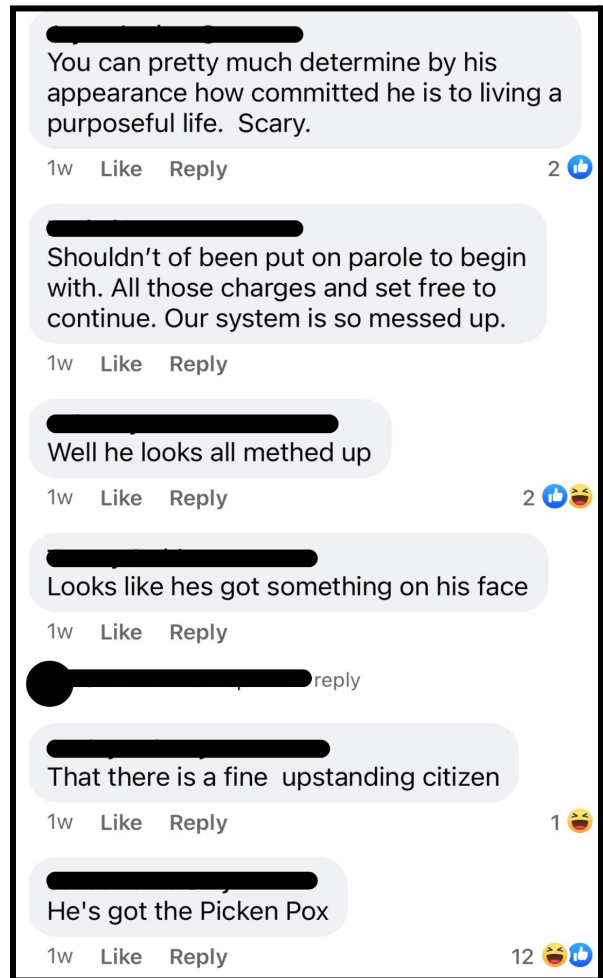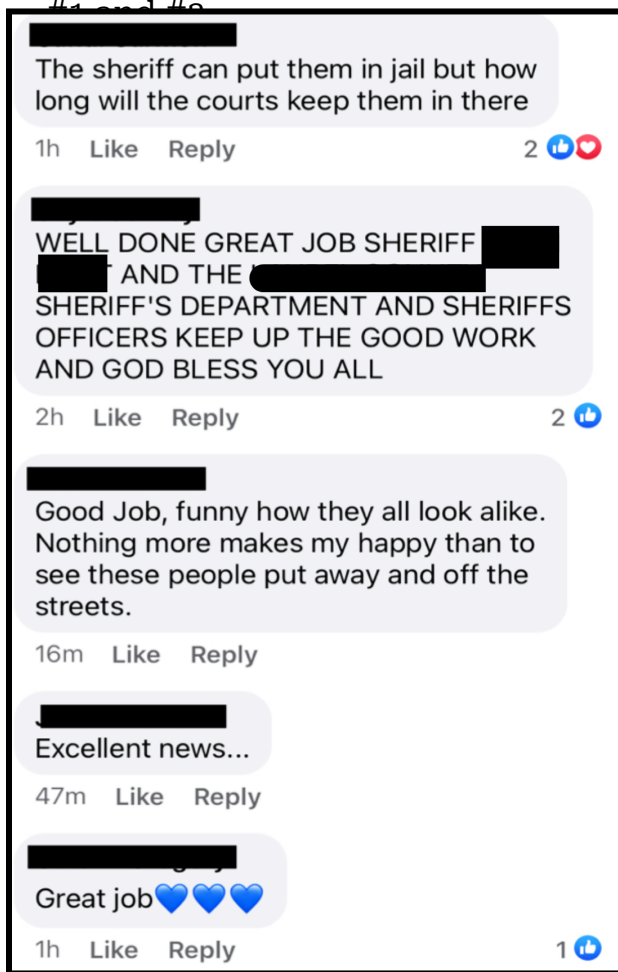

Image #1 and Image #2 - Comments pulled from a public post made by a local police department.

In response to these feelings expressed by the previously incarcerated individuals, I decided to explore these feelings through a photographic exposé. The photographs were specifically curated to showcase feelings of hopelessness and even loss-of-self. In order to do this, I compiled willing individuals to be the center of the portraits. I then gathered their previous mugshots, all of which had been publicly shared on the local police department's social media. I had the individuals hold their cellphones in a manner that covered their face. This was to represent the fact that they feel unseen; moreover, that all people see in them is their past mistake. As you can see in the photo to the right of Jane Doe #1 (image #6), the mugshots are also blurred. This is to signify that the person in that picture is no longer there, but it is how these individuals will be remembered on their social media pages. It also maintained privacy for the individual, which has become a centerpoint for this project. I continued this same pose and stature for every individual that

volunteered. I was able to keep the group small, with four total individuals, while also maintaining an acceptable amount of diversity with two females (referred to in this article as Jane Doe #1 and #2) and two males (referred to in this article as John Doe #1 and #2).

(Image #5 - John Doe #1)

(Image #6 - John Doe #2)

(Image #4 - Jane Doe #2)

After I completed the initial photographs, I still felt like the photographic exposé was missing something. I found that the posts on social media all had one thing in common: they attempted to put a face to the crimes that they were alleging. It was then that the idea of "the faces of crime" occurred to me. Who exactly is the face of crime? The "criminals"? The police? These questions faded into what seemed to be an answer. There is no one face that can represent crime, it is a number: 11,500,000. That is the estimated number of incarcerated individuals across the world. This mosaic (Image #7) features roughly 200 individuals who were featured on PD social media accounts across eastern Kentucky, which is only a drop in the bucket of those affected.

These are the faces of crime.

The Faces of Crime:

How Municipal Police Department Presence on Social Media

Influences the Lives of Incarcerated Americans

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Imagine you are scrolling on your social media page. You see the usual: a cute puppy, a new recipe, a news article, and then you see a post that causes you to stop scrolling. It's a high school friend, they're in a bright orange jumpsuit and they're plastered across the local sheriff's department page. The image is highlighted with a bright red arrest stamp, reminiscent of a scarlet letter. You see the same person you sat beside in algebra, in their worst moment. You open the post to find that the comments are humiliating. One person says they're ugly, another that they're thankful the streets are clean, as if your friend is a piece of trash to be hauled away to the dump. The post has been shared dozens of times, even their family has seen it by now. Then, you keep scrolling. Social media has grown tremendously in the last decade. Nearly everyone has a profile, even pets. With so much access, comes a plethora of new legal issues regarding privacy. This is especially true as police departments choose to utilize social media to publish arrests, instead of the local paper; however, unlike the local paper which you can trash every week, the posts on social media are

practically permanent. These posts can be shared and saved by any individual who sees them.

The usage of social media by municipal police departments can be a double edged sword. While the presence of the departments on social media can allow for better community connections with the department, they can also cause harmful consequences to the individuals who are posted and their families. Incarcerated Americans are faced with the challenge of rehabilitation, which for some can be extremely difficult due to the lack of confidence and feelings of self worth. The posting of the accused individuals will stay online forever and can be haunting for someone looking to better themselves. These individuals have been proven to struggle more when finding work upon release and are increasingly at risk for reincarceration. It can be argued that the value behind the community connections made through social media outweigh this issue, however the scarring impact of the posts made arguably create more distress for the community.

The concept of this thesis was derived from my local police department's social media page and their usage of posting mugshots in order to convey their inner department successes. These posts were developed for the agenda of both deterrence and to establish their department's "accomplishments" as they define them. I utilized

personal experiences with these publications on Facebook to develop a research question and then found correlating articles to both support and challenge my thesis question. This original idea has evolved with the sources that were chosen and now focuses on the implications of police department presence on social media. More specifically, this thesis asks how their positive intentions to create relationships with the community can actually further harm arrested and incarcerated individuals through the stigma and shame of having one's mugshot on social media. These issues can, and likely will, hurt the community in the long run due to mass incarceration caused by an overwhelming increase in the rate of reincarceration.

Origins of Mugshots in the United States

Mugshots can be traced back to as early as the 1800's in the United States and Eastern Kentucky counties (Infotracer). The processes of
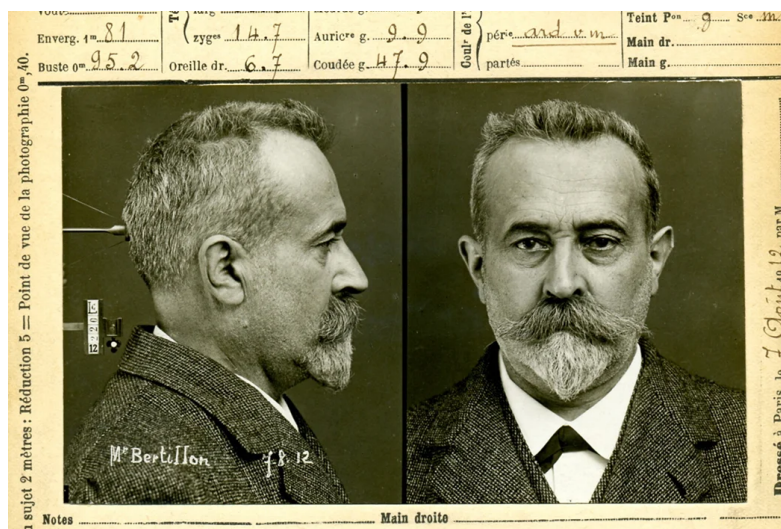
mugshots became standard following French law enforcement officer, Alphonse Bertillon. Officer Bertillon originated the "face the camera, turn to the side" model of mugshots (pictured above in image #8). In

1908, the New York City Police Department even issued a demonstration of how to capture and publish the photographs. These photographs even included images of officers holding down individuals to force them to stay still for the photos (Smith, 2018). These officers later went on to say that they recognized that the individuals did not want their image to be associated with the word "criminal" (Smith 2018). Originally, these mugshots were compiled in "mug books" to record the individuals so that witnesses and victims could identify the suspects. They were also utilized to identify individuals whom a judge has issued arrest for, in order to make the identification and arrest of the individual easier for officers. The process of the mugshots remains relatively the same: upon booking for an arrest, the individual's photo is taken and kept for record. It is, however, the purpose of the mugshot that has changed dramatically since. Mugshots have since been posted in local newspapers or, more recently, on social media. This is somewhat unusual given that "mug books" still exist in some way or form, meaning that mugshots are already accessible to the public. There are several reasons as to why police departments in Eastern Kentucky have decided to utilize social media as a form of mugshot publication. The most common reason being to build community relations and/or establish a sense of trust to the officers of the county. That being said, there are also negative personal, social, and legal implications to those being publicly shared.

Social Media and Community Relations

Municipal police department presence on social media has been proven to create stronger relationships within the community. It's necessary to understand the benefits of police department presence on social media before evaluating its effects on the community. In *Information Polity*, Huang and his colleagues offer the fact that 96.4% of agencies confirm their use of social media to pursue networking opportunities (Huang, 3). These departments all join and participate in social media for their respective reasons, but these can usually be grouped into two or three categories. Most police departments make an effort to be active on social media in an effort to draw connections with the community and/or to showcase their work within the community. In his literary work published to *Police Practice and Research*, Mayes (2020) argues that these police departments utilize social media as a way to humanize their officers and portray the crime-stopping efforts they demonstrate during their line of work. This is usually to establish a bond of trust between the community and the police department. Mayes also contends that social media offers a personal connection between members of the community and their policemen by offering a perspective of the line of work. This personal connection is essential to ensuring that the department's officers have the trust of their community. This also adds an element of respect for both the community and the officers involved. In small

towns, there are often already established connections between the community and the local police department. The act of utilizing social media is usually an attempt to, well, be social. By "friending" someone, you are initiating a positive connotation to your acquaintanceship. This is true, as well, as departments seek to draw connections between themselves and their community. Departments might utilize social media to establish a sense of friendship and community, which can positively impact their ability to perform their jobs. That being said, by utilizing social media anyone and everyone is able to comment or interact, meaning that not everyone will view these actions as acts of friendship. These posts can create divides between the departments and the accused who are posted, as well as their families. The way in which the posts are articulated create the idea that the department's actions are heroic, while the individuals are painted as criminals, or villains. The ideas of heroes and villains are initiated in early adolescence. This creates an almost involuntary response to root for the heroes, and therefore discourage the villains. By creating posts to seem as if it is heroes versus villains, the department will gain support; meanwhile, the individuals who are posted are villainized.

Similarly, Jeanis and their colleagues (2019) published a study that analyzed the posts made by the departments and what agenda these posts sought to achieve. There were several reasons as to why

the departments chose to publish the posts that were reviewed. Jeanis contends that police presence on social media helps with crime deterrence and community knowledge as their posts serve to inform the public. This fact relies solely on the types of posts that are being made. Huang's study correlates well with the idea that beneficial aspects of police departments rely on types of post and also argues that the frequency of posts contributes to this idea as well. Huang's sole argument contends that there is a prominence of implications of posting by police departments, depending on these factors of posting. The variation of these posts offered different effects on the viewers of the departments page, which resulted in a skewed data set on if the posts were effective at maintaining a community relationship.

<u>Consequences to Arrested Individuals</u>

Despite the beneficial factors of police presence on social media, there is a lot of evidence surrounding the idea that this presence can cause damage to the rehabilitation probability of the incarcerated Americans that are affected. In a study that held in-depth interviews with incarcerated Americans, Umamaheswar (2021) noted significant emotions that were conveyed by the inmates. Umamaaheswar contends that the prison setting generates negative emotions such as sadness, shame, humiliation, and anger. These emotions were demonstrated by nearly every individual present in the

study and were exacerbated during discussions regarding reintegration into society and family relations. His primary argument conveys that these emotions constitute an overlooked source of these men's social marginalization, which contributes to the inmates' struggle to rehabilitate back into society.

Inmates are already facing crime deterrence in the idea of prison alone, nevermind their situation being shared for the viewing pleasure of the public. The posts that exploit the individuals' situations, charges, and their mugshot can also contribute to more pronounced feelings of shame and humiliation. It is reminiscent of the days where men were publicly punished, either by stoning or hanging. Instead of just punishing the crime, the individuals are being publicly humiliated alongside their already detrimental punishments. Especially since these posts are made public to the community and will continue to have implications for the individuals for as long as they are up. This can be in several ways, such as when the inmates look to apply for a job upon release, their trials if the jury sees the posts, and their families.

<u>Impact on Family Relations</u>

One study dissected the issue of children with incarcerated parents. The author, Turney, claims that, "Early life course paternal incarceration facilitates chains of adversity that accumulate throughout early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence…"

(Turney, 2021). These chains of adversity can be lifelong, both for the incarcerated parent and the child. With the rise in young teens and children being present on social media, this also causes issues with what they see in regards to police department presence on social media. If they are to see their parents or loved ones posted across the web, this is likely to deteriorate their confidence both in the department and the incarcerated loved one. This ultimately contributes back to Umamaaheswar's study which argues the significant emotions of inmates, notably shame, humiliation, and likely anger in the situation that their loved one sees them in this state.
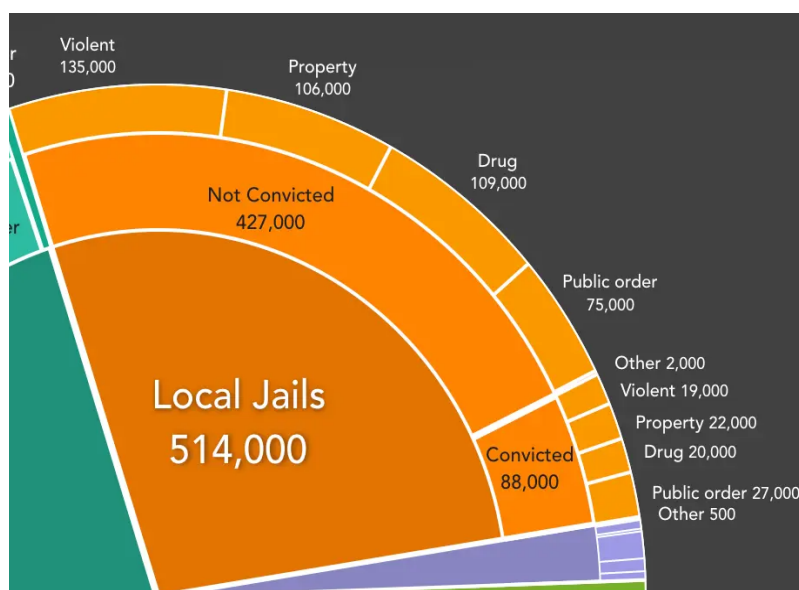
These posts often strain family relations on several fronts. Children of individuals who are arrested are already more likely to face issues with authority, have resentment to the parent, and also have emotional regulation issues. There are children as young as twelve years old who are present on social media, which gives them access to posts made publicly by police departments. This means that the child, or any family otherwise, would have a direct line of access to the posts made by the department and the comments made by the public. These posts will also be seen by the peers of the children, the spouse, the parents, and any other family members, which might create strain in their own line of work. It is not just the individual who

is posted that will suffer the consequences, but also the families of those individuals.

Legal Implications

It is important to point out that when the individuals are posted, they are not yet convicted. In fact, at any given time roughly 514,000 people are in local jails; yet, only 88,000 of those individuals are convicted (as shown below, in a section of Figure 1). More specifically, one Eastern Kentucky County has approximately 397 people in jail at any given time, with over 200 of these individuals awaiting pretrial (County Office). This is just over half of the total individuals inside the local county jail that have not yet been convicted of their crimes. This is not to say that these individuals will not ever be convicted, but that during the time the posts are created, they have not been. In fact, they may never be found guilty following their trial. It is the basis of our legal system that an individual is innocent until they are proven guilty, which is precisely why the posts

on social media are premature given the lack of a conviction. This could also unintentionally bias the jury in any case that involves such a trial. If members of the jury, meant to be made up of general peers, have access to the page of the local department and see a post of the person on trial, this could create a bias regarding if the individual on trial is in fact guilty or not.

Moreover, there is a risk local departments run by publishing the mugshots and the charges of individuals online: defamation. Defamation is any statement that may result in the damaging of a third party's reputation (Cornell University). Many local departments, however, tend to bypass this concern by ensuring to list crimes and charges as "alleged," therefore not directly accusing an individual of the crime. This fix unfortunately is not a cure all, as several individuals still face repercussions and consequences due to these posts even after being found not guilty or acquitted. Individuals may still suffer damage to their reputation even if the post does not directly imply that the individual is guilty. This can likely be due to the blind trust individuals place into online sources, especially sources that they deem as reliable, such as their local police department. There have even been reports of individuals being mistakenly put into incorrect posts. For example, a woman arrested for failing to pay a fine was mistakenly put into a post entitled "Oktoberfest, Drug Bust,'' which is a drastic mistake given the

implications of the latter charge. The post was unfortunately never taken down and the women's reputation both in her personal and work life had been damaged severely. This effect can also be prominent in cases where individuals are not yet given a guilty verdict or have yet to be convicted, which is more than 80% of individuals.

CONCLUSION

The overall implications on the criminal justice system regards both the ethicality and legality of police department presence on social media. When first developing the argument for this thesis, it was unclear how the positive attributes of their social media presence can contribute to community connections and trust. The usage of media as a form of exploitation, however, raises genuine concerns for the wellbeing of the incarcerated. The ultimate goal of incarceration is rehabilitation, which is the development of responses to the issues with the incarcerated individual to ensure they are ready to be placed back into society with better insights and opportunities than before. While the first amendment ensures that police departments have the right to write, post, and share their arrests, it can be argued that their actions are unethical. By exploiting these individuals in what could be their darkest moments, it makes it more difficult for them to create brighter futures. Their self-worth, confidence, and trust in the justice system suffers at the hands of those meant to protect and serve. If

departments continue to hinder the workings of rehabilitation for

inmates, reincarceration rates will likely rise, contributing to the

country-wide dilemma of mass incarceration.

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