

Crime Control In the Age of Mass Incarceration

By Bobby Bostic

Locking criminals up and throwing away the key will not solve the crime problem. Statistics show that although incarceration rates have increased, but crime continues to decrease. We do have a serious crime problem in this country that needs to be addressed. Crime presents a social harm that poses a threat to all elements of society. ("Deviant Behavior"). In this paper I point out the unfairness in which those in power address the crime epidemic. Street crimes are often heavily punished with stiff penalties. On the other hand white-collar crimes cause more social harm to society but they are often punished with minor penalties. ("Unraveling Bias in Arrest Decisions"). Such inequality in the criminal justice system is what leads to the current crisis of mass incarceration.

In order to solve crime we must address its root causes. Poverty is at the root cause of most street economic crimes. ("The Culture of Poverty"). It starts in childhood for those most affected by this. ("Effects of Poverty in Children"). These entire communities become "hollowed out". ("Expanding Coupled Shock Fronts of Urban Decay and Criminal Behavior: How U.S. Cities Are Becoming Hollowed Out"). Social ecologists have studied such neighborhoods and have linked the abject poverty to crime. ("Social Disorganization and Theories of Crime and Delinquency"). Thousands of studies have established a direct link between urban blight and crime. ("The Effects of Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Poverty Concentration on Homicide").

The government can help to reduce crime by providing more funds for social welfare programs. This has been a proven method to reduce crime. ("Reconsidering the Relationship Between Welfare Spending and Serious Crime"). Another aspect to this equation is how we address the so-called "War on Drugs". Addicts should be treated and not arrested. Being addicted to drugs is a public health issue and not a crime in of itself. Yet this is how the problem is currently being addressed in the criminal justice system. Drug courts are a good alternative to address public health problems linked to drug abuse.

Many crimes are drug related. "Drug courts provide an ideal setting to address these problems by linking the justice system with health services and drug treatment providers while easing the burden on the already overtaxed correctional system." ("Criminology: Theories, Patterns and Typologies").

The errors associated with the War on Drugs are endless. At the forefront are people of color being criminalized indiscriminately. Drug arrests make people ineligible for housing, education grants, and welfare benefits which only exacerbate the problem. This pushes drug users further into a life of crime. Billions of tax dollars are wasted in this fight. Treatment is the solution. Group therapy, outpatient programs, residential care, counseling, detoxification, mental health care, and other alternative sources of treatment must be integrated to address drug addiction. ("DrugFacts: Treatment Approaches for Drug Addiction").

Non-violent offenders need to be rehabilitated instead of merely being warehoused in prison. Probation/Parole violators should be placed in community correctional centers instead of being sent back to prison. The 1994 Crime Bill to address violent crime has proved ineffective as well. There needs to be a varied approach to reducing violent crime. Making first-time violent serve eighty-five percent of their sentences has not had a deterrent effect upon violent crime. ("Imprisonment and Crime: Can Both Be Reduced"). Even such measures as Three-Strikes-And-Your Out have not proven to have a deterrent effect upon crime. ("Proposition 8 and Crime Rates in California: The Case of the Disappearing Deterrent"). These violent offenders need rehabilitation also. Pell Grants need to be given back to prisoners as well. Statistics show that having a college education reduces a prisoner's recidivism rate to 65 percent.

The vast majority of prisoners will be released back out into society. Therefore it only makes sense that more money be put into rehabilitating prisoners. If we fail to do this we will only continue to add to the problem of mass incarceration. Furthermore mass incarceration creates its own set of problems. It costs vast sums of money to incarcerate people. States now spend more of their budget in prisons than they do on education. The United States has over 2.5 million people in prison. Forty percent of these prisoners are over the age of 50. These older prisoners have cost the government and tax payers billions of dollars on health care due to a harsh prison environment that triggers health

complications. A lot of these older prisoners no longer pose a threat to society because they aged out of crime. ("Crime and Human Nature"). The only way to really put a dent into mass incarceration is to allow some of our life sentenced prisoners to get a chance for parole one day if they prove themselves worthy of such. One out of ten prisoners is serving a sentence of life without parole or virtual life. ("Meaning of Life: Life Sentences in the United States"). Some of the tens of thousands of prisoners serving this harsh sentence deserve a second chance. For those who no longer pose a threat, it is only feasible for society to re-evaluate their harsh sentences. If we do this it will really help us to reduce the prison population. Geriatric prisoners who have aged out of crime pose no threat to society and therefore we waste billions of dollars warehousing such humans in prison. In turn once we release the above prisoners they can add to the tax base and help keep kids out of trouble as well as contribute to society in many ways with their life learned lessons in prison. Once we take these steps we can end the saga of mass incarceration. Ultimately, this will help us in all sectors of society.

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