Incarceration in America:

Where the Correctional System Fails in Maintaining Sustainable Communities and How It Can

Be More Effective

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Abstract

Throughout the last forty years, the American penal system has grown to possess the highest

incarceration rate in the world. Over two million people are currently imprisoned in institutions

across the United States. The prison culture within these institutions tends to breed criminals

rather than reform them resulting in the tendency for these criminals to reoffend after release.

High recidivism rates reflect the ineffectiveness of the penal system to reform criminals. As a

result of mass incarceration, American society has suffered on the community level to the

national level. This research paper will demonstrate the need for reform in the penal system

through current statistics and propose how the system can be made more effective through

examination of examples of reform programs that have been successful. The research will

provide a twofold solution to the problem with the penal system. First, sentencing policy change

is necessary to reduce the number of people incarcerated as well as the length of stays. Second,

sustainable reform programs need to implemented to help reform criminals to reenter society.

The findings of this research will provide insight into how to improve the criminal justice system

and, in return, promote safer communities.

Keywords: Penal system, mass incarceration, recidivism, reform

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With over two million people behind bars in America, the United States possesses the

highest incarceration rate in the world. Even though the United States has only about five percent

of the world's population, it contains roughly twenty five percent of the world's total prison

population (Brown & Patterson, 2016). The criminal justice system incarcerates about 690

people for every 100,000 people in America, a rate that is five times higher than any other nation

(Wagner & Walsh, 2016). Despite the belief that incarceration rates are directly related to crime

rates, crime has been on the decline for the last two decades, while imprisonment rates have

remained the same (Clear & Frost, 2015, p. 35). But if crime rates do not drive incarceration

rates, then what does?

Mass incarceration has its roots in the 1960s and early 1970s. Criminologists Todd Clear,

Michael Lynch, and Michael Jacobson agree that incarceration rates escalated because of big

prison policy that stemmed from ideas percolating in society that crime was a social problem and

the belief that punishment, particularly imprisonment, could change behavior as well as deter

crime. The "tough on crime" and "big prison" policies implemented in the 1970s and 1980s have

done little to reduce crime. These policies and mass incarceration have augmented crime and

have had negative implications for American communities and the society at large.

Although people are beginning to see the need for change in the penal system, the

reliance on mass incarceration continues to be a pressing issue that has come with a cost to

American communities. Prison culture has the tendency to create more violent offenders out of

non-violent offenders (Reid, 2015). Therefore, when inmates are released from prison back into their communities, they are more likely to offend again, and offend violently, as well as spread the culture cultivated in prisons to impressionable people in their communities. In urban minority areas characterized by high-incarceration, social matrices are disrupted tremendously. Juvenile delinquency, sexually transmitted diseases and poverty are higher in areas affected by high-incarceration rates because of the lack of men and the influence they have in their communities (Clear et al., 2015, p. 150). Mass incarceration poses many problems for communities and society as a whole. Without reform in the penal system, many communities will continue to remain unstable. Incarceration should no longer be the go-to for punishment, but rather rehabilitative programs that reform offenders. The American criminal justice system's reliance on mass incarceration has been detrimental to the stability of safe communities within the United States. The criminal justice system can help create more sustainable communities by implementing reforms that greatly reduce mass incarceration and introduce programs geared toward rehabilitation.

The History of Mass Incarceration in America

While crime has always been a part of American society, mass incarceration has not. The United States currently contains millions of people in the correctional system. Considering the total correctional population, the incarcerated portion, 2.2 million people, only make up one third, while the remainder of individuals in the correctional system (probation and parole) account for about 4.95 million people, equaling a total of 7.25 million people in the corrections system in America (Clear et al., 2015, p. 19). As criminologists Clear and Frost put it, "When the population under any form of correctional supervision (probation, parole, or prison/jail) is counted…one in every thirty adults across the United States [is] in prison or jail or on probation

and parole" (p. 19). To put this in perspective, in 1972, there were 196,092 people imprisoned in the United States (Lynch, 2007, p. 51). When we compare the 196,000-people incarcerated in 1972 to the 2.2 million people imprisoned today, these statistics are astounding, and it is necessary to look at the history of mass incarceration in America to understand where the justice system went wrong, how we got to this point, and how this broken system can be mended and made more effective.

Before the 1970s, the United States did not possess the rates of incarceration that it does now, nor was it the leader in incarceration rates worldwide. After 1972, the number of incarcerated people grew substantially every year until 2008, from 196,092 in 1972 to 2,307,500 in 2008 (Lynch, 2007, p. 51-52; U.S. Department of Justice, 2013, p. 3). Prior to the 1970s, incarceration rates remained relatively stable. What happened in the years to follow that caused such a rapid increase in the number of incarcerated people? It is nearly impossible to pinpoint one exact cause of mass incarceration in America. There were multiple factors that played into the upward spiral of incarceration rates. Among those factors were economic issues, social tension, politics and even an increase in crime. It is important to note however, that crime waves are normal to any society. A main factor for the change was the magnified social concerns of the public and politics' reaction to those concerns. Social and political attitudes toward crime began to change in the period following World War Two through the 1960s. Attitudes shifted from seeing crime and crime waves as a normal part of society with levels of crime and imprisonment as self-regulating and stable to seeing crime as an alarming, growing social problem that needed intervention (Esperian, 2010 p. 319; Clear et al., 2015, p. 57, 61).

The time following World War Two throughout the 1960s was affected by social strife and racial tensions. As World War Two ended, many people immigrated into the United States

and many veterans returned home from war. The integration of new, different races into

American society increased racial tension and violence between minority populations and whites

(National Research Council, 2014, p. 107). With the rise of civil rights movements and U.S.

involvement in the Vietnam war, violence increased as well. Especially from the 1960s to 1970s,

crime increased as a result of social and racial tensions. Whites who opposed civil rights

increasingly wanted more attention to be brought to the governmental and political scenes about

the increasing crime (NRC, 2014, p. 107). Some politicians began to rally for more police

involvement and solutions to the unrest and violence, while President Lyndon Johnson called for

solutions to his believed root cause of crime, poverty and inequality (NRC, 2014, p. 109: Clear et

al, 2015, p. 53). His "War on Poverty" and "War on Crime" were closely related. He believed

that crime came out of poverty and that more social programs of welfare and education would

help reduce crime by bringing more people out of poverty (Clear et al., 2015, p. 53).

As crime increased from the 1960s to the 1970s, public concern about crime continued to

increase. This rising public concern was convenient for political platforms. Politicians appealed

to the fears of whites about the growing crime. Many began to criticize Johnson's social

programs, saying that they had been too lenient on crime and a deterrent for crime was needed to

reduce crime. The idea that criminals needed to be incarcerated as a deterrent factor soon

overrode the idea of rehabilitation programs (Clear et al., 2015, p. 58). Even after crime rates

went down, this "tough on crime" agenda continued to exist. In the 1970s, as Clear and Frost call

it, the "punishment imperative" began to take hold (p. 65). The response to just about any crime

was imprisonment. Throughout the following decades, this incarceration agenda prevailed. Even

in time periods where crime rates were low, incarceration rates still increased (Clear et al., 2015,

p. 35). Although the relationship between incarceration and crime is complex, evidence shows

that incarceration has very little to do with decreasing crime (King, Maurer & Young, 2016). Other researchers like Melanie Reid find that incarceration even plays a role in maintaining crime (Reid, 2015).

Policies That Exacerbate Mass Incarceration

The "tough on crime" ideology that has prevailed over the last forty years called for detrimental policies that have only made mass incarceration worse and reduced the possibility of rehabilitation. Policies increasing the harshness of sentences for nonviolent drug crimes, likelihood of sentencing and lengths of stays for criminals as well as the Three Strikes law and Truth in Sentencing law took power away from the judge to personalize sentences for each individual convicted of a crime, otherwise known as "indeterminate sentencing" (NRC, 2014, p. 71). Indeterminate sentencing meant that the judge could take certain factors and circumstances into consideration in each individual case when determining what punishment would be handed down. Along with the belief that punishment needed to be stronger to deter crime, indeterminate sentencing began to be chastised by voices in the criminal justice system, believing that it was too lenient, resulting in a shift to determinate sentencing (Clear et al. 2015, p. 77). Determinate sentencing meant that a judge followed guidelines for certain crimes and a narrower sentence would be given that does not allow for much individualization. The implications for determinate sentencing meant that more people were sent to prison.

The Truth in sentencing Laws are responsible for the longer stays of inmates in prisons, by decreasing the possibility for early release even if the inmate shows good behavior. These laws require that the offender would serve at least eighty-five percent of his sentence before being considered for release adding to the number of people in prison longer (Clear et al., 2015, p. 87). For example, in the federal prison system, the average length of stays in 1988 was about

18 months, and in 2012 the average length of stays was about 37.5 months (Pew Charitable

Trusts, 2015).

The Three Strikes law targets recidivist offenders. The laws entail that an offender who

has been convicted of two crimes and a felony crime would receive a harsher sentence, typically

25 years to life (Clear et al., 2015, p. 88). This type of law greatly takes away the judges'

discernment, which can be unfair to the offender depending on the degrees of their crimes.

These additions to criminal justice policy are just a more prominent few of the many

policies put into law that amplified mass incarceration. The policies increase the incarcerated

population by increasing the total amount of time people are in prison and increasing the number

of people in prison. The policies stemmed from the ideas that crime needed to have harsher

penalties and a shift away from rehabilitation in punitive programs. Committing so many people

to prison and for long periods of time is damaging to communities within and without of prisons,

especially when the culture in prisons is criminal rather than rehabilitative.

Detriments of Prison Culture

When nonviolent offenders are locked up for substantial periods of time with violent

criminals, it can create more violent offenders out of the nonviolent offenders (Clear et al., 2015,

p. 10). This poses a great problem when these offenders return back to the community. The

culture harbored in prisons does not potentiate reform in criminals. Prisons are overcrowded and

prisoners enter into unhealthy atmospheres where there is little opportunity for rehabilitation

through education or jobs (Western, 2014). Making the environment more unstable and unsafe,

prisons often hold more people with psychiatric disorders than do psychiatric institutions

(Torrey, Kennard, Eslinger, Lamb & Pavle, 2010, p. 6). Prison culture is detrimental to inmates

on various dimensions such as the physical, mental and emotional. There are different kinds of

people in prison. There are dangerous offenders who have committed severe crimes, for which

prison is necessary to keep them away from the public. Some inmates have committed less

severe or non-violent crimes, and this group can be divided further into two groups: those who

have internal motivation to reform as well as external motivation and support and those who do

not have the internal motivation or may not even know how to gain that motivation as well as no

external support or encouragement to reform from family, friends or any positive influence from

their community. According to Melanie Reid, professor of law and criminal justice at Lincoln

Memorial University, those without motivation and support are the most impressionable for

prison culture during their prison stay, which is more often than not criminogenic and damaging

rather than reformative (Reid, 2015).

      Reid states in her research that "prisons are breeding grounds for criminals" (Reid, 2015).

In prison, the inmates from different backgrounds and criminal histories are able to talk and even

brag about the crimes they have committed and crimes they plan to commit. Impressionable

inmates hear what these older criminals have to say and take this on as their way of life in prison

because it is the best and easiest way for them to be protected from the violence within prisons.

This is harmful; once the inmate leaves prison, unreformed, he brings this new culture into his

community, with the high chance of reoffending. The effects of prison culture can be summed up

by former federal prison inmate, Bernard Kerik:

> Grown men sit around…talking about old times, drugs, guns… Then you have young,
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> nonviolent, low-level drug offenders who are sentenced to five to ten years and wind up
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> in here in the same camp with the older prisoners… This is a terrible circumstance for
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> these younger men. Some of them have graduated from high school, a few attended
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> college, but many are uneducated, some completely illiterate… However, once they

arrive here and mix into their new surroundings and the fear of prison dissipates, they

begin their new education with the older, institutionalized inmates as their teachers. They

learn how to lie, cheat, steal, con, manipulate and gamble… Many of them seem to have

no respect for the privacy of others… minor disagreements often result in threats of

violence. Here they learn more about drug trade than they did on the outside, and they

make all the contacts they need to further themselves in criminal activity once back on

the street. Over time, their surroundings begin to demoralize and demean them, and they

lose respect, discipline, and responsibility. (Reid, 2015).

The inmates do not learn how to live, behave, and be productive in their communities, but rather

they learn how *not* to live. Once these inmates are released from prison, they return back to their

communities worse than when they entered prison. Imprisonment is an optimal solution for

getting heinous criminals out of communities to protect public safety, but it should not be the

solution for every person convicted of a crime. By imprisoning all types of offenders together,

the public is made less safe. Many people who are released from prison end up reoffending and

back in prison. The Bureau of Justice Statistics performed a recidivism study that followed

404,638 prisoners released in 2005. They found that after a three-year period, 67.8 percent

reoffended, and after a five-year period 76.6 percent reoffended. Of the percentages that did

reoffend, 56.6 percent reoffended in the first-year post-release (U.S. DOJ, 2014).   Prison tends

to create people who are unstable for society creating unsustainable communities of crime and

poverty.

Mass Incarceration's Effects on Communities

Communities have greatly suffered at the hands of mass incarceration, especially urban

minority communities. The concentration of incarceration is unequally distributed. African

Americans are seven times more likely to be incarcerated than whites (Clear, 2008, p. 102). Once

people have a prison record they are hindered from successful reintegration by collateral

consequences, or laws and rules that make it difficult for them to find housing and employment,

because of the stigma that come along with a criminal record (Morenoff & Harding, 2014, p. 3).

If ex-convicts have difficulty finding housing and a job they are more likely to commit crimes in

order to provide for their families, creating a more unsafe environment in the communities.

Incarceration harms communities by disrupting the social matrices within the

communities. As working-age men are taken out of the community, communities become

impoverished because of the lack of men in the labor market (Clear, 2008, p. 106). The cycle of

men being imprisoned, reentering society, reverting to criminal activity to get by and being re-

incarcerated only keeps communities in poverty.

Intergenerational incarceration is a consequence for urban communities as well. Nearly

three fourths of African American men who are incarcerated have children (Clear, 2008, p. 105).

As fathers are taken out of the community, the family structure that is necessary for child social

and emotional development is disrupted. Children suffer from a lack of parental guidance and

support and are about four times more likely to be involved in criminal activity and incarcerated

themselves (Clear, 2008, p. 110).

Incarceration can even make communities more unsafe. Although one theory argues that

public safety is increased through incarceration by locking up criminals and deterring people

from crime, evidence has shown otherwise (Moenoff et al., 2014 p. 5). As noted earlier, prison

culture damages any rehabilitative effort of prison to reform criminals (Jacobsen, 2005, p. 51).

When prisoners are released, they tend to offend and more violently than before. Collateral

consequences keep these individuals from acquiring jobs and providing for themselves and their

families, leaving them to resort to criminal activity in drug dealing and robbery to get by. In a study conducted by Todd Clear, the Tallahassee coercive mobility model, results showed that higher rates of prisoner reentry into communities increased crime and, at a certain threshold, when a certain number of people in the community were admitted to prison, crime also increased (Clear, 2008, p. 119).

America's system of incarceration has prevailed for far too long. Although it would take years to reverse the effects of over forty years of mass incarceration, communities are suffering, and reforms need to be implemented in the criminal justice system beginning in prison reform to help alleviate some of the detrimental effects of incarceration on communities.

Reform in the Penal System

The American prison system has issues that tend to make communities more unstable because of the atmosphere within prisons and the policies that incarcerate a mass number of offenders. Steps need to be taken to transform the system into such that will reduce the negative effects on communities and create a more rehabilitative, punitive reform system for criminals.

The first focus for reforming the penal system is to reduce the prison population by doing away with policy that drives mass incarceration and implementing alternatives to imprisonment. Although reducing the prison population may increase anxiety about creating chaos and making the public less safe, research shows otherwise. Over a three-year period of research, Dr. James Austin, Lauren-Brooke Eisen with James Cullen and Jonathan Frank, from the Brennan Center for Justice, produced a study that showed that 39 percent of people imprisoned in federal and state institutions are incarcerated without a public safety reason (Austin, Eisen, Cullen & Frank, 2016, p. 23). These are people who do not need to be serving time in prison at all or at the length of time that they are. The research also shows that 25 percent of low-level offenders, mainly drug

offenders, typically sentenced for a longer than one year stay, could better benefit from

alternatives to prison such as community service, probation and treatment (Austin et al., 2016, p.

23).

Alternatives to incarceration for lower level crimes are necessary to reduce mass

incarceration and the detrimental effects on communities. If reforms are implemented,

specifically reforms that eliminated incarceration for the 39 percent imprisoned with no reason

for public safety, 20 billion dollars could be saved per year (Austin et al., 2016, p. 7). For

example, drug offenses are low level offenses. Imprisonment for drug offenders will do little to

help them versus an alternative to imprisonment (Cullen, 2016). The drug offender who has an

addiction would better benefit from treatment and rehabilitation, instead of sitting in prison for a

period of time, suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Upon release the offender would be more

likely to go back to drug usage because he had no treatment and counselling to help properly

deal with the addiction. Other low-level crimes include minor theft and burglary, basic or simple

assault, basic fraud or forgery. Austin et al offer that alternatives such as "community service,

electronic monitoring, probation, restitution, [and] treatment" should be the punishment for these

offenders rather than imprisonment (Austin et al., 2016, p. 9). In these situations, the judges

presiding over the cases should use their own discretion in determining certain circumstances

and conditions of the crime such as the severity or repetition of crime.

Along with reducing the scope of crimes that can be punished by prison, the justice

system needs to reduce or even do away with mandatory minimum sentences. Mandatory

sentences have increased mass incarceration by increasing the time that prisoners are

incarcerated, as well as increasing the number of people that go to prison. Mandatory minimum

sentences hinder judges from using their full discretion in individual cases. Although mandatory

sentences were put into law to be fair in every case of the same type of crime, they have proven

to be unfair. These laws provide for very little discretion and consideration of the background of

the offender, circumstances of crime, and history of criminal behavior (Clear et al., 2015, p.165).

Todd Clear and Natasha Frost point out that one way in which mandatory sentences are unfair is

that judges and officials involved in the cases know that these sentences are harsh, and because

of that, they attempt to get around the law and provide a more fitting sentence (p.165). This

would cause officials in some cases to strictly follow the law, giving some offenders committing

the same crime as someone else a much harsher sentence, while in some cases, the bypassing of

the law by officials could give someone a much lesser sentence for the same crime, creating

unfairness. Repealing mandatory sentences would put most of the discretion and judgement back

into the judges control to consider individual differences in each case to create the most effective

and fair sentence for the offender.

　　　　Congruent with the idea of repealing mandatory sentences is reducing the lengths of stays

for prisoners, targeting the Truth in Sentencing laws, which require that offenders must serve

about 85 percent of their sentence before being eligible for parole and early release. Austin et al

suggests in their research report the following:

　　　　We recommend that legislators consider a 25 percent cut [in the sentence length] as a

　　　　starting point to determine how to reduce sentences for the six major crimes that make up

　　　　the bulk of the current prison population: aggravated assault, murder, nonviolent weapons

　　　　offense, robbery, serious burglary, and serious drug trafficking. Sentences would be

　　　　shorter, but still substantial (Austin et al., 2016 p. 10).

This cut in sentence length that they recommend would still require the offender to serve a large

portion of time for the crime that they committed, because they will be released at some point

and keeping them in there longer will only increase mass incarceration along with cost. By

following their plan of a 25 percent reduction, 6.6 billion dollars could be saved and used

towards reform programs in prisons and communities (Austin et al., 2016, p. 38).

Another aspect of prison reform would be to change the nature of prisons and create a

rehabilitative environment in which inmates could learn skills that help them when they are

released into their communities. Recidivism is a prime indicator in determining how effective the

penal system is at reforming offenders. With high recidivism rates in the American prison

system, we can see that the current system is flawed. Punishment by itself does not succeed in

reforming criminals, but rather it maintains recidivism. Rehabilitative programs are necessary for

reforming offenders. An avenue that would help accomplish rehabilitation is through correctional

education, which provides for education for life skills, basic education, secondary education, and

even post-secondary education.

U.S. prisons house the highest illiterate population in the country, with about sixty

percent of inmates unable to read above a sixth-grade level (Esperian, 2010, p. 320). In some

cases, the undereducation of those who go to prison is a reason for their inability to find

employment, resulting in their criminal activity. If we really want to see rehabilitation in

criminals who enter the penal system, offenders need to be educated, so that when they return to

their communities, they come back better off than when they entered prison. An effective

solution to reforming these offenders is to provide them with educational opportunities. Research

conducted by the RAND Corporation shows that inmates who took part in correctional education

had a forty three percent lower chance of recidivating than those who did not take part in

correctional education (Davis et al., 2014, p. 39). The opportunity for inmates to acquire a degree

or diploma equivalent can help them reintegrate into their communities upon release, by giving

them the chance to turn from criminal activity as a means to provide for themselves and their families.

More Sustainable Communities

Reform in the penal system can play a part in creating more sustainable communities. Reforming penal policies, such as mandatory sentencing laws and Truth in Sentencing laws, that keep offenders in prison for long periods of time, would decrease the amount of time that prisoners are incarcerated. Along with this, reform in correctional policy that uses incarceration as a primary punishment, replacing it with alternatives to prison, especially for nonviolent offenders, would greatly reduce the number of people in prison. Implications for reforms reducing the number of people sentenced to prison as well as reducing the lengths of stays for offenders would decrease the number of people removed from communities, and decrease spending in prisons. Providing that this would decrease the number of people in prison, more offenders would remain in communities. Although reducing the prison population plays a major part in helping urban communities, reform cannot stop here, or else offenders would remain in communities in unhealthy circumstances with no outlets for rehabilitation or opportunities to improve their lives (National Research Council, 2014, p. 351). Money saved from the reduced spending in prisons, because of fewer inmates, could be used toward community investments in the social services to help improve life within communities, making it more sustainable.

The money that would be saved through decreasing the prison population could better be used on community investment in urban areas. On average, it costs 31,000 dollars a year to house one inmate (Austin et al., 2016, p. 44). As mentioned previously, the research conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice found that 39 percent of federal prisoners are non-violent offenders, incarcerated without a public safety reason (Austin et al., 2016, p. 7). If reforms were

made that would do away with imprisonment for this 39 percent of nonviolent offenders, 20

billion dollars could be saved annually and redirected toward community services in urban areas

(Austin et al., 2016, p. 7).

In order to make communities affected by heavy reliance on incarceration more stable,

social services and community investment is necessary to help vitalize areas marked by poverty.

Investment in community programs can help create sustainable community life by giving people

opportunities to reduce reliance on crime and become educated and increase their social

mobility. Employment is a key factor in preventing ex-criminals from reoffending (Chamberlain,

2011). Implementing programs in communities that provide education to obtain employment and

advancement would be extremely beneficial. Education is an avenue for growth, and programs

should be introduced into underprivileged communities to help improve poor conditions. On top

of that, affordable housing and adequate drug and mental health services are necessary to provide

rehabilitation for people affected by unhealthy conditions that are characteristic of poorer

communities (National Research Council, 2014, p. 352). Instead of focusing on being tough on

crime, the American correctional system can help foster improvement in society, especially in

poor urban communities, by directing its attention toward community investment through

rehabilitative programs and social services that allow members of those communities to have

opportunities grow.

Conclusion

The American criminal justice system's reliance on mass incarceration has caused many

detrimental consequences to the stability of urban communities in the United States. The

criminal justice system can help make communities more sustainable by implementing reforms

into prisons and communities that greatly reduce mass incarceration and introduce programs

focusing on rehabilitation, versus punishment alone. Over the past forty years, the prison system

in the United States has grown to possess twenty-five percent of the world's prison population,

while comprising only five percent of the world's total population. (Brown & Patterson, 2016).

This out-of-control spiral toward mass incarceration came about during a time of increased

social, political, racial tension, and crime. Crime began to be viewed as something that could

only be deterred by strict punishment rather than rehabilitation. This ideology led to the "tough

on crime" initiative, where the creation of strict policies governing sentencing laws made it

possible for more offenders to be sentenced to prison, and for longer periods than had been seen

in previous decades. The United States prison system experienced rapid growth in a short time

that has had detrimental implications for communities.

Incarcerating more people for longer time periods with less focus on rehabilitation allows

for the cultivation of criminals within prison. The culture in prisons is more criminogenic and

damaging in nature, rather than rehabilitative, mostly affecting non-violent offenders. More often

than not, prison culture succeeds in creating more violent criminals out of non-violent criminals,

causing offenders to be released back into their communities worse than how they entered. Many

offenders, once released from prison, will even re-offend and recidivate within a few years. This

is harmful in that it spreads criminogenic behavior throughout communities. Mass incarceration

has done much to exacerbate poverty and poor conditions in urban communities. Reform in the

correctional system is necessary to help improve communities damaged by high concentrations

of incarceration.

First, reforms in sentencing laws are necessary to decrease the number of people who are

incarcerated. This would include laws that implement incarceration as the go-to punishment and

laws that keep people in prison for long sentences. These reforms would work to decrease

spending in prisons, on inmates, and allow for more money to be redirected toward correctional education and community investment. What poor communities need most is access to affordable housing, treatment and jobs. Educational programs are important to help ex-offenders acquire skills and knowledge to become employable. Education is a pathway that can allow people to improve their circumstances and break their reliance on crime to provide. An emphasis on rehabilitation, advancement, and support for individuals, rather than an emphasis on punishment alone, can help to create a more sustainable environment within communities, by helping people to improve their circumstances, as well as the conditions within their communities.

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