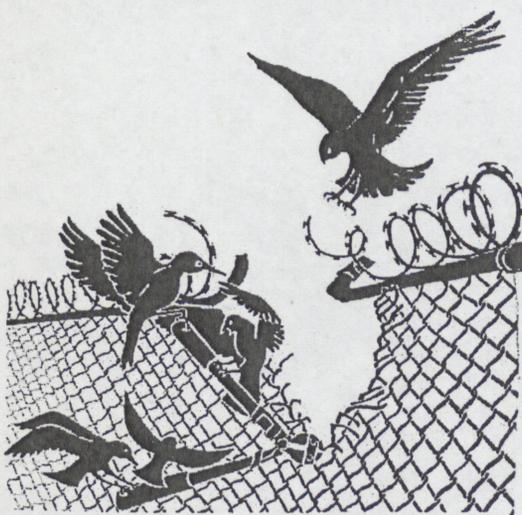




The Ugly Truth About Prisons and Our Society

Tiny - Posted on 04 April 2016

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Imprisonment is usually justified by appeals to one of two philosophies: protecting the public or rehabilitating the prisoners. By either standard, however, the evidence is overwhelming that prisons do not work. In fact, if one had systematically and diabolically tried to create mental illness, one could probably have constructed no better system than the American prison system.

In this context, the image of the 'bleeding-heart liberal'— that universal object of scorn—is one that deserves particular scrutiny. Implicit in

this characterization is an assumption that public safety and social justice are somehow at odds— that policies which protect the civil rights of prisoners or challenge racism/white supremacy in the prison systems cannot really be effective in stopping crime.

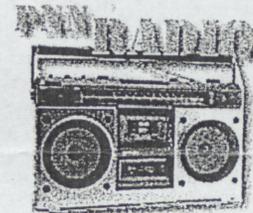
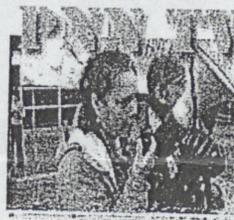
A far more compelling case can be made that social justice is a requirement for public safety. Racism and economic bias are structural features of the U.S. prison system. Understanding this relationship can yield important insights into why that system functions so poorly to protect the public.

At present, the United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the industrialized world. Nonetheless, crime continues to plague our society to a degree unknown in other countries— which do not come close to America's rate of imprisonment.

Studies have shown that more than 90% of the adult population has committed offenses that are punishable by imprisonment. Few, however, actually go to prison.

Contrary to popular belief, the seriousness of a crime is not the most crucial element in predicting who goes to prison and who does not. Society's losses from 'white-collar-crime' far exceed the economic impact of all burglaries, larcenies, and auto-thefts combined. Nonetheless the former class of criminals is far less likely to go to jail or prison than the latter.

What does determine who goes to prison? A large part of the answer is certainly race. Black men born in America and fortunate enough to live past the age of twenty are psychosocially conditioned to accept the inevitability of being sent to a so-called "correctional facility". For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase of profound humiliations. Nationwide, the rate of imprisonment for African-Americans is nine times that of European-Americans. In ten states, all in the north, the incarceration rate for African-Americans is more than fifteen times that for whites. Another striking indicator of institutional racism is the lengths of prison terms. When time served is compared for similar offenses— including first-time offenders— African-Americans serve far longer sentences than whites.



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The discussion above is not intended to minimize the seriousness of crime, whether violent or not. The point is rather that swelling the prison population has failed to reduce crime. The racial and economic bias built into the prison system also works against crime victims. Poor people and people of color are also the most frequent victims of crime, and they stand to suffer the most from repressive policies that fail to stop, and in many cases fuel, criminal activities.

Prisons illustrate how racial and economic discrimination reinforce one another. As noted above, prison inmates are drawn from the ranks of the economically marginalized of all races. As an institution however, prisons have a far greater impact on communities of color, because of their disproportionate representation in prison populations.

The social policies of the 1980s and 1990s up until now have caused an unprecedented increase in the numbers of people living in poverty in the United States, as well as a widening gap between the incomes and living standards of the rich and poor. Throughout this entire period, prison populations grew rapidly. With budgets slashed for every type of social service, prisons now stand out as the country's principal government program for the poor.

If you go back in history and plot the population of all prisons and compare it to all the other variables you can think of, you will find a positive correlation only with unemployment; the higher the rate of joblessness, the higher the rate of prison commitments. It doesn't take a PhD in economics or criminology to see the patterns.

Ironically, in many cases prisons have been touted as a solution to economic decline, especially in rural areas like Crescent City, California the location for super-max prison Pelican Bay. Prisons, filled with unemployed people of color, along with poor whites, from the inner cities, are being sold to economically depressed rural communities as a source of jobs for their growing numbers of unemployed who are usually poor whites. Again, with local and national 'leaders' often see a potential state or federal prison as a recession-proof economic base. In fact, prisons are more than recession-proof economic base. In fact, prisons are more than "recession-proof": they are the one industry next to war that greatly benefits from recession. Actually, in many cases the two industries overlap.

From architects to academics who study prisoners and the prison system, from food service vendors to health care firms, from corrections bureaucrats to forensic psychologists and social workers, there is a lot of money to be made from the proliferation of prisons. The cost is estimated at 100 billion to run America's entire prison system!

It is a bitter irony that the high cost of prison cuts into the health, education, and social services needed by the very people who, lacking such supports, often end up in prison! The real roots of crime in America are associated with a constellation of suffering so hideous, like at Pelican Bay State Prison, that as a society, it cannot bear to look it in the face. So it hands its casualties to a system that will keep us from its sight.

If one views the U.S. prison system as a reasonable response to lawbreaking, then crime, violence, and drugs seem like problems that can never be solved. To gain a deeper understanding of the purpose of prisons, it is far more helpful to analyze them as a response to major recent transformations of the U.S. economy: capital flight, the shift to a service-sector economy, the depopulation of the inner-cities, an increasingly segmented labor force, the economic marginalization of communities of color, the rise in youth unemployment, and the defunding of social services of every description.

Crime could be fought by increasing the participation of poor communities in educational, social and economic institutions. The money poured into maintaining the prison systems of America, which exceeds \$200 billion a year, is money which could be used to create jobs, improve education and training, and stimulate economic activities. President Obama didn't include this in his 'stimulus package'.

Instead, the social policies of the last two decades have reflected a consistent choice to abandon poor communities, especially communities of color, to increasing dislocation and the inevitable growth of 'criminal' activity, which is quite criminal in itself. As a result, 'our' society is polarized further and further—not only into the haves and the have-nots, but also into the incarcerators and in the incarcerated.

Meanwhile, African so-called 'Americans' and other people of color are stigmatized as criminals and drug addicts, through media images that subtly (and not so subtly) mask the equal participation of whites in the culture of addiction, crime, and violence. The deepening polarization of society thus becomes a self-perpetuating cycle in which the image of the criminal 'under-class' is used to garner support for the very policies that greatly contribute to the destruction of poor urban communities.

It has been said that 'the truth will set you free'. But the truth does more. It indicts, it convicts, it rends and shreds excuses, denials and the simple ability to live at peace with the past. The truth is hard, which is why people often choose instead the soft

comfort of lies.

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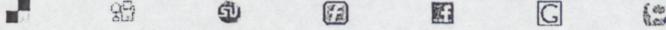
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P.S. A people already invisible can be easily made to disappear as this is the primary function of ghettos and prisons in America!

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