

# Prisons Punishment and the Real American Exceptionalism



## Unusually Cruel: Prisons, Punishment, and the Real American Exceptionalism by David Lionheart

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The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with over 2 million people behind bars. This is a staggering number, and it has a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities. In this article, we will explore the history of mass incarceration in the United States, the factors that have contributed to it, and the consequences of this phenomenon. We will also discuss the need for alternatives to incarceration and the importance of reducing the prison population.

## The History of Mass Incarceration in the United States

The roots of mass incarceration in the United States can be traced back to the 1970s, when the country began to experience a sharp increase in crime rates. In response to this increase, the government adopted a number of

policies that led to a dramatic increase in the number of people being sent to prison. These policies included the "war on drugs," which resulted in the criminalization of drug use and the imposition of harsh penalties for drug offenses; the "tough on crime" movement, which led to the passage of laws that increased the penalties for a wide range of crimes; and the "broken windows" theory of policing, which focused on cracking down on minor offenses in order to prevent more serious crimes from occurring.

As a result of these policies, the prison population in the United States skyrocketed. Between 1970 and 2000, the number of people in prison increased by more than 500%. This increase was particularly pronounced among African Americans, who are now incarcerated at a rate that is more than five times higher than the rate for white Americans.

## **The Factors That Have Contributed to Mass Incarceration**

There are a number of factors that have contributed to mass incarceration in the United States. These factors include:

- The war on drugs: The war on drugs has been a major factor in the increase in the prison population in the United States. Since the 1970s, the government has spent billions of dollars on drug enforcement, and this has led to the arrest and imprisonment of millions of people for drug offenses. African Americans are disproportionately affected by the war on drugs, and they are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to prison for drug offenses than white Americans.
- The tough on crime movement: The tough on crime movement has also contributed to the increase in the prison population in the United States. This movement led to the passage of laws that increased the penalties for a wide range of crimes, including nonviolent crimes. As a

result of these laws, more people are being sent to prison for longer periods of time.

- The broken windows theory of policing: The broken windows theory of policing has also contributed to the increase in the prison population in the United States. This theory holds that cracking down on minor offenses, such as broken windows and graffiti, will prevent more serious crimes from occurring. However, this theory has been criticized for leading to the over-policing of minority communities and the arrest and imprisonment of people for minor offenses.
- Economic inequality: Economic inequality has also contributed to mass incarceration in the United States. People who live in poverty are more likely to be involved in crime, and they are also more likely to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to prison. This is because poverty can lead to a lack of opportunity, which can make it difficult for people to find jobs and housing. It can also lead to stress and instability, which can make it more difficult for people to make good choices.
- Racism: Racism has also played a role in mass incarceration in the United States. African Americans are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and sentenced to prison than white Americans for the same crimes. This is because of the long history of racism in the United States, which has led to the over-policing of minority communities and the unequal application of the law.

## **The Consequences of Mass Incarceration**

Mass incarceration has a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities. For individuals, mass incarceration can lead to the loss of jobs, housing, and family relationships. It can also lead to mental health

problems and substance abuse. For families, mass incarceration can lead to poverty, instability, and trauma. It can also make it difficult for children to succeed in school and to avoid crime. For communities, mass incarceration can lead to increased crime rates, decreased economic development, and a loss of trust in the government.

Mass incarceration also has a negative impact on the economy. The United States spends more money on prisons than any other country in the world. This money could be used to invest in education, healthcare, and other important programs that would benefit the entire country. However, instead, it is being used to lock up millions of people, most of whom are nonviolent offenders.

### **The Need for Alternatives to Incarceration**

There is a growing consensus that the United States needs to find alternatives to incarceration. Mass incarceration is a failed policy that has had a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities. It is time to rethink our approach to crime and punishment and to invest in programs that will reduce the prison population and make our communities safer.

There are a number of alternatives to incarceration that have been shown to be effective in reducing crime and recidivism. These alternatives include:

- **Drug courts:** Drug courts are specialized courts that offer treatment and support to drug offenders instead of prison sentences. Drug courts have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and helping people to stay sober.

- **Mental health courts:** Mental health courts are specialized courts that offer treatment and support to people with mental illness who have come into contact with the criminal justice system. Mental health courts have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and helping people to get the treatment they need.
- **Community service:** Community service is a sentencing option that allows people to serve their sentences by performing unpaid work for the community. Community service has been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and helping people to give back to their communities.
- **Diversion programs:** Diversion programs are programs that allow people to avoid prosecution or sentencing by completing treatment or rehabilitation programs. Diversion programs have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism and helping people to get the help they need.

## **The Importance of Reducing the Prison Population**

Reducing the prison population is essential for creating a more just and equitable society. Mass incarceration has had a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities, and it is time to end this failed policy. By investing in alternatives to incarceration, we can reduce the prison population, save money, and create a safer and more just society for everyone.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and this has a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities. Mass incarceration is a failed policy that is based on racism and economic inequality. It is time to rethink our approach to crime and punishment and to

invest in programs that will reduce the prison population and make our communities safer.



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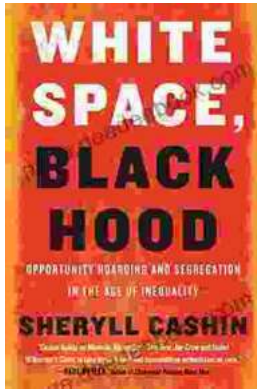
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