

Mass Incarceration is Real and on the Rise By Asher Harris

When I was younger, I believed people went to prison after committing an offense, and having a fair trial and being prosecuted by an unbiased jury. Now I know this isn't the reality. I was introduced to the stories of those who are innocent who were sentenced to, at worst, death. I began to understand that certain communities have been policed and convicted at higher rates than others. These ideas began to cloud my vision of a perfect American justice system. But we can't just say it is broken and cannot be fixed. We need to work to address these problems. At the center of these conundrums is mass incarceration, which is characterized by historically high rates of imprisonment of largely disadvantaged populations. Mass incarceration must be ended because it has no advantageous effect and hurts not helps.

At the end of 2018, there were an estimated 1,471,200 people in federal and state prisons in the United States.¹ That's almost 150% more than the population of Alaska.² This distressing amount of incarceration doesn't deter crime. "Increased incarceration has a marginal-to-zero impact on crime. In some cases, increased incarceration can even lead to an increase in crime," according to the Vera Institute of Justice.³ So how has this happened? Some say it has to do with the war on drugs and the phenomenon of sentencing more people for nonviolent offenses, which started in the 1980s. Others claim it relates to the rise of throw-away-the-key sentencing in which people are sentenced for extensive amounts of time. Personally, I think it's all of these factors and more that leads to this large problem.

As citizens, we can vote for leaders and politicians who will strive to help the problem, not hurt it. Change on a governmental level, federal and local, is probably the most likely to be effective. However, there are some things a non-office-holding citizen can do. We can support bail reform as it greatly reduces the number of people in jail.⁴ We can donate to or volunteer with groups that are working on reform of the system. One organization to support is the Vera Institute for Justice, located in New York City. It is a criminal justice reform institute whose mission is "[t]o urgently build and improve justice systems that ensure fairness, promote safety, and strengthen communities."⁵ Also, the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Alabama, spearheaded by Bryan Stevenson, is a committed organization working on all of these issues. Overall, we can raise more awareness of the issues at hand by protesting, using social media, or just educating in general. Mass incarceration in the United States affects everyone and we need to work towards reform.

¹ The Vera Institute for Justice: People in Prison in 2018 by Jacob Kang-Brown, Eital Schnattner-Elmaleh, and Oliver Hinds, April 2019

² The United States Census Bureau: Population of Alaska in 2018

³ The Vera Institute for Justice: The Prison Paradox by Don Stemen, Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, Loyola University Chicago; Member, Vera Research Advisory Board, July 2017

⁴ The New York Times: There's a Strong Case for Sticking With Bail Reform by Emily Bazelon and Insha Rahman, January 24, 2020

⁵ The Vera Institute for Justice: About