



**Joseph Williams**  
Helping the incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and their families reach their God-given potential.

### Introduction

One cannot honestly start to talk about prisoner reintegration today without beginning with the very serious issue of mass incarceration. Some have said that mass incarceration is perhaps the greatest civil rights issue of our time. It certainly is one of the most pressing social problems we face today. The term mass incarceration refers to the staggering number of men and women held within the American prison system. The number and rate of people held in American prisons today is historic, unprecedented, and unmatched by any other nation in the world.

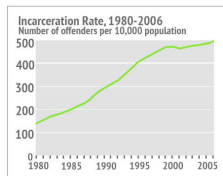
This explosion of people entering the prison system occurred over a period of three decades. According to the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1980 people incarcerated in US federal and state prisons and jails numbered 501,886. By 2006, that number reached 2,336,871. That's nearly a fivefold increase in just one generation!

When I began in correctional ministry back in 1982, there were a handful of prisons in Michigan, about four or five. During my time in ministry, the Michigan prison population peaked at about 50,000 people. At its peak there were 50 prison institutions in Michigan. Prisoners and prison were not nearly the significant factors they are today in our society.

According to a study released by the Pew Center for the States titled *One in 100: Behind Bars in America* in 2008, for the first time in history there were one in one hundred adults incarcerated in this country. The American prison system now holds nearly 2.3 million adults. That makes our prison system the largest on the planet. We incarcerate more people than China, which was second at 1.5 million people. China has 1.3 billion people compared to 317 million Americans. Russia was a distant third with only 890,000 inmates and a population of 143 million.

#### Mass Incarceration

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#### Mass Incarceration

- For the first time in history, there are 1/100 adults incarcerated in this country.
- The American prison system holds about 2.3 million adults, more than any other country in the world.
- China is second with 1.5 million people, and Russia is a distant third with 890,000 inmates.



### Mass Incarceration

- In my lifetime, I have personally witnessed this explosion in the prison population.
- When I grew up in the 50s and 60s in inner-city Detroit, Michigan, there were relatively few people who ended up in prison.
- Nowadays one would be hard-pressed to find someone, especially those who live in large cities, who do not know someone in prison or who has spent time in prison.
- Growing up I did not know anyone who worked in a prison, in probation, or with parolees. Today the field of criminal justice is thriving.

### Mass Incarceration

Beyond the sheer number of inmates, America also is the global leader in the rate at which it incarcerates its citizenry, outpacing nations like South Africa and Iran.



### Mass Incarceration

We have become what some scholars are calling a **Prison Nation**, **Incarceration Nation**, or **Prison Industrial Complex**.

In my lifetime, I have personally witnessed this explosion in the prison population. I have witnessed the increasingly significant role prison has played in our society. I have witnessed firsthand how the economy of inner cities has shifted because of the dramatic increase in the rate of incarceration of American citizens.

When I grew up in the 50s and 60s in inner-city Detroit, Michigan, there were relatively few people who ended up in prison. Going to jail back in those days was a pretty rare and very serious experience. Being sent to prison was an experience that was reserved for the most odious members of society. They had committed serious crimes such as murder, rape, robbery, theft, and other crimes that made them a real threat to the community. If you went to prison back then, you were a pretty bad dude. I say dude because only a tiny fraction of the prison population was made up of female inmates.

Nowadays one would be hard-pressed to find someone, especially those who live in large cities, who do not know someone in prison or who has spent time in prison. Most of those who live in urban areas have a close family member who has experienced prison. Most urban churches have congregants who have themselves experienced prison or have loved ones who experienced prison.

Growing up, I did not know anyone who worked in a prison, in probation, or with parolees. Today the field of criminal justice is thriving. Most colleges offer degrees in criminal justice. Many young people are deciding to go into the criminal justice field including law enforcement. This means that many more people from urban communities have some type of criminal justice experience. They have been on one side of the fence or the other. They are the jailed or the jailers.

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In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the US, the rate is roughly eight times that or 750 per 100,000.

We have become what some scholars are calling a Prison Nation, Incarceration Nation, or Prison Industrial Complex.

## Mass Incarceration

International Rates of Incarceration, 2010



Here is a graphical illustration of the rates of incarceration of other nations compared to the incarceration rate of the US per 100,000 people. As you can see, in terms of incarceration rates, the US far outpaces other nations in the incarceration of its citizens.

Some states began to discuss and address the issue of mass incarceration during the mid-late 2000s. This was in large part due to the failing economy. Prison expenditures consumed a large portion of state budgets as departments of corrections dramatically increased in size. States could no longer afford to build prisons at such a rapid pace. They could no longer afford to house such high numbers of people. Therefore, they began to come up with alternative ways to deal with offenders.

Please note that the movement to create reentry programs and alternatives to incarceration were not due largely to a philosophical shift but rather to an economic crisis. This truth is borne out in the fact that states that did not suffer significantly from the economic downturn have not aggressively engaged in prisoner reentry and alternatives to incarceration.

Of the states that did make efforts to reduce their prison populations, many created substantial reentry initiatives. Many created prison diversion programs. Technical rule violations and minor offenses of parolees were dealt with differently. Rather than automatically sending a person back to prison, ways were found to deal with infractions in the community.

When I began working with men and women returning to the community from prison here in Michigan back in the early 90s, we were in the throes of mass incarceration. There were no programs of note designed to help people stay out of prison or to divert people from going to prison. The incarceration rate was steadily increasing and the recidivism rate was very high. Under Governor John Engler, a policy of zero tolerance was implemented by the Michigan Department of Corrections. Under zero tolerance, people who were released to the community on parole or placed into community residential placement (CRP) lived under very strict rules.

Zero tolerance assured that the return rate for prison would remain extremely high. Consequently, the prison rate would remain high. Under this policy, parolees were violated by their parole officers and returned to prison for the least rule infraction. Returning to the community residential placement center or home while on tether one minute late from a social

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- Under the administration of Governor Jennifer Granholm, an initiative was launched to reduce the prison population in Michigan.
- The new administration in Michigan has continued efforts to reduce the prison population.

occasion earned a person a technical rule violation and a return trip to prison. Corrections staff even went so far as to stretch the application of this rule to include those who were late from work assignments or other business-related appointments. Infractions such as substance abuse and other minor criminal infractions quickly and routinely led to reincarceration. In those days, parole failures were extremely high.

Under the administration of Governor Jennifer Granholm, an initiative was launched to reduce the prison population in Michigan. The economy of Michigan was in the tank, and measures needed to be taken to cut the budget. The prison system was one of the largest drains on Michigan's budget. Therefore, Granholm sought to reduce the number of people in prison by creating a state-wide reentry program called the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative (MPRI). Under MPRI, facilities were established in the community to temporarily detain those who committed technical rule violations. Even those who committed minor crimes were not automatically returned to prison. They were held in these facilities from 30 to 90 days. While they were detained in these facilities, they had access to classes and other services to help them be successful once they were rereleased to the community.

The new administration in Michigan has continued efforts to reduce the prison population. Newly established facilities have been set up to prevent people from being sent back to prison for minor infractions. Additionally, prison diversion programs have been established to prevent people from being sentenced to prison on the front end. As a result of these efforts, the prison system has been kept in check. I'm sure that similar efforts are in place in other states as well.

As a result of these efforts, the prison population has been slightly reduced over the past several years. The prison population in the United States dropped in 2012 for the third consecutive year. The number of inmates in state and federal prisons decreased by 1.7 percent to an estimated 1,571,013 in 2012 from 1,598,783 in 2011, according to figures released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

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### Race

To a significant degree, mass incarceration is a black and brown issue. African-Americans and Hispanics have been

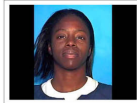
## Mass Incarceration

### Race

- This phenomena is particularly problematic for the black and brown communities. The national incarceration rate for whites is 412 per 100,000 residents, compared to 2,290 for African-Americans and 742 for Hispanics.
- Approximately 12-13 percent of the American population is African-American, but they make up 40 percent of the prison population.
- Hispanics are the fastest-growing group being imprisoned, increasing from 10.9 percent of all state and federal inmates in 1985 to 15.6 percent in 2001.

## Mass Incarceration

- While one in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars; for black males in that age group the figure is one in nine.
- Black women in their thirties behind bars have hit the 1/100 mark.



## Mass Incarceration

### The War on Drugs

- The War on Drugs created an explosion in the prison population.
- President Nixon declared war on drugs in 1971.
- This war was greatly accelerated during the Reagan administration in the 80s.
- It was created and driven at the federal level.
- Mass incarceration of black and brown people—overpolicing.

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While one in 30 men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars, for black males in that age group the figure is one in nine. Black women in their thirties have hit the 1/100 mark in that one in 100 black women in that age range are now behind bars.

There are now more African-American men in prison, on parole, or on probation than there were in slavery in 1850.

## The War on Drugs

The War on Drugs has created an explosion in the prison population. President Nixon declared war on drugs in 1971. At that time, he dramatically increased the size and presence of federal agencies that dealt with drug control. Laws were implemented that made it easier for police to enforce drug laws such as no-knock warrants.

The War of Drugs was greatly accelerated during the Reagan administration in the 80s. This was in great part due to the advent of crack cocaine. There was much media and political hype about the danger that drugs posed to the nation. As a result, many draconian laws were passed. Many very aggressive policing practices were adopted that were focused mainly on inner-city neighborhoods. These laws and practices have led to mass incarceration of mostly black and brown people.

The War on Drugs was created at and driven at the federal level. Every presidential candidate wanted to prove they were tougher on crime than the previous administration. Federal incentives were made available to state and local police agencies for increasing drug arrests. These incentives include grants of funding and surplus military equipment to police agencies. These incentives led to the overpolicing of black and brown communities.

## Mass Incarceration

This practice of trading surplus military equipment for drug arrests is no more clear than the events that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. Members of the community gathered in protest of the shooting of a young man by the name of Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer. The nation watched as the local policing agencies responded to the protests by mobilizing a number of military-style, armored vehicles. Police officers donned military-style gear and brandished military-style weapons in their response to the protestors. This militaristic show of force was made possible by federal government programs related to the war on drugs.

## Mass Incarceration

### Legislation

- Legislators proposed and passed many draconian laws related to the possession and sale of drugs.
- Mandatory minimum sentences
- Waiving the rights of juveniles
- Abolishment of parole
- Truth in sentencing

## Mass Incarceration

- Prior to the implementation of truth in sentencing, those who had served a certain portion of their sentence were allowed to be released into the community prior to receiving an actual parole.
- As residents of CRP Centers, people were able to work jobs prior to receiving parole and save their money.
- The CRP Centers were phased out after the implementation of truth in sentencing because it prohibited people from being released from prison prior to serving their minimum sentence.

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## Legislation

Legislators proposed and passed many draconian laws related to the possession and sales of drugs. Mandatory minimum sentence laws were passed that removed discretion from judges and imposed lengthy sentences on those who were found guilty of drug offences. Many jurisdictions began to routinely waive the rights of juvenile offenders, trying them as adults and imposing adult sentences upon them. Many states abolished parole, meaning that those in prison would be forced to serve their entire sentence and were never given the chance of early release for good behavior. Many states implemented the policy of “truth in sentencing” whereby early release from prison was abolished.

Mass incarceration has been fueled mostly by the incarceration of nonviolent, low-level drug offenders. It should be noted that no other country similar to the United States deals with these types of offenders in the way they are dealt with in our country.

I watched these issues played out in the Michigan prison system. Prior to the implementation of truth in sentencing, those who had served a certain portion of their sentence were allowed to be released into the community prior to receiving an actual parole. They were sent to CRP Centers to begin their transition back into the community. While in a center, they were able to go to school, seek and obtain employment, obtain services and support from programs in the community, and enjoy “social” time such as spending time with family and attending religious services.

As residents of CRP Centers, people were able to work jobs prior to receiving parole and save their money. Those who were not planning to move in with family members after receiving their

## Mass Incarceration

### Economics

- Mass incarceration has come with a very hefty price tag.
- Prison costs = \$75 billion annually
- Police, detention, judicial, and legal fees are estimated to have been approximately \$185 billion.
- Private prisons on the stock exchange
- Phone companies, gun manufacturers, health care providers, military, food service, lawyers, rural communities

parole were able to save their money to live independently once paroled. Reconnection to family members was established. Connections to support in the community were formed. These centers served as an excellent method of transition back to the community. However, because of truth in sentencing, they were discontinued.

The CRP Centers were phased out after the implementation of truth in sentencing, because it prohibited people from being released from prison prior to serving their minimum sentence. No longer were men and women nearing the end of their sentence able to benefit from this step-down approach to reentry. They now were held in prison, out of the community, until they were able to be released on parole.

## Economics

Mass Incarceration has come with a very hefty price tag. It is estimated that current prison costs in this country are approximately \$75 billion annually. Police, detention, judicial, and legal fees are estimated to have been approximately \$185 billion in 2006. In 2003 there were approximately 2.4 million criminal justice system employees.

Prisons are big business in this country. There are a number of major corporations that realize significant profits from the incarceration of this huge number of people. Many millions of dollars have been invested in private prisons. And private prisons, including one owned by former Vice President Cheney, are traded on the stock exchange.

Phone companies rake in millions by charging exorbitant rates for families to stay in touch with loved-ones. Gun manufacturers receive large contracts from prison systems. Private health providers provide health services within prisons. The US military engages prisons to produce gear for soldiers. There are a host of other contractors including food service companies that make money off prisons. Lawyers, rural communities within which prisons are located, and local police agencies all stand to lose money if the prison population is significantly reduced.

## Mass Incarceration

### Effects

- Underclass: people with felonies become second-class citizens.
- The number of children at risk increases.
- Families are weakened.
- Communities lose material and human resources.

## Mass Incarceration

### Effects

The extraction of young men from urban communities has been so astounding that Laura Kurgan at Columbia University and Eric Cadora of the Justice Mapping Center have coined the term "million dollar block." A million dollar block is a city block that has so many men who have gone to prison that the total cost of their incarceration amounts to over one million dollars. This is further proof that mass incarceration is an urban problem, black and brown problem, and a community problem.

## Effects

Incarcerating people at such high rates has, in effect, led to the creation of an American underclass, as people with felonies become second-class citizens. The risk level of children is significantly increased as going to prison has proven to be generational in nature. Families are weakened as the pool of men who are eligible for marriage is significantly diminished.

Communities are robbed of valuable human and material resources and unprecedented numbers of young men are extracted from the community.

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