

Brave Church/Hard Topics, 3/15/2023: Race & the Prison System

This is the chat log of the discussion. Names and identifiable information have been removed for privacy.

References to slides for this session can be found in the ***Brave Church – Prison System 1 3-15-23.pdf*** document linked [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#).

Additional information added after the discussion are identified with “**NOTE:**”

Discussion Questions 1 (slide 3)/Whiteboard:

What concerns you about the U.S. prison system?

What questions do you bring to this topic?

NOTE: Most of the concerns were captured on the Whiteboard. A screen capture of the whiteboard will be posted separately on the [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#). Below are some concerns posted in the chat:

I have concerns about the number of people who are incarcerated wrongly. I have concerns about how people are treated in prisons, especially private prisons.

I am concerned about the role of education/literacy re: incarceration rates.

Overview of Race & the Prison System (slides 4-9)

Comments and clarifications during the overview:

Q: What are the black codes? Are they the precursors of the Jim Crow laws?

These were first passed after the end of the Civil War, used by whites to keep blacks/former slaves from owning property, voting.

The Legacy Museum in Montgomery AL part of EJI-Equal Justice Initiative founded by Bryan Stevenson, traces enslavement to mass incarceration

Clarification on the War on Drug terminology:

Wikipedia -- “The term was popularized by the media shortly after a press conference given on June 18, 1971, by President Richard Nixon—the day after publication of a special message from President Nixon to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control—during which he declared drug abuse “public enemy number one”.”

Resource: ***New Jim Crow*** by Michelle Alexander

NOTE: There are a number of copies of *New Jim Crow* in the Fairfax Library System

Jails in Alabama that are compensated per prisoner allow sheriffs to cut costs on food

New Jim Crow is about mass incarceration.

Another resource: ***Understanding, dismantling and disrupting the prison to school pipeline***

Quick Response Questions (slide 10):

What stands out to you?

What are you unsure about?

Statistics are always in question: they're easy to put in eye of the beholder. But they raise questions.

US rates high, but rest of the world doesn't report everything. Would be interested in seeing more about that. It is the business of the country and some feel no need to share.

Correlation between less education and increased probability of ending up in jail. A possible solution, take a look at our school systems.

From the pediatric point, kids who cannot read well by third grade have a poor future outlook. A cause--entering kindergarten unprepared.

Kids who have been suspended multiple times is a high predictor of not graduating.

Be intentional in the language that we use.

a lot of issues of inequity in education is due to generations of intentional inequities placed on groups of people. The system is working the way it was intended. We have to disrupt this if we want to change it.

See book/resource: ***Understanding, dismantling and disrupting the prison to school pipeline***

An impact of incarceration is the lack of eligible men for life mates.

so true

It will take us a long time to decrease the number incarcerated because of the long sentences, particularly because of the war on drugs. Through crime control acts from early 80s almost to present - what's happening today: even if arrest rate goes down, incarceration rate will remain high because of long sentences. Unless there's an amnesty/correction

When preparing cases for court, I find it rare that the person had a 'normal' childhood - divorce, abuse (physical/sexual), etc - it is a cycle.

Family is the essential component of the indicator of outcome.

1 in 9 black children have had a parent incarcerated.

A lot of intergenerational trauma that has gone unresolved, contributing to family issues

When the government, state or federal, funds service programs, they are very compartmentalized. And they don't integrate.

Most of our money goes into the prison systems rather than prevention, like in our schools.

BOLD PROVOCATIONS FOR DISCUSSION, part 1 (Slide 11)

- **Our judicial system was born from white fear and built on the control and surveillance of people of color. Racial discrimination, fear, and control remains core to the system today.**
- **White people in particular are responsible to deconstruct the current system, from schools to policing to prisons to post-incarceration.**
- **Jesus, as an unjustly-arrested ethnic minority (Jew) executed by the state (Rome) gives Christians a particular story to draw on**

AGREE!!!!

Think the 1st bullet is 'supportable by fact': Presently we're building walled/gated communities to keep other people (who are undesirable) out. Keeping people out is the counterpoint to putting them in jail.

Too many specifics here: don't agree w/ born from 'white fear' and specifically toward 'people of color'. There were a lot of discrimination from other immigrants (ex: Irish). We must be mindful of all of the things that have contributed to our judicial system.

Reacted to "Be mindful of all of..." with 👍

Not all born of white fear, as some homogeneous communities needed a judicial system. That was then used against minorities.

2nd bullet: remember desegregation of schools. White people are now going toward moving away from the public schools - deconstruction in the wrong direction. White people are deconstructing the current system in the wrong way. A rebirth of segregation with white people moving to private schools.

Agree with all 3 points. A lot of this has been used to incite fear of others. Mindful of indigenous populations who were wiped out.

The values of the white settlers, they feared the natives and the slaves they were controlling.

I read these statements to be based on the US judicial system

Are we willing to grapple with and acknowledge those difficult, hard truths when we've been carefully taught only certain truths?

That is dead on for actions settlers/colonists used.

Laws are used to control human behavior - were born of controlling the population, based on the values of the population at the time. The systems and laws have been hijacked by white people over time. I think it is possible for us to take action to pull it back to reflect the nation's values.

Jesus was executed by the state, but at the insistence of his own people.

In 1: add "and Israel": can substitute different words/people, would have what is happening in Israel today.

It makes me angry to see the terms 'white fear' and to see fear used as an excuse for some kind of control. From what I understand, it was the white master who instilled in black slaves the need to be forceful in order to escape. They wanted to be free. For them to be feared was created by the white man and that became the reality. Blacks today will run from police to escape the white man. View that blacks are dangerous was perpetuated by the system.

The fear white people have of Black people has been perpetuated by the system.

Absolutely!

The judicial system is not perfect. The judicial system has morphed for a number of reasons, not all for the better. Instead of an orderly system, it is now a morass that needs to be reformed. It is up to everyone to be a part of the solution - we need input from all communities impacted in order to make it better.

BOLD PROVOCATIONS FOR DISCUSSION, part 2 (Slide 12)

Reform needs to go beyond the "low-hanging fruit" of reforming sentencing around nonviolent drug offenders.

- **Divert arrests to crisis services (MH, SA)**
- **Reduce/eliminate pre-trial detention (bail)**
- **Reduce/eliminate re-incarceration for probation & parole violations**
- **Reduce stigma against “violent” offenders**
- **Reduce pretextual traffic stops**
- **Reform school discipline, youth offenses, misdemeanors**

This ties into the myths/facts link - need to go beyond the 'low-hanging' fruit.

Like the idea of trying to defuse things.

How do we do this?

When the judicial system works on the core of the problem to treat the underlying problems – using a carrot/stick so they don't have to go to jail – that's where people's lives have been transformed.

Why do we incarcerate people? Like it or not, Americans are vengeful, want to see people punished for their actions. Want to see justice for the victims. Want people locked up for safety of the community. One of driving factors - not to rehabilitate them.

Alternatives to incarceration can prevent some people going to jail. Example: going through the court system and not jail to receive something like drug rehab and mental health treatment.

This is a big-bucket problem. There are not going to be global solutions.

Work on the things that are unjust. Punishment versus rehabilitation.

Victims viewpoints: they don't necessarily want to hammer the offenders (one of links). Services are provided for the victims. There is fear of being a victim. We need to provide protection for community, fear of going out is an issue. Important to look out case-to-case.

Comparing differences in the way Japan and the US handle drug crimes: In Japan, marijuana offenses are severe (30 days). Judicial systems are very different. Culturally, Japanese are law-abiding, rule-following culture. In US, the end user may not be the ones we need to go after.

We need to focus on the way the drugs are coming in from other countries - need to cut the source off.

A lot of answers to concerns have to do with the way we allocate money to pay for things. So much of your likelihood to be involved in crime depends on your background. It is a vicious cycle. The mandatory services (such as Mental Health) are understaffed/underpaid. Getting to the cause of the problem means shifting prison money to other resources.