
The Issue of Mass Incarceration in the United States

America: The Mass Incarceration Station

Mass incarceration has been plaguing Americans since President Richard Nixon. As a result, lives have been ruined by the stigma around drug addicts and drug charges. Also, money lined the pockets of the greedy monsters who make money to keep people incarcerated. I'm assuming "out of sight, out of mind" is how people sleep while benefiting off mass incarceration. While they sleep, did you know that America takes up approximately five percent of the world's population, but we house around twenty-five percent of the world's inmate population? Did you know that the United States spends eighty billion dollars on incarceration a year?

It cost local, state, and federal governments anywhere from twenty thousand to fifty thousand annually to house inmates. It cost about twenty thousand to fifty thousand dollars to send people to rehab through insurance for thirty days which is the recommended time for rehab and it cost approximately that much to send people to college. The most disheartening fact is that around fifty percent of our inmates are rotting in jail for non-violent, drug charges. The stigma and criticism of marijuana is slowly being lifted and states begin to legalize weed. On the other hand, we continue to let people with marijuana charges sit in jail while the state makes money doing the same thing those men and women did to get locked up. I am scared to see where the future of legalization takes us, depending on who is in charge.

The "War on Drugs" is the most commonly condemned for the genesis of this movement on what seemed to be the war on the mentally ill and poor. It all began with Richard Nixon. In the sixties, drugs were a symbol of restless youth, escapism, the beginning of a mutinous revolt of citizens. Drugs served as a reaction to the unfortunate reality Americans were living in with Nixon, the Vietnam war, and the evident lack of opportunity in America for a certain type of people. The Drug Policy Alliance has quoted one of Nixon's top aides John Ehrlichman that shows who and what the Nixon administration really cared about: "You want to know what this was really all about. The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying. We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities... Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course, we did." Presidents who use fear mongering need a boogie man, something to pretend to save us from. A short time of consolation took place when Jimmy Carter was elected into office.

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Opposite from Nixon, Jimmy Carter wanted to decriminalize weed. I think the way Jimmy Carter handled other political exploits made Americans weary of him and it convinced the public that they needed a conservative president.

So, as a devastating result, we got Ronald Reagan in 1981. Resembling Trump, Ronald Reagan was also a celebrity who pretended to understand to the middle class and convinced them that he was running to improve their quality of life. He had a strong anti-drug ideology. “The number of people behind bars for nonviolent drug law offenses increased from 50,000 in 1980 to over 400,000 by 1997.” Nancy Reagan began the “Just say no” anti-drug campaign, which also inspired a police chief in Los Angeles begin the D.A.R.E. drug education program. The same police chief by the name of Daryl Gates also publicly stated “Casual drugs users should be taken out and shot.” It seemed to inspire a few people in positions of authority that were already fueled by hate and the Reagans put a fire under them with a soapbox to hop on. While Reagan was in office he began to defund and end harm reduction programs and needle exchanges which was also the beginning of the worsening of the HIV/AIDS crisis that was ignored while he was president. While tens of thousands died because of this epidemic, he remained almost completely silent. I think this was that admiration’s way of letting population control takes its place while seeming to keep their hands clean.

This administration successfully made drug use public enemy number one. “In 1985, the proportion of Americans polled who saw drug abuse as the nation's "number one problem" was just 2-6 percent. The figure grew through the remainder of the 1980s until, in September 1989, it reached a remarkable 64 percent – one of the most intense fixations by the American public on any issue in polling history.” While the Reagan administration was instilling fear into Americans, some people died, some got locked away in cages for minor drug charges, many more died of HIV/AIDS. The most ironic thing about the Reagan years is that by the end of his time in office, teen marijuana use had gone up. Their “boogie man” backfired because curiosity killed the false rhetoric that they tried to brainwash the Reagan youth with. It’s quite poetic to me.

“We talk about mass incarceration but we still view crime as only an individual level phenomenon, blaming it on poor decision-making, bad parenting, and disrespect for law and order. Somehow, we ignore the mass, community-wide pressures: institutionalized racial privilege and disadvantage, labor market failures and poverty. We talk about mass incarceration while only proposing individual level solutions—usually punishment—and offer little to promote healing for harm, or treatment for mental illness, for individuals or for communities.” The amount of money the United States spends on incarceration annually, the least we could do is help inmates experience a smoother transition back into the real world. You have the option to get your GED when you are incarcerated but we desperately need higher education classes or trade school classes set up. Knowledge is the one thing people cannot take from you. So being able to take a new trade, skill, or new knowledge out into the real world, it shows potential

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employers that you are more than your charges and past faults.

For one, when you get out, you are required to give your parole officer an address. A lot of the time, families can't house these people because they are tired of them or they don't speak with their family any longer. If you are lucky enough to have the money saved to get your own place, you must find a place that is felon friendly which is difficult especially in a time crunch. If you do not find a place to stay, you will violate your probation or parole for being homeless. If you want to try to go back to college, you can't get financial aid to pay for school. You cannot vote when you get out, which translates to your voice not being significant or mattering in the future of America. When you are a convicted felon you do not qualify for any social service like, food stamps, SSI, public housing. These program's original purpose was to assist people getting back on their feet. You must give people options. These programs all have rules and qualifications. If they don't meet the qualifications or break the rules of these programs, take their benefits away.

My liberal friends love to make Nixon and Reagan the bad guys and frequently ignore that Bill Clinton had a huge impact on mass incarceration. Bill Clinton probably held the most hypocritical stance on drug use. He not only feigned support for drug treatment in lieu of jail time for drug offenses. He rejected the idea of making the crack vs cocaine sentencing the same. Crack and Cocaine are the same exact drug, one is to smoke and one is to snort. Cocaine user were getting off much easier than their crack user counter parts. Cocaine is notoriously a rich white person's drug of choice and crack is notoriously a poor black person's drug of choice. Also, Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. The violent crime control act "created longer mandatory sentences, reclassified less serious crimes as felonies and put tens of thousands more police officers on the streets." This act also included the "three strike rule" which only put heat on law enforcement to push people back into the system. This act militarized the police even more and made it easier to incarcerate people. Bill Clinton now admits that the bill was an atrocious idea that contributed to the growth the prison population.

You cannot place blame one person, or one party, or one philosophy. The United States has been working towards mass incarceration for years in one way or another. Until the United States government recognizes it's a problem, we will get nowhere in this fight. We can't bring up mass incarceration until we bring up the issue of racism in America. The first step is admitting you have a problem. Emma Goldman said "No real social change has ever been brought about without a revolution - Revolution is but thought carried into action. Every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass."

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