

Mass Incarceration:

A list of thoughts by a non-incarcerated student

by Erin Feeley

Last year, I took this course. It was called Education, Incarceration, and Justice. I thought it would be about the school-to-prison pipeline.

Today, I work for the University of Utah Prison Education Project—a college-in-prison program that offers a rigorous liberal arts and science undergraduate curriculum to incarcerated student at the Utah State Prison in Salt Lake.

As it turns out, there's a lot more to the relationship between prison and education than can be summed up by a pipeline analogy.

In the U.S., 2.3 million people are currently behind bars in jails and prisons scattered across the country (Alexander, 2010). By almost all accounts, this is an underestimate of the scope of mass incarceration.

We, the American public, incarcerate more of our own citizens than any nation in history—by percentage of the population and in absolute terms (Wagner & Walsh, 2016).

By *all* accounts, sitting in an honors class at a top tier research university is the safest and most comfortable location where one can learn about these realities, but I still remember the experience as jarring.

In the U.S., crime rates have little to no bearing on the rate of incarceration. In Utah, the crime rate has fallen over the past two decades, yet between 2004 and 2013, the state's prison population grew by 18% (Pew, 2015).

I remember how that classroom, despite its high ceilings and full-length windows, could feel so dark and suffocating at times—the air heavy with the weight of our complacency, our privilege.

If it isn't crime rates that are driving incarceration rates, what is?

In the U.S., we banned slavery and involuntary servitude, “except as a punishment for crime” (U.S. Const. amend. XIII). We call this the 13th amendment.

In Florida, 1.5 million formerly incarcerated citizens may regain their right to vote pending a Fall 2018 ballot on the matter (Ballotpedia, 2018).

In the U.S., the average hourly wage in state prisons is \$0.93; in Nevada, it's \$0.13 and in Texas and Georgia it's \$0 (Wagner, 2003).

I read this quote the other day: “We find that the system of mass incarceration costs the government and families of justice-involved people at least \$182 billion every year.” Later in the article appeared a list of all the costs that had been excluded from that number. (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017)

I have to be careful about the questions I ask. After all, how much do I really want to know?

Scholars call the modern monetary interests of government and private industry in surveillance and detention the prison industrial complex.

In every state, White people are underrepresented in prisons and jails (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.). Some say we shouldn't be surprised (Alexander, 2010). The 13th amendment was the way we chose to end slavery.

In that class, I gained a new appreciation for the phrase "ignorance is bliss".

In Utah, 24% of the incarcerated population identifies as Latin@; that's compared to 13% of the state's general population (Prison Policy Initiative, n.d.).

Someone told me that ICE raided Utah's State Prisons last summer. Apparently, they deported 40 people. Information like this isn't available on the internet.

In our nation's capital, three out of four young African American men are expected to experience incarceration during their lifetime (Circle, n.d.).

Once, a formerly incarcerated Black man told me the story of how he ended up in solitary confinement after he mentioned race while on the phone with his grandma.

In this colorblind nation, racism is defined as the discussion of race.

Once, I met a seven-year-old girl at a local library. She told me that her dad was in prison. She told me that her mom was coming back from prison soon, and she couldn't wait to see her. When her twelve-year-old sister overheard, the air froze. As silence descended, you could smell the sister's shame, but the sweet seven-year-old standing in front of me didn't understand—not yet anyway.

In the U.S., between 1977 and 2004 the incarceration rate for women grew by 757% (Circle, n.d.). We shouldn't need to know how many of these women are mothers for this to matter.

Of course, as expected in the era of the New Jim Crow, the incarceration rate for women of color grew faster.

None of this seemed to have much to do with justice, but I was certainly being educated.

In the U.S., despite the reality of mass incarceration, most of us who haven't experienced incarceration don't think the penal system has anything to do with us. Foucault says we are wrong. (Foucault, 1977)

In Utah, there are two state prisons. One in Gunnison, the other just outside of Salt Lake City in Draper. The Draper prison is just across the highway from IKEA. The Gunnison prison is farther south. It's more remote, more isolated.

I've heard that the county jails and the Gunnison get to pick their occupants first. Then, whoever is left ends up in one of Draper's six facilities: Wasatch, Oquirrh, Uinta, Olympus, Promontory, or Timpanogos.

The Uinta facility houses Draper's highest security housing. Here, people really do talk to each other through little mail slots in their cell doors.

The Oquirrh facility has a geriatric ward for individuals over the age of 55. It's called "Lone Peak".

Sometimes, when people learn that I've been studying prisons, they ask me if I've ever watched *Orange is the New Black*. I think, on some level, it's an attempt to diminish the reality of mass incarceration.

The Olympus is the mental health facility. I once read a letter from someone living there—confined there. He was suicidal. He was desperate, but sending a response would have been a form of illegal communication.

In the U.S., an estimated 55% of men and 73% of women in state prisons have mental illness (Khazan, 2015).

How can it be wrong to respond to someone who just wants help, connection, and hope?

Once, I was in a prison when movement happened: A bell rang and everyone returned to their cells to be counted. It was like high school—matching uniforms marching through windowless hallways on their way to their appointed destination. Only this time, those hallways were completely silent.

The other day, I found this disclaimer on Draper prison's website: "The prison is neither equipped nor funded to deliver intensive mental-health treatment to offenders but works to do the best it can to stabilize and manage each offender in its custody." (UDC, 2018)

In Timpanogos, the women's facility, someone asked me if I was afraid of her. The thought hadn't crossed my mind, but looking through her eyes, the question seemed obvious. The mere no I offered was insufficient, but I didn't know how to tell her that I still recognized her humanity.

Which would you rather be called? A prisoner, a criminal, an inmate, or an offender. The Utah Department of Corrections has a preference towards "offender" but utilizes "inmate" from time to time as well.

In Tennessee, I visited a prison nestled in the rolling hills of Appalachia. It was fall; the colors were breathtaking and the air out there had a nice fresh smell. It was gorgeous.

I think I would prefer to be called an "inmate" if given a choice.

In the U.S., capital punishment is still legal. The following are suitable ways to perform an execution: lethal injection, electrocution, gas chamber, hanging, and firing squad (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011).

I remember being in a prison library once and wondering how many of the people around me would die within the barbed borders of that facility. Everyone in sight had white hair and wrinkles.

In the U.S., our favorite method of execution is lethal injection.

When the world deems you a criminal, it becomes so hard to keep calling yourself a human.

I wonder which is harder: looking through a chain-linked fence to see the beautiful shades of a natural world you can't touch or listening to the bustle of human interactions you can't have through cement walls.

Lethal injection is the most likely method to result in a botched execution (Sarat, 2014). Still, lethal injection is more palatable than gas chambers.

In recent years, the death penalty has faced increased opposition and logistical challenges. In the European Union, the manufacturing of lethal injection drugs was banned for human rights reasons, and in the U.S., leaked videos brought the reality of execution a bit too close for comfort.

Once, when I was 12, I visited a holocaust concentration camp. I remember the barbed wire and the images of the piled dead. Cremation, it seems, was primarily a logistical necessity.

Meanwhile, 2,817 people continue to wait for their date on death row (DPIC, 2017).

In the Draper prison, an officer showed me the spot where several people were killed when gang violence broke out a few years ago.

What do we do with all our bodies?

Sometimes I think officers just say things to get a reaction out of me, but maybe that's really all there is to talk about.

In the U.S., at least one in 20 people are sexually assaulted while behind bars (HRW, 2007). Contrary to popular belief, staff members are typically the perpetrators of these sexual assaults (HRW, 2007).

The American political philosopher, John Rawls said that justice requires the principle of fairness: the rich can get richer, but the poor shouldn't get poorer (Rawls, 1971).

The Lowell Correctional Institute in Florida is under investigation for horrendous abuse allegations. In this prison, the largest women's prison in the nation, sexual assault among many other horrors are reported to be daily occurrences. (Berkowitz, 2016)

When books are no longer fit for use at public libraries, they are often sent to prisons or jails as an act of charity.

According to international standards, solitary confinement is torture (Ginatta, 2014).

Once, an officer showed me a cart of beat up books that were ready to be taken to the super-max facility. “In super-max,” he said, “those guys have no respect; they will destroy them.” “They’ll piss on them like animals,” he said.

In the U.S., when people are not fit for school, we tend to incarcerate them. We call this the school to prison pipeline.

In the U.S., solitary confinement is legal and common practice (Ginatta, 2014).

How do we decide how much we owe to the poor?

Once, I heard about this program that showed nature videos in a solitary confinement unit. It was reported to calm both guards and incarcerated folks alike.

What do we owe each other as fellow citizens?

That nature video project was called the “blue room experiment”. It won a place on Time magazine’s list of the top 25 inventions of 2014. (Denson, 2014)

I read a description of an execution once. I can’t recall everything, but I remember the author talking about all the noise: the clanging of chains against metal bars, the whistling, the cries. The author said it was an act of solidarity.

I wonder if adding a few windows or opening a few doors would have a similar effect to the “blue room”.

I wouldn’t have expected an execution to be a loud affair. Lethal injection seems so sterile. And it’s a too late to protest the outcome.

Besides, who’s listening?

We weren't. We aren't. We cast the votes that created this reality.

Mass incarceration in the U.S. has been growing since the 1970s. It started in California, but it's now a staple of America's economic diet.

Every day, as I sit in class, learning, growing, working to create a better world, I profit off of mass incarceration—off of the prison industrial complex.

Who deserves to sit in a classroom and who deserves to sit in a cage?

Who is to blame for the poverty and violence permeate our society?

Maybe it's on all of us.

Maybe we should all carry the weight of these crimes.

Maybe we all deserve to sit in a classroom.

Maybe we all deserve dignity.

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