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### Combating Mass Incarceration Through Communication

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31 March 2022

*Combating Mass Incarceration Through Communication*

By: Rose Kores & Sara-Lou Adams

The United States has the largest prison population in the world, with over two million incarcerated prisoners. One of the contributing factors for these skyrocketing rates was the War on Drugs which began in the early 1970s in the U.S. This catalyzed incarceration by arresting citizens who participated in the illegal drug trade. This era resulted in a shift away from utilizing rehabilitation as a means to correct crimes, and instead transitioned into the usage of confinement and inhumane punishment as a form of crime correction and reduction. The majority of U.S. prisons are understaffed, unsanitary, strict, and lacking in resources. As a result, prisoners are often abused either sexually, physically, or mentally; subjected to disease; isolated; refused activities such as self-improvement and education sessions or resources; are stripped of their regular medications, and; are denied mental health services.

Wendy Sawyer, author of the article, 'Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020', relates that "American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons." (Sawyer, para. 2) This depicts the unnecessary and excessive number of individuals that are currently locked up in prisons and jails in the United States.

Art plays a significant role in aiding prisoners because it is a therapeutic channel into which prisoners can pour their emotions and aggressive tendencies. A multitude of current and past prisoners produce and display artwork in their communities with the help of local artists and volunteers. This artwork portrays the complexity of this problem to others but also educates them on the stark realities of prison life, and the effects of our fractured social justice system on

individuals, families, and our communities. In a world plagued by crime, racism, injustice, prejudice, and discrimination, art enables self-expression and encourages those voices to be heard. It can be a stepping stone for seeking justice and reform. Such reform has the power to reduce prison population numbers as well as mass incarceration as a whole. Thus, this process of reform begins with artistic and informative resources, such as podcasts, that aim at educating and engaging society about the injustices of mass incarceration.

Art can be presented in a variety of forms and mediums. Oil paintings, sculptures, and collages can depict a day in a prisoner's life or can convey the emotions or experiences of the artist to viewers. For instance, Omari Booker, a guest speaker in our Honors Fine Arts course, was a Belmont alum that was once incarcerated. Booker, previously exposed to art as a child, was reintroduced to it during his time in prison. Booker uses art to overcome the struggles of his own life. His earlier artwork reflects liberation, peace, and freedom. His work focuses on the criminal justice system, shining a light on the racial disparities that plague it.

Booker's artistic process consists of, "Leaving most of my pieces unfinished, allowing room for new ideas to blossom." He declares his pieces complete when "people begin to view or critique them." The majority of his works reflect his or other peoples' experience in prison or with oppression. Most of his pieces are sketched with charcoal, which reflects the darkness of oppression and incarceration, as well as representing the discrimination and disadvantage that face the African American community. Art is a sense of freedom for Booker. He defines freedom as feeling at peace and comfortable in his skin and skill. This shows the remarkable role art plays in the lives of prisoners, and how it can influence or inspire them to turn their lives around and enable them to succeed, all the while making their voices heard.

The issue of mass incarceration is complicated due to its deep-seated roots that have been embedded in society for centuries. The process of actively changing or reforming the broken social justice and mass incarceration systems begins with educating citizens about these issues, which will, in turn, garner the support needed to enact change. Since technology has become the staple of modern society, it is essential to use technology as a resource to connect and educate the masses. Presently, many people prefer to listen to podcasts or audible books instead of reading a physical copy of a book. Podcasts are a great educational and compatible resource for all generations and age groups.

A podcast can convey the same level of emotion and power that a typical painting or sculpture can, rather in a technological form. According to Ethan Cramer-Flood, author of the article, ‘Global Podcast Listener Forecast 2021-2025’, it is explained that, “The US leads the world in podcast listenership across every category. In 2021, 117.8 million people in the country will be monthly podcast listeners, representing 40.0% of all internet users. Coming in second in terms of penetration in Sweden, where 34.6% of internet users will listen to podcasts this year.” (Cramer-Flood, para. 1) This shows that not only is the U.S. a prominent leader in podcast listeners, podcasts are also commonly used in different countries around the world. Therefore, podcasts are a vital way to spread awareness of mass incarceration and its negative effects, both on a domestic and international spectrum.

One of the first individuals to host a podcast that covers topics such as mass incarceration and the prison system is Nigel Poor. Poor, a local San Francisco Bay artist, began her career through photography. Many of her photographs have been featured in museums and institutions around the nation. Some of her most notable works include photographs taken inside prisons, portraying the life of a prisoner. According to, ‘Podchaser’, it is explained that, “Her work has

been shown at many museums and institutions. She is interested in portraiture, how to document life, and what is worthy of preservation. In 2011 she began teaching the history of photography classes at San Quentin Prison. She has since moved away from being a solely visual artist working alone to working inside the prison with prisoners on photographic projects and producing radio stories about life inside.” (Podchaser, Para. 1) Poor currently serves as a host for the podcast, ‘Ear Hustle’, in which she debates mass incarceration and uses her photography to inspire change and discussion. Nigel’s podcast is targeted towards all audiences. She hopes to spread awareness of mass incarceration to anyone who will listen.

These statistics and individuals have played significant roles in the creation of our podcast, which is centered around mass incarceration and the prison and social justice systems. Thus, the ‘Behind Bars’ podcast was born. This conversational-style podcast addresses serious issues such as mass incarceration, inequality, racism, and the death penalty, among other topics. These issues, which have long been swept under the rug, will reach new generations, in a modern way. Each episode will include an interview with an individual that is knowledgeable or experienced in the areas of criminal justice, incarceration, and art. The first episode of this podcast series showcases an interview with Lucian E. Dervan, a certified criminal justice attorney that currently serves as a law professor at Belmont University. These interviews support the topics of the podcast and contribute to the overall conversation of change and awareness of mass incarceration.

The ‘Behind Bars’ podcast came to life through a compilation of research on mass incarceration and podcasts. After combing through podcast generator platforms and templates, the Anchor Podcasts website by Spotify was selected, and so the work began. The interview questions were specifically designed and created for this podcast based on information

researched from the Honors Fine Arts course and outside sources, as well as through the information we thought best to be initially addressed or covered. Some of the questions we posed were personal queries we desired to be answered or that we deemed important additions to the conversations being had. Seeming as we did not have access to resources such as a recording studio, high-tech microphones, or podcast equipment, the first 'Behind Bars' segment was recorded via an iPhone device. We voice recorded and then edited the interview and introduction contents of the episode. We hope to gain access to the proper equipment for future interviews and episodes, to provide the best sound quality and experience to our listeners and supporters. Possible interview subjects were selected and contacted until Lucian E. Dervan agreed to participate in the project. His credentials: a criminal defense attorney; a Belmont Law professor; and having experience in the field of mass incarceration and death row due to his past criminal defense cases, all allow him to offer detailed and insightful information that was included in the introduction episode of 'Behind Bars'.

During his interview, Dr. Dervan highlighted the startling fact that "We have an incredibly large criminal and jail population in the United States. Right now, somewhere around two million people are in prisons and jails. This represents roughly a five hundred percent increase in the last four years. Today, the U.S. represents five percent of the world population, but we represent twenty-five percent of prisoners, globally." Moreover, Dr. Dervan expressed, "In 1980, there were roughly 40,000 people incarcerated for drug offenses. In 2019, that number had reached 430,000." Finally, Dervan explained that "We have growing evidence that innocent people have been wrongly convicted of a crime and executed before having enough evidence to be proven innocent."

Our podcast includes a list of resources; different Tennessee-based organizations and nonprofits that listeners can support, via donation or through volunteerism. It also includes reading materials and books including ‘Just Mercy’, by Bryan Stevenson; Fania Davis’s, ‘Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice’; as well as James Kilgore’s, ‘Understanding Mass Incarceration’ novel. Our podcast covers trending or past news stories regarding incarceration, to introduce listeners to accounts or examples that support and expand upon these issues. These resources enable listeners to further educate themselves about mass incarceration and the importance of preventing it from maintaining a negative and unjust grip on society, especially in impoverished and minority communities.

Poor and minority communities bear the brunt of incarceration and crime, seeming as their circumstances are ideal targets for police forces, following years of institutional prejudice and racial bias. Bryan Stevenson, author of the novel, ‘Just Mercy’ relates the key concepts that, “1 out of 3 black men is currently on probation, parole, or is imprisoned.” Additionally, he discloses that “The system of justice in the U.S. today is centered primarily around the impoverished as well as those of color. It is estimated that in the next ten years voting disenfranchisement will have surpassed rates before those of the Voting Rights Act times.” (Stevenson, Just Mercy) In addition, according to the article, “Criminal Justice Fact Sheet”, created by the NAACP, it is revealed that, “A Black person is five times more likely to be stopped without just cause than a white person.” (NAACP, Para. 2) Further, it is stipulated that “65% of Black adults have felt targeted because of their race. Similarly, approximately 35% of Latino and Asian adults have felt targeted because of race.” (NAACP, Para. 2)

Due to their lack of financial resources, low-income and minority families are often strapped for money and unable to finance the trials that follow an arrest or even to send their

loved ones necessities such as hygiene products, during their time in prison. Furthermore, these families are likely to experience a devastating ripple effect of arrests. Once a family experiences an arrest, it is likely for other members of the family to eventually be incarcerated. This is due to several factors, such as the influence of crime on children, or the family's financial state worsening upon experiencing an arrest. Hence, action must be taken to prevent further impoverished and minority communities from being subjected to and targeted by the injustices of a broken social justice system.

It is these groups that compose the vast majority of the United States prison population. By utilizing artwork and podcasts such as 'Behind Bars', we are making long-overdue headway in the fight against mass incarceration. This progress, however, must begin by spreading awareness and education about this dilemma. Our goal is to educate the greater Belmont and Nashville communities about the adverse effects of mass incarceration through communication and education via an accessible and efficient podcasting platform. Therefore, beneficial and sustainable change that will eliminate and reform the prejudicial incarceration systems that have dominated American society for centuries, will be made.



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