



Student Work

1-24-2023

Topics Christians Should Discuss: Mass Incarceration (Part 1)

Joya Schreurs

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/student_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Topics Christians Should Discuss: Mass Incarceration (Part 1)

Joya Schreurs

January 24, 2023

What do we talk about? In Christian circles, some topics receive little attention or thoughtful conversation because of difficult subject matter. We hope this iAt series “Topics Christians Should Discuss” provides meaningful content for you to ponder, and we encourage you to begin or continue hearty conversations as a result of what you read. Leave a comment if there is a topic you’d like us to address.

In praying, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” the church—in word—submits itself to God’s willed shape of life. However, these requests often land weakly at God’s throne, inanimate from our refusal to suspend our comfort to make them reality. Our faith becomes characterized by sloth and complacency, lacking the vigorous application to culture we uphold in the Reformed tradition.

One societal ill currently demanding our Christian engagement is the crisis of mass incarceration in the United States. While literally millions of American citizens are imprisoned in a discriminatory system¹ that prioritizes profit over persons, the church has remained, as declared by one believer and scholar, “eerily silent.”²

This injustice must awaken the witness of the proximal church. We must learn what the LORD requires of us in the face of sin that runs so staggeringly wide and deep, reapplying the directives of Scripture and turning to the wisdom of brothers and sisters acutely affected by and especially knowledgeable about mass incarceration. In this process, the church gains concrete instruction to approach an otherwise hopelessly vast issue; wisdom to bridge the gap between God’s kingdom and our role in its coming. As mass incarceration is a crisis developed over decades and convoluted by evil from every side, our knowledge of it can never be exhaustive and our efforts against it can never be enough. However, our actions both can and should be direct refusals of injustice and infused with compassion for all impacted parties.

To begin understanding how incarceration became “mass” and fraught with inequity, some statistics are in order. Despite decreasing crime rates, the national prison population has skyrocketed, with an increase from 350,000 to over 2.3 billion in the past thirty years

alone.³ The racial demographic of this population is also troubling, with Black citizens being incarcerated at a rate over five times higher than that of white citizens, despite white people making up over five times more of the United States' population.⁴ In fact, while a remarkable one in seventeen white men will serve prison time in their lifetimes, so will a staggering one in six Latino men and one in three Black men.⁵ The hold of private companies on this system, which financially benefit from keeping prisons filled, further intensify this issue. Due to the racialized roots of mass incarceration and corrupt privatization that values profit over humanity, the church must harness these axioms to enact minority justice on individual, communal, and political levels.

The national motion towards mass, discriminatory imprisonment was largely activated by Richard Nixon's subliminal baptism of the 1950's "law and order" movement that formed in opposition to Civil Rights activism. The current crime rate, according to Nixon, could "be traced directly to the spread of the corrosive doctrine that every citizen possesses an inherent right to decide for himself which laws to obey and when to disobey them."⁶ Nixon's consequent war on drugs depicted a rebellious, Black population addicted to hard drugs like heroin, thereby criminalizing the substances and the users. Ten years later, Ronald Reagan capitalized on this sentiment in his 1980 "tough on crime" initiative, which sought national morality through aggressive street policing, particularly in low-income communities. Denigrating welfare recipients and targeting users of crack cocaine, new policies crushed Black citizens already disadvantaged economically and geographically.⁷

Prisoners—both the fresh "street criminal" wave in the 1970s and 80s and today's continuously racialized input—enter a system that profits from their inability to be liberated. Privatized prisons, contracted by the government and owned by third parties, were implemented to deflect governmental costs from already high prison populations. However, as private companies seek to increase their profit, the institutions have only increased the volume of prisoners in the United States. Rather than cutting down on federal expenses, private prison companies seek to fill all available spaces, making government costs balloon as more prisons are needed. The motivation of profit over rehabilitation promotes poor inmate care, overcrowding, low guard-to-inmate ratios, and extended sentences.⁸

So then, this is where we stand. The church is confronted with perverted societal narratives that have cemented racial prejudice further into the fabric of our nation and monetized retribution instead of enacting rehabilitation. As mass incarceration has many sides, so our approach must take many forms—individual, familial, communal, systemic—and angles—religious, political, social economic. Continually looking to Christ as our example, heeding the voice of the Holy Spirit, and valuing every element of God's good creation, we will articulate basic principles of our Christian faith to enlighten our response to mass incarceration and, using the wisdom of the Reformed tradition, let them work in this confluence of faith and culture.

1. Correction: The original publishing included an incorrect amount of “billions.” The article has been corrected to “millions”. According to Pew Research in 2019, nearly 2.1 million people are behind bars. Also, “the U.S. incarcerates a larger share of its population than any other country” (2021).
2. Dominique Dubois Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores* (Westmont, IL: Ivp Books, 2018), 4.
3. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*(UK: Penguin Books, 2020), 93.
4. Peter Wagner and Daniel Kopf, “The Racial Geography of Mass Incarceration,” (Prison Policy Initiative, 2015), 2.
5. Bernie Sanders, “Abolish For-Profit Prisons,” *Ending Mass Incarceration* (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019), 3.
6. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,41.
7. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 50.
8. Lucas Anderson, “Kicking the National Habit: The Legal and Policy Arguments for Abolishing Private Prison Contracts,” *Public Contract Law Journal* 39, no. 1 (2009), 114-117.