Dismantling Mass Incarceration: An Actionable Guide to Dismantling the Systemic Issue of Mass Incarceration in the United States

An actionable guide to dismantling the systemic issue of mass incarceration in the United States

Based on the CLU Exchange event held on March 25th, 2017

claremontlincoln.edu/engage
THE ISSUE

The United States imprisons more people than any other country.

In 1970, the prison population consisted of 357,292 people incarcerated. By 2014, the prison population in the United States consisted of 2,306,200 people incarcerated—a population increase of 545%, according to The Sentencing Project.

How did the United States get to this point? The groundbreaking documentary film 13th has an answer: Go back in history to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery and freed enslaved people nationwide. The amendment states:

NEITHER SLAVERY NOR INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE, EXCEPT AS PUNISHMENT FOR CRIME, WHERE OF THE PARTY SHALL HAVE BEEN DULY CONVICTED, SHALL EXIST WITHIN THE UNITED STATES, OR ANY PLACE SUBJECT TO THEIR JURISDICTION.

The Netflix documentary by Ava DuVernay proposes that this key phrase—“except as punishment for crime”—established a constitutional and historical precedent to criminalize mass majorities of people to produce the system of mass incarceration that is seen today. Author of The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander states, “The system of mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs and institutions that collectively ensure the subordinate status of a group defined by race.”

According to the ACLU:

- $80 Billion – The United States spends over $80 billion on incarceration each year.
- 10X – Black people are incarcerated for drug offenses at a rate 10 times greater than that of white people, despite the fact that black and white people use drugs at roughly the same rates.
- $20,000 - $50,000 – Local, state, and federal governments spend anywhere from $20-50K annually to keep an individual behind bars.

This guide aims to empower readers to take action, work towards restorative justice, and positively change the harmful system of mass incarceration.
THE SOLUTION

Dismantling mass incarceration must include awareness, reform, and action.

In order to dismantle the systemic issue of mass incarceration, it involves a three-pronged solution. Based on the recommendations culminating from the Exchange event on March 25th, 2017, the solution comprises of the following:

1. ADVOCATE FOR AWARENESS
2. SUPPORT LEGISLATION FOR REFORM
3. ORGANIZE LOCALLY FOR ACTION

Tackling a national, systemic issue like mass incarceration must begin at a local, individualized level. First, to tackle mass incarceration, the issue must be more widely recognized. One must advocate and raise awareness of the impact that mass incarceration has on local communities.

Second, the criminal justice system must be reformed at the local, state, and federal levels. However, the most important level to affect change is at the local level by supporting local legislation that affects various components of the criminal justice system.

Lastly, there must be a consistent, organized effort to keep the issue of mass incarceration at the forefront and help support various efforts for rehabilitation, re-entry, and education for those affected by mass incarceration.

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander helped to influence the proposed solution with Alexander’s three-part approach of consciousness-raising, an ‘underground railroad’ of support, and organizing for abolition of mass incarceration.
ADVOCATE FOR AWARENESS

“Educate others on mass incarceration every day, every second, everywhere you are.” - Dr. Baz Dreisinger, CLU Exchange, March 25th, 2017

Awareness is vital to dismantling mass incarceration. Being more informed with the issue of mass incarceration will better enable you to take action on this issue. It’s also important to advocate for those that have been affected by this systemic issue and make others aware of the impact mass incarceration has on your local community, region, state, and the whole nation. You can even start advocating for awareness by tackling commonly repeated myths about the system of incarceration in the United States (See The Facts on Mass Incarceration in the Printables section).

Michelle Alexander suggests the following on advocating for awareness:

“Consciousness-raising [will begin an] awakening within communities of all colors: building an underground railroad that will provide support to all those directly impacted by the system; and organizing for abolition of the system of mass incarceration as a whole, including advocacy to end the drug war, to end discrimination against people branded criminals, and to shift from purely punitive approach to dealing with violence and violent crime to a more rehabilitative and restorative one. This all begins with education of the issues.”

HOW YOU CAN ADVOCATE AND RAISE AWARENESS:

- Distribute The Facts on Mass Incarceration one-sheet on social media or in-person to dispel myths about mass incarceration (See Printables section).

- Watch the documentary 13th on Netflix and recommend the film to others for a concise overview of the issue.

- Learn more about the various legal and social factors that comprise the large, systemic issue of mass incarceration by visiting the following sites:
  - American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): Mass Incarceration Issue
  - The Pew Charitable Trusts—Public Safety Performance Project
Presented by Claremont Lincoln University
http://claremontlincoln.edu/engage

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- Amnesty International: Mass Incarceration in the U.S.A.
- Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)
- Equal Justice Initiative
- Vera Institute of Justice
- Southern Poverty Law Center: Criminal Justice Reform
- Brennan Center for Justice: Reducing Mass Incarceration
- Center for Constitutional Rights: Mass Incarceration

BOOKS ON MASS INCARCERATION:

*Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons Around the World* by Baz Dreisinger

Beginning in Africa and ending in Europe, *Incarceration Nations* is a first-person odyssey through the prison systems of the world. Professor, journalist, and founder of the Prison-to-College-Pipeline, Dreisinger looks into the human stories of incarcerated men and women and those who imprison them, creating a jarring, poignant view of a world to which most are denied access, and a rethinking of one of America's most far-reaching global exports: the modern prison complex. [Buy on Amazon here.](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0393358394)

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander

By targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control—relegating millions to a permanent second-class status—even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness. In the words of Benjamin Todd Jealous, president and CEO of the NAACP, this book is a “call to action.” [Buy on Amazon here.](https://www.amazon.com/dp/080707507X)
TIME Innocent: The Fight Against Wrongful Convictions by The Editors of TIME

On the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Innocence Project—which is devoted to overturning wrongful convictions—this special edition looks at some of the most compelling and confounding cases of those who've served time for crimes they didn't commit: the recently exonerated West Memphis 3, the Central Park jogger defendant; the Making a Murderer subject, Steven Avery, who served 18 years for a rape before he was proved innocent by DNA evidence. Buy on Amazon here.

Special thanks to TIME Magazine for providing copies of this TIME special edition for our Exchange event on March 25th, 2017!
SUPPORT LEGISLATION FOR REFORM

“If we say we’re about democracy, we have to be involved.” - Dr. Tessa Hicks Peterson, CLU Exchange, March 25th, 2017

One of the most important actions you can take as a constituent is civic engagement, especially as voting rights are scaled back and people who were formerly incarcerated have minimal to no voting rights at all. Taking action through the ballot box and connecting with your local representatives is vitally important to reforming the criminal justice system that powers the systemic issue of mass incarceration.

There are various legislative bills being introduced at the local state level that works to reform components of the criminal justice system, such as the bail money system, driving restrictions, and other important factors. Engaging with your representatives as an empowered voter and constituent will help affect positive change at the legislative level.

HOW TO SUPPORT REFORM LEGISLATION IN YOUR AREA:

- Identify your elected officials and local representatives. Remember to identify not just your representatives in the U.S. Senate and House, but also your State Senate and House: [http://act.commoncause.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sunlight_advocacy_list_page](http://act.commoncause.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sunlight_advocacy_list_page)

- Inform yourself on the legislation that comes across all of your representatives’ desks. For U.S. Congress: [https://www.govtrack.us/](https://www.govtrack.us/) For your state: [https://openstates.org/](https://openstates.org/)

- Call the offices of your representatives. Calling is the most effective method of communication as each call from a verified constituent gets tallied and given to the representative.

Sample Call Script:

“My name is [Your Name]. I am a constituent of Senator [Senator Name]/Assemblymember [Assemblymember Name], and I live in [Name of Your City]. I am calling to express my support/concern for (specific criminal justice reform issue and/or
legislative bill) and I look forward to seeing the Senator’s/Assemblymember’s (support/disapproval). Thank you."

- Send an email of support or concern to all of your representatives regarding key criminal justice reform issues.

- Send a written letter of support to your representatives about the particular issue you’re concerned with.

- Join legislative advocacy groups in your area. Some groups you can start with is your political party’s local committee or by forming a group at your local representative’s town halls.
ORGANIZE LOCALLY FOR ACTION


Change begins locally, so the most important action you can take regarding mass incarceration is to organize. By joining together with other change-makers in your area, you can organize to effect local, positive change regarding the issue of mass incarceration.

Luckily, there’s multiple organizations, advocacy groups, and campaigns that already exist that you can help support or join.

SOME ORGANIZATIONS & CAMPAIGNS YOU CAN SUPPORT OR JOIN:

- **California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement** – An organization whose mission is to stop the inhumane treatment of prisoners within the California Penal System, especially those hold in solitary confinement and administrative housing units.

- **Prison of Peace** – Since early 2010, Prison of Peace has been working with incarcerated women and men throughout California to enhance opportunities for rehabilitation through conflict resolution practices.

- **The Prison Library Project by the Claremont Forum** – The Prison Library Project’s mission is to provide free reading materials to people who are incarcerated nationwide.

- **Legal Services for Prisoners with Children** – The organization's core belief is that incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people have the right and responsibility to speak and be heard in their own voices, transform their lives and communities, and fully participate in all aspects of society.

- **The Prison-to-College Pipeline (P2CP)** – P2CP is an innovative education program founded by John Jay English professor Dr. Baz Dreisinger and provides prisoners with access to public university-level education, mentorship, and community support to increase their chances of timely graduation and employment upon release.

- **Ban the Box** – This campaign calls for removing the question and check box, “Have you been convicted by a court?” from applications for employment, housing, public benefits, insurance, loans and other services.

- **Voting Rights for All** – This campaign focuses on voter education and voter registration so formerly incarcerated people and people in jail know what their voting rights are.
• **Clean Slate** – This campaign focuses on working with legal advocates and service providers to aid people with certain criminal conviction records to get those records dismissed and apply for pardons and certificates of rehabilitation.

• **Response to Realignment** – In response to changes in California’s criminal justice policies over the past few years, aka “Realignment,” this group focuses on organizing campaigns to stop jail expansion and support alternative proposals and visions for public safety.

• **Oppose Gang Injunctions and Gang Databases** – In Oakland, All of Us or None worked with other community organizations to win modifications in current injunctions and a moratorium against any new injunctions.

• **California Coalition for Women Prisoners** – This grassroots organization fights for the rights of incarcerated women; publishes *The Fire Inside*, a bi-monthly newsletter by and about women in prison.

• **California Prison Focus** – This grassroots organization works to stop human rights violations, improve medical care, and end isolation units in California prisons.

• **California Prison Moratorium Project** – This grassroots organization works to stop prison construction.

• **Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB)** – This alliance of organizations is concerned with state budget priorities and is dedicated to reducing the number of prisons and prisoners in California.

• **Families to Amend Three Strikes (FACTS)** – A statewide California organization working to amend California’s Three Strikes Law.

• **Justice Now** – Law clinic focused on the needs of women prisoners in the areas of compassionate release, healthcare access, defense of parental rights, sentencing mitigation, and placement in community programs.

• **Prison Activist Resource Center** – A volunteer prison abolitionist group that exposes prison conditions and the role prisons play. Publishes a resource guide.

• **Prison Hunger Strike Solidarity** - Coalition based in the Bay Area made up of grassroots organizations and community members committed to amplifying the voices of and supporting the prisoners at Pelican Bay and other California prisons while on hunger strike.

• **Project WHAT! ("We're Here And Talking")** - A training program staffed by youth that raises awareness about the effects of parental incarceration on children, with the long-term goal of improving services and policies that affect these children.

• **Stop the Injunctions Coalition** - A diverse group of concerned community members fighting gang injunctions in Oakland and advocating for effective approaches to issues of crime and violence which address root causes.
• **Youth Justice Coalition** - Working to build a youth, family and prisoner-led movement to challenge race, gender and class inequality in Los Angeles County’s and California’s juvenile injustice systems.

• **Partnership for Safety and Justice** - Advocates for progressive prison reform in Oregon.

• **The Correctional Association of New York** - Through monitoring, research, public education and policy recommendations, the Correctional Association strives to make the administration of justice in New York State more fair, efficient and humane.

• **ACLU Prisoner Rights Project** - National branch of the ACLU involved in impact litigation regarding conditions of confinement.

• **American Friends Service Committee** - A Quaker organization devoted to service, development, and peace programs, including a special focus on prisons. AFSC opposes maximum security prisons, lockdowns and the death penalty, and works to improve prison conditions.

• **Center for Constitutional Rights** - Dedicated to advancing and protecting the rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

• **Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice** - A national organization working to reduce society’s reliance on the use of incarceration as a solution to social problems.

• **Critical Resistance** - A national organization devoted to stopping the expansion of the Prison Industrial Complex.

• **Death Penalty Focus** - A national membership organization fighting against the death penalty.

• **Drug Policy Alliance** - Fights for drug policies based on science, compassion, health and human rights.

• **Families Against Mandatory Minimums** - National organization working to reform federal and state mandatory minimum sentencing laws.

• **FedCURE** - Focuses on advocacy on behalf of the federal inmate population.

• **Freedom Archives** - An organization that manages over 5000 hours of audio tape recordings from the late 60’s through the mid-90’s that chronicles the progressive history of the Bay Area, United States, and international solidarity movements.

• **Just Detention International** - A small national organization dedicated to combating the rape of prisoners; also provides limited assistance to survivors of jailhouse rape.

• **Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation** - A national anti-capital punishment organization comprised of family members of murder victims.

• **National Advocates for Pregnant Women (NAPW)** - An organization that works to secure the human and civil rights, health and welfare of all women, focusing particularly on
pregnant and parenting women, and those who are most vulnerable – low income women, women of color, and drug-using women.

- **The November Coalition** - A grassroots organization working to expose the sham and end the War on Drugs.
- **Real Cost of Prisons Project** - Brings together prison/justice policy activists with political economists to create popular education workshops and materials which explore both the immediate and long-term costs of incarceration on the individual, her/his family, community and the nation.
- **The Rebecca Project for Human Rights** - A national legal and policy organization that advocates for public policy reform, justice and dignity for vulnerable families, including those dealing with incarceration.
- **Transgender, Gender Variant and Intersex Justice Project (TGIJP)** - An organization whose mission is to challenge and end the human rights abuses committed against transgender, gender variant/genderqueer, and intersex people in California prisons and beyond.

This list of organizations, campaigns, and groups is not at all a comprehensive list. If there are other organizations in your area or anywhere in the world that you want to support or join, add them to your own personal organization list. And if there’s a particular issue in the large, systemic issue of mass incarceration that you would like to organize around, feel free to gather up a group of your own!
CONCLUSION

“Mass incarceration affects you, whether you know it or not. And the question I want you to answer today is, ‘What can I do to change this?’” - Dr. David Carter, CLU Exchange, March 25th, 2017

This guide was written to provide actionable steps anyone can take to dismantling mass incarceration—whether you’re just beginning to engage with the issue or if you’ve been organizing around the issue for years. Our goal is that everyone who learns about this systemic issue turns that learning into practice. With an organized, local effort of passionate individuals who want positive social change, we truly believe that, block by block, we can all dismantle mass incarceration together.

ABOUT CLAREMONT LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

Founded in 2010, CLU is a unique, pluralistic graduate university that offers innovative, 21st Century educational programs with a secular global perspective designed to bridge the social divides. Their mission is to put ideas and ideals into action utilizing their proprietary Claremont Core® methodology of cultivating the engagement skills of mindfulness, dialogue and collaboration that transcend cultural, religious, ideological, and economic barriers. The university offers Masters programs in Social Impact, Ethical Leadership and Interfaith Action. Students are taught to integrate self-knowledge with critical perspectives and contemporary skills to create sustainable social change.

For more information visit http://www.claremontlincoln.edu/ or connect on Twitter @C_Lincoln_Univ and Facebook at www.facebook.com/claremontlincoln.
THE FACTS ON MASS INCARCERATION

There are many myths about mass incarceration that simply aren’t true. Here are the facts.

- **Myth #1: Surging incarceration rates can be explained by crime rates.**
  Fact #1: Crime rates have declined substantially since the early 1990s, but the National Research Council concluded that incarceration was not a large factor in the decrease. ([The Sentencing Project](https://www.sentencingproject.org))

- **Myth #2: Most people cycling in and out of the criminal justice system are violent offenders.**
  Fact #2: 46% of people incarcerated in state prisons in 2015 were convicted of nonviolent drug, property or public order crimes. ([The Sentencing Project](https://www.sentencingproject.org))

- **Myth #3: People of color are more likely to use and sell illegal drugs than whites.**
  Fact #3: Black people use drugs at roughly the same rates as white people but are 3 to 5 times more likely to be arrested. ([Southern Poverty Law Center](https://www.splcenter.org))

- **Myth #4: The U.S. Constitution’s guarantee of “equal protection under the law” protects racial minorities from bias in the criminal justice system.**
  Fact #4: Sentencing policies, implicit racial bias, and socioeconomic equity contribute to making people of color 67% of the prison population, despite PoCs being only 37% of the U.S. population. ([The Sentencing Project](https://www.sentencingproject.org))
ACTION CHECKLIST ON MASS INCARCERATION

There are a few easy ways to take action on dismantling mass incarceration.

- Host a viewing of the documentary 13th on Netflix.
- Read The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander.
- Read Incarceration Nations by Baz Dreisinger.
- Text RESIST to 50409 to turn your text messages into daily letters to Congress about criminal justice reform. [https://resistbot.io/](https://resistbot.io/)
- Call your local representatives and voice your concerns about the criminal justice system and mass incarceration.
- Donate to the ACLU, which tackles mass incarceration and other human rights violations in the U.S. [https://www.aclu.org/issues/mass-incarceration](https://www.aclu.org/issues/mass-incarceration)
- Volunteer to organizations that address various issues within mass incarceration, such as re-entry, rehabilitation, solitary confinement, etc.
- Join local advocacy groups in your community, region, or state.