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America's Deep Rooted Division in Race

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AUSTIN POWELL IS A THIRD YEAR STUDENT FROM CORINTH, MS WHO IS MAJORING IN PUBLIC POLICY LEADERSHIP AND PHILOSOPHY. HIS PAPER WAS EDITED BY DR. MARVIN KING, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE.

INTRODUCTION

In Book V of Plato’s Republic, Plato’s Socrates asks, “Is there any greater evil we can mention for a city than that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or any greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one?” Plato claims that, as a city there is no greater good than unity for its people, whereas disunity is detrimental to the state’s atmosphere. Recently, Americans have perceived racially based conflicts as a divisive issue. The issue of older white male police officers killing unarmed black males during arrests have contributed to the dialectic of the underlying problem of the mentality in the police force and the criminal justice system as a whole. The aforementioned mentality is derived from the outlook behind Loic Wacquant’s phenomenon of ‘hyper-incarceration’, the idea that current incarceration rates of African American males are much more higher and excessive in comparison to any other ethnic group. Wacquant explains the mentality taken by the American police force, criminal courts, and prisons to target individuals, mainly young African American men residing in the ghetto, as individual discrimination based on double selectivity: race, and social class. Plato would agree that hyper-incarceration generates issues – “a great evil” – that trigger division among cities like Baltimore, and nations like the United States of America. Although the problems of hyper-incarceration are too big to solve short term, I maintain that policymakers should make changes necessary to diminish the overall targeted African American male prison population and the recidivism rate, in the case the percent of people post-incarceration returning to criminal activity and/or prison.

First, a succinct overview of the American criminal justice system climate followed by an illustration of racial disparity between African American males and Caucasian males. This paper will also identify the specific obstacles of race and poverty African American males experience before even reaching the courtroom, as well as relate the obstacles that other groups may or may not have. In addition, I will address how hyper-incarceration encourages felony disenfranchisement as it intensifies the division among citizens by marginalizing the targeted group – African American men – from participating in democracy. Bryan Stevenson, for instance, claims that the American criminal justice system distorts race and poverty to attest that wealth, not culpability, influences the outcome for some. However, some continue to argue that

2 Wacquant, Loic. “Class, Race, & Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America”. Daedalus.74-90.Print
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
America should be “tough-on-crime” by focusing on the “war on drugs”, which can be interpreted by other groups as a war on communities of color. I will oppose the position of “tough-on-crime” by illustrating how financially irresponsible hyper-incarceration, due to the “war on drugs,” is on state and federal budgets. Aristotle claims that the aims of each representative are to make society good by habituating them. Aristotle’s understanding strengthens my view that tax funded educational programs in and out of prison will inculcate positive dialectic among society and diminish not only the overall targeted population, but also the likelihood of the increased recidivism rates.

GROWING INCARCERATION IN AMERICA (OVERVIEW)
The United States has the world’s largest criminal justice system. The number of individuals incarcerated grew from 200,000 inmates to over 2.2 million prisoners serving sentences in jails and prisons across the country. The changes in public policy, not in crime rates, can explain the increase. According to the Pew research center, America only holds five percent of the world’s population, but claims twenty five percent of the world’s prison population. Since 1982, the number of Americans who have been convicted, on parole, or probation has risen from 2.1 to 7.3 million. Due to the preceding information, it is understood that the overall prison population is rising. Bryan Stevenson, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), created the Equal Justice Initiative to “provide(s) legal representation to [underprivileged] defendants and prisoners who have been denied fair and just treatment in the legal system”. It is because of hyper-incarceration and the double selectivity mentality that there is racial disparity within our criminal justice system, and Stevenson wants to lead the reform for different groups who have been marginalized by poverty or race. In order to understand that Stevenson’s idea that racial disparity aligns with Wacquant’s idea, hyper-incarceration and its effects must be illustrated.

HYPER-INCARCERATION
Hyper-incarceration reflects the current and excessive amount of young African American males in prison as compared to other ethnic groups incarceration rates. If the targeted group’s trends continues, one in every three black males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime – compared to one of every six Latino males or one of every seventeen white males. Of the 2.2 million prisoners, African Americans make up roughly one million of the total inmates population, and they are imprisoned at nearly six times the rate of whites. For African American men over the age of thirty, on any given day any one out of ten are in prison.

Racial disparity is depicted through the lens of juvenile and life sentences, “tough-on-crime” drug policies, and in felon disenfranchisement policies after prison. In the United States with the decreasing use of juvenile facilities, though this varies by state, children can be tried and sentenced as adults. Children of color enter the system more often than white youth, and

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8 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Stevenson, Bryan. "Transcript of "We Need to Talk about an Injustice"" Bryan Stevenson: We Need to Talk about an Injustice. TED, Mar. 2012. Web. 09 May 2015.
14 Ibid.
are more likely to serve a longer sentence. Although there is a decrease of prisoners serving life sentences because of violent crimes, there is still an increase of life sentences received. In 2012, 47.2 percent of men serving life are black, compared to the 34.7 percent of white inmates serving life. Additionally, after prison, inmates expect to return to the basic freedoms and liberties they once enjoyed. However, in 48 states that is not the case due to the disenfranchisement of felons. Of the 5.85 million disenfranchised voters in America, 75 percent are currently not in jail or prison. According to the Sentencing project, 7.66 percent of the African Americans are disenfranchised, compared to 2.5 percent of whites. These examples of racial disparity imply that hyperincarceration affects the black race more profoundly in comparison to other groups.

SOCIAL AND RACIAL OBSTACLES

Socrates comments on the notion that the wealthy live morally easier lives when he says, “Cephalos, I suppose that the majority of people don’t agree, they think that you bear old age more easily not because of the way you live but because your wealthy, for the wealthy, they say, have many [comforts].” A series of experiments performed by researches at the University of Warwick, Harvard, and Princeton put this concept to test. As a result they found that “low-income people who were primed to think about financial problems performed poorly on a series of cognitive tests”. In other words, people afflicted with poverty “lost thirteen IQ points or comparable cognitive skills that’s been observed between chronic alcoholics and normal adults”. The condition of poverty directly affects the cognitive skills of the brain whereas the rich subject did not result in any cognitive changes. Cognitive skills include basic every day skills like a person’s ability to reason, make decisions and judgments, produce memories, comprehend situations. Having established that the rich were not cognitively impaired as the poor, Plato would agree with this study’s finding and say this stems from all the comforts associated with wealth. The study’s results coincide with Plato’s idea, but also offer a new perspective about the deliberation and lifestyle of poor citizens.

Having established that people in poverty are more likely lacking cognitive resources, it seems understandable how a lapse in judgment affects many individuals – mainly young African American males. Through slavery and racial terror from Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement, African American men and women have suffered from racial and economic injustices. Today, the average white family is wealthier than black and Hispanic families at every education level. The U.S Census Bureau reported that 24.7 percent of African Americans live in poverty compared to the 8.6 percent of whites. Because race and poverty are closely woven together, economic and educational opportunities have not been as accessible for communities of color. As an illustration, the state of Mississippi has the largest percentage of Black residents per population at 38.1 percent. People like Jamelle Bouie believe Mississippi’s failures are “rooted in its violent and racist past”. On a national scale, Mississippi is frequently ranked last in education. For years, the

16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
state legislature purportedly has attempted to find different policy solutions to better the system whether it is more funding or charter schools, but usually there is no general consensus. The lack of consensus comes from Plato’s belief of disunity being a detriment to a community, but more directly a problem deep rooted in the racial past. After Brown v. Board, Mississippi saw the creation of about 35 private schools in the Mississippi Delta. These private schools were created to keep whites and blacks segregated. In a state where blacks are 3.5 times more likely to get arrested over whites, their educational needs were not fulfilled as well as they could have been. The educational opportunities are not present for some Mississippi students in certain school districts, and in return the learning curve for African Americans is further behind other students. This implies that impoverished students are more susceptible to lack in judgment and cognitive skills. In this case, the condition of poverty and race play a major role in the lives of African American males way before they even reach the court.

**“TOUGH-ON-CRIME” AND “WAR ON DRUGS”**

With an increase of prisoners incarcerated follows an increase in spending for these new prisoners. In the fiscal year of 2008, the U.S “estimated to have spent more than $47 billion of general funds on corrections, a 20-year jump of 303 percent.” The average state is paying $79 per night, and about $29,000 for each inmate. Due to the influx of arrests and convictions solely based on drugs, the federal prisons are filling up with inmates, who are not major drug dealers or have any previous criminal history. Simply, they are the ones who got caught and are a low level risk to our communities. Currently in America’s fiscal situation, a balanced budget and economic prosperity are the agendas of those running for office. When states with budget crises search for opportunities to relieve financial obligations to fund educational or health initiatives, by reevaluating mandatory sentencing and zero tolerance policies of low-risk inmates is a unique means to achieve that end.

**HABITUAL REFORMATION**

In Book II of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that “we become just people by doing just actions,” and the goal of any policymaker is to “make citizens good by habituating them.” With this in mind, I consider we seek policy reformation in not only funding educational initiatives that inculcate a thirst for knowledge and just behavior among young African American males, but also in policies that extend prison reform to assure that while in prison the attitudes and behaviors are corrected. In *The Republic*, Socrates illustrates a dark cave where a group of people have lived since birth, are bound to the chairs inside, and can only see what images are portrayed in front of them. A prisoner is set free and shown the truth, and the veil is lifted. The idea behind the story is to illustrate the power of education on one’s soul. Education has moved the prisoner to a closer Form of the Good.

In looking to change behavioral trends of a targeted group of people, Aristotle’s advice of developing habits is seen through a program like Inside-Out, where students and inmates interact through a “semester-long academic course, meeting once a week, through which 15 to 18

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31 Ibid.
“outside” (i.e.: undergraduate) students and the same number of “inside” (i.e.: incarcerated) students attend class together inside prison. All participants read a variety of texts and write several papers; during class sessions, students discuss issues in small and large groups.”\(^{33}\) This program cohesively ties in Plato’s idea of the dialectic and discussing the importance of issues with habituating inmates to appreciate knowledge and learning. The importance of having dialectic is to better our society, and habituating prisoners and colleges students to understand their issues enough to debate them is Aristotle’s aim. Similarly to the goals of the Inside-Out program, a beneficial idea may be have state funded initiatives that specifically saw the oversight of how the correctional facilities can be used to correct behavior. Currently, we are experiencing a time where the prison systems may not even be beneficial for the prisoners as far as correcting behavior, because it is such a dangerous culture. Developing a curriculum, which educates the prison population and continues the dialectic about the good of society can be beneficial in reducing the rate of recidivism.

**CONCLUSION**

Hyper-incarceration has created a bias and mental selectivity of race and social class to target a specific group – African Americans – and plague them with the mentality that they need to be or deserve to be in prison. Through the creation and adoption of certain policy movements like “tough-on-crime” and the “War on Drugs” that target moral behavior, African American men are targeted as the criminals in these policies. This affects the rate of men serving life sentences for drug convictions as being greater than the amount of men serving life sentences for violent crimes, and often times these are low risk men with no previous criminal record. With the mentality, that those from both of these backgrounds are more susceptible to being incarcerated creates a division in America. The division of unfair treatment based on race is a problem that people like Dr. Martin Luther King worked tirelessly to fix. However due to these policies racial divisions grow. Reflecting on the issues like the Freddie Gray case educational opportunities in low-income African American community targeting middle school and high school age males could have been used to create the dialectic style of learning and habituate them to understand their obstacles, and become more aware of their surrounding. By reflecting on Plato’s idea of unity, I draw one final conclusion – hyper-incarceration creates the racial and political divide and it is our goal to alleviate the stress, which it places on society.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


