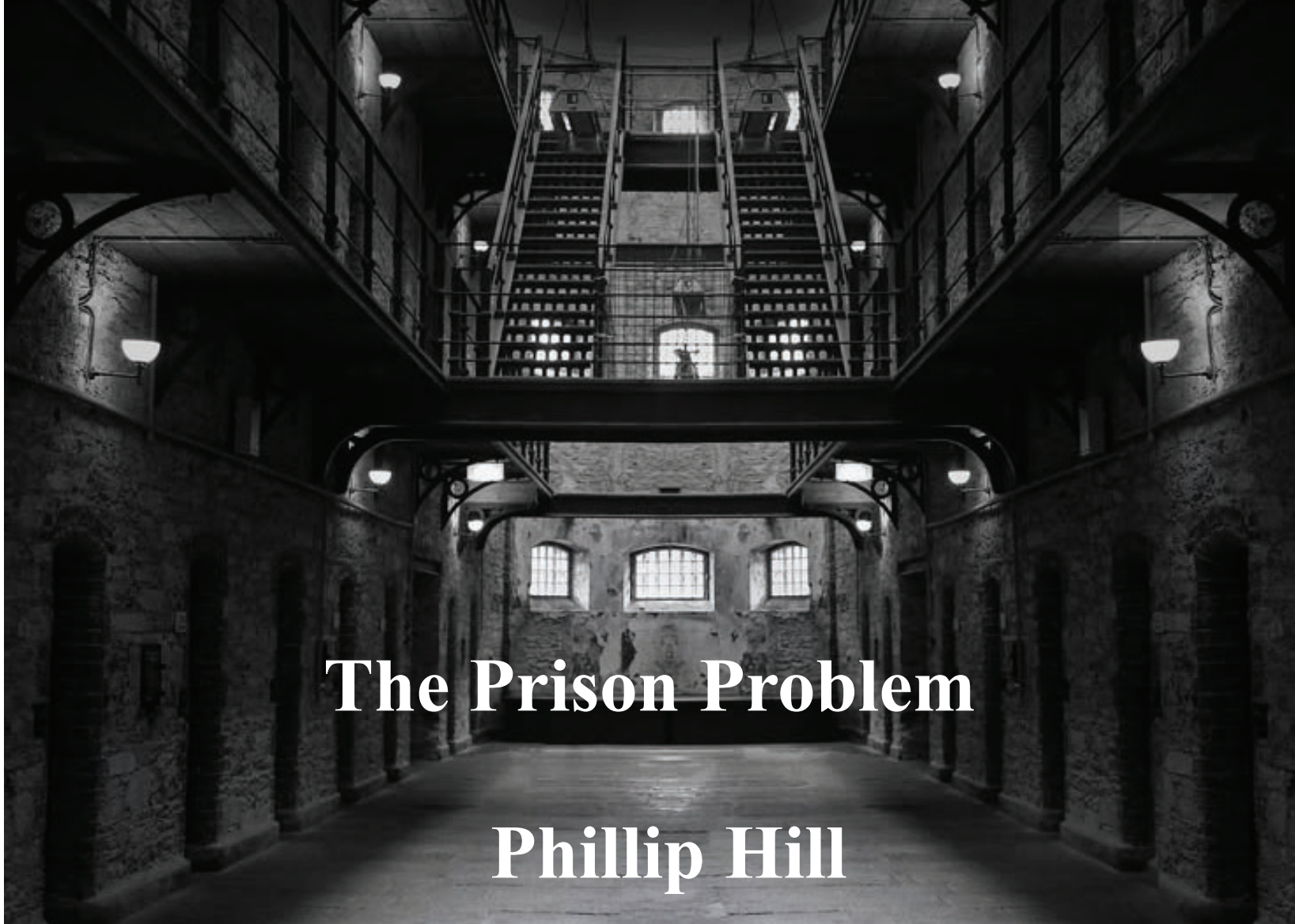




The Prison Problem

Phillip Hill

Introduction

The prison population in the United States (US) is one of the largest in the world, with over two million individuals incarcerated in state and federal prisons, jails, and detention centers. The demographics of this population reflect systemic inequities in race, socioeconomic status, and political disenfranchisement. Mass incarceration has disproportionately affected communities of color, particularly African Americans and Latino populations, creating a cycle of poverty and marginalization.

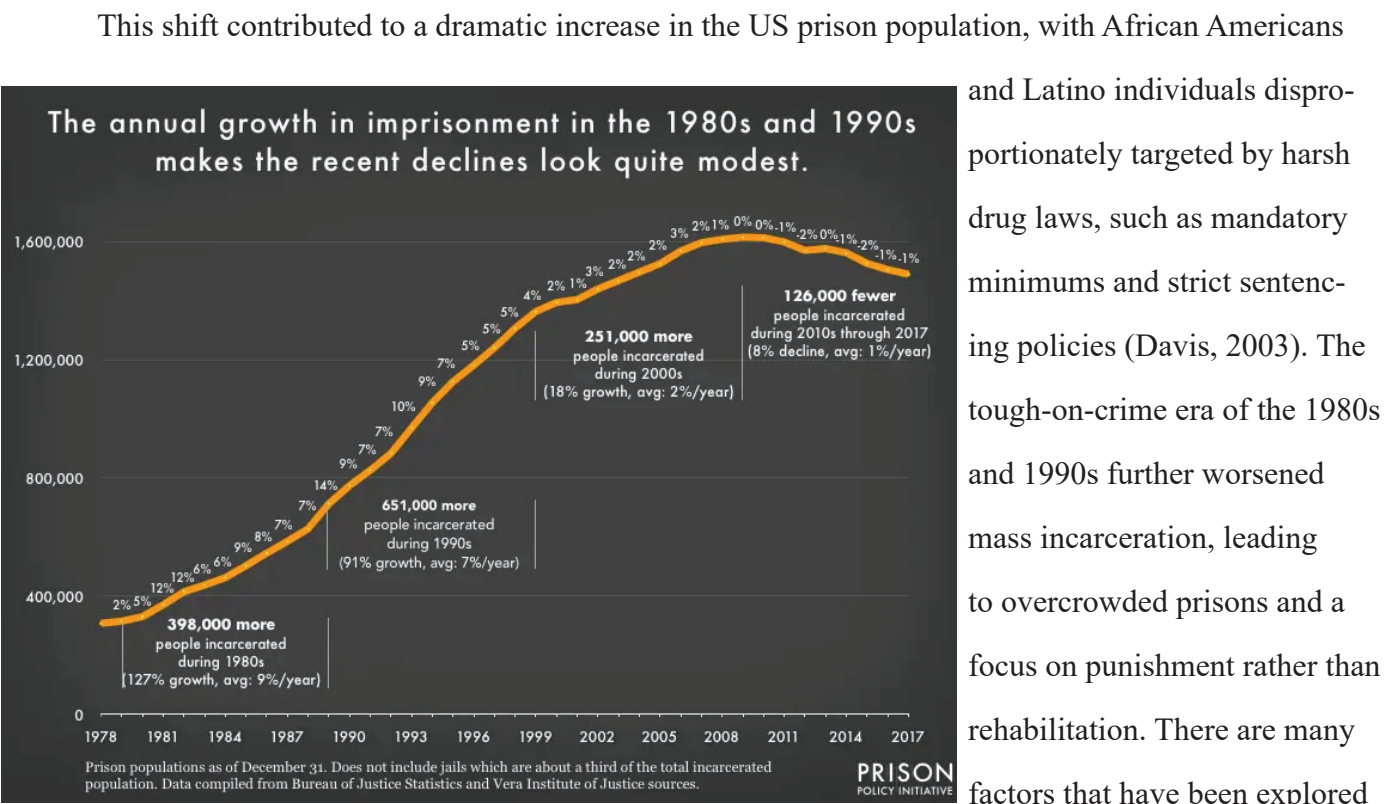
To fully understand the scope of this crisis, we must explore the history, culture, and sociopolitical-economic experiences of the prison population in the United States. Additionally, we must examine contemporary threats facing incarcerated individuals and analyze frameworks that social workers can use to affirm dignity and provide culturally grounded care when working with this population. Finally, we must understand the racial disparity that is currently and has historically targeted minority populations, specifically African American and Latino individuals. Rather than viewing these issues in isolation, this analysis examines the historical context of the prison system, contemporary challenges for incarcerated individuals, and

frameworks for affirmative social work practice to propose conclusions on how social workers can support this population and advocate for systemic betterment.

History and Identification of the Prison Population

History of the Prison System

The history of incarceration in the United States is deeply intertwined with colonialism, slavery, and racial discrimination. The US prison system evolved from early colonial jails designed to detain individuals for minor offenses to a vast punitive institution that now holds millions of individuals, many for non-violent crimes. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the prison system shifted from rehabilitation-focused approaches to a more punitive model, especially with the rise of the War on Drugs in the 1970s (Alexander, 2010).



as possible rationale as to why this racial disparity occurs, but regardless of the possible political or racial motivation, the issue is real.

Cultural Background

The cultural makeup of the US prison population reflects the systemic inequities that exist outside of prison walls. African Americans, who make up 13 percent of the US population, represent 40 percent of the incarcerated population (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Latino individuals also face high incarceration

rates, often linked to immigration policies and economic exploitation. When the COVID-19 pandemic saw the greatest decrease in prison population in recent history, it conversely saw an increase in the number of individuals incarcerated that fall into the African American and Latino categories (Valero, 2023).

Within prisons, distinct subcultures develop, with racial and ethnic identities often dictating social hierarchies and group affiliations. Prison gangs, which often form along racial lines, play a significant role in the social dynamics of prison life. These gangs serve both as a means of protection and as a way to navigate the power structures within the prison system.

Often, these gangs and the illegal activities they participate in can extend prisoner sentences because individuals find themselves facing new convictions and punishment while already in the prison system. This creates a vicious cycle that exploits an already vulnerable population. And for those who are lucky enough to find themselves released on probation or parole, the financial requirements of fines, fees, and probation costs create a never-ending cycle that preys upon the lack of resources that most felons and recently released individuals face. This is akin to predatory lending schemes similar in a sense to cash advance and pay day loan businesses, but with the threat of returning to jail as the penalty for not being able to pay.

Sociopolitical-Economic Experiences

Incarcerated individuals often come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Prior to incarceration, many individuals experience poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education. Black men lacking a high school education are five times more likely to be incarcerated than similarly situated White men (Wakefield and Wildeman, 2013). Economically, incarcerated individuals are further exploited through prison labor programs, where they are paid below minimum wage to work in industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and services. Wages can be as low as ten to fifteen cents per day for eight hours of work.

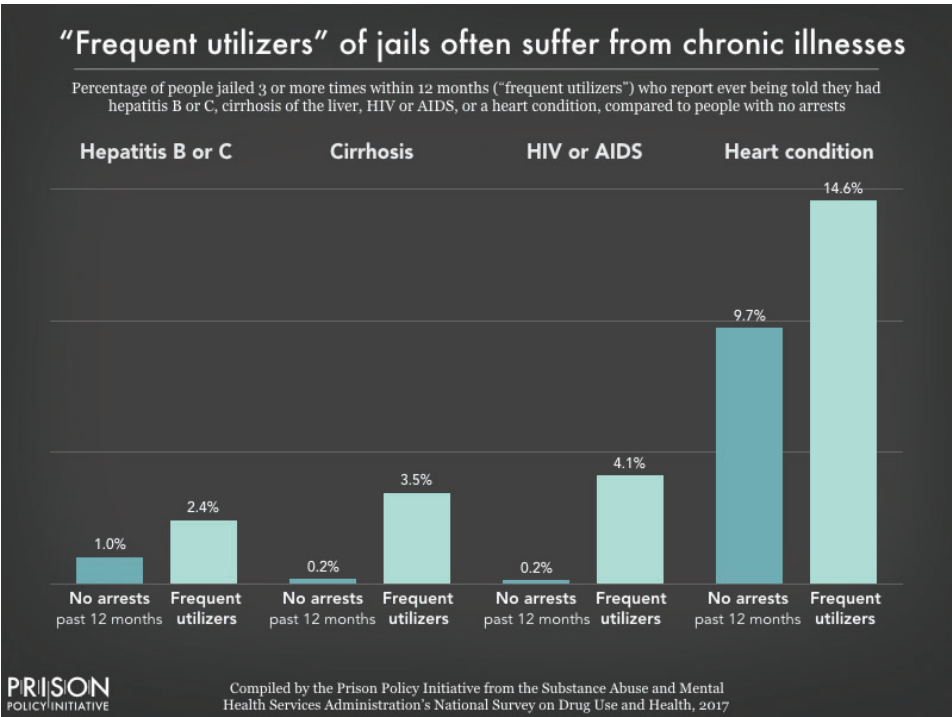


Often the money earned is then recycled back into the jails and prisons via commissary purchases that charge high markups and premiums for no clearly defined reason. An example of this would be that the cost of a package of ramen noodles in the prison system is \$1.20 as opposed to the actual real-world cost of eight to twelve cents, a 1000 percent markup. Politically, incarcerated individuals face significant disenfranchisement. Many states strip convicted felons of their right to vote, further isolating them from civic participation and perpetuating their marginalization even after release (Western, 2006). Additional losses of rights paired with the uphill climb that is navigating life with a felony record can seem like ongoing punishment despite release from incarceration.

Contemporary Threats to the Prison Population

Overcrowding and Inhumane Conditions

One of the most pressing contemporary issues in US prisons is overcrowding. Overpopulated facilities result in poor living conditions, inadequate healthcare, and increased violence among incarcerated



individuals. The prison industrial complex, fueled by the privatization of prisons, prioritizes profit over the welfare of those incarcerated. Private prisons often cut costs by reducing staff and essential services, such as educational programs, mental health resources, and nutritional standards, which leads to inhumane conditions that violate basic human rights (Dolovich, 2011).

Overcrowding also exacerbates the spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, HIV, and most recently, COVID-19, due to close quarters and limited healthcare resources (Ahalt et al., 2020). When the conviction and the subsequent incarceration of an individual means profit at any level, a vested interest in the prison population being increased and even maintained becomes very real. By allowing private entities and investors to capitalize on the suffering and caging of others, we create a modern system of slavery that

ignores the basic human needs and rights of those it exploits.

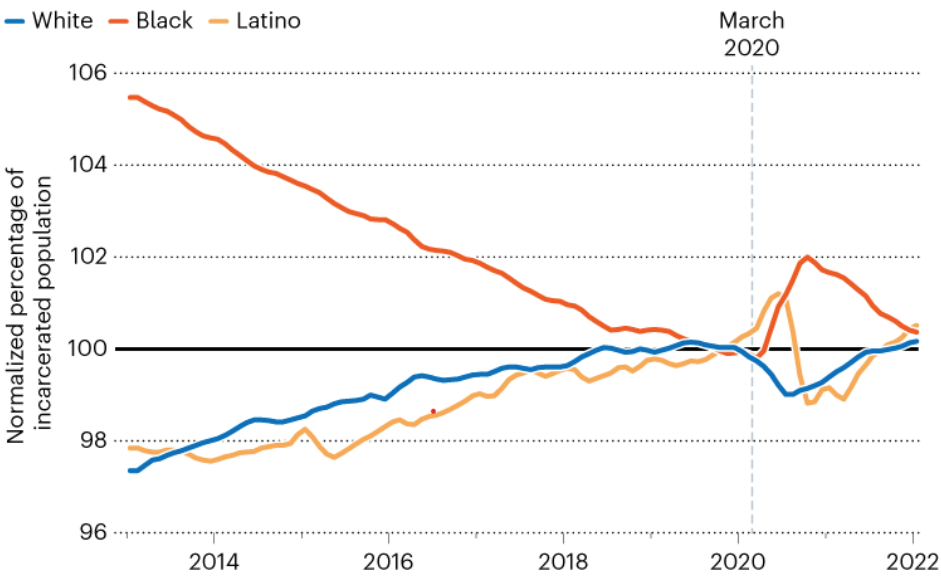
Racial Disparities in Sentencing and Incarceration

Racial disparities remain a significant factor when we look at the breakdowns of incarcerated individuals. African Americans are incarcerated at a rate five times higher than White individuals; Latino

individuals also experience disproportionately high rates of incarceration (Western, 2006). These disparities are driven by a combination of racial biases in policing, sentencing, and parole decisions. Minority groups often receive harsher sentences for the same offenses compared to White individuals, particularly for drug-related crimes, driven by policies such as three strikes laws. Additionally, Black and Latino individuals are less likely to be granted parole or receive alternative sentencing options such as probation (Alexander, 2010).

HOW COVID CHANGED RACIAL DISPARITIES IN US PRISONS

During the height of pandemic restrictions, the proportions of incarcerated people in the United States who were Black and who were Latino* rose, while the proportion who were white fell.



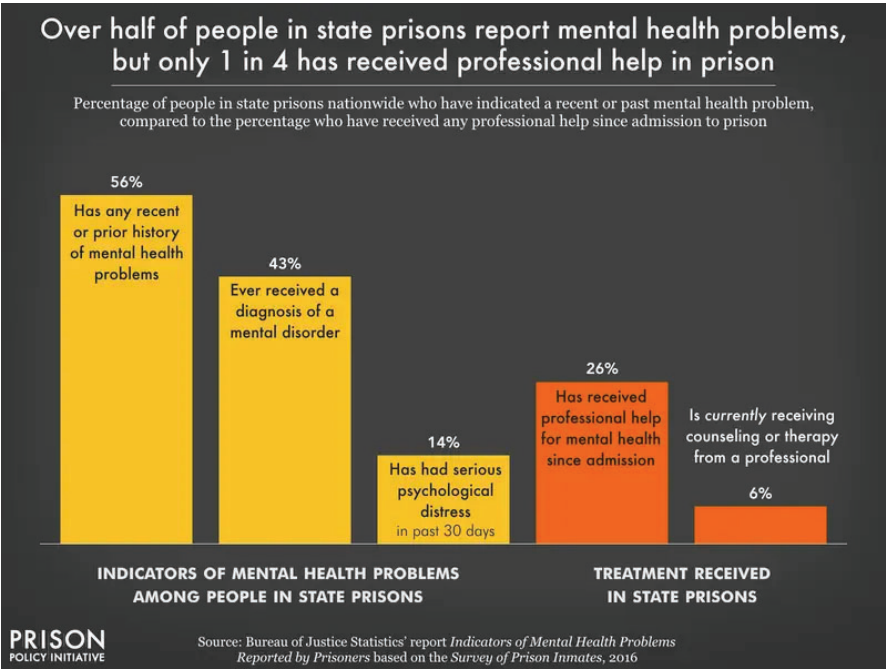
The impact of COVID-19 on the prison population was also quite telling regarding the racial disparity in the prison system. While overall prison populations decreased by record numbers, the proportion of incarcerated people who were Black and Latino increased during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the largest decrease of the US prison population in the country’s history; however compiled data shows that White people disproportionately benefited from this reduction (Valero, 2023).

Other areas that should be explored are the lack of qualified defense attorneys for marginalized populations. The reliance of these groups on the public defense system, which is strained due to overwhelming caseloads, has a massive impact on not only the quality of the defense and services provided but also the urgency of the pretrial stage of the process. This means that even when an individual finds themselves acquitted of all charged offenses, they may often have already served significant time on pretrial confinement. There is no recourse for these individuals to be compensated for the irrevocable damage that comes from

being erroneously removed from society for extended periods of time, sometimes even multiple years.

Health Disparities

Incarcerated individuals face substantial health disparities, with many experiencing untreated physical and mental health conditions. Mental health services are particularly lacking in US prisons, where approximately 37 percent of incarcerated individuals have been diagnosed with a mental illness (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Often when we think of health, we fail to weigh the impact of mental health regard-



ing the total health of the individual. This is of particular concern, given the stress and impact prison can have on the mental health of the individual.

The conditions of incarceration, including isolation in solitary confinement, can exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues, leading to increased rates of suicide and self-harm among the prison population

(Cloud et al., 2016). Prison healthcare systems are often underfunded and ill-equipped to address the complex health needs of incarcerated individuals, leading to further health deterioration.

Recidivism and Lack of Rehabilitation Programs

Despite substantial evidence demonstrating that rehabilitative strategies are more effective at reducing recidivism than punitive ones, many correctional facilities continue to lack sufficient educational and vocational training opportunities. The cycle of re-incarceration, particularly for individuals who lack access to stable housing, employment, and social support upon release, is further compounded by the absence of comprehensive rehabilitation programs within prisons (Travis et al., 2014). Recidivism rates in the US remain alarmingly high, with more than 60 percent of formerly incarcerated individuals re-arrested within three years of their release (Durose et al., 2014).

A large reason for this is the shift that has occurred in the last twenty years in the justice system. The goal of incarceration was rooted in the correction of criminal behavior by programs and services that

changed the individual and allowed them to find new means and ethics. The goal was to create productive members of society by focusing on deficiencies and creating opportunities for those who did not have any previously. The focus has now shifted to punishment, which does nothing to treat the underlying problem that caused the criminal behavior in the first place.

Human Rights Violations and Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement, a practice where individuals are isolated for 22–24 hours a day, has been widely condemned as a form of psychological torture. Prolonged isolation can lead to severe mental health deterioration, including depression, anxiety, and hallucinations (Haney, 2018). Despite international human rights organizations calling for an end to its use, solitary confinement remains a common practice in US prisons, often disproportionately applied to minority prisoners. This raises the following questions: Is there reasonable justification from a safety perspective if it severely harms the individual? Do the same rights apply to incarcerated individuals that apply to the rest of Americans? How do we balance social justice and civil rights with corrections-based positive outcomes?



Social Work Practice Framework and Methodology

Trauma-Informed Care

Many incarcerated individuals have experienced significant trauma before and during their time in prison. Social workers can use trauma-informed care frameworks to recognize the widespread impact of trauma and provide a supportive environment that fosters healing. This approach emphasizes safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, and collaboration, all of which are critical for individuals who have been subjected to the punitive and often violent environments of prison (Levenson and Grady, 2016).

This is another vital aspect that can help assist with recidivism rates due to the impact that proper mental health care can have on the total wellness of the individual. This raises the question that, instead of finding the cure for the damage done, how can we stop the damage from occurring? A larger presence of social workers in the prison system, specifically transitional programs geared toward reentry, could have profound and lasting consequences on limiting the recidivism rates.

Cultural Competency Framework

Social workers must engage in culturally competent practices when working with incarcerated populations. This means understanding the cultural, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds of those incarcerated; acknowledging systemic biases; and working to build trust. Cultural humility, which involves recognizing one’s own biases and continuously learning about the unique cultural contexts of those they serve, is crucial in creating meaningful and effective interventions (Abrams and Moio, 2009).

For instance, addressing the racial disparities in the criminal justice system requires social workers to be aware of the historical and current forms of systemic racism that contribute to mass incarceration and the understanding that privilege is not a fictional thing. The role that race and socioeconomic factors play in the social justice system cannot be discounted. Respect for experiences that might not be specific to the social workers themselves is vital in establishing a strong personal relationship with the client.

Human Rights Approach

A human rights-based approach to social work prioritizes the dignity and worth of all individuals, regardless of their incarceration status. Social workers can advocate for rights to healthcare, education, and humane treatment, as well as challenge policies that perpetuate inequality and abuse (Reichert, 2011). By framing their work within a human rights context, social workers can empower incarcerated individuals and promote systemic change. And while that is a vital aspect of improving the environment within the prison systems, the same approach needs to be applied to the aftermath of release. The stigma that felons experience regarding employment, housing, and other core needs is a perspective that is also part of the equation.

Restorative Justice Models

Another facet of social work efforts that can be improved is restorative justice, which focuses on healing and reconciliation between offenders and their communities. Social workers can incorporate restorative justice principles into their practice by facilitating dialogue between incarcerated individuals and their victims or communities, fostering a sense of accountability, and promoting rehabilitation (Braithwaite, 2002). This approach aligns with social work values by emphasizing the importance of relationships, community, and healing, rather than punishment. By working to break the cycle of criminality that can occur when healing is not a focus in the process, we work to stop individuals from returning to incarceration and stem the tide of new criminal activity, influenced by anger and misunderstandings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the prison population in the United States faces numerous challenges that are deeply rooted in history, culture, and socioeconomic disparities. From the origins of the prison system in colonial eras to the contemporary threats of overcrowding, racial disparities, and health inequities, the current model continues to harm incarcerated individuals. However, there is a path forward. By utilizing frameworks such as trauma-informed care, cultural competence, human rights-based approaches, and restorative justice, social workers can affirm the dignity of incarcerated individuals and promote culturally grounded interventions.

Moving forward, it is essential for social workers to advocate for systemic changes that address the root causes of mass incarceration and provide holistic support for this marginalized population. Only by addressing the historical precedents and current inequities can we create a system rooted in a foundation of change, as opposed to a system that feeds off oppression and vulnerable at-risk populations for profit.

References

Abrams, L. S., and Moio, J. A. (2009). CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND THE CULTURAL COMPETENCE DILEMMA IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(2), 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2009.200700109>.

Alexander, M. (2020). *The new Jim Crow: mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (Tenth Anniversary edition.). The New Press.

Braithwaite, J. (2001). *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation* (1st ed., pp. xii–xii). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195136395.001.0001>

Bureau of Justice Statistics: Correctional Populations in the United States, 2022 - Statistical Tables. (2024, May 31). *Targeted News Service*

Cloud, D. H., Parsons, J., and Delany-Brumsey, A. (2014). Addressing Mass Incarceration: A Clarion Call for Public Health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 104(3), 389–391. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301741>

Davis, A. Y. (2003). *Are prisons obsolete?* Seven Stories Press.

Durose, M. R., Cooper, A. D., and Snyder, H. N. (2014). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 30 states in 2005: patterns from 2005 to 2010*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Haney, C. (2018). The Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement: A Systematic Critique. *Crime and Justice (Chicago, Ill.)*, 47(1), 365–416. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696041>

Huq, A. Z. (2015). Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality. By Sarah Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 231 pp. \$34.95 cloth [Review of *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality*. By Sarah Wakefield and Christopher Wildeman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 231 pp. \$34.95 cloth]. *Law & Society Review*, 49(1), 282–285. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lasr.12129>

Levenson, J., and Grady, M. (2016). Childhood Adversity, Substance Abuse, and Violence: Implications for Trauma-Informed Social Work Practice. *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, 16(1–2), 24–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533256X.2016.1150853>

Reichert, E. (2011). *Social work and human rights: A foundation for policy and practice*. Columbia University Press.

Travis, J., Western, B., and Redburn, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The growth of incarceration in the United States: exploring causes and consequences* (1st ed.). National Academies Press.

Vidal Valero, M. (2023). Racial inequalities deepened in US prisons during COVID. *Nature (London)*, 616(7958), 640–640. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-01311-7>

Wakefield, S., and Wildeman, C. (2013). *Children of the prison boom: Mass incarceration and the future of American inequality*. Oxford University Press.

Western, B. (2006). *Punishment and inequality in America*. Russell Sage Foundation.

Phillip Hill is a published poet, essayist, and aspiring author. A graduate student in the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, he is an honors summa cum laude BSW graduate from UALR and a McNair Scholar. A devoted husband and father, he lives with his wife, children, and two cats.

