Locking Up Black and Brown People: Theological Responses to Race & Mass Incarceration

Introduction:

The prison population in the United States has exploded over the last 30 years. The U.S. has the highest prison population rate¹ in the world. The exponential increase is attributable in large part to the mass incarceration of people of color, in particular the lock-up of black and brown men. Many of the people serving time were sentenced for minor drug or other nonviolent offenses. Racial disparity touches every part of the system, from initial contact with law enforcement officers on the street or in traffic, to the charges leveled in court or juvenile court, to the imposed sentences for convicted offenders. While white people are more likely than any other race² to use drugs, black people are more than three times as likely³ to be arrested for possession. How can youth ministers respond with young people to the alarming rise in the prison population? How can the church bear witness to the hope of Jesus in communities that systematically experience discrimination or privilege?

In This Issue:

Articles

Amy Levad – Responding to the Prison Society p. 2
Charles Atkins – Family and Community Impact p. 3
SueJeanne Koh – Who Is My Neighbor? p. 4
James Logan – Hip Hop as a Culture of Resistance p. 5
Kermit Moss – Background and Consequences p. 6

Discussion Questions p. 8

Additional Resources p. 9


Response: Amy Levad

When I was in college, someone who is very important in my life went to prison. Over the days, months, and years that she was processed through courts, jails, prisons, and eventually a boot camp, our family—including my loved one—struggled with isolation, fear, and shame. We did our best to care for my loved one’s children. We tried to provide answers when they asked where Mommy had gone and to preserve in their little minds the idea that she was good although our society told them that prison is a place for “bad people.” We wrestled with how we had failed my loved one, with whether we could forgive her, with whether justice had been done by sending her to prison, with whether her future would look any different than a past troubled by addiction.

As we looked around our communities for support, we found little help. We found that we could not talk about my loved one and her imprisonment at work, at school, and especially at church. Despite the freeing words found in Isaiah that the spirit of the Lord has come to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to release the prisoners (61: 1), our churches did little to heal our hearts or to offer a freeing word to our loved one. Perhaps more than anywhere else, at church, we felt isolated, fearful, and ashamed.

Youth ministers are in a vital position within the church to deliver the good news of Isaiah to people impacted by mass incarceration. The experience of my family—white and middle class—speaks to the necessity of addressing the problems of mass incarceration in all Christian communities throughout the United States. We never know fully who is struggling with the surreal reality of a family member or friend caught up in our criminal justice systems. Nevertheless, we must also be aware of the extreme racial, ethnic, and class disparities in these systems, and acknowledge that the effects of mass incarceration are concentrated within certain communities. My family may have been exceptional in our community, but in some communities, incarceration has become a normal, although still devastating, experience. Especially in communities most affected by mass incarceration, youth ministers need to offer words and actions that break the bars of isolation, fear, and shame constructed by our prison society.

In the face of mass incarceration:

- Are there ways that you can provide a safe place for people to talk about loved ones who are incarcerated? Can you uphold the fundamental goodness of people who are in prison, despite the mistakes that they have made? Can you affirm that love for people in prison is not misplaced, but part of the call of Christians who worship a God who became incarnate as a convicted criminal?

- Can you provide services to bring together people who are in prison and their loved ones outside? Can you find funds for young people to make collect phone calls to a loved one in prison? Can you give a young person a ride to prison to visit a father, mother, sister, or brother? Can you be there after the visit to minister to the pain of separation?

- If you have young people in your congregation who themselves might become caught up in criminal justice systems, are there ways that you can advocate for them? If they are being suspended, expelled, stopped-and-frisked, or referred to the juvenile courts can you offer support to them and their families? Can you show up in courtrooms? Can you appear before
police review boards? Can you provide space and volunteers for restorative justice programs?

Of course, these are only a few possibilities of how youth ministers can respond to mass incarceration. Depending on your context, the appropriate responses may vary significantly. However, wherever you minister, you may find people who need inclusion instead of isolation, courage in the face of a fearful system, and unconditional love to overcome shame. For people who are struggling on the frontlines of mass incarceration, we need to begin by talking openly about the causes and effects of our nation’s reliance on prisons on individuals, families, and communities in our midst.

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Response: Charles Atkins

"Imagine...a country in which the citizens never procreate, nevertheless, the census continues to register enormous growth in the population... Each step and each position of the inhabitants are known and under surveillance. And even if the obscure “Orwellian” night has fallen, the lights are always on, somewhere..." Lennie Spitale, Prison Ministry

This description of the very real (although incredible) world of incarceration is experienced by approximately one in every one hundred adult Americans in the United States. For the last 18 years I have seen this reality up-close as I performed my duties within the fields of prison ministry and youth ministry. One of the scriptures that help me to face this reality is Mark 10:14 where Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” I have always seen this as a call for the church to introduce children to the person and work of Jesus. Children, especially the children of prisoners, should be introduced to the wisdom, knowledge, understanding, restoration, redemption, peace, hope and love of Christ.

It is not only the offender who is punished in the American criminal justice system. The families and the communities to which the incarcerated someday return often suffer as well. As an African American growing up in Camden, New Jersey—a city that has been classified as one of the most dangerous cities in America—I would see poor men and women (mainly African American) go on to supply a large percentage of the prison population in New Jersey. I have witnessed that incarceration has a damaging effect on family and kinship ties regardless of the strength of those ties. The children of prisoners are six times more likely to be incarcerated than other children. This is due, in part to the loss of financial support from the incarcerated parent and after the release of that parent s/he often has difficulty finding employers who trust them. Consequently, they are often pushed into the secondary labor market of precarious employment and stagnant wages, which damage the marriage-ability of ex-prisoners and their capacity to support families.

In addition, those poor neighborhoods that produce the poorly educated and low-skilled people who make up the majority of the imprisoned only become more impoverished as the ex-captives return to them, since they return without the capacity to bring the economic and political leadership needed to transform the disadvantaged structure of those neighborhoods. This dynamic shows the U.S. system of mass incarceration to be "part of a uniquely American system of social
The Gospel of Jesus Christ stands as a force that can transform the structure of social inequality by transforming the lives of those who are actors and victims within this system. While I support the large legal efforts to challenge and change the criminal justice system, these efforts take years and while that time is being spent, people who are currently caught up in the system need ministry. Youth ministries that include serving disadvantaged youth or, at the very least, programs that increase awareness about children of prisoners can be of great help to American society. Youth ministers can engage the American culture of incarceration by creating or joining organizations and/or programs that offer educational, emotional, and spiritual services in self-development and community-building while the larger work of transforming the racially-biased criminal justice system continues.

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Response: SueJeanne Koh

Who is my neighbor? For most of my youth, I lived in a sheltered, suburban environment outside of Philadelphia where my experiences of crime were overall limited to being warned about the dangers of drugs and seeing coverage of crime on the local news. Occasionally, I heard stories from congregation members at my Korean immigrant church or friends whose parents owned stores in certain areas of the city about violent confrontations between Korean storeowners and African Americans who lived in those communities. As an adult, only once did I hear a story about a childhood friend who ended up serving time in prison. I was shocked because he was a bright, competitive person whose childhood trajectory would not have anticipated this turn of events. But ultimately this too seemed far removed from the rhythms of my actual, daily life. Issues related to incarceration were “not in my backyard.”

I share this background because I am keenly aware that my personal experiences of the dynamics of incarceration are limited at best and naïve at the worst. Nor do I have extensive or intimate knowledge of prison ministries. But I think my vantage point is important because my experiences are similarly shared by many middle-class Christians around the country. For many, the realities of incarceration are both geographically and psychically distant. Moreover because we often frame justice in terms of retribution and isolated to the reward and punishment of individual acts, we often lose sight of incarceration’s broader context.

I am grateful to both Michelle Alexander and more recently, Amy Levad for illuminating for me how incarceration must be understood not as something that happens ‘over there’ but arises from an entanglement of race, health, and economics. The facts are these: the United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any country in the world. Of these citizens, as of 2009 black non-Hispanic men were incarcerated at six times the rate as white non-Hispanic men, and three times the rate of
Hispanic men. Incarcerated women, too, reflect similar racial and ethnic disparities in their numbers. Moreover, approximately two-thirds of incarcerated women were living with minor children before they went to state prison, bringing into sharp focus how incarceration disrupts social and family networks as well.

To reflect on these stark realities is to understand how my privilege has sheltered me from both incarcerate realities and the experience of being targeted as a suspicious, criminal presence based on my race. To realize this is to also know that I—a Christian and a citizen of the United States—must somehow participate in the patient and painful work of restorative, not retributive, justice, and how we are all linked together in this process. As a result, a Christian response to incarceration is to creatively expand our collective vision of who is part of the body of Christ, and to partake in the Eucharistic rhythms of hospitality, reconciliation, and restoration. It is to ask oneself the crucial question, who is my neighbor? It is to get a sense of prison ministries and reintegration programs in your local and regional communities, as well as see if your denomination has programs and resources. And to actively pray for the empowering of the Spirit who announces release to the prisoners (Lk. 4:18) and to work toward the dismantlement of the systems of imprisonment in this country.

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Response: James Logan

As a resource for dialoging with youth about issues concerning race and mass incarceration, Christian youth ministers ought to consider Michelle Alexander’s widely read and debated text, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness. Alexander correctly notes that mass incarceration "is a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into permanent second class citizenship." 6

Considering Alexander’s expansive definition of “mass incarceration,” youth ministers would do well to foster candid discussions about the social function of Hip Hop culture as a force working against the most recent national episodes of police violence, which lie beyond the physical incarceration of nearly one million Black residents of the nation.

The moral significance of Hip Hop as a force confronting the tragedy at Ferguson — indeed the

nation’s latest symbol of the obsessive surveillance, monetary abuse, militarized policing, mass imprisonment and authorized killing of Black bodies — ought to be considered by every Christian church. Youth ministers can help lead the way in an exploration of Hip Hop as a cultural site of (indignant) resistance, racial justice, and (ultimately) reconciling Christian love forged against the necropolitics revealed in the memes, “Ferguson is Everywhere” and “#BlackLivesMatter.”

The tragedies of Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, Beavercreek, etc. (as dimensions of mass incarceration), invite youth ministers to contemplate what to make of the Hip Hop generation in times such as these, a time when J. Cole mobilizes masses of young people (of every hue and ethnic persuasion) with a Hip Hop tribute to Michael Brown called, “Be Free,” a half century after “We Shall Overcome” first hit the blood-soaked streets of protest, justice and freedom. And, yes, this is the same J. Cole whose new (already best selling) album, 2014 Forrest Hills Drive, contains the track “G.O.M.D.”, indeed a too-often rap summoning of phallic male power employed in lyrical warfare soaked with theologies of misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism.

Youth ministers should embrace increased, uncomfortable, and hopeful Christian companionship inside the world of our (significantly) Black youthful Hip Hop generation, who bear the brunt of excessive surveillance, punitive policing, confinement, and death. This would signal a risk of faith that might require us Christians getting our easy convictions about racial reconciliation upended in the name of Jesus. Indeed such an upending might well reverse the currently common sterilization of the cross, a cross that has largely been wiped of Christ’s blood by modern churches. Perhaps some of the life-affirming dimensions of Hip Hop we see in J. Cole’s lament for Brown or in Common and John Legend’s recent Hip Hop spiritual, ”Glory,” will help Christians to resist such sterilization.

Born in Harlem and raised in the South Bronx, James Logan is an Associate Professor of Religion, and Associate Professor and Director of African & African American Studies at Earlham College. He is the author of Good Punishment?: Christian Moral Practice and U.S. Imprisonment.

Response: Kermit Moss

In exploring race and mass incarceration, it is essential to examine causes, consequences and propose solutions pertaining to mass incarceration of people of color. First, one must be careful to make a distinction between the circumstances that help to cause incarceration and elements contributing to the result of mass incarceration. For example, circumstances contributing to incarceration include poverty, inadequate education in public schools, lack of employment opportunities, reductions in after-school and summer employment programs, library closings, and the lack of mental health services for some youth. In addition, other factors leading to incarceration include the on-going pressure to join gangs as a pragmatic means to personal safety, unstable family structures, lack of mentorship, poor judgment, and the lure of drug dealing as an immediate antidote to the crippling effects of poverty.

However, mass incarceration of youth and young adults of color is caused by racial prejudice and is evidenced in racial practices awakening memories of Jim Crow. To illustrate, the continued usage of strict sentencing guidelines (a by-product of 1980’s racial politics and policy masked under the guise of the need for order and lawfulness in urban areas) in some states has led to an explosion in prison populations. Yet, the collateral damage of these draconian policies that do not allow alternatives to incarceration are nonviolent drug users, first-time offenders, and young people who commit low-level crimes. Alternatives to incarceration are fiscally feasible options for municipalities struggling with tight budgets, prove more effective in rehabilitating young people,
and spare black and brown youth from the criminalizing impact of prison on their psyche as well as the prospects of recidivism. Yet, more prisons continue to be built each year.

Further, aggressive policing of neighborhoods of color is justified by broken windows theories of policing7 and subsequent racial profiling is fueled by stereotypes of young black and brown criminalization. Yet, corrections budgets in states increase while educational budgets decrease and more prisons are built each year. Furthermore, states contract with privately run, for-profit prisons as the bodies of youth become articles of commerce and inevitably more prisons are built.

The consequences of mass incarceration is devastating on communities of color. Firstly, the mass incarceration of people of color disrupts family structures in communities. Social networks are ruptured and there is a communal loss of social capital. In addition, the economic loss experienced by families and communities is substantial. Lastly, the impact of the experience of incarceration, stigmatization upon release, and difficulty attaining employment as a result of their record contributes to the likelihood of their return to prison. Yet, more prisons continue to be built and prison culture in neighborhoods with high incarceration rates can gradually become part of the ethos of the community.

There are multiple solutions to the problem of the mass incarceration of people of color. Firstly, Christians of all races need to break their silence and acknowledge that the driving forces behind mass incarceration are racism and profit. Believers must come to recognize that mass incarceration is a problem for the whole of society and a matter of injustice. Secondly, Christians should advocate and lobby for alternative programs to incarceration as well as work to alleviate the causes that lead to incarceration such as poverty. Thirdly, church programs should have re-entry programs that attend to the spiritual, emotional and employment struggles of the formerly incarcerated and their families.

Fourthly, churches and communities must develop preventative measures to steer people away from incarceration such as mentoring programs, after school programs, and partnering with community partners to develop internships and volunteer opportunities, to re-establish art and music programs in communities, and to develop programs for spiritual/ethical formation outside of the walls of the church. Otherwise, more prisons will continue to be built.

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7 “Broken windows policing” is a controversial police tactic that refers to aggressive police measures against minor offenses such as loitering or vandalism in an attempt to reduce more serious criminal activity.
Discussion Questions

1. Have you had personal encounters with the police? Have you or has someone close to you spent time in prison? How has this impacted you?
2. On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (extremely so), how much do you think race affects incarceration? On the same scale, how much do you think breaking the law affects incarceration?
3. Has your experience or lack of experience with the criminal justice system informed your relationship with authority figures? Has it shaped how you see God at work?
4. Were you surprised by the statistics about incarceration in the United States?
5. How can the stories of incarcerated persons—whether narrative or musical—help us learn about the racial and communal struggles caused by the prison system?
6. What implications does Isaiah 61:1 have with regard to how the Church interacts with prisons?
7. How can your congregation care for former and current prisoners and their families?
8. What would reconciliation look like in light of the current epidemic of mass incarceration?
Additional Resources

‘A Conversation With My Black Son’ – This Op-Doc video was featured in the Opinion Pages of The New York Times. Parents talk about the difficult conversation they are compelled to have with their black sons - http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/17/opinion/a-conversation-with-my-black-son.html?_r=0

Portraits of Reconciliation – Read stories of reconciliation between victims and perpetrators of violence 20 years after the genocide in Rwanda to envision what hope and reconciliation might look like in a broken system - http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/magazine/06-pieter-hugo-rwanda-portraits.html

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness (Michelle Alexander) – This book details the rise of the prison system in the United States, including a racial account of the war on drugs, racial police tactics, unequal arrests, prosecutions and convictions, all amounting to what Alexander describes to be the New Jim Crow era in U.S. history.
ENGAGE: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues

**Lifetime Likelihood of Imprisonment**

- **All Men**: 1 in 9
- **White Men**: 1 in 17
- **Black Men**: 1 in 3
- **Latino Men**: 1 in 6
- **All Women**: 1 in 56
- **White Women**: 1 in 111
- **Black Women**: 1 in 18
- **Latina Women**: 1 in 45

IS THIS 'JUSTICE'?  
7 shocking facts about America's prison system

The US accounts for 5% of global population but houses 25% of the world’s prisoners.

1 in 15 black men is behind bars.

THE BILL: US taxpayers pay $69bn - each year - to maintain the prison system.

One in 13 African Americans is unable to vote due to laws that deny the right to vote to ex-felons.

There are more African Americans in prison or jail, on parole or on probation today than there were slaves in 1850.

2.8-5.5x Arrests of black adults on drug charges are 2.8 to 5.5 times higher than white adults, despite similar use rates.

4x It costs nearly four times as much to keep an inmate in jail for a year as it costs to send a child to school.

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