The Responsibilities of Intellectuals in the Age of Mass Incarceration

A Lecture at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University
December 3, 2012
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Introduction:
   This lecture provides one scholar's reaction to the historically unprecedented rate of incarceration that has emerged in the United States. What, I ask, are an intellectual's responsibilities in the face of this situation given the sheer difficulty of persuasive causal inferences on key questions of fact (Does the death penalty deter murder? How much of the crime decline can be attributed to increased imprisonment?); given the limits of the purportedly objective" cost-benefit" analyses that inform public decision-making (how should we value a "thug's" wellbeing?); given the incentives to conformity that stifle reflexive and critical thinking in the academy (who in their right mind would come to the Kennedy School and give a lecture like this!); given the career concerns of investigators lead them to frame their studies so as to remain credible within prevailing structures of authority and funding; given that historical narratives are under-determined by empirical research with the result that substantive political commitments can masquerade under the cover of supposedly neutral investigation; given that disciplinary compartmentalization limits the depth of academic conversation about these matters (no useful exchanges are taking place between ethnographers and econometricians); and given what Larry Bobo has called our "American delusion" – that we now live in a post-racial society where illusions to our racist past are irrelevant at best, and evidence of disloyalty at worst.

   America's prison system has grown into a leviathan unmatched in human history. Anyone professing to love liberty should be deeply troubled by this. That incarceration on a massive scale has become a central component of social policy in this country is a preeminent moral challenge to be faced, not merely a technical problem to be solved. We are not dealing here with mere policy analysis. The very nature of the country is at stake. And our integrity is on the line. America – with great armies deployed under a figurative banner that reads FREEDOM – harbors the largest custodial infrastructure for the mass deprivation of liberty on the planet. For poorly educated black and Latino men, coercion is now the most salient feature of their encounters with the American state. More than mere law enforcement – more than locking up 'bad guys' in the name of public safety – incarceration has become a modality of governance. It is social policy writ large. And no other nation on earth does it quite the way we do.

   As a "second line of defense," if you will, American punishment policy deals with individuals whose human development has not been adequately fostered by other societal institutions. It operates in conjunction with and interacts powerfully with social welfare, education, employment and job training, mental health and other social initiatives. It is a site for the (re)production of social stratification, for the (re)enforcement of various social stigmas, and for the (re)enactment of powerful and uniquely American social dramas.

And yet, the ubiquity of prison as a fact of life in poor urban neighborhoods has left families in these places less effective at inculcating in their children the delinquency-resistant self-control and pro-social attitudes that insulate youths against law-breaking. As criminologist Todd Clear concludes from a review of evidence, "[D]eficits in informal social controls that result from high levels of incarceration are, in fact, crime-promoting. The high incarceration rates in poor communities destabilize the social relationships in these places and help cause crime rather than prevent it." Put differently, the relationship between prison and public safety is complicated in view of the fact that "what happens in San Quentin need not stay in San Quentin."

What are the responsibilities of the policy intellectual in this situation? This is a difficult question, for punishing criminals is not just instrumental state action. It is also expressive. Americans have these last decades wanted to 'send a message,' and have done so with a vengeance. Along the way we have constructed a national narrative to assuage our fears. And we have answered the question: Who is to blame for the maladies which beset our troubled civilization? Intellectuals have played a key role in this process. For instance, any cost-benefit analysis of our historic prison build-up needs to specify, at least implicitly, how one reckons the pain imposed on imprisoned people and those with whom they share social affiliation. Failure to consider 'collateral damage' of this kind in the development of policy implicitly discounts the humanity of the thieves, drug sellers, prostitutes, rapists and, yes, of those whom we would unceremoniously put to death. Yet, it is clear that choosing the weight–if any–to place on a "thug's" wellbeing, or on that of his wife or his son, is not a scientific question. Nor do the data tell us how to weigh any additional cost borne by the offending classes against the benefit of increased security and peace of mind for the rest of us. The data can only take us so far in our quest to identify ideal institutions. Not counting the costs imposed on offenders by institutions of punishment is a *political* not a *scientific* decision. We intellectuals – too many of us, wittingly or not – have become the handmaidens to a massive internal mobilization that our work has helped to justify and to implement.

This is serious business. Punishment is rooted in violence. Prison institutionalizes the necessary though problematic violence routinely undertaken by the state on behalf of its citizenry in the interest of order maintenance. Social control and the management of the unruly are the primary function served by such institutions. Social affirmation – the construction of the virtuous "we" – is a less celebrated though no less central function. And this violence is not only physical. There is also a violence of thought and conception – a "violence of ideas," if you will. Key to this violence of ideas is the mystifying process by means of which the exercise of might on this scale and with this degree of inequality comes to seem natural, inevitable, necessary and just. Rather than becoming cheerleaders in this process, my view is that responsible policy intellectuals must strive to de-mystify – that is, to lay bare the underlying ideological terrain.

The social formation of "race" plays a central part in all of this. Although slavery is a distant memory, the racial subordination accompanying African slavery cast a very long shadow. Urban districts like North Philadelphia, the West Side of Chicago, the East Side of Detroit, or South Central Los Angeles are man-made structures that were created

over the generations, and have persisted due to a complex of forces and interests ranging far beyond those communities' borders. Antisocial behavior by people embedded in such social structures may reflect personal moral deviance, but it also reflects shortcomings of the society as a whole. As a result, the rise of the mass imprisonment state has opened-up a new front in the historic struggle for racial justice. That struggle most decidedly is not over I'm afraid I must insist on this point: racial disparity in punishment reflects explicit and tacit racism. These policies have garnered support at times because of and at other times despite their having a disproportionate impact on blacks.

In *The Condemnation of Blackness*, a study of entanglement of race with crime in turn-of-the-twentieth-century American political culture, the historian Khalil Muhammad contrasts reactions of American political and intellectual elites to two related, though differently experienced, phenomena: crime perpetrated by new European immigrants and crime by recently emancipated black Americans. Citing the emergent statistical social-science literatures of that time, Muhammad shows how the prevailing ideological climate influenced analysts to construe the problems of urbanizing and industrializing America in such a way that while the poor, white city-dwelling migrants were seen to be committing crimes, the poor African Americans migrating to those same cities were seen to be inherently criminal. As a matter of historical causation, the structure of our cities, with their massive racial ghettos, is implicated in the production of deviancy among their residents. As a matter of ethical evaluation, the decency of our institutions depends on the extent to which they comport with a narrative of national purpose that acknowledges and seeks to limit and to reverse the consequences of history's wrongs.

Much evidence suggests that managing social dysfunction via imprisonment is now a primary means by which racial stigma is reproduced in the United States. But, racial disparity in the realm of punishment is not merely an accretion of neutral state action applied to a diverse social flux – the chips having fallen as they may, so to speak. Instead, I see it as a salient feature of contemporary American social life best understood as the residual effect of a history of enslavement, violent domination, disenfranchisement and racial discrimination. (I realize that talking in this way may imperil my viability within the system, but I am old enough now not to care.) For massive inequality by race in the incidence of punishment in this country is one of two things: it is either a necessary evil given the need to maintain order, or it is an abhorrent expression of who we have become as a people at the dawn of the 21st century. Nothing in the data – nothing within empirical social science – can tell us which of these alternative narratives is the "correct" one. So, I am free to take the latter view. On the whole, we have concluded that those languishing at the margins of society are simply reaping what they have sown. Their deviance is seen to have nothing to do with us – it is not taken as a systemic failure, entailing social responsibilities, correctable via public action. This is wrong-headed in my view.

When the socially marginal are not seen as a part of the same general public body as the rest of us, it becomes possible to do just about anything with them. What does this state of affairs say about our purportedly open and democratic society? What manner of people does our punishment policy, particularly its racial disparate incidence, show us

Americans to be? As I see it, we are acting as though some of us are different from the rest and because of their culture, their bad values, their self-destructive behavior, their malfeasance, their criminality, their lack of responsibility – they deserve their fate. I wish to suggest that this posture is inconsistent with the attainment of any distribution of benefits and burdens in our society that could rightly be called 'just.'

In my book 2002 *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* I proposed as a general matter that durable racial inequality be understood as the outgrowth of a series of "vicious circles of cumulative causation." The "social meaning of race" – i.e., tacit connotations associated with "blackness" in the observer's imagination, especially the negative connotations—biases the social cognitions of observing agents, leading them to make detrimental causal misattributions. They have difficulty identifying with the plight of people whom they mistakenly assume simply to be "reaping what they have sown." This lack of empathy undermines public enthusiasm for egalitarian racial reform, thus encouraging the reproduction through time of racial inequality. Yet, absent such reforms, the low social conditions of (some) blacks persist, the negative social meanings ascribed to blackness are thereby reinforced, and the racially biased social-cognitive processes are reproduced, completing the circle. As they navigate through the epistemic fog, observing agents find their cognitive sensibilities being influenced by history and culture, by social conditions, and by the continuing construction and transmission of civic narrative. Groping along, these observers—acting in varied roles, from that of economic agent to that of public citizen—"create facts" about race, even as they remain blind to their ability to unmake those facts and oblivious to the moral implications of their handiwork. The current policy of mass imprisonment is now a central factor in this tragic and morally troubling process.

In my view an ethic of personal responsibility could not come close to justifying the current situation. Accordingly, I have taken up the task, as a black intellectual in the age of mass incarceration, of advocating greater social responsibility – even for wrongful acts freely chosen by individual persons. I encourage you to join me in this! This is not to say that a criminal has no choices, but rather that the society is implicated in his choices because we have acquiesced in arrangements that work to his detriment, and that shape his consciousness in such a way that the choices he makes, which we must condemn, are nevertheless compelling to him. In saying this I rely on a conception of durable social inequality wherein closed and bounded structures – like racially homogeneous urban ghettos – foster contexts within which pathology and dysfunction can emerge. However, these behaviors are not intrinsic to the people caught in these structures. Neither are they independent of the behavior of those of us who stand outside of them.

The Black Community's Impossible Dilemma – A Report from the Front Lines:
But saying all of this does not exhaust a (black) intellectual's responsibilities. I see urban violence on a great scale – involving blacks as both perpetrators and victims – as posing a dilemma for black leaders and intellectuals. On the one hand, as the legal scholar Randall Kennedy has observed, elites need to represent the decent, law-abiding majority of African Americans who cower fearfully inside their homes while drug-peddling teenagers rule the inner-city streets. And they need to do this not simply to

enhance their group's reputation before the wider public, but also as a precondition their own dignity and self-respect.

On the other hand, these elites must counter the demonization of young black men in which the majority culture has, for some time now, been feverishly engaged. Even as they condemn them for degrading their community, they cannot but view with sympathy the plight of the many poor youngsters who are not incorrigible, but who have committed crimes. They must wrestle with the complex historical and contemporary causes internal and external to the black experience that account for this pathology. At the same time they must insist that, despite these causal factors, each black youngster has the freedom to choose a moral way of life. This, too, is necessary for the black community's dignity and self-respect.

This dilemma is made all the more difficult by the reaction of the wider public to the threat posed by young black males in the cities. Many are frightened by and disgusted with the violent criminal behavior that, with reason, they associate with inner-city blacks. Their fear and disgust have bred contempt; and that contempt has in turn produced a truly remarkable degree of publicly expressed disrespect and disdain. It is no exaggeration to say that black, male youngsters in the central cities have been demonized in the popular mind as have no other group in recent American history. What was once whispered is now openly shouted. One conservative critic declared of white opinion: "the criminal and irresponsible black underclass represents a revival of barbarism in the midst of Western civilization." The objective basis for such harsh statements notwithstanding, there is more than a hint of racism in the relish with which some have taken up this newly liberated racial discourse. No reflective black American can fail to be alarmed by such rhetoric. What, for example, might the majority be expected to do, having discovered a malignant barbarism in its midst?

There can be little doubt that blacks, even those living in dangerous communities, are deeply ambivalent about the trend toward increased incarceration of young black men. Those wreaking havoc are the brothers, lovers, and sons of law-abiding residents in these same districts. For most residents of such communities the desire for retribution is tempered by identification with the perpetrators. (There, but for the grace of God, go I, or my husband, or my son.) Thus, we find urban jurors voting to "nullify" criminal charges against guilty defendants and justifying their action by saying they could not bear to send another young "brother" to prison. And we find liberal black politicians from the highest crime areas arguing against punitive criminal justice policies, though their constituents would gain enormously from an improvement in public safety. These jurors are not fools; neither, I believe, are the politicians rightly thought of as knaves. It is a safe assumption that these are deeply conflicted people, caught on the horns of an impossible dilemma.

The muted response of inner-city residents (and of their representatives) to their own victimization constitutes one of the very few checks on the severity of contemporary criminal justice policy in America. Were the residents of America's ghettos to demand, in the name of justice and civil rights, protection from the predation of criminals who just happen to be black, then their cries would powerfully complement the trend toward law

and order that already dominates political debate. It would be arrogant to attribute, as do some on the right, their reticence to "false consciousness." More plausibly, this muted response in the face of victimization is a direct and powerful reflection of their ambivalence toward—and identification with—the perpetrators of these crimes. Viewed in this light, one can better appreciate the tragic moral dilemma in which these people are trapped.

In his book, "The Collapse of American Criminal Justice," the late Harvard Law scholar William Stuntz expresses concern over interplay between local control, democratic governance and inequality in punishment policy. Some observers have argued that the US is more punitive than many countries in Europe because the formulation of punishment policies in the US is more democratic – less deference being given here to experts who are insulated from the passions of the electorate than is the case in continental Europe – Bill Stuntz suggests that exactly the opposite is the case -- that race/class inequality in incidence of punishment is mainly due, not to some generalized anti-black racial animus but, rather, to a shift over two generations in the manner by which crime control policies and punishment judgments are taken: Due to plea bargaining prosecutors now exercise more power than juries do; due to a thicket of constitutional protections, federal appellate judges now have more influence than trial judges; due to population decentralization trends and mechanisms of metropolitan governance, voters in suburban and ex-urban communities have a good deal more to say than do voters in central cities about state-level sentencing policies, even though they are much less affected by the consequences of those policies.

More generally, argues Stuntz, the law has grown more specific and extensive in the definition of criminality and has left less room for discretion in its application. Mass incarceration reflects a disjunction between the "locus of control" and the "locus of interests" in policy formulation. Stuntz is saying that the ultimate source of inequality in punishment is the alienation of local urban populations from the exercise of democratic controls over the apparatus of punishment. As some pro-law enforcement writers like to stress, these are the populations bearing the brunt of the misbehaviors of the law breakers in their midst. And yet, as many law-enforcement skeptics have emphasized, these are also the populations most closely connected to law breakers via the bonds of social and psychic affiliation. This ambiguity of relationship – this intimate proximity to both sides of the offender-victim divide, this wealth of local knowledge combined with keen local interests – these, according to Stuntz, are the essential ingredients for the proper doing of justice. For Stuntz, hyper-incarceration, and the (racial) inequalities that it has bred, can be seen to be largely a product of the political agency problems engendered by separation of local communities -- where both the depredations of crime and the enormous personal costs of its unequal punishment are being experienced -- from any means of effective control over the administration of criminal justice.

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I was reminded of this delicate, perplexing dilemma when interviewing a young black lawyer of many years' acquaintance, who once served as prosecutor for the juvenile

division of the district attorney's office in a large city. This young woman, let us call her "Elaine," did not want her identity publicly disclosed.

When first entering law school, Elaine never dreamed she would become a prosecutor. Like many of her peers, she presumed that the "black struggle" could be best pursued as a member of the defense bar. However, a summer in the public defender's office changed that. "I realized that all of our clients were guilty, some of the most heinous offenses." Shaken from her naiveté, she applied for an assistant D.A. position upon graduation, to serve her community by protecting the good people from the predations of the bad. After a brief apprenticeship, she assumed responsibility for a large number of juvenile felony cases that came into the D.A.'s office. Elaine describes her experience as "difficult and frustrating." She talks derisively of "those little gang bangers," every one black or Hispanic, who are both defendants and victims in the endless stream of shooting cases that come across her desk. "It seems that there aren't that many good guys out there; most of these kids involved in gang-related cases, both the victims and the defendants, are bad guys." Especially troubling to her is the extent to which the gangs use the criminal justice system as a mere extension of their street activities. A victim in a case one day becomes a defendant the next, walking right out of court to seek retaliation against the assailant's gang. Or a witness one day disappears the next as a sudden truce between the warring gangs leads him to "forget" what he first claimed to have seen.

Thus, while Elaine began thinking she would help protect the community from bad people, she has begun to wonder, especially when dealing with gang violence, whether this was an impossible vision. She has also begun to question how her office handles gang-related violence. Every allegation is pursued straightforwardly, even though it is ultimately unclear whether 'justice" is being done. "They're just shooting each other, and we're sweeping up the mess," she says. "The more we sweep, the dustier it gets. Sometimes I wonder if we wouldn't do more good by just standing back and letting them have at it."

But she immediately dismisses the thought. The scale of the "mess" is staggering. "I just don't know how long I can go on, staring into the vacant eyes of these children who have, without apparent remorse, done the most awful things." In one case, a 14-year-old child used a baseball bat to bludgeon a parent to death. In another, youngsters aged 13 and 14 collaborated in a robbery-cum-murder, masquerading as petty drug dealers to lure their prey out of his automobile. In yet another, a 15-year-old boy explained his apparently senseless shooting spree that resulted in several serious injuries by saying, "I had a lot to prove." He was referring to his need to earn the respect of fellow gang members.

Elaine constantly laments that "these little gang bangers have no fear, either of jail or of death, it seems." Indeed, Elaine finds them almost indifferent to the prospect of incarceration, which they see as a rite of passage, another step in their burgeoning criminal careers. "They don't see any future for themselves; their future doesn't extend beyond tomorrow. They have no hope. They don't respect or value human life." She

believes that many of the youngsters whom she encounters have been abused or neglected, though she cannot be certain since only a small fraction of her juvenile defendants' families have open cases pending with the state's child and family welfare department. In about a quarter of her cases, the defendant has an incarcerated parent at the time of the hearing. She says that, invariably, one or more of the following factors— welfare dependency, serious behavioral problems in school, parental drug addiction or a history of neglect and abuse—are present in the juvenile felony cases she sees.

Elaine has dealt with abuse cases as bad as any that have made national headlines. They seem to be taking their toll on her. In one, several crack-addicted welfare mothers lived collectively in an apartment with their children. Investigators found the children, left to their own devices for a number of days, malnourished and living in utter filth. One of these children later turned up, at age 13, as a murder defendant in a case of Elaine's. Later, after the boy was remanded to a therapeutic school to await trial, he attempted suicide. "It's like his life has already been totally destroyed, and he's still just a baby. Yet, if we let him walk around on the street, God only knows how many other lives he'd destroy. But I doubt that we can help him."

Like other judges and prosecutors working with juvenile criminal defendants, Elaine believes that youthful crime records should not be sealed after the child becomes an adult. She notes that this gives gangs the incentive to use juveniles as "shooters," since the penalties they face if caught are relatively light. Unlike many of her fellow prosecutors, though, Elaine is wary of the claims made by the police in certain cases:

"There are a number of cases in which I go before the judge and request charges be dismissed because I'm convinced that the cop was lying. Some white cops just decide they're going to ride into the ghetto and lock up some little nigger tonight. When I think that's going on, I seek dismissal and take the files right to the shredder. Police officers have too much discretion; sometimes they abuse it."

But these occasions are not the norm. Elaine's views of the role of police in poor black communities are complicated. "Sure," she says, "the police patrol our community, sweeping these young men into jail. But those kids are doing terrible things. If something is wrong with our community, then we've got to fix it, and [if we did] we wouldn't have to be concerned about the attitudes of white cops."

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What manner of people are you, who live like this?" The question is unavoidable. It may be true that black Americans are a diminished people who have survived, more or less intact, after a tremendous travail. But this is not the only truth. Blacks are a people of resourcefulness, ingenuity, creativity, courage, beauty and wonder. Foremost, blacks are a quintessentially American people. But the historical scar tissue so evidently manifest in the lives of these poor, black urban masses makes their circumstance special. Intellectuals have the responsibility to tell truths as they understand them–especially unpalatable ones.

It does no good to say that criminals are a minority of black persons; that there are good and sufficient reasons for their troubling behaviors; that others, who are not black, have also fallen short. These are truths, of course; but voicing them changes nothing. Middle-class blacks must admit, and begin to overcome, their fear in the face of this carnage. We are afraid to go into these communities. We do not recognize these kids as us; the distance is great and difficult to bridge. We are embarrassed by their behavior; we pick up the newspaper with trepidation, bracing ourselves for news that the latest crime has been committed by a black person. This silence is costly. All blacks are connected – by bonds of history, family, conscience and common perception in the eyes of others – to those in the urban slums. Black clergy, intellectuals, businessmen and ordinary folk must create hope in these desolate young lives; they must work to rebuild these communities; they must become their brother's keeper. Many are already doing so, but even more is required.

But dealing with the "root causes" of black crime may require remedies beyond the reach of individuals, families or ethnic collectives. Talk of "root causes" has become a pejorative in some quarters. It is said with a sneer, as if the only reason to think about these fundamental sources of criminal behavior is exculpatory -- to relieve a perpetrator of responsibility for his act. But, if one wants to do more than simply "lock them up and throw away the key," it is essential to think about "root causes." If, on the other hand, one is looking to fix blame for the unlovely character of one's civilization on a pathologically deficient element of the population, then thinking deeply about causation only gets in the way.

There are individual, communal and social responsibilities involved here. Persons must be held accountable for their wrongful acts by the state. That they act under myriad influences beyond their control cannot be allowed to cancel their accountability. Families and communities are, to some considerable degree, responsible for the behavior of their children. The task of socializing a child is inescapably a familial and communal task, one which can be aided only in the crudest way by government action. But, in the end, there is no escaping the need for social action, mediated by government and politics, in which resources are mobilized in the public sphere to help meet the needs of the indigent. We can argue about how this is to be done and what should be the extent of such social provision, but a decent society cannot tolerate with indifference the kind of deprivation that is to be observed on a daily basis in the lower reaches of the American social order.

Conclusion:
Finally, allow me to observe that the incarcerated and their families are not passive in their alienation. Rather, they construct meaningful worlds for themselves amidst the storm. They truck up to prisons to visit a kid, or a parent, or a partner going through a rite of passage that is soon enough to become familiar. They bail someone out, knowing the money could be lost. To save their own hides, they turn their loved ones in to the cops. They live with relatives who steal from them. They are – one and the same persons and at the same time – "victims" as well as "perps." The political dichotomy of "us" vs "them" is morally fraught, Any given one of "us" falls, depending on the day, or the hour of the day, to one side or another of that divide. A biographic life may be lived

to either side of the line. But, the imagined life, having staggered back and forth across the line many times over its course, will still be seen as unified in its righteousness, and justified in its condemnations.

In this regard, I know whereof I speak. As it happens, I have passed through the courtroom, and the jailhouse, on my way to this distinguished podium. I have sat in the visitor's room at a state prison; I have known – personally and intimately – men and women who lived their entire lives with one foot to either side of the law. And, in my mind's eye, I can envision voiceless and despairing people – perpetrators and victims alike – who would hope I might represent them on an occasion such as this. I know that these revelations will discredit me in some quarters. Some may assume that I am siding with the "thug" and not with the "victims of senseless violence." Truth be told, some would assume that no matter what I might say here – so deeply entrenched is this binary opposition in the American public mind. So, I will not even bother to deny or refute the charge.

Five years ago I was invited to give the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Stanford. These lectures marked an important moment for me on the long and ongoing trajectory that has joined my lived experience to my scholarship and my politics. Entitled "Racial Stigma, Mass Incarceration, and American Values," the lectures brimmed with moral passion and what I hope was seen to be rigorous analysis. The lectures asserted what I have said here today – that the number of black men incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails reflects the social dishonor to which African Americans are still subject today, a dishonor with roots in our history of slavery.

I have not recounted the substance of that argument at any length here. My talk along with some commentaries was published as a small book by M.I.T. Press in 2008. What I wish to declare, here at the Kennedy School this Monday afternoon and speaking only for myself, is that I have, indeed, committed my life to doing something about this. In addition to teaching and writing, I have testified before Congress and helped launch a study of the causes and consequences of high rates of incarceration in the United States, now proceeding under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences. I see this work as discharging a personal responsibility. This issue has propelled me once again into a role I have flirted with throughout my career – that of public intellectual. Of course, as an economist my work is to crunch numbers (or, at least to be on intimately familiar terms with the labors of those who do.) But what the numbers have revealed has triggered my moral outrage. In this, I make no apologies. Crunching numbers is not all there is to the intellectual life. I am determined to reach beyond science and policy analysis, and within the limits of my abilities to address deeper questions. My journey to the issue of prisons has taken unlikely twists and turns. It has involved not just the courthouse and the jailhouse, but my many years as a conservative pundit. It has included a religious rebirth followed by a repudiation of that religion, and then, as if to prove that God has a sense of humor, a re-embrace of it again. And it has brought me, finally, to the far left of the political spectrum.

I am the eldest of two children, raised after an early divorce by a single mom. I grew up on Chicago's South Side in the 1950s and 60s. Although the neighborhood was

rough, my family was comfortable enough. My father was a high-level administrator with the Internal Revenue Service, and my mother a secretary with the Veterans Administration. I had cousins who became doctors and lawyers; I also had relatives who died of a drug overdose or who spent years in prison. In his book, "Code of the Streets," ethnographer Elijah Anderson describes two broad categories of social orientation in inner cities: "decent families," who tend to be working poor (rather than unemployed) and who value self-reliance, hard work, education, and church; and "street families," who turn to lawlessness to make ends meet and violence to settle conflicts. My family had a little of both, sometimes in a single person. I'm thinking, for instance, about my uncle Mooney. He was a legitimate small businessman – a barber and dry cleaner -- but he sold marijuana out the back of his barbershop, routinely. I'm thinking of my great Aunts Cammie and Rosetta, who fenced stolen goods as a regular course of events. They had young women who were shoplifting clothing and foodstuffs from retailers, and they would get twenty cents or thirty cents on the dollar from my aunts, who then had big freezers in the basement. So that whenever you wanted to have a family thing, you knew that you didn't go and buy your ham and your turkey from the Stop & Shop. You went to Aunt Cammie or Aunt Rosetta. These are church ladies with big hats! They were the salt of the earth, these people! But that's what they did.

Racial identity was of primary importance in the Chicago of my youth. White flight had turned many of the city's neighborhoods into African American enclaves, and the civil rights and black power movements had fired up black young people – me included. Even as my political approach to "the race problem" has veered sharply from left to right to center and back to the left again, my foundational belief has remained consistent. Perhaps then you can understand why it is that I have spoken to you in such a manner today.

Thank you.

Some Data:

Figure 2-2. Growth in U.S. incarceration rate

Rate per 100,000 population (y-axis: 0, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 600)

x-axis: 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010

Table 1
Homicide Offending

Offender	Victim						
	Black 15-24	Black 25-34	Black 35+	White 15-24	White 25-34	White 35+	Total
Black 15-24	8448	5190	4125	1158	961	2161	22043
	(.38)	(.24)	(.19)	(.05)	(.04)	(.10)	(1.00)
	{.52}	{.28}	{.22}	{.09}	{.07}	{.11}	{.22}
Black 25-34	3763	7256	4995	497	715	1094	18320
	(.21)	(.40)	(.27)	(.03)	(.04)	(.06)	(1.00)
	{.23}	{.39}	{.27}	{.04}	{.05}	{.06}	{.18}
Black 35+	2386	4474	8431	324	433	953	17001
	(.14)	(.26)	(.50)	(.02)	(.03)	(.06)	(1.00)
	{.15}	{.24}	{.45}	{.02}	{.03}	{.05}	{.17}
White 15-24	517	366	266	6324	3528	3833	14834
	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)	(.43)	(.24)	(.26)	(1.00)
	{.03}	{.02}	{.01}	{.47}	{.25}	{.20}	{.15}
White 25-34	506	627	480	3051	4958	4034	13656
	(.04)	(.05)	(.04)	(.22)	(.36)	(.30)	(1.00)
	{.03}	{.03}	{.03}	{.23}	{.36}	{.21}	{.14}
White 35+	481	556	425	2012	3301	6939	13714
	(.04)	(.04)	(.03)	(.15)	(.24)	(.51)	(1.00)
	{.03}	{.03}	{.02}	{.15}	{.24}	{.36}	{.14}
Total	16101	18469	18722	13366	13896	19014	99568
	(.16)	(.19)	(.19)	(.13)	(.14)	(.19)	(1.00)
	{1.00}	{1.00}	{1.00}	{1.00}	{1.00}	{1.00}	{1.00}

Note. The cells display the total number of homicides in our sample of counties over the years 1976 to 1988 for offenders of the given age and race against victims of the given age and race. The data is from the Supplemental Homicides Report (SHR). Row percents are in parentheses and column percents are in brackets.

FIGURE 2-3. Number of persons incarcerated in federal, state, and local correctional facilities, age 18-64, 1980-2008.
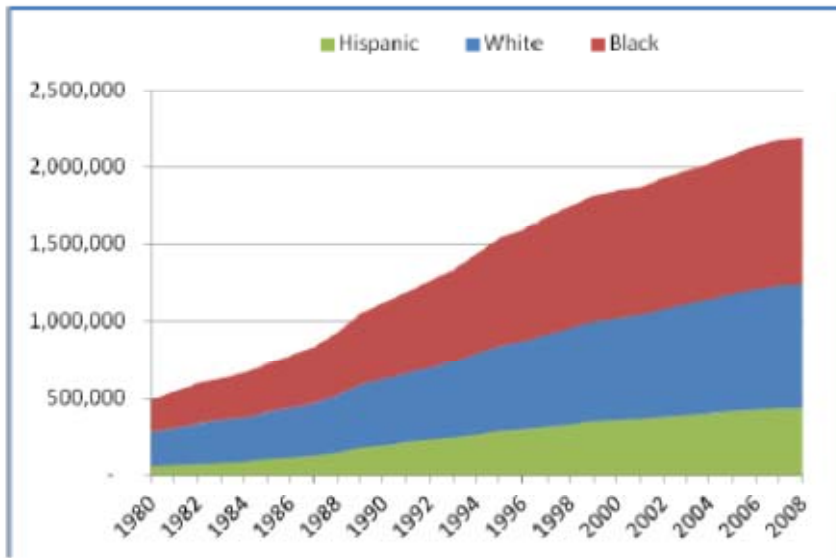
SOURCE: Western and Pettit (2009).
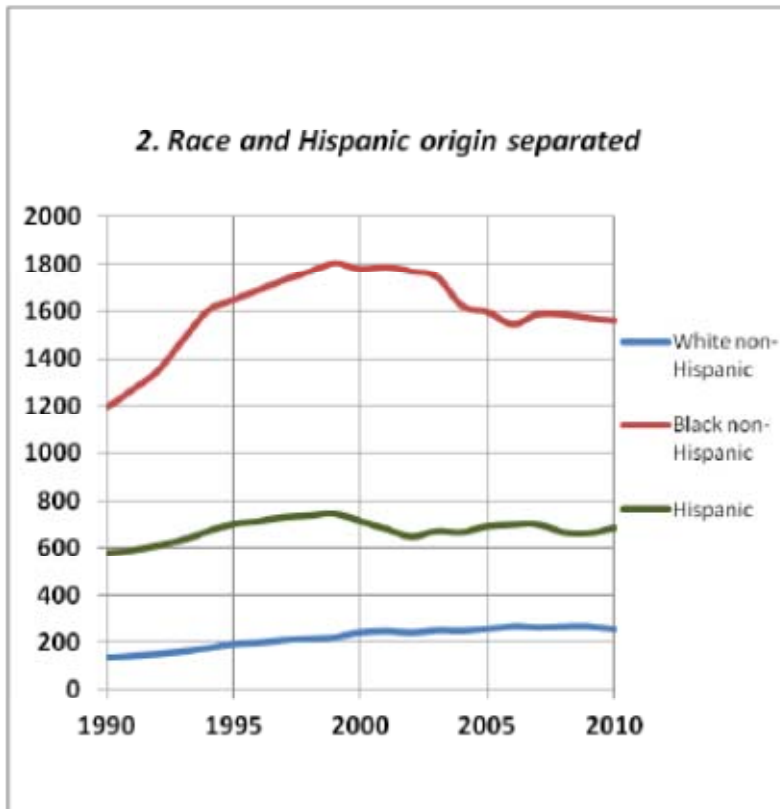

2. Race and Hispanic origin separated

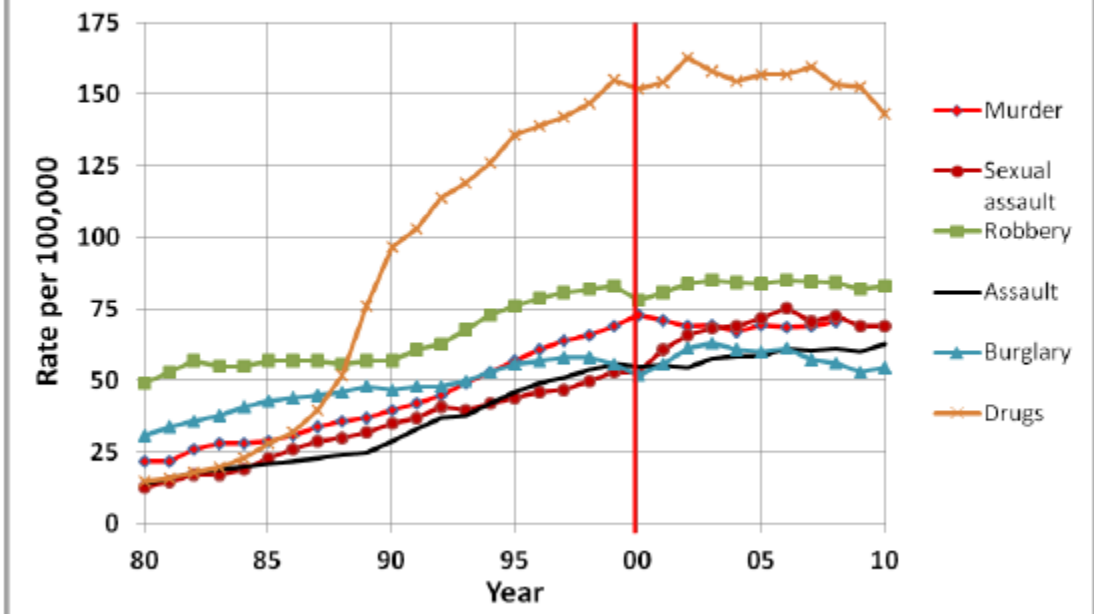Figure 2-9. State incarceration rates by crime type

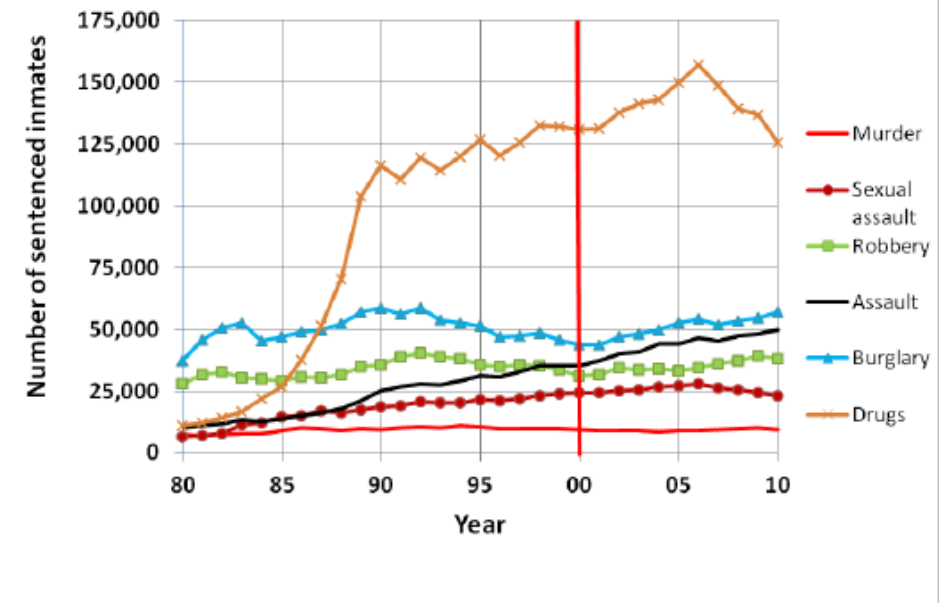Figure 2-10. Court commitments to state prison by crime type*

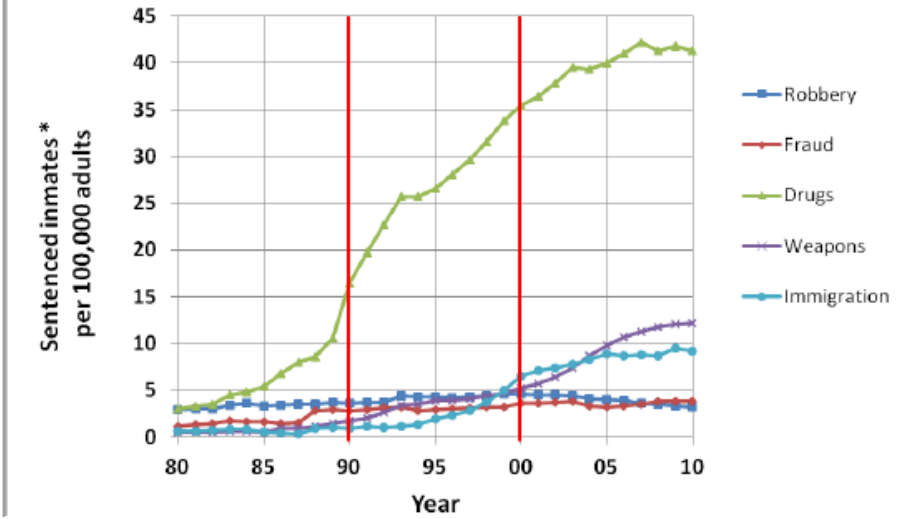Figure 2-11. Federal incarceration rates by crime type

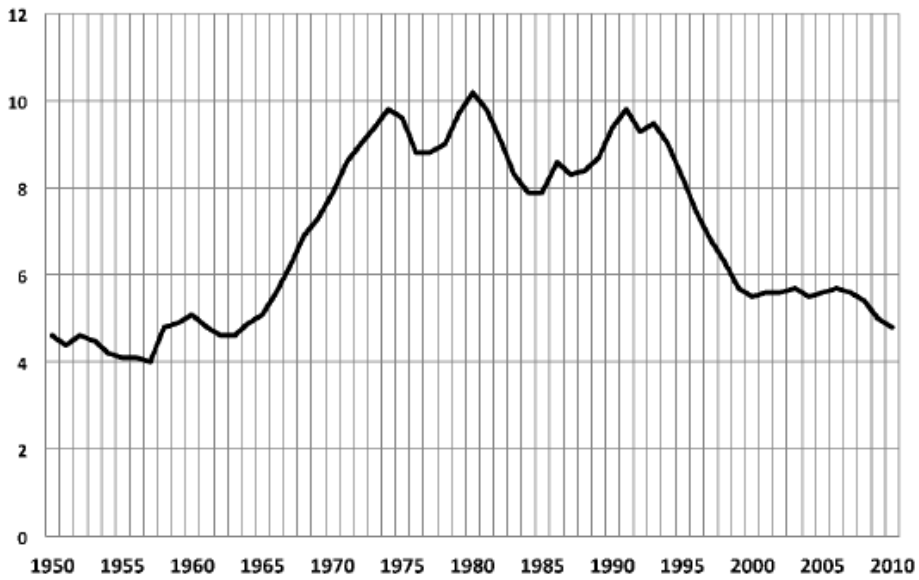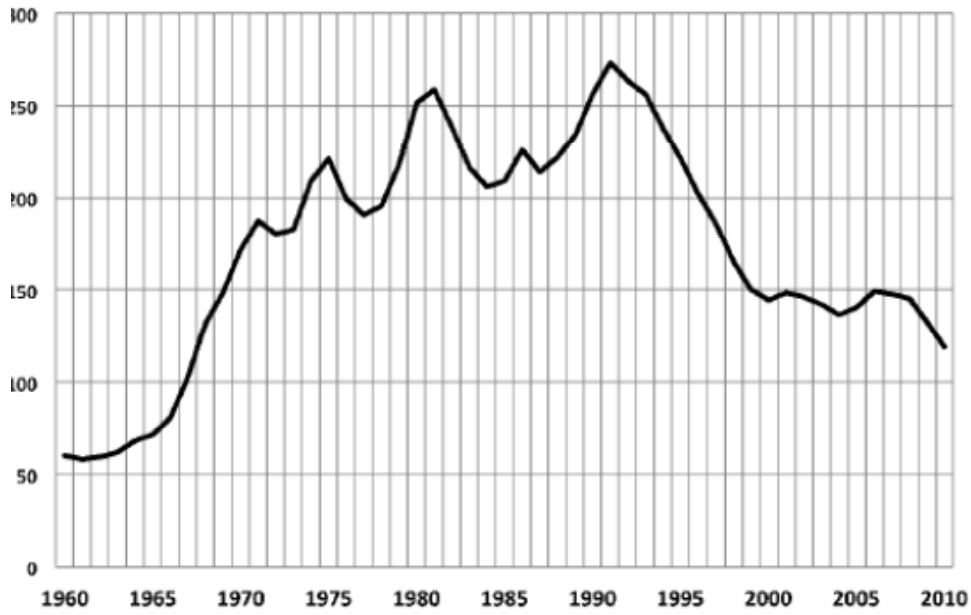Figure 1. Homicides per 100,000 US Population, 1950 - 2010

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics
(http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail)

Figure 5. UCR Robberies per 100,000 Population, 1960 - 2010

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

(http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/ucrdata/Search/Crime/Crime.cfm)