

Mass incarceration is a problem in the United States. The numbers are disturbing at best and alarming at worst. So why are the numbers so high? Obviously there are many reasons and not just one sole cause. But I believe that the "fear campaign" by our federal government unleashed in the '90s has resulted in a "Lock'em up and throw away the key" mentality.

That mentality still exists today and is a key reason for the "Truth and Sentencing" laws that many States have now enacted. And to the building of many new prisons. Private prisons are now quite common and even expanding. A recent USA Today article reported that a private prison corporation was willing to purchase state prisons if the State would sign a contract to keep the prison at 90% capacity.

The sad truth is that prison has become a major industry in some States. And if it is treated like an industry than mass incarceration will not end any time soon! In the past 20 years Wisconsin alone has built seven new prisons and bought one that was built by a private prison contractor. And each one of them is now overcrowded!

For real lasting change to take place attitudes need to change. And the fact that there are now organizations working to end mass incarceration that is occurring at some level. Thank God! Now it's about changing the attitudes of those in positions to make the necessary changes. And the media does play a very significant part! People pay attention to what they hear through the media and politicians pay attention to the people. Change the attitudes of enough of the people and our leaders will listen!

Knee-jerk reactions to horrible crimes are at the heart of the issue. Many new laws and new sentencing procedures are the result of just such crimes. Some people need to be locked up forever. However, the majority of people locked up today do not fit into that category. Emotions run high over crime which is perfectly natural but it can't be the basis for policies governing law and sentencing procedures!

Judges are elected to use their discretion and knowledge

to not only judge a case but to determine a sentence that will not only punish the crime but will also serve society best. Not every person who commits the same crime warrants, or even deserves, the same sentence. Yes, Judges do make mistakes, but they did pretty good for the first two-hundred years of this Nation's existence. Mandatory sentencing negates years of experience dealing with people and leads to mass incarceration. The judges need to be allowed to do the jobs they were elected to do!

As long as the media continues to use terms such as "soft on crime" when describing a person running for Political Office it's going to be hard to change policies. People like "sound bites" and they often repeat them whether they are accurate or not. The media's job is to give people different "sound bites" that portray the truth of our prison situation today.

Many of us prisoners who have been in prison since the early 1980's and still are solely because the sentencing guidelines have changed while we've been incarcerated. The emphasis is now longer on personal change but on being punished. And if there is no law to force their hand then we will remain in prison.

A lot of the problems that currently exist in the prison systems are a result of overcrowding. Many of the services provided would improve if that was addressed. And, of course, the overcrowding is largely a product of prisons becoming a State's fastest growing industry. It's the wrong way to create jobs in my opinion.

There is a lot of work to be done to end mass incarceration but it seems like that work has finally begun. The media can help in an effort to change attitudes and end mandatory sentencing.

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