

Ending Mass Incarceration: Next Steps

Our queries on social concerns ask: “How can I express my faith in action? To what extent is my sense of justice based in love? How do we show through our way of living that love of God includes affirming the humanity, dignity and that of God within every person?”

This year, the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (BYM) had a “One Book Program” to read *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander. Many meetings held discussion groups on this book, which stimulated a much-needed conversation about the role of the criminal justice system in creating and perpetuating racial hierarchy in the US. Mass incarceration has emerged as a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised lifetime system of racialized control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow. Those with criminal records are confined to the margins as second-class citizens with discrimination being legal in employment, voting, housing, public assistance, and membership on juries.

We may not have noticed this. Many of us have been taught to see racism in terms of individuals, not institutions; in terms of intentions, rather than impact or outcomes. We have been blinded by the successes of the 1960s Civil Rights movement, affirmative action programs, and our trust in the US legal system. The current belief in colorblindness makes it harder for us to see institutional or structural racism. We think we can rest easy.

We urge Friends to read this book and to seek out other sources of information, such as the documentary *The House I Live In*, to see how this massive injustice has happened all around us, even though most people have been unaware of it. We encourage Friends to create opportunities to discuss the book within the Quaker community, with nearby congregations and with other neighbors.

A few facts: Incarceration rates and taxpayer costs more than tripled in 20 years (1980 to 2000), including a 55% increase in the incarceration of nonviolent offenders, but crime rates have remained similar. In Maryland, the recidivism rate has hovered between 41 and 51% (lower in Virginia). In Maryland, African-Americans, 25% of Maryland’s population, constitute 78% of the inmate population. Maryland

taxpayers now spend over \$38,000 per year per inmate. Whites and African-Americans use drugs at the same rate, but the incarceration rate for whites is much lower.

We ask individuals and meetings to hone our spiritual discernment and practical visions that inspire us to join in direct actions to reduce mass incarceration and augment the ongoing, invaluable work that some have already begun. Our ministry may take many forms, which can be grouped under five topics:

1. Increasing personal and public awareness – Possible means include: a) forming study groups on *The New Jim Crow* and other resources; b) raising the issue with candidates for public office, including sponsoring public forums; c) writing letters to editors, blogs, op-eds and internet organizations such as MoveOn.org; and d) offering ex-offenders opportunities to speak of their experiences.

2. Advocacy at national, state, and local levels – a) Collaborate with FCNL in national initiatives to lower incarceration rates in federal prisons. Include conservative supporters, because rehabilitation saves more taxpayer funds than incarceration and reduced recidivism is “smart on crime.” b) On the state level, network with Quakers and others to promote legislation to reduce incarceration, expand educational opportunities in prison, and promote ex-offender employment (e.g., “Ban the Box” that ex-offenders must check on job applications). c) On the local level, network with local detention centers, nonprofits and others to build comprehensive reentry programs to work with offenders as early as possible in their incarceration. d) On all levels, seek to humanize prisons by increasing prison visitation programs, such as the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP); providing better health care; increasing compassionate release; and reducing solitary confinement.

3. Prevention programs – a) Recognizing that better education, employment opportunities, and family support protect youths against criminal involvement, support parenting classes, tutoring and mentoring programs, job skills programs and fewer school suspensions. b) Recognizing that earlier involvement with courts increases the risk of crime, support juvenile and young offender diversion programs. c) Recognizing that substance abuse is involved in the majority of serious crimes, support evidence-based, community outpatient drug programs. d) Recognizing that people with low incomes

do not have the resources to defend themselves, increase funding for public defenders.

4. Easing re-entry – Recognizing that regular employment reduces the rate of new offenses by 50%, find ways to support ex-offender’s employment opportunities such as: a) entrepreneurial self-employment opportunities; b) local employers’ use of tax incentives and federal bonding; c) “enterprise employment” through non-profits such as “Home Boy Industries” in California and Harbor City Services in Baltimore; d) improved programs for all offenders during incarceration providing practical training/job experience during incarceration; and e) easing restrictions on access to public housing and other programs, such as food stamps.

5. Ending the discriminatory and unsuccessful “War on Drugs” – a) Pursue further research on the disproportionate impact of drug enforcement on minorities in your community. b) Seek changes in law enforcement practices that target low-income neighborhoods. c) Advocate for ending financial incentives for drug arrests, revoking forfeiture laws, and ending the transfer of military equipment to police departments.

Friends General Conference, the American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, and several yearly meetings are putting major efforts into ending mass incarceration. We urge Friends in Baltimore Yearly Meeting to join these efforts.

We invite Friends to join in the movement to end mass incarceration, prevent violence and create communities where everyone’s God-given gifts can be recognized through prevention and rehabilitation. The BYM Working Group on Racism is ready to work with Friends and monthly meetings. For details, contact the clerk, David Etheridge, at david.etheridge@verizon.net.

A Quaker Response to Mass Incarceration

WHAT CAN I DO?

A follow-up to *The New Jim Crow*

**Baltimore Yearly Meeting
of the Religious Society of
Friends**

Working Group on Racism

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