Mass Incarceration And Racial Segregation In US

How far is too far? Punishment is taken to an extreme in the American criminal justice system. America has 4% of the world's people and 25% of the world's incarcerated people. This is a major issue affecting communities of color. When reviewing America's past, trends of white supremacy emerge from the roots of the nation. When slavery was abolished in 1865 the Jim Crow laws came into effect. These laws made it possible to segregate the United States by whites from blacks and included: hospitals, churches, neighborhoods, phone booths, and jails. There has always been a common theme in the United States and that is a hierarchy which depicts minorities as inferior and whites as superior. During the Jim Crow era black people were forced to move to the back of the bus/exchange their seats if a white person requested it. America used these laws for racial control of communities of color. Although the Jim Crow laws ended almost 55 years ago segregation is somehow still being allowed and enforced by America's very own criminal justice system. Segregation is being expressed through mass incarceration and the stigmas that follow one that has been released from a prison. A person deemed a criminal and or felon (from a drug conviction) is now subject to a life of discrimination, unequal opportunities, ineligibility to basic human rights such as government assistance, education, voting and jobs.

In the US Constitution, Amendment 15 states,"The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude". However, for Clinton Drake this right has been denied due to him not being able to save $900 dollars and pay it towards his court costs/fines. Drake, a veteran of the Vietnam war states, "...I was on the 1965 voting rights march from Selma. I was fifteen years old. At eighteen, I was in Vietnam fighting for my country. And now? Unemployed and they won't allow me to vote". In Drake's case, he was convicted of drug possession (marijuana) twice in Alabama. Due to the fact that he was a repeat offender he was facing multiple years in prison for minor drug charges. A plea was offered for only 5 years to serve if he pleaded guilty and he did instead of risking a longer term. Fast forward to when he got out, he can't vote, can't pay the fines he owes. He is unemployed and can not find a job because of his designated label that was put on him as he exited the prison to reenter his old life in the world. A basic human fundamental right is being able to vote and help create laws based on what is favored by the voter. For criminals and felons released from prison this is not the case.

Some might argue that criminals should not be allowed to help create laws and vote because they didn't follow them to begin with. According to There Are Good Reasons for Felons to Lose the Right to Vote by Roger Clegg and Hans Spakovsky, "If you're not willing to follow the law, then you should not have a role in making the law for everyone else, which is what you do when you vote". Although critics with this mentality believe that breaking the law is grounds for taking away basic human rights away even if the crime is minor, the United States constitution 15th amendment guarantees the right to vote and that should not be overlooked. This same thing happened during the Jim Crow era when the literacy tests were being forced on people of color to prevent them from voting. The united states is again falling into what seems to be a continuous theme throughout the country's history… it is segregating white from people of color by taking away their rights to vote.

After prison life is anything but easy. Not only has the right to vote been stripped away but the background checks that follow open the door and allow for discrimination. In almost all job applications a box is available to check if an individual has been convicted of a felony. Once checking that you allow your potential employers to look at your application with a label that brings a stereotype along with it. According to Shenkar Vedantam, an american journalist states, “So many employers simply will not call you for an interview if you check a box saying that you have a criminal history. This has big effects on ex-felons and disproportionately affects African-American men and other people of color”. Vedantam states that the box gives the opportunity to reject an application based on criminal background history. He goes on and mentions that if an employer meets a potential employee and likes their personality before knowing of any background history they'll be less inclined to deny employment.

Although this box may seem unfair to people trying to reintegrate into society, to most employers it is a more efficient way of the hiring process. Employers avoid problems or delays, and save money by using this method of the box. According to Michelle Yoder, author of What Employers Should Know About Ban The Box states, “forcing an employer to have an extended hiring process, when clearly it is not appropriate to have an individual with a conviction, can put an unnecessary burden on a company”. From an employers point of view keeping this feature on applications allows for an easier hiring process, however it is also unethical and illegal solely to discriminate against someone based on their past convictions. According to California Fair Chance Act, it is illegal for employers to include any questions of any convictions in their job applications.

Not only is the opportunity to achieve employment affected, so is receiving federal help. Once one is charged for a drug offense and labeled a felon, the federal government will not aid you with food stamps. More than 2,100 drug felons were denied SNAP benefits in West Virginia in 2016, according to the state Department of Health and Human Resources. These people are requesting help but the government is refusing to help even if these former prisoners have already served their time. Punishment in the US goes beyond prison with the amount of regulations a person faces when asking for help. Tracy Jividen, a drug treatment facility cook states, “...mom if they would just give me food stamps I would not have to do this…”. Jividen was convicted of a drug charge 7 years ago and throughout her life she faced jail time as she struggled with her addiction. She remained sober until her marriage broke and her life fell apart completely… no employment and her children were taken away from her. She resorted to stealing because no one would help her, not even the government. Felons are forced into failing and falling into bad habits because they are labeled as bad. They are segregated from society and continuously facing judgment no matter how hard they try to change.

Mass incarceration in today’s society is way more than what it seems. It represents cruel punishment that continues even after time has been served for the crime committed. If branded a felon in the United States of America the government allows for discrimination, segregation, and unfairness to be apart of the rest of the felons life. Statistics show that people of color are greatly affected by mass incarceration and that the negligence of the government allows for the cycle of black communities being incarcerated to continue. Racial segregation is still alive in America but it is being enforced indirectly through mass incarceration.