

Mass incarceration is one of the most prominent racial issues that afflict hundreds of thousands of black and colored men and women all across the United States. With its roots in the abolition of slavery in the '1860s, the true beginning of mass incarceration of minorities began in the early '70s under President Richard Nixon and perpetuated itself into the present day.

While slavery was abolished in the thirteenth amendment in 1865, it was still permissible as punishment for criminals. It was made this way so that slave owners that now had to free their slaves, could still use slave labor on their plantations under the mask of them being prisoners. And though these abhorrent practices no longer persist today and began to diminish after abolition, this evolved into the imprisonment of hundreds of minority men, essentially being mass incarceration.

Mass incarceration was initiated by Richard Nixon in the early '70s at the beginning of the war on drugs where he declared drug abuse "public enemy number one". This made it so that many drug-related activities were made illegal and punishable by prison time, but this was used as a pretext to incarcerate the minority black and colored communities of the United States into prisons. This was made shamelessly apparent by Richard Nixon's domestic policy advisor John Ehrlichman in 1984 when Dan Baum, a reporter for Harpers Magazine, tracked him down and asked him about the war on drugs policy of Nixon, he confessed, "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people... We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their

leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” This blatantly depicts how Nixon and everyone around him used the criminalization of drugs to attack and dismantle and disrupt black American communities by lying about the true nature of drugs, with an overtly racist motive to disrupt those communities.

This was then hardened in the ‘80s in the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 under Ronald Reagan which created mandatory minimum sentences, which are sentences that require a judge to give a sentence with a fixed minimum time to an offender regardless of the circumstances of the case. And then again in the ‘90s with the Clinton administration and bi-partisanly the senate passing the 1994 crime bills that put more police on the street and incentivized the states with billions of dollars in grants to construct more prisons to house more inmates as well as many new and even harsher punishments being put into place. These resulted in the meteoric rise of incarceration in the U.S. known as mass incarceration. And the overwhelming majority of the people being incarcerated were black men from poor communities.

These effects came to bear on military veteran Derek Harris. Derek served in 1990 on Operation Desert Storm in Iraq and developed a drug and alcohol addiction when he returned back home from service. But in 2008 he was sentenced to 15 years in prison for selling 0.69 grams of marijuana, less than \$30 worth, to an undercover cop. He already had previous drug charges from 1991 where he was convicted for distributing cocaine and sentenced to nine years. But after he was sentenced to 15 years in prison for selling marijuana to the undercover policeman, in 2012, he was resentenced to life in prison because of the Habitual Offenders Law

that made it so that another drug offense will be much longer after a prior one, a provision created by the tough-on-crime policy of the '90s. The judges and jury were well aware that Derek was not a drug dealer, but a drug addict as it was pointed out in his case, but they still convicted him to life in prison. Luckily in his case, he was released in 2020. This is only one instance of a case like this where a minor drug offense will lead to dramatic and extreme punishments, and in many cases, they are never released early and some people must live the rest of their life in prison without the possibility of parole.

In the modern day, many of the effects of the war on drugs and its tough-on-crime policies persist today causing black and colored men all across the county to be brutally convicted to extensive sentences for minor drug offenses and the persistence of mass incarceration. In my life; family members, friends, and loved ones have been victims of mass incarceration in the draconian drug policies that we have in the U.S. and had years of life stripped from them they will never regain.

The only way to fix the racial disparity that plagues our justice system and reverse the effects of mass incarceration is to completely remove the drug policy of the war on drugs that has ruined the lives of so many black and colored men in the U.S., let alone how ineffective it's been at even solving the drug problem. Mandatory minimum sentences must be removed, the Habitual Offenders Law for drug offenders must be removed, and the actions of both the 1994 crime bills and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 must be removed.

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