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large numbers. The system has been growing continuously since the mid-1970s, and just over the last 10 years, really, criminal-justice-system involvement has become pervasive in these communities, particularly for those with a high school education or less.

T.H.: *How does mass incarceration mask the real levels of unemployment?*

B.W.: This is an interesting characteristic of the system. From the point of view of the statistical agencies, people that are institutionalized have no economic status at all. So, just as they are segregated from the rest of society, they are also segregated from our assessment of the economic health of the society. So you've got these huge numbers of idle men housed in prisons and jails that are left out of our usual accounts of things like the unemployment rate or the broader measures of joblessness that include people that have dropped out of the labor force altogether.

This uncounted unemployment in prisons and jails has been important because through the 1990s, the economy was doing very, very well. And it appeared that wages and employment were improving for very disadvantaged groups, particularly for young African-American men who hadn't been to college. It was thought that a strong economy could succeed where social policy had failed, and all you needed was a really strong economy and these guys who had been very difficult to employ were finally getting work. But once you count the growth of the prison and jail system through the 1990s, you can see that joblessness actually increased for those young African-American men who haven't been to college. Their wages were not increasing either, so, the appearance of economic improvement for them was completely an artifact of this hidden unemployment created by growth in America's prisons and jails.

T.H.: *What did those statistics look like: official unemployment versus real unemployment among young African-American males?*

B.W.: So, if you looked at the whole population of black men under age 35 who have dropped out of high school, 40 percent had jobs in 2008. If you count the prison and jail population, the true number is only 25 percent – only one in four had jobs – and that entire gap between the official statistic of 40 (percent), and the correct statistic of 25 (percent), is due to imprisonment. And in fact, by 2008 those young black dropouts were more likely to be imprisoned or jailed than in paid employment.

T.H.: *So this might be a tough question to answer, but: Where's the outrage? Why haven't we seen more of a civil rights movement forming around these issues?*

B.W.: I think, unlike the old civil rights movement, criminal justice involvement is deeply stigmatizing. The conventional understanding is that you only get into prison if you are committing crime. So I think for a lot of people, all of those people that wind up in prison have forfeited their right to be the beneficiaries of moral outrage.

The truth is, these very high rates of incarceration have a little bit to do with crime, but a lot to do with how the American economy has developed and how American politics have developed, and I think the task of generating moral outrage depends upon building understanding about how changes in the economy and the political system have contributed to the problem.

T.H.: *There are a few, perhaps, hopeful signs for reduction in the prison population, and I'm wondering what your thoughts are. For example, California recently needed to release a number of prisoners because of budgetary constraints. Do you think that there's a budgetary tipping point at which mass incarceration is just simply no longer feasible?*

B.W.: Yeah. People are talking a lot about this now, and certainly the cost of the system, particularly in the current climate of recession, is making policymakers look for the first time at cheaper alternatives to incarceration. I think that's one important piece of a meaningful reform process, and it's been the first major sign of change in decades. So, while that's encouraging, there are two more pieces that are needed for meaningful reform to happen. One is: we need to have a broader discussion than simply criminal justice reform. If the discussion we're having is only about how to do correction more cheaply, we could easily wind up with a range of bad outcomes. One of those, for example, would be widespread privatization, which would be cheaper, and the conditions of confinement would probably be harsher as a result.

T.H.: *What about the retroactive change in crack cocaine sentencing guidelines. How much of an impact is that going to have? (In 2010, President Obama signed a law retroactively reducing mandatory sentencing for crack cocaine possession to make it more on par with that of powder cocaine.)*

B.W.: I think that's a different kind of a change because that's a recognition that the system was too punitive in a way that disproportionately disadvantaged African Americans over others. That change has been a long time coming, but it's very important. The number of people affected is not vast – because it's in the federal system, and the federal system is only 10 percent of the whole prison system – but the political significance of it is very substantial. And that's kind of where I was getting to with the other thing that needs to change in order for there to be more meaningful reform.

Ultimately, the political conversation has to be broader than simply about crime and public safety, and be large enough to accommodate issues of racial and social justice. The policy has to address the really deep employment problems people were having in poor, inner-city communities, and all of the social problems that flow from high rates of unemployment.

T.H.: *In terms of movement building, then, do we lead with this vision of rebuilding and creating jobs and equality in our communities, and get at incarceration through that?*

B.W.: The way I think about it is that it's time to find a middle ground between those who are really motivated by social justice and those who are really motivated by the problems of crime and public safety, and we need to redefine what public safety means. In the era of mass incarceration, public safety has a very thin definition in which people were unsafe because they faced the risk of violence from strangers. That was sort of the phantom that mass incarceration was trying to control. But in real life, people face a whole array of risks and a whole array of uncertainties and unpredictabilities in their daily life, not just the risk of criminal victimization. There are risks of unemployment, there are risks of poor health when you're uninsured or underinsured, risks of your family breaking up. And so what we need is a much thicker conception of public safety to motivate a public policy that tries to bring order and stability and regularity into people's lives. This would really allow us to imagine a future for ourselves, make plans for our children and invest as best we can in our communities.

T.H.: *It seems, with the imposition of domestic austerity that the debt-ceiling deal represents, that we are headed in exactly the opposite direction. I'm sure that you've been thinking a bit about the recent deal that was carved out in Washington and what that means for the issues you care about.*

B.W.: Things have gotten markedly worse in the political climate very quickly, and there is no appetite among policy makers for spending. For those of us interested in policy reform, the current moment creates really special and significant challenges, and we have to try and think innovatively about where we go from here, and how can we build this thick public safety net without big public expenditures. It probably will involve things like partnerships with nonprofits, which are also under stress, and an increased role for community organizations, civic associations and things like that. It's a profoundly challenging time right now.

The truth is, these very high rates of incarceration have a little bit to do with crime, but a lot to do with how the American economy has developed and how American politics have developed, and I think the task of generating moral outrage depends upon building understanding about how changes in the economy and the political system have contributed to the problem.

The other thing I'd say is, you know, when you look historically at when large-scale policy reform programs were undertaken, grassroots organization has been enormously important. I think that's the other avenue that we have to look down in order to be able to conceive of the progressive futures of policy reform.

T.H.: *So, to take that one step farther, this is a moment where multiracial organizing is especially critical.*

B.W.: I agree with that. You know, in some ways I think maybe this is the unfinished business of the civil rights movement. The protections for the economically disadvantaged – I'm trying to figure out the best way to say this – were only ever a second priority for the civil rights movement, which was very much focused on the institutions of Jim Crow and explicit racial discrimination. This had some redistributive effect for the economically disadvantaged, but the whole policy thrust was not focused on the poor specifically. The poor of black and white alike. I think that's the current challenge for grassroots organization.

T.H.: *It seems like the success of the civil rights movement was in building a strong black middle class, and even that is threatened at this point.*

B.W.: It is. I mean, this is where we're at now. The kinds of social problems and disadvantage that we used to discuss in the context of poverty – the bottom 10 or 15 percent – now really describes the situation of the bottom third of American society. And so the economic challenges the more solidly middle- and working-class households are facing are really significant. The economic gains of the black middle class that were produced by the civil rights movement are at risk of being lost. That's less a story about mass incarceration than it is about rising economic inequality and insecurity in the United States.

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