Harvard professor examines history of mass incarceration in new book

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Representing 5 percent of the planet’s population and 25 percent of its prisoners, the United States is the incarceration capital of the world. At last count, 2.2 million individuals were behind bars in the U.S, a 943 percent increase over the last 50 years, with an annual cost of $80 billion.

Black Americans and Latinos constitute 59 percent of prison inmates, even though they make up about 25 percent of the population. About half of young Black urban males are either in jail, on probation or on parole.

In “From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime,” Elizabeth Hinton, an assistant professor of History and African American Studies at Harvard University, argues that mass incarceration did not begin with Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs, but in the domestic policies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

Victims blamed

Convinced that the fundamental cause of poverty and crime in Black ghettos was the social pathology of individuals, Hinton maintains, New Frontier and Great Society liberals moved further and further away from initiatives that might have eradicated poverty and segregation and toward punitive and preemptive crime control policies.

Richard Nixon “advanced some of the worst, most coercive dimensions” of the Johnson administration – and from then to now federal policymakers attacked “the consequences of poverty, subpar school systems, and unemployment as those consequences manifested through crime,” instead of the causes. In essence, they blamed the victims.

Other explanations

Hinton provides voluminous evidence that federal crime control policies (including policing, sentencing, surveillance, and the racial profiling of "potential delinquents") were often informed by racist assumptions – and that they did not work. Although Whites account for about 70 percent of monthly drug users and 65 percent of drug abuse arrests, for example, Hinton reveals that Blacks comprise two-thirds of prisoners serving time for possession.

That said, Hinton may well exaggerate the extent to which the war on crime “contaminated” efforts to foster equality and economic opportunity in the 1960s. There are many other, more compelling explanations of the evisceration of key progressive features of the Great Society (including, but limited to a “law and order” backlash of voters in the wake of urban riots, the inflation produced by Johnson’s “guns and butter” policies, and the Vietnam War induced “credibility gap”).

Many ’60s liberals did not believe that crime control precluded education and employment initiatives; they did not view law enforcement programs as the only “viable response to socioeconomic inequality and institutional racism.”
Radical reforms

It is important to note as well that Hinton advocates reforms that are far more radical than those proposed by John Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson.

She imagines “what the United States might look like today” had a bipartisan political consensus mobilized behind the principles of “maximum feasible participation” (i.e. community representation and grassroots empowerment) “with the same level of commitment they gave to the War on Crime” – and supported education and jobs programs for at-risk groups outside of the service economy (like Denver’s cost effective alternative to incarceration, “Project New Pride,” virtually all of whose graduates have remained at least in part-time employment), enabling them – and us – to confront systemic inequality.

Resource for legislators

Hinton also endorses the view of U.S. District Court Judge James Doyle that the prison has no place in the modern world.

“In many respects,” Doyle wrote in a 1972 ruling in Wisconsin, “it is intolerable within the United States as was the institution of slavery, equally brutalizing to all involved, equally toxic to the social system, equally subversive of the brotherhood of men, even more costly by some standards and probably less rational.”

Recently, Republicans and Democrats in Congress have expressed grave concerns about mass incarceration. They are far from ready to implement grassroots empowerment or adopt Hinton’s “take no prisoners” root and branch reforms. But they can learn a lot from her account of how “the land of the free” turned punitive – and why we have an urgent need to identify more effective and just alternatives to the carceral state.

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