

Preface to the Second Edition

Once held out hope that a second edition of this book was going to be unnecessary. I wrote the first edition nearly a decade ago, and after it was published in 2009, it seemed like things were getting better with respect to both crime and punishment—at least a little bit. Crime rates (particularly homicides) continued to steadily go down, and the voices claiming that the drop in crime was due to getting tough (more prisons; more police) seemed quieter than those pointing to the intersection of demographic shifts, broader economic changes, and stabilizing drug markets. And 8 years of a progressive presidential administration saw the rise in the popularity of “evidence-based” policymaking, and state prison growth began to level off. We even started letting drug offenders out of prison, and a number of states legalized marijuana—things that were unheard of in 2009. All of this seemed to me like the “addiction to incarceration” might be taking a turn for the better.

And then 2016 happened. The United States elected as its president Donald J. Trump. Now whether you like him or hate him is not necessarily what is important. What is important is how his campaign and time in office have fundamentally changed the nature of the conversations we have about what information is real or not real. When the first edition of *Addicted to Incarceration* was published, the Internet—at least as we now think of it, where we all have unfettered access to it—was only about 10 years old. And with that “democratization” of information, it became difficult to sift through the sea of information and to separate the good evidence from the bad. That was really the point of the book when I wrote it—to give the reader the “best available evidence” on the nature and consequences of incarceration. That, in and of itself, was challenging enough.

But in this new era of politics, we have now reached a point where it seems as though we are no longer even obligated to get good information. We can instead pick and choose what things we want to believe and then dismiss the rest as “fake news”—a term that has now solidified its place in the American political lexicon. And it turns out that the only evidentiary standard that needs to be met to determine whether something is fake or not is stunningly simple: It’s fake if we don’t like it. We are now even free to dismiss information as fake just because of where it came from: Did it come from *CNN*? Fake news. Was it reported in the (failing) *New York Times*? Fake news. Was it produced by a bunch of overly educated, elitist academics who need safe spaces and trigger warnings? Fake news and snowflakes. This state of affairs is far more troubling than the information overload I was sifting through when *Addicted to Incarceration* first came out. The risk now is that not only can we not even reach a shared understanding of reality, but also we don’t even really need to try to reach one anymore. This is not healthy.

Because the reality of incarceration in this country is still rather troubling. This is the nation we currently live in: one where 2.2 million people are housed

in our nation's prisons and jails. Just to put this figure into perspective, this is roughly the same number of people who populate the cities of Las Vegas, St. Louis, and Dallas combined. This group of incarcerated citizens would also be large enough to fill the seats of the nation's largest college football stadium at the University of Michigan 20 times. We live in a nation where if a restaurant is too crowded, a fire marshal can shut it down; but if a prison is too crowded, we either build more space or we rewrite the definition of what the word "crowded" means.

So here in America we still really like to lock people up. A lot. We have had a deep and abiding affection for doing so, and as a \$74 billion dollar a year industry it is safe to say that our addiction to incarceration is still running the show. And the reasons why remain the same: There is faulty information being used about the nature of crime and punishment. Thus, the core purpose of the book remains the same; that is, to expose this misinformation for what it is, and to provide the best available evidence on these issues. This task is arguably more important now than it was 10 years ago.

Accordingly, the central thesis of this book is that the United States has become "addicted to incarceration." This addiction has been fueled by policies legitimized by faulty information about the crime problem in the United States, American citizens' opinions about crime and punishment, and the efficacy of incarceration as a means of social control. Previous works on incarceration trends have often made the mistake of divorcing punishment policy from the larger social context that generated such policies. This book, on the other hand, takes the wider approach of using trends in incarceration as an example of how the politics of punishment (and the politics of misinformation) have influenced criminal justice policy in recent years.

In doing so, the chapters contained in Part I outline the "scope of the problem" with regard to our current practice of incarceration. The introductory chapter highlights the nature of the political discussions surrounding criminal justice policy in general, and corrections policy in particular, and explicitly discusses the role of misinformation in how the United States has ended up with its current state of incarceration (i.e., how we got to this state of affairs). The second chapter in this section outlines the processes by which political discourse on crime, criminal justice, and punishment has become more and more politicized since the 1960s. In particular, this discussion addresses how control over the nature of punishment "changed hands" away from correctional professionals and toward political entrepreneurs in the late 1960s in the wake of a general movement to bring the issues of crime and its control to the political forefront. It ends with a discussion of the recent rise in "evidence-based" policymaking and how corrections policy has benefitted from this trend, and that there is a risk that those benefits are once again coming under political fire.

The three chapters that comprise Part II—the "Sources and Dimensions of Misinformation"—demonstrate how the policy prescriptions of the last four decades (e.g., mandatory sentences connected to the "war on drugs," three strikes laws) have been based on three different (yet certainly interrelated) forms of misinformation. The first form is misinformation about crime (the

topic covered in Chapter 3); specifically, the false notion that increases in the “fear of crime” among Americans simply reflect increases in their actual probability of being the victim of a crime—and in particular, a violent crime. This misconception has been central to policy makers’ public justifications for the continued growth of incarceration as a response to the fears of their voters, particularly in recent years with the growth of immigration and policy makers’ use (or rather misuse) of that issue to whip up even more fear among the public. Misinformation about crime also comes in the form of the misconception that low-level offenders (e.g., drug and property offenders) will inevitably graduate to violent offending if they are not immediately locked up. This erroneous assumption has been the linchpin for stiffening the sanctions associated with a host of criminal offenses—not just the violent ones. According to this logic, sentences for even nonserious offenses should be ratcheted up if one assumes that today’s jaywalker is tomorrow’s murderer. On a related note, misinformation about crime has also produced the false assumption that chronic, life-course persistent offending can be accurately predicted using variables that are given the most “weight” in criminal justice processing: the severity of the offender’s present offense and his or her prior record.

The second source of misinformation examined in Part II has to do with policy makers’ concerns over the desires and attitudes of the American public (the topic of Chapter 4). While political advocates of mass incarceration consistently contend that they are merely being responsive to the demands of their constituents (i.e., they are simply giving the public what it wants), the research presented in Chapter 4 demonstrates that Americans’ views on crime and punishment are far more complex than policy makers generally care to admit. While Americans do harbor fairly punitive “global” opinions about crime and the use of incarceration, a number of studies have demonstrated that when it gets to the “specifics,” Americans also support the philosophy and practice of correctional rehabilitation (even if they still place considerable faith in deterrence and incapacitation approaches). Americans are also quite supportive of early intervention strategies with juveniles and alternatives to incarceration (especially for nonserious drug offenders). The broad point of Chapter 4 is that policy makers have outpaced the desires of the American public to increase the punitiveness of punishment policies.

The third source of misinformation in Part II concerns the effectiveness of incarceration as a crime control strategy (the topic covered in Chapter 5). The specific focus of this chapter is the empirical status of the research that scholars have produced in an effort to uncover whether prison expansion and related policy efforts actually reduce crime. In all, the evidence in favor of “prisons for crime control” is scarce. The reasons behind such weak “incapacitation effects” are also explored in this chapter—in particular, the comparative validity of the “bad implementation” (e.g., “we’re just not tough enough”) versus the “incomplete theory of offender decision making” explanations for why locking up more and more offenders does not seem to do much to the crime rate. The general conclusion reached in Chapter 5 is that prisons, at best, provide little in the way of a crime control return for our public dollar.

The chapters in Part III—“Consequences and Looking Forward”—go on to discuss the various social costs of incarceration. These costs come in the form of how incarceration has replaced other social institutions (e.g., public and mental health care) that were previously charged with the tasks of dealing with public problems; how incarceration (especially the way incarceration is done in the United States) has heightened the risk of personal victimization for inmates and has become a barrier to successful offender reintegration into society; how recent trends in the spatial distribution of the communities from which our primary incarcerated population is drawn have contributed to the further breakdown of inner-city environments and have affected the families and children of incarcerated parents; how incarceration has reinforced and exacerbated existing racial inequalities; how our need to provide additional prison space has resulted in the state’s abdication of punishment to the private sphere and what the profit motive has done (and is continuing to do) to the practice of punishment; and how incarceration affects the children and families of those doing time in prison.

The book ends with the suggestion of a number of strategies to combat our dependence on incarceration. These include emphasizing the practice and philosophy of correctional rehabilitation, developing early intervention strategies with juvenile offenders, and reinvesting in community corrections, as well as strategies that readers can employ to separate good information from bad. The point here is not to be preachy, but rather to offer up evidence-based crime control policy alternatives to incarceration. By shining a spotlight on the misinformation surrounding our current punishment practices, perhaps the work presented here may, at minimum, serve as a catalyst for a more informed public discussion about our reliance on prisons as the primary mechanism for social control.

And to that end, this is not a time to ignore social scientific evidence or to be dismissive of it—particularly with something that affects so many American lives like incarceration does. At a time when respect for reliable information is dwindling, the important thing is to fight back against it with the body of legitimate scientific evidence that we have access to, and to remember that *facts* and *feelings* are not the same thing (just because you “feel” like it was a record crowd at inauguration day and that the sun was shining does not magically turn either of those things into facts).

Because in the end, addictions do not go away quietly—they go kicking and screaming, and the tantrum over reducing levels of incarceration seems to have already started. So I will double down on my faith in the notion that good evidence still matters and that ignoring it has consequences. Not all readers will be happy with what they read here. Indeed, those who cling to the idea that we can build our way out of the crime problem will find little in the way of comfort in this book—the evidence is simply stacked way too high against that idea. Accordingly, I urge readers to resist the temptation to dismiss it. You can do better. We all can.

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