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The Crisis of Belonging: Building Alternative Communities for Care

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Overview: Examining the Crisis of Belonging and Community-lessness

There has long been concern about the role of belonging in shaping political behavior in the United States. While most literature focuses on belonging as it represents the experiences of immigrants and naturalized American citizens, there remain many concerns about the ways that belonging and citizenship function for marginalized populations in the United States.

Often, when we discuss inclusion in the United States, we focus on the advent of social media and other technologies which have encouraged individual participation in civic society without deep intimate and personal connections to the community. In recent years, with the increases of "lone shooters," who are often young white males who were known to be lonely, single, or unemployed[1], more attention has been paid to the ways that community and family networks are tethered to personal mental health struggles, issues with connectedness, and violent behavior. In his 2001 book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam suggests that the decreased camaraderie and cohesiveness of communities have resulted in the degradation of American civic engagement, discourse, and participation. This isolation and disconnectedness have resulted in persistent alienation that some researchers believe might be the key to preventing more mass shootings[2].

However, many marginalized groups face disparate consequences for exclusion and a lack of belonging. For example, LGBTQIA+ youth are at "elevated risk of homelessness and housing instability" when compared with other groups (DeChants et al. 2021). This elevated risk is linked to severe mental health issues and long-term concerns about accessibility to safe housing and employment. In response, some in the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically trans women, have a history of establishing alternative communities despite the persistent oppression they face in public spaces. This is most clearly seen in "Ball and House Culture," and in the activism leading up to and after the Stonewall Riots in summer 1969. House Culture represents a person's chosen family and is structured to replicate family dynamics with a "mother" and "father" guiding the "children" of the house through the community via the ball system (Monforte 2010).

Following the Stonewall Uprising in 1969, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two transgender activists and sex workers in New York City, created the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), a home for trans and queer sex workers and queens living on the streets[3]. During this time, LGBTQ+ people and activists banded together with discreet meeting spaces, social groups, etc. to stand against political and social discrimination (Hall 2010; Armstrong and Crage 2006). Often providing the basic necessities for survival like reliable shelter, food, and fellowship, the importance of community and coming together to combat oppressive institutions is critical for individuals and groups that fall to the margins of society. But, because these communities are often formed on the edges of society, in neighborhoods with high poverty and crime, among individuals deemed deviant, they are rarely recognized as valid sites of potential political knowledge and engagement.

In this policy brief, we examine how marginalized peoples, like Black Americans, Latinx/e/o/a people, immigrants, disabled folx, queer and trans people, previously and currently incarcerated people, poor and working-class people, and many others in the United States often form alternative sites of camaraderie, citizenship, and togetherness to

combat the violence and exclusion of mainstream white heteropatriarchal society and the watchful eye of the State[4]. Meanwhile, we put forth, state actors typically deem these actions criminal, deviant, and outside the normative boundaries of citizenship. We argue that these spaces are critical sites of political revolution, identity formation, and general fellowship that are often denied in other contexts. Further, if the State expanded human rights and dignities for all social groups equally, the prevalence of alternative groups for belonging might reflect reduced violence, crime, and in-group competition.

Counter-publics as Answers to Societal Problems

Marginalized populations often rely on alternative public spaces to provide resources not allocated in the predominant sphere (by the State). Social scientists have long debated how these public spaces serve the democratic concerns of the American people. For example, some argue for the centrality of a normative or "official" public sphere (Habermas 1962; Calhoun 1992). Others argue that the centralization of a normative public sphere, one which is typically composed of white, heterosexual, middle-class, men, does not accurately represent the ways that marginalized groups have long organized themselves in their own communities and among competing social interests (Fraser 1990; Dawson 1992; Warner 2005). These counter publics, or alternative social and political communities which rest outside of the normative public, have long been critical to the survival of racial, gender, sexual, and other minorities for whom the mainstream public comes with a host of rules and laws which delimit personal freedom and self-expression. Counter-publics also provide a host of benefits to those who are deemed deviant. Specifically, in addition to being potential sites for political organizing and mobilization, they are frequently foundational for the transference of information and expertise which only arises from experience.

For example, because the Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self-Defense is often recognized as an expressly political organization, those outside of Black communities rarely understand the full extent to which the Panthers worked to build healthy communities for Black children. The organization was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. It was originally established as a radical, liberationist group meant to empower and arm Black Americans against police brutality. However, one of the most important contributions the BPP made was its free breakfast program. The program was run mostly by community women who served local children's meals during the school day to ensure that they were prepared to learn at school.

But like many patriarchal and male-led organizations, the BPP was riddled with issues of misogyny and violence against women. In her discussion of "Panther women," Joy James says, "the average political spectator…is more captivated by the Black Panthers' stance on armed self-defense and their battles with police - and resulting male martyrs - than with the social service programs largely organized and run by women" (99). James, like many other scholars of the Black Panther Party, notes that many women affiliated with the Panthers experienced hyper-sexualization and physical violence, often at the hands of Party leaders. This complex community-based organization, while critical to the survival of Black people, was also a potential site of trauma, harm, and intra-community injustices

that often undermine the goals of such organizations.

Social movements like the Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter (BLM) are examples of the ways that community-based organizations and spaces offer unique access to training, civic education, and political knowledge that might not be obtained elsewhere. Like BPP's regional and local focus, BLM created chapter organizations which were established in local communities to address and resolve local problems. These chapter organizations also acted as political experts for local citizens seeking resources about local issues and concerns.

For example, in Chicago, BLM-related organizations were critical in ousting then - State Attorney Anita Alvarez after she was found to be concealing the video of Chicago Police killing 17-year-old LaQuan McDonald[5]. To execute this political feat, organizers led the #ByeAnita campaign, a grassroots marketing and mobilization effort by young Black and Brown, queer and trans, and immigrant Chicagoans who door-knocked, engaged in direct actions, and built voting power among their neighbors and fellow citizens. After mounting a strong fight against Alvarez, they were critical in electing Kim Foxx, the first Black woman to be elected as Cook County's state attorney.

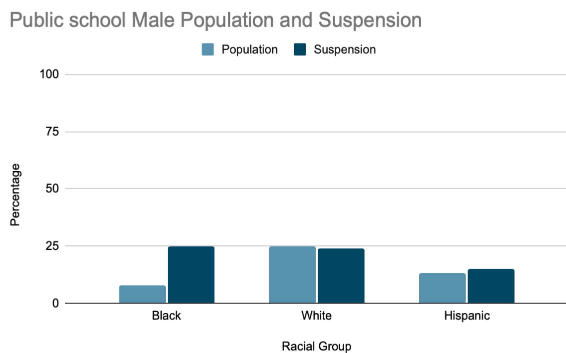
In this way, alternative community creation acts not only as an answer to the gaps in social amenities offered by state institutions, it also provides a potential site for resistance and response to the political actors responsible for inequality faced by marginalized populations. While these organizations and alternative publics are by no means perfect, they are efforts to reclaim ingroup status and center local needs in developing answers to community-based problems.

Discrimination and Alienation in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

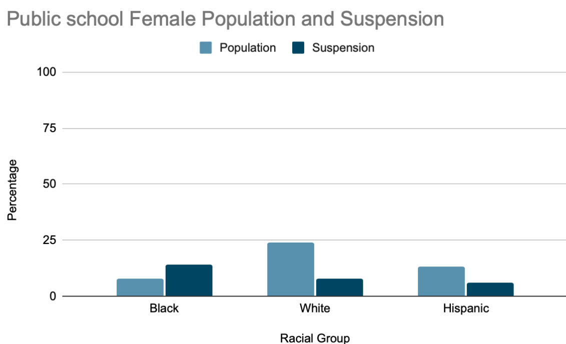
One of the first institutions that many young people engage with is grade school. While at-home schooling and virtual education options grew exponentially as the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the globe, traditional schools remain the primary educational mechanisms for children between the ages of 5 and 18 in the United States.

Public schools in the United States remain sites of great social and political contention. While they can be a mechanism for achievement, many have shown that they can also become an avenue for incarceration. Studies have shown us that education is one of the great predictors of success but also highlights the disparities between racial groups and genders (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001). Public school enrollment is 51% white students, 16% Black students, and the remaining 31% made up by various other racial groups (ACLU.org 2023). However, when comparing multiple suspension rates between white and Black students, studies find that Black students make up 42% of the multiple suspension rates while their white counterparts make up 31% (ACLU.org 2023)[6]. Meaning, a group of students that makes up less than a quarter of the total population accounts for almost half of the total multiple suspension population. Thus, we see a disproportionate number of Black students spending time away from their education due to their suspensions. As previously stated, schools serve as primary education and socialization mechanisms. By removing children from school for extended periods of time, their education is negatively impacted, illiteracy rates increase, their ability to socialize with their peer group is hampered, and their association of authority figures and state institutions as punitive institutions increases.

Further, the higher rates of Black student suspensions hold true even when including Hispanic student statistics and breaking down suspensions percentages by binary gender populations. Black male[7] students make up only 8% of the student body but account for 25% of out-of-school suspensions, and Black female students make up 8% of the student body and account for 14% of out-of-school suspensions (American University School of Education 2022). Hispanic male students account for 13% of the total population and 15% of out-of-school suspensions while female Hispanic students account for 13% of the population and 6% of the out-of-school suspensions (American University School of Education 2022).



Source: American University 2022



Source: American University 2022

Comparatively, white male students make up 25% of the population, and account for 24% of out of school suspension, and white female students make up 24% of the population and 8% of the out of school suspensions (American University School of Education 2022). These numbers are alarming considering the large population difference between Black and white students in public school. Conversely, Black students account for 31% of school arrests, are suspended three times more than their white counterparts, with statistics showing that youth who are suspended or expelled for a discretionary offense are almost three times more likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system within the following year (ACLU.org 2023).

These statistics are important when understanding that 59% of federally incarcerated people, 75% of state prison incarcerated people, and 69% of jail incarcerated people have dropped out of high school (U.S. department of Justice 2003). The current standard of discretionary punishment has clear racial divides and exiles already marginalized groups from belonging and success within mainstream society. Further, studies have also shown students who may have mental or emotional challenges have their behavior labeled as "problematic," "disruptive," or even "delinquent." This label then carries a stigma that follows them throughout their schooling and increases their chances of punishment in the form of suspension or expulsion, and long-term consequences of ending up incarcerated.

The negative labeling can also have an isolating effect as their peers and parents of their peers will want to maintain a distance so as not to be associated with a "troublemaker." It is important to note that suspensions and disruptive behaviors not only impact the individual but the larger body of students as well. Each student has a vested interest in their

ability to attend class and learn, however when there are disruptions, it pulls teacher focus from the lessons and hampers the class's overall ability to learn. This is also coupled by the lack of power many teachers feel when trying to adequately address disruptions in the classroom while being able to effectively teach. This can further drive the "problem" student from their peer group. This social isolation can drive the child further from wanting to reclaim their place in school, change their behavior, and assimilate to the preferred behavior. Instead, they may seek out alternative groups for social acceptance, see less value in school and education, increase the amount of time away from education (i.e. ditching), find avenues of self-medication for the mental struggles they are facing, and participate in increasingly risky behavior.

Policing, Stigma, and Surveillance of Black and Brown Communities

In the United States, the roots of racial slavery form the basis of the surveillance models we witness today. Historically, enslaved Black people engaged in escape from plantations and created their own remote societies, often referred to as "maroon communities." In Brazil, these communities were often called "quilombos." These communities, while typically established outside of the purview of mainstream society, were prime sources of concern for white Americans and formal governments that sought to control the movements and livelihoods of Black Americans. As maroons and quilombos, escaped slaves were able to transfer critical information about escape routes, pathways to freedom, and resistance that were not permitted on plantation soil. Escaping from the watchful eye of the slave master allowed these groups to congregate and make plans for their freedom. Meanwhile, state actors and wealthy plantation owners created stricter public laws, grew police structures to include headhunters and local bounty men (slave patrols), and changed public policy (like the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850) to ensure that their escaped slaves were returned. These systems laid the foundation for the police organizations which exist today[8]. These frameworks also lay the basis for the modern carceral state.

A central determinant of the conditions of one's citizenship is whether one has been deemed deviant, or outside of the normative social principles which govern civic society. While many in the mass public define deviancy in terms of criminal behavior or other explicit markers of outsider status, there are subtle ways that those deemed deviant by the U.S. government (e.g. undocumented immigrants, unemployed persons, transgender people[9]), are reminded of their second-class citizenship status. This characterization often becomes the justification for increased surveillance and policing.

An example of this is "broken window policing" which is often synonymous with "zero-tolerance" policing. Here, the idea is if police constrain disorderly behavior, it will prevent more serious crime from moving into the area. However, this concept has been taken to an extreme level where almost every instance of disorder is often ticketed or results in an arrest. Further, this has allowed for increased discretion when conducting stops which has been geared disproportionately towards the Black and brown communities. While these stops may not result in arrests, they have the consequence of provoking fear and distrust of police and state actors, and alienation of the community. This also increases the concentration of arrests and incarceration to specific areas which then gives that community a stigma of high crime which ultimately increases police presence and surveillance. This is further illustrated by the wave of

unmanned police vehicles strategically placed in or near these neighborhoods. The idea again is to be a deterrence for severe crime; however, it only manages to drive a deeper divide between the state and the surveilled community.

The stigma associated with incarceration carries the deepest and most lasting scar for those who find themselves imprisoned. Research has shown that previously and intermittently incarcerated Black and brown people often still face stigma and surveillance even after they have served their time (Alexander 2010). Simply having to identify as a felon on a job application or in some other public context carries the potential to delimit access to public resources, disqualify the previously incarcerated from employment, potentially jeopardize their housing, and reduce the likelihood that surrounding family members will be able to support them. This also decreases their ability to provide positively for their family and community, which leads to negative views of the government and can cause the individual and their family to isolate, be less likely to participate and teach political participation to their children and decrease mobilization in that community. Thus, when these communities don't participate in local, state, or national politics, their needs and voices aren't being heard, further entrenching the struggles their community is facing. This allows for a concentration of power with other people in those areas who can then dictate and influence power and resources. Even within marginalized communities, a hierarchy appears, and the "less" marginalized folks can maintain power over the "more" marginalized folks. This increases the inability for the more marginalized folks to be able to express concerns and issues to police and other government agencies (Burch 2014). Ultimately, these communities will become increasingly surveilled by the State as they turn to extra-governance alternatives for resources, protection, and survival.

Because our society is still anti-Black, organized via a long history of racial discrimination, and rooted in white supremacy, multiple marginalized people are more likely to be arrested at even younger ages than their white peers. Research shows that 24% of Americans have been arrested at least once, 12% convicted, and 5% incarcerated by young adulthood (Lerman and Weaver 2014)[10]. Specifically, one third of all Black men ages 25-29 are under correctional supervision at any given time and 11% of Black men ages 20-34 are currently in jail or prison (Lerman and Weaver 2014). These statistics are coupled with a disproportionate amount of stops of the Black and brown communities, of which 90% have insufficient evidence that the individuals stopped were actually engaging in criminal behavior (Lerman and Weaver 2014). This creates an environment of fear and increases a power dynamic divide between Black and brown communities and law enforcement. The perception of the state and state sanctioned agencies becomes one of control and punishment rather than protection and service.

Increasing the reach of the surveillance state, at the end of 2021, an estimated 3,745,000 adults were under community supervision (probation and parole) which equates to 1 in every 69 adult U.S. residents, and almost 2 million people were in jail or prison (Bureau of Judicial Statistics 2021; Prison Policy Initiative 2023). A stable trend shows Black neighborhoods, "high crime" neighborhoods, and high poverty neighborhoods have larger concentrations of imprisonment and community supervision (Burch 2013, p.57). This has a widespread impact in regard to people's views on government, trust in government institutions, political participation, and socialization. It also

increases experiences of isolation which may lead to seeking alternative forms of community building and belonging.

We know socialization of societal norms, “proper behavior”, political orientation, and democratic ideals have primarily come through family, community, work, school, and religion, and other informal social institutions. This is further dedicated through individual income and education disparities, and the relative incidence of paying income and property taxes. However, criminal justice institutions have increasingly played a role in socializing a subset of Americans, fundamentally influencing how they conceptualize the democratic state and their place in it (Lerman and Weaver 2014). Often, a person's contact and experience with a policy or institution will influence their views on not just that institution but government in general. This becomes especially salient when looking at individual and community interactions with the carceral state including police, courts, and corrections institutions. People who live in high incarcerated or community supervision areas are less likely to participate in politics (i.e. voting) based on their experience with supervision or incarceration and the subsequent feelings of disenfranchisement or because they know someone who has been incarcerated or supervised. This has led to a heterogeneity among neighborhoods as they feel the effects of putative interactions with the state more actively and the subsequent disorganization, stigma of cultural deviance, and increased surveillance than their counterparts in low incarceration neighborhoods (Burch 2013, p.73). Thus, with the criminal justice system shaping the way marginalized communities view the government they often feel as if there is no institutional recourse for them to express their grievances. This ultimately leads to them seeking out spaces where they feel as though they have control and a voice.

To further this point, the National Neighborhoods Indicators Partnership worked with the Urban Institute and Microsoft to analyze police data by neighborhood in Los Angeles (LA). They broke down LA by groups, by reporting districts that have similar crime statistics in an attempt to connect police contact relationships. It is reported that there are 4 million people living in LA; 48.7% are Hispanic, 28.4% are white, 8.6% are Black, 11.5% are Asian, and 2.8% identified as other (NNIP.org 2023). Data show that group 5 (predominantly south LA) has the smallest reporting district numbers (148) but the largest population density per square mile (21,986 avg), largest business density per square mile (3,036 avg), and the largest number of addresses per square mile (13,613 avg), and has the most stops (428), calls for service (384), arrests (67) (NNIP.org 2023). This is a stark contrast to the number of stops in group 1 (71), group 2 (106), group 3 (130), and group 4 (183) as well as the total arrests for groups 1-4 totaling 64, which is less than the total arrests for group 5 (NNIP.org 2023). A further breakdown of these statistics shows that Black people in all groups have a higher likelihood to be stopped, with a low of .26 in group 1 and a high of .92 in group 5. Across all races, group 5 is the most likely to be stopped with a low of .19 for the Asian population and a high of .92 for the Black community. A deeper look shows that group 5 has almost 60% of people living below the poverty line, 23% are immigrants, 18% have limited English-speaking households, and 80% are renting. This is all compared to group one which consistently scores far below group 5 in terms of police contact, stops, arrests, crime. Group 1 also has the lowest number of people below poverty (20%), immigrant households (9%),

(33%). With the high number of stops, arrests, and police contact, people in these areas naturally form a distrust of police and government and find other avenues of community and safety that fall outside of the societal norms.

When coupling this information with the demographic breakdown of the 4 million people reported, the Black community, which makes up only 8.6% of the total population, encounters more stops than any other racial group, and brown communities encounter a disproportionate amount of contact with police than their white, Asian, and "other" counterparts. In addition, group 5's status in low socio-economic neighborhoods underscores the majority of stops, arrests, and contact with police. It is important to note that when presenting and discussing these statistics we are setting aside the consideration of the relative incidence of the individual behaviors leading to those outcomes.

How Carceral Logics Shape Gang Affiliation

Because so many Americans have little knowledge of the conditions of U.S. prisons, they often do not understand the nuanced ways that contact with the carceral state, or the constellation of surveillance, policing, and punishment structures which work together to govern public life, shapes the rules and norms which those who are affected must follow to survive and navigate the system. Carceral logics are those pathologies and ideas which perpetuate ideas about inherent criminality and beliefs that punishment (rather than restorative justice) is the best answer to societal problems.

Unfortunately, these carceral logics, which also frame the school-to-prison pipeline, create alternative knowledge networks and survival processes for those individuals deemed deviant. For example, upon entering prison, individuals are often forced into a parallel society that is often run by extra-legal institutions. Here the "convict code" is laid out and enforced by other incarcerated people, and more notably, by prison gangs. One of the cardinal rules in prison is "snitches get stitches." This mindset stems from distrust of the authority figures and the systems that placed individuals in custody. The concept is to encourage individuals to mind their own business while doing time, discourage people from infringing upon the privacy and autonomy of their incarcerated peers, and to keep prison staff at a distance.

This norm is still highly enforced by prison gangs which internalize rule enforcement and punishment to internal structures and decrease the power state actors have over the incarcerated population. Thus, when you have an issue in prison or see illicit activity occurring, seeking a guard to help solve that concern comes with its own set of risks. The only alternatives available then become handling the issue yourself or being acquainted with a larger group (typically race based), while seeking protection and retribution from them. After spending substantial time within prison reorienting to this new set of norms, being released has a new set of struggles. One of those is unlearning everything that kept you alive in prison, including your trust of formal authority such as prison guards or on the streets, the police.

Prison in itself is a controlled environment with a rigid structure in place for the incarcerated population, with a prison building schedule dictating when prisoners get up, eat, sleep, go outside, attend programming, etc. Further, incarcerated people outnumber staff about 9 to 1. Thus, it is nearly impossible for prison staff to ensure the safety, police wrongdoings, and meet the daily and emergent

needs of the population. This results in the population lessening trust for state institutions and actors to be there for them and results in them finding other avenues to obtain the resources they need to survive their incarceration.

Upon release, a person who has spent any significant time in prison will now have to reorient themselves to the standards of society; however, that distrust of state institutions and dependance on themselves and extra-governmental groups will remain ingrained in their perception of survival on the streets. Moreover, group affiliation within prison can extend beyond the prison walls and follow a person into their post custody life. There will be certain standards and behaviors that need to be maintained to remain in good standing with the group, especially if there is a chance that they or a family member may end up back in custody. This will further distance them from reliance on state sanctioned institutions and concretize their reliance on the extra-governmental groups established in neighborhoods and communities.

Extra-Institutional Groups as Community-Based Alternatives to Governmentless-ness

History shows us that outside of prison, mafias (and gangs) are created out of power vacuums. Here, a power vacuum is created when a person (or institution) in power has lost control of something and there is no (formal) replacement. For gangs, when the traditional powers (police, government) have lost control in a certain area or neighborhood, gangs move in to fill that void. Often this loss of control stems from the community losing faith in the systems, no longer viewing the State and its agencies as legitimate, and a lack of resources. These extra-governmental groups will often fill in voids left by the state either from collapses, increased legal restrictions, or lack of safeguards for civilians and become a legitimate form of governance rather than the State. This has its own implications for "democratic" institutions as individuals and communities lose trust in the State and increase trust in extra-institutional groups. In some ousted communities when they seek protection or belonging from these other publics and spaces, they no longer view the state sanctioned groups as legitimate or viable, which impacts political participation.

For example, upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a demand for protection by shop owners as property rights enforcement became unstable. Shop owners turned to private protection and viewed these organizations as an alternative to the failing and ineffective state-based police and courts (Skarbek 2014 p.48). Further, we know that some extra-governmental groups are able to form connections and build relationships with the populace on a level that is unachievable by the formal governmental institutions. Often this is achievable due to the belief that leaders and members of these groups come from the same place as the general public and have shared experiences. For example, during WWII the Mafia had control over the docks in NYC and the government became dependent on their connections and knowledge to alert them when Nazi U-boats arrived (Black 2023). Here, it shows a clear divide between the government and the extra-governmental groups' connection to the people. These dock workers were Italian and sometimes German. Their perception of government made them feel othered while the Mafia hierarchy felt like their community. Even in times of conflict the loyalty individuals had to the other group over the formal government was clear. While it is undisputed that these organizations involve criminal elements, violence, and illicit

economies, they also center on providing protection or security to their members.

Recommendations

Our recommendations are rooted in the work of grassroots organizers, transformative justice scholars, and community workers who, first, center the needs of those who are the most at-risk of harm. This approach is referred to as a transformative justice approach because it works to identify the root causes and justifications for harm and build solutions which are directly related to their resolution. As such, we offer five central recommendations meant to a) address the carceral logics which identify marginalized populations as inherently deviant and criminal, b) reduce the expansiveness of the surveillance state, c) allocate tax funds to communities which are most impacted, and d) increase access to restorative care models that may decrease reliance on alternative publics.

1. Decarceration and decriminalization

a. A first small step here is to decriminalize small amounts of marijuana and address the droves of people in prisons for minor possession. Even as states across the country debate the merits of medical marijuana, many states are opting to legalize. The FBI Crime Data Explorer shows that over 170,000 Americans were arrested for marijuana possession in 2021. While current prison numbers show at least 40,000 of Americans are in prisons due to possessions of small amounts of marijuana. It is important to note that these numbers and the minimum as reporting to the Crime Data Explorer is voluntary and there has been a large decrease in contributions by states over the years.

2. Reduced surveillance technology

a. Reduce surveillance structures associated with the State.

b. Invest in more community-based alternatives to State surveillance structures. Organizers have referred to this as “community policing” in which community members are responsible for the maintenance and facilitation of safety networks in their neighborhoods rather than outside actors and city police.

3. Invest in marginalized communities

a. Expand school hours and programs in public schools to allow for greater access before and after formal teaching hours.

b. Invest in practical skills classes, such as shop or life skills, in public high schools across the U.S. to highlight career options that fall outside of college and provide useful knowledge and skills. “Shop”[11] courses, sewing, cooking, etc. can all be classes that not only provide a life skill but can also help lead students to interests and careers that fall outside of additional formal education such as college. This can increase interest in attending school, show viable career options, and provide feelings of success and hopefulness for the future. Unfortunately shop courses have been on the decline in U.S. high schools or have been limited to a semester which limits what can be taught within the time frame. Often this is due to budget constraints of the school and the prioritization of courses that meet the preparation requirements for university[12].

c. When appropriate, finding alternative "punishments" for students instead of taking them out of classes and isolating them from their peers. Create and implement programming that can keep

kids in school, socializing, but help focus their energies and attention into more productive things.

d. Support the expansion of mental health facilities and other alternative sites of care.

4. Deprivatization of community care

a. Invest in neighborhood community centers that are funded by cities (not private businesses). In recent years, private industry has grown and increased its reach into the private lives of citizens in the United States. This is clearly seen in the increase of the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) or the collection of nongovernmental agencies, private firms, consumer organizations, and other institutions who invest in prisonization in the United States. Some of these businesses provide prisons with food supplies, some with clothing and furniture, and others supply technological goods and services. Because private industry is rooted in supply and demand rather than in the dignity of all human beings, these organizations do not have the capacity to provide equitable access to care. Rather, their priorities will frequently rest on the bottom-line, profits over people.

5. Rehabilitation and healing programs for affected communities

a. Target previously incarcerated people for rehabilitative care and mental health support upon release.

b. Nested levels (or tiered levels) of intervention and programing; this can help treat people in more case-by-case situations. Building models of rewarding positive behaviors and progress rather than focusing on punitive measures of relapse or mistakes. Looking at individual stressors for the slip up and building models to help individuals identify triggers/stressors that can be catalysts for reoffending or relapses (or whatever the issue is).

Conclusion

In closing, in this policy brief we have analyzed the centrality of belonging in the United States political and social landscape. We have presented this phenomenon as a crisis primarily because, as we have shown, a lack of civic belonging holds a number of risks for individuals and communities. For marginalized groups, this crisis manifests in terms of life outcomes, access to public goods and services, regulation of bodily autonomy, and increased contact with the carceral arm of the state. When compared with white Americans, these people of color, especially Black and Brown Americans, are much more likely to experience enduring exclusion, perceived deviance, and a general retraction of protections associated with citizenship.

The outlined recommendations may seem radical but are building upon ideas and conversations that are currently taking place among organizers, policymakers, and elected officials.

Recommendation 1 is building onto the wave that is making its way across the U.S. where state by state the legalization of marijuana is appearing on ballets. Our recommendation to decriminalize and decarcerate small amounts of marijuana will reduce a large percent of the state and federal incarcerated population. This can also increase job opportunities for those who use marijuana recreationally or medicinally and allow them to positively contribute to the family and the community. Reducing the incarcerated population will also allow for better prison conditions for those who remain in custody

and lessen the money the public contributes to the prison systems.

Recommendation 2 centers on combating the “big brother” surveillance that has been implemented across marginalized communities. Reducing State surveillance such as the broken window policing, will allow for communities to regain control by self-policing behavior, and ultimately help build better relationships between State agencies and marginalized communities. This fosters stronger community connections, can reduce incarceration rates, reduce stigmatizing a subset of the population, and bolster positive interactions between these communities and those around them. When we see elevated punitive interactions between communities and government, we see an increase of extra-governmental groups emerge and gain control. Sometimes these groups are street gangs which center on illicit economies and bring with them a host of consequences for the community. However, by supporting community policing efforts, we are empowering communities to find avenues of safety, support, and structure through legitimate means that will not involve illicit economies and groups. This can also help to combat gang membership and power over neighborhoods because the needs for safety and resources are being met through empowered community members.

Recommendation 3 has sweeping implications for reducing the school to prison pipeline. When looking at the high rates of suspensions, illiteracy rates, and poor schools, we are often directed to districts that have high rates of low socioeconomic families, marginalized communities, and high incarceration rates. This then perpetuates a cycle of poverty, poor education, or a deviation from schooling and education. By investing in these schools and communities we are able to combat some of the issues plaguing these areas. Additionally, by expanding the hours of before and after formal school, we can account for some childcare that often places a large financial burden on working parents while giving students a positive environment to socialize, build relationships, and have a safe and positive space to play and grow. By incorporating more trade-based electives students are being presented with employment alternatives that may be more enticing to them than the traditional education. While we have seen an increase in pushing for continued education via community colleges or 4-year institutions, we create a divide between people. Those who are educated become a higher class of citizen than those who are not. However, we are also invalidating and alienating kids whose future and skill set falls outside of a classroom and more into a hands-on trade. Showcasing these as viable alternatives to college where they can have a career, make good money, provide for themselves and their family can go a long way with keeping at-risk kids in school and engaged.

Recommendation 4 brings attention and empowerment back to the individuals most impacted by the community members. Recently, there have been news stories highlighting the fact that some children need to take a bus an hour away to be able to reach a playing (football) field and participate in recreation activities. The communities that do house the facilities are often run by a privatized corporation which can drive up membership fees and exclude many in the community that want to utilize them. By diverting tax money in that community to the establishment and maintenance of community centers you are making it more accessible to the general public. This will give a safe space for children and adults to congregate, enjoy recreational activities, establish various support programs, build connections, and strengthen community.

Recommendation 5 is an expansion on current rehabilitative efforts currently taking place in California. While there has been a long-standing push for increased rehabilitative programs for people incarcerated in prison, the reality is the rehabilitative effort needs to occur while in custody and upon release. As mentioned above, prison is a controlled environment that is highly regimented. To have an individual go from no choices to an abundance can be overwhelming and triggering. Reintegration into a society that looks different from when they left will be daunting, and without proper resources impossible. Expanding rehabilitative care and mental health care to people who are released from custody can go a long way in helping them reestablish themselves, and positively reconnect with community and family. Further, a "one size fits all" approach to rehabilitation and reintegration is inconsistent with the individual struggles of the individuals. By creating a nested system of rehabilitation and programing we are able to look individually at each case, provide them the level of care they need, and reward for success. For example, creating a three-tiered intervention program ranging from high intervention to low we would then assess each individual's needs and place them within the appropriate tier level programming. From there, service providers will work with the individual to create achievable goals that when met would allow them to be able to move to the next tier down. If a person has a relapse or slip up, an assessment would be done with the individual to see if they needed to go back to a higher-level tier that may provide more structure or just identify the triggering behavior/scenario and continue on. The ultimate goal here is to have people leave the tier program and with skills and patterns of behavior to successfully resume life without intervention. This concept is focused on providing resources and reinforcing achievement and positive behavior rather than a focus on punitive repercussions. The long-term effects of this recommendation is to lower recidivism rates which reduces prison populations and will save taxpayer money, boost community, reduce carceral intervention, and can ultimately positively impact views on government.

Footnotes

[1]https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/lone-wolf-attacks-are-becoming-more-common-and-more-deadly/

[2]https://news.vcu.edu/article/2023/02/addressing-social-isolation-may-be-key-in-preventing-mass-shootings-study-finds

[3]https://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/gay-power-is-trans-history-street-transvestite-action-revolutionaries

[4]The capitalization of State is to refer to a self-governing political entity such as the United States and the various agencies and institutions that act on behalf of the government (police, prisons, courts).

[5]https://colorlines.com/article/byeanita-chicago-voters-oust-states-attorney-anita-alvarez/

[6]When looking at these statistics, we are setting aside the consideration of the relative incidence of the individual behaviors leading to those outcomes.

[7]The use of male and female for gender is reflective of the study referenced

[8]Slave patrols were abolished in 1860 with the majority of formalized police agencies being created in large cities around 1880.

[9]Transgender individuals are considered deviant for having a gender identity or expression that is not in line with their birth sex (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4689648/; Bockting et al., 2013; Grant, 2011; Lombardi et al., 2002)

[10]When discussing arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates, we are setting aside the question of behavior leading to the encounter with law enforcement and the judicial system.

[11]Shop class traditionally refers to classes that focus on teaching a trade or craft such as masonry, electrical, carpentry, and even welding. They are considered career and technical education (CTE) courses.

[12]https://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/05/30/the-death-of-shop-class-and-americas-high-skilled-workforce/?sh=5ca5f069541f

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