

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/american-jails>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

On Sunday evening, CNN will premiere *American Jail*, a documentary film by Roger Ross Williams that explores the modern tragedy of mass incarceration from both a very personal and a political angle.

Williams, who grew up in and then fled Easton, PA, a small city on the eastern edge of the Lehigh Valley, returns to Easton as the film begins to find out what happened to a childhood friend, Tommy, who has committed suicide after years in and out of the Northampton County jail and struggles with depression and alcoholism.

Tommy's experience, far from unusual in the black community of Easton's West Ward, leads Williams to consider his own path out of Easton and then to take a hard look at that county jail, which sits on a high hill overlooking the West Ward, and the devastating and systemic destruction wrought by the criminal justice system on black men like Tommy.

While the dimensions of this broader story have been told before, Williams' step-by-step exploration of how mass incarceration came to be and what it has wrought, touching back again and again to the people in Easton and others whose lives have been cut to the quick by the justice system reminds us again why this story matters.

I was interviewed for *American Jail* and appreciated the opportunity to spend an afternoon sharing what I've learned through my work at Vera and elsewhere with Williams. I'm never particularly comfortable seeing myself on film, but I was glad to be in such good company; one thing that's notable about *American Jail* is that while we hear from a number of experts, Williams hands a good piece of the job of explaining the system to those who have been directly impacted by it, including people who are currently incarcerated. These experts are rarely heard on CNN, or anywhere, and they are the voices that need most to be heard.

For those of us who are lucky enough to be outside the grip of the criminal justice system as we work to change it, it's possible to forget that how outrageous it really is. This program reminded me to hold on to my outrage and use it to mobilize action.

With that in mind, I am glad that *American Jail* is the sort of program that makes us outraged, even in a time in which the news gives us reasons daily to feel overwhelmed. I am glad, too, that many of those voices of critique and outrage come to the screen from inside America's jails and prisons. We need to hear more from the people we too often forget about.

PUBLICATION

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.