**Class Reflections for UP 494**

Written by - Arpita Banerjee, for Tuesday Session No. 9 (03-30-2021)

Session Name: *Crime and Incarceration*

Write-Up: *A description of Million Dollar Blocks (based on readings)*

The unequal creation of crime reports is concerning, and more concerning is the evidence that shows spending money on incarceration neither reduces crime, nor ensures safer neighborhoods. Instead of focusing on where crime occurs, we might need to shift our focus to where crime is created – or blocks whose residents are being incarcerated.

In the story of Chicago’s Million Dollar Blocks, public spending on incarceration is ineffective. Large amounts of unpaid bills ($ 8 million) remain while the city commits 1.4billion $ to incarcerating residents despite a decline in crime rates. This bears evidence of city’s priorities, privatization of jails and unfairness to individual neighborhoods. Rates of incarceration are grossly disproportionate and harsher sentences are doled out to residents of low-income segregated neighborhoods of South and West Chicago [ranked from highest to lowest investments on incarceration – Austin, Humboldt Park, North Lawndale, West Englewood, Roseland]. Spatial unevenness in Chicago has been consistent for the past two decades [70% of adult men have been subjected to the criminal justice system]. 121 blocks have registered more than $ 1 million to prison sentences for non-violent crimes. Incarceration disproportionately affects low-income African American communities while larger areas of white population are completely unscathed. Research shows that incarceration rates are not dependent on local crimes, but have correlations with geographical locations, education quality and economic development. High rates of incarceration are coupled with an equally high rate of recidivism, 50% of all prisoners return to prison, churning out a prison cycle that worsens the incidence of crime.

*“We are punishing them for the places where they live, the schools that failed them and the employers that rejected them. And, without question, we are punishing them for the darkness of their skin.”* (Cooper & Lugalia-Hollon, n.d.)

Alternatives/ Solutions

Investing in the Drivers of Crime and countering the production of incarceration with community level justice. Interesting interventions include Workforce Development, Addiction Treatment, Mental Health Diversions as low hanging fruits. Rebuilding of local economies, going beyond reduction of drug charges are often left unaddressed.

Maps/ Data Analysis methodologies –

1. Spending Map showing adult convictions based on offense, length of sentence and offender’s residential address.
2. Dollar amounts are derived from sentence lengths based on the assumption that $22,000 are send each year on each inmate. Life expectancy of average adults informs spending calculations of lifetime prisoners.
3. Assumptions
   1. Prisoners only serve their minimum sentence.
   2. Sentence of the most serious offense is assumed for prisoners with multiple offenses.
   3. Only non-violent offenders are represented in the “drug incarceration” section
   4. Court and policing costs are ignored.

# References

Cooper, D. & Lugalia-Hollon, R., n.d. *Chicago's Million Dollar Blocks,* s.l.: s.n.