Alice Goffman: How we're priming some kids for college — and others for prison

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0:12 On the path that American children travel to adulthood, two institutions oversee the journey. The first is the one we hear a lot about: college. Some of you may remember the excitement that you felt when you first set off for college. Some of you may be in college right now and you're feeling this excitement at this very moment.

0:34 College has some shortcomings. It's expensive; it leaves young people in debt. But all in all, it's a pretty good path. Young people emerge from college with pride and with great friends and with a lot of knowledge about the world. And perhaps most importantly, a better chance in the labor market than they had before they got there.

0:56 Today I want to talk about the second institution overseeing the journey from childhood to adulthood in the United States. And that institution is prison. Young people on this journey are meeting with probation officers instead of with teachers. They're going to court dates instead of to class. Their junior year abroad is instead a trip to a state correctional facility. And they're emerging from their 20s not with degrees in business and English, but with criminal records.

1:33 This institution is also costing us a lot, about 40,000 dollars a year to send a young person to prison in New Jersey. But here, taxpayers are footing the bill and what kids are getting is a cold prison cell and a permanent mark against them when they come home and apply for work.

1:53 There are more and more kids on this journey to adulthood than ever before in the United States and that's because in the past 40 years, our incarceration rate has grown by 700 percent. I have one slide for this talk. Here it is. Here's our incarceration rate, about 716 people per 100,000 in the population. Here's the OECD countries.

2:29 What's more, it's poor kids that we're sending to prison, too many drawn from African-American and Latino communities so that prison now stands firmly between the young people trying to make it and the fulfillment of the American Dream. The problem's actually a bit worse than this 'cause we're not just sending poor kids to prison, we're saddling poor kids with court fees, with probation and parole restrictions, with low-level warrants, we're asking them to live in halfway houses and on house arrest, and we're asking them to negotiate a police force that is entering poor communities of color, not for the purposes of promoting public safety, but to make arrest counts, to line city coffers.

3:17 This is the hidden underside to our historic experiment in punishment: young people worried that at any moment, they will be stopped, searched and seized. Not just in the streets, but in their homes, at school and at work.

3:33 I got interested in this other path to adulthood when I was myself a college student attending the University of Pennsylvania in the early 2000s. Penn sits within a historic African-American neighborhood. So you've got these two parallel journeys going on simultaneously: the kids attending this elite, private university, and the kids from the adjacent neighborhood, some of whom are making it to college, and many of whom are being shipped to prison.

4:03 In my sophomore year, I started tutoring a young woman who was in high school who lived about 10 minutes away from the university. Soon, her cousin came home from a juvenile detention center. He was 15, a freshman in high school. I began to get to know him and his friends and family, and I asked him what he thought about me writing about his life for my senior thesis in college. This senior thesis became a dissertation at Princeton and now a book.

4:32 By the end of my sophomore year, I moved into the neighborhood and I spent the next six years

4:37 trying to understand what young people were facing as they came of age. The first week I spent in this neighborhood, I saw two boys, five and seven years old, play this game of chase, where the older boy ran after the other boy. He played the cop. When the cop caught up to the younger boy, he pushed him down, handcuffed him with imaginary handcuffs, took a quarter out of the other child's pocket, saying, "I'm seizing that." He asked the child if he was carrying any drugs or if he had a warrant. Many times, I saw this game repeated, sometimes children would simply give up running, and stick their bodies flat against the ground with their hands above their heads, or flat up against a wall. Children would yell at each other, "I'm going to lock you up, I'm going to lock you up and you're never coming home!" Once I saw a six-year-old child pull another child's pants down and try to do a cavity search.

5:35 In the first 18 months that I lived in this neighborhood, I wrote down every time I saw any contact between police and people that were my neighbors. So in the first 18 months, I watched the police stop pedestrians or people in cars, search people, run people's names, chase people through the streets, pull people in for questioning, or make an arrest every single day, with five exceptions. Fifty-two times, I watched the police break down doors, chase people through houses or make an arrest of someone in their home. Fourteen times in this first year and a half, I watched the police punch, choke, kick, stomp on or beat young men after they had caught them.

6:23 Bit by bit, I got to know two brothers, Chuck and Tim. Chuck was 18 when we met, a senior in high school. He was playing on the basketball team and making C's and B's. His younger brother, Tim, was 10. And Tim loved Chuck; he followed him around a lot, looked to Chuck to be a mentor. They lived with their mom and grandfather in a two-story row home with a front lawn and a back porch. Their mom was struggling with addiction all while the boys were growing up. She never really was able to hold down a job for very long. It was their grandfather's pension that supported the family, not really enough to pay

for food and clothes and school supplies for growing boys. The family was really struggling.

7:05 So when we met, Chuck was a senior in high school. He had just turned 18. That winter, a kid in the schoolyard called Chuck's mom a crack whore. Chuck pushed the kid's face into the snow and the school cops charged him with aggravated assault. The other kid was fine the next day, I think it was his pride that was injured more than anything.

7:28 But anyway, since Chuck was 18, this agg. assault case sent him to adult county jail on State Road in northeast Philadelphia, where he sat, unable to pay the bail – he couldn't afford it – while the trial dates dragged on and on and on through almost his entire senior year. Finally, near the end of this season, the judge on this assault case threw out most of the charges and Chuck came home with only a few hundred dollars' worth of court fees hanging over his head. Tim was pretty happy that day.

8:01 The next fall, Chuck tried to re-enroll as a senior, but the school secretary told him that he was then 19 and too old to be readmitted. Then the judge on his assault case issued him a warrant for his arrest because he couldn't pay the 225 dollars in court fees that came due a few weeks after the case ended. Then he was a high school dropout living on the run.

8:23 Tim's first arrest came later that year after he turned 11. Chuck had managed to get his warrant lifted and he was on a payment plan for the court fees and he was driving Tim to school in his girlfriend's car. So a cop pulls them over, runs the car, and the car comes up as stolen in California. Chuck had no idea where in the history of this car it had been stolen. His girlfriend's uncle bought it from a used car auction in northeast Philly. Chuck and Tim had never been outside of the tri-state, let alone to California. But anyway, the cops down at the precinct charged Chuck with receiving stolen property. And then a juvenile judge, a few days later, charged Tim, age 11, with accessory to receiving a stolen property and then he was placed on three years of probation. With this probation sentence hanging over his head,

9:18 Chuck sat his little brother down and began teaching him how to run from the police. They would sit side by side on their back porch looking out into the shared alleyway and Chuck would coach Tim how to spot undercover cars, how to negotiate a late-night police raid, how and where to hide.

9:38 I want you to imagine for a second what Chuck and Tim's lives would be like if they were living in a neighborhood where kids were going to college, not prison. A neighborhood like the one I got to grow up in. Okay, you might say. But Chuck and Tim, kids like them, they're committing crimes! Don't they deserve to be in prison? Don't they deserve to be living in fear of arrest? Well, my answer would be no. They don't. And certainly not for the same things that other young people with more privilege are doing with impunity. If Chuck had gone to my high school, that schoolyard fight would have ended there, as a schoolyard fight. It never would have become an aggravated assault case. Not

a single kid that I went to college with has a criminal record right now. Not a single one. But can you imagine how many might have if the police had stopped those kids and searched their pockets for drugs as they walked to class? Or had raided their frat parties in the middle of the night?

10:43 Okay, you might say. But doesn't this high incarceration rate partly account for our really low crime rate? Crime is down. That's a good thing. Totally, that is a good thing. Crime is down. It dropped precipitously in the '90s and through the 2000s. But according to a committee of academics convened by the National Academy of Sciences last year, the relationship between our historically high incarceration rates and our low crime rate is pretty shaky. It turns out that the crime rate goes up and down irrespective of how many young people we send to prison.

11:20 *We tend to think about justice in a pretty narrow way: good and bad, innocent and guilty. Injustice is about being wrongfully convicted. So if you're convicted of something you did do, you should be punished for it. There are innocent and guilty people, there are victims and there are perpetrators. Maybe we could think a little bit more broadly than that.*

11:43 **Right now, we're asking kids who live in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, who have the least amount of family resources, who are attending the country's worst schools, who are facing the toughest time in the labor market, who are living in neighborhoods where violence is an everyday problem, we're asking these kids to walk the thinnest possible line – to basically *never do anything wrong*.**

12:07 **Why are we not providing support to young kids facing these challenges? Why are we offering only handcuffs, jail time and this fugitive existence? Can we imagine something better? Can we imagine a criminal justice system that prioritizes recovery, prevention, civic inclusion, rather than punishment?** (Applause) A criminal justice system that acknowledges the legacy of exclusion that poor people of color in the U.S. have faced and that does not promote and perpetuate those exclusions. (Applause) And finally, a criminal justice system that believes in black young people, rather than treating black young people as the enemy to be rounded up. (Applause)

13:10 The good news is that we already are. **A few years ago, Michelle Alexander wrote "The New Jim Crow," which got Americans to see incarceration as a civil rights issue of historic proportions in a way they had not seen it before. President Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder have come out very strongly on sentencing reform, on the need to address racial disparity in incarceration. We're seeing states throw out Stop and Frisk as the civil rights violation that it is. We're seeing cities and states decriminalize possession of marijuana.** New York, New Jersey and California have been dropping their prison populations, closing prisons, while also seeing a big drop in crime. Texas has gotten into the

game now, also closing prisons, investing in education. This curious coalition is building from the right and the left, made up of former prisoners and fiscal conservatives, of civil rights activists and libertarians, of young people taking to the streets to protest police violence against unarmed black teenagers, and older, wealthier people – some of you are here in the audience – pumping big money into decarceration initiatives In a deeply divided Congress, the work of reforming our criminal justice system is just about the only thing that the right and the left are coming together on.

14:36 I did not think I would see this political moment in my lifetime. I think many of the people who have been working tirelessly to write about the causes and consequences of our historically high incarceration rates did not think we would see this moment in our lifetime. The question for us now is, how much can we make of it? How much can we change?

14:58 I want to end with a call to young people, the young people attending college and the young people struggling to stay out of prison or to make it through prison and return home. It may seem like these paths to adulthood are worlds apart, but the young people participating in these two institutions conveying us to adulthood, they have one thing in common: Both can be leaders in the work of reforming our criminal justice system. Young people have always been leaders in the fight for equal rights, the fight for more people to be granted dignity and a fighting chance at freedom. The mission for the generation of young people coming of age in this, a sea-change moment, potentially, is to end mass incarceration and build a new criminal justice system, emphasis on the word justice.

15:51 Thanks.

15:52 (Applause)