

## The United States of Incarceration: The Criminal Justice Assault on Minorities, the Poor, and the Mentally Ill

**Tim Anderson**

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*The United States of Incarceration is a valuable arms cache for those who want to engage in the war on mass incarceration.*

*The United States of Incarceration*, by Tim Anderson, soberly and effectively gives ammunition to a growing number of people and organizations from a range of political perspectives who agree that US criminal justice reform is necessary. Anderson effectively establishes reasons why the current system amounts to, as the book's subtitle says, an "assault on minorities, the poor, and the mentally ill." He does this in a way that is more effective than fiery rhetoric—he uses facts.

The author has great insight not only into the problem of mass incarceration, but also the philosophical and practical underpinnings that have prevented any solution for decades. A kind of blending of competing agendas—between neoliberals and neoconservatives—made reform a political no-go. Neoconservatives advocate small government, yet strength abroad, which then translates into a show of strength at home and the increased militarization of local police forces. Neoliberalism has taken on different meanings over the past century and primarily refers to economic policies, but one side effect is limited government involvement in markets. This has led to the rise of private prison companies that do not answer directly to voters.

These factors combine to create what is popularly, and accurately, described as the "prison-industrial complex." This system of self-perpetuating job creation and false feeling that society is safer under a draconian criminal justice system has devastated communities far beyond the huge numbers of individual people incarcerated. It has not made us safer, nor has it reduced crime.

Soberly, Anderson describes how the effect of mass incarceration is intergenerational, cumulative, and hidden from society, impacting people who already have minimal economic opportunities. Had the book been written in the past few months, Anderson could have added that members of the devastated communities will at times come out of hiding to let the world know of the hardwired unfairness of the system—as they did recently in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, following police killings of unarmed African American men. But what sets this book apart is that it does not need to mention these specific flare-ups in the news. What it does is give the reasons behind them.

Among the many facts: Three-strikes drugs laws and defunding of state psychiatric hospitals have made jails and prisons de facto detox centers and mental institutions, places where the mentally ill are routinely submitted to torture via solitary confinement. African Americans and Latinos are more likely to be given harsher sentences than Caucasians accused of the same crimes. Anderson makes the connections; these are not disparate facts. Mandatory minimum sentences, militarization of police, disparities in sentencing—all have the cumulative effect of keeping society's most vulnerable people and entire communities in the margins, held back by the plague of incarceration.

What this author does not do is fill out the book with anecdotes. That's left for other authors and is not the purpose of

this book. This book is a kind of encyclopedia for those who know there's something fundamentally flawed about our criminal justice system but aren't sure how or why. *The United States of Incarceration* is a valuable arms cache for those who want to engage in the war on mass incarceration.

HOWARD LOVY (April 8, 2015)

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