

# INCARCERATION AND COMMUNITIES: THE EFFECTS OF MASS INCARCERATION ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

*by Melissa Lang*

This paper attempts to describe the development of cities from the growth machine perspective. The paper explores the growth machine theory and how it offers an explanation for the involvement of mass incarceration within the urban growth machine as well as incarceration's inhibiting effect on specific community development, especially in cities such as Chicago. The paper recommends areas for future research and future policy planning to attempt to counter these effects.

Researchers such as Tonry and Petersilia have made compelling arguments that prisons are a microcosm of society: through studying them, we will learn about ourselves (Tonry and Petersilia: 1999). The impact of massive incarceration on communities historically has been overlooked in discussions of community development. It is important to consider the percentage of a given community involved with the criminal justice system when examining and understanding the political economy of the city and urban development. A number of different theories attempt to explain the economic and political development of cities; the growth machine theory is a particularly useful way to conceptualize urban change and community development. To view cities as growth machines and understand development from this perspective demonstrates how powerful stakeholders create and implement policies that benefit the elite at the cost of the lower class. Minorities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and underrepresented as members of the growth machine. Powerful political stakeholders with little invested in these communities have endorsed policies that have had particularly tragic impacts upon the African-American population. The criminal justice system has become a manifestation of the growth machine in action, especially in the city of Chicago.

Logon and Molotch's portrayal of the growth machine theory starts with a question: who governs and for what? The theory asserts that powerful stakeholders develop and maintain policies that exclude a specific population. The result is the marginalization and oppression of these groups both economically and socially. These stakeholders seem to have little interest in seeing current policy change because they reap benefits from maintaining the status quo. The snowball effect of the criminal justice system has gone ignored because its negative impacts affect communities that are not considered a part of the growth machine. Members of these communities are not stakeholders in the growth machine; they are not economically powerful and are therefore politically weak.

Specific policies have influenced low-income and minority representation in the criminal justice system. Current drug control and crime policies unfairly target specific areas of major cities, perpetuating underdevelopment and inequality. These policies contribute to the marginalization of an already discriminated-against group. Particularly in Chicago, the overrepresentation of members of primarily black communities in the criminal justice system contributes to these communities' lack of power. Michael Tonry comments on the strong link between crime, race and economic status in the United States: "For as long as crime statistics have been compiled, crime and poverty have marched together" (Tonry: 128).

The nature of the criminal justice system is not preventative, which is evident in policy proposals targeting those individuals who are being released from the criminal justice system. The current policy around criminal justice places less attention on the antecedents to and prevention of crime. The majority of research in this area focuses on the effect of being involved in the system and issues of prisoner reentry into the community. The fracturing of communities as a result of mass incarceration inhibits community organization, ultimately impeding community development. Few prevention efforts are aimed at preempting criminal justice involvement.

Actual change and improvements in these communities requires that policy action be taken before individuals enter the criminal justice system. Laws that affect initial engagement in the system need to be evaluated instead of merely funneling money into increased policing and greater incarceration. Policymakers need to gain an appreciation of the socioeconomic factors associated with criminal behavior, and they must make efforts to change the power structure of the city to allow groups to reap the benefits of community development.

## INCARCERATION AND COMMUNITIES

Since the 1980s, the United States has seen a significantly dramatic increase in its prison and jail populations. Beyond analyzing the rise in incarceration rates, much stands to be learned from looking at which individuals are represented in this growing population. Low-income minorities, in particular African-American males, are disproportionately represented at every level in the criminal justice system. The relationship to race, class and criminality is difficult to deny. In the United States, individuals of color are more likely to be in poverty and more likely to be incarcerated. Davis (2002) reports "53% of people warehoused in our nation's prisons earned less than \$10,000 a year prior to incarceration. Although the minority population is approximately 13%, 66% of the nation's prison population is people of color."

As of June 2002 in Illinois, 6 out of 10 of the adult Department of Corrections population was black, as well as approximately 6 out of 10 of the juvenile corrections population. In June 2001, approximately 7 out of 10 arrested males in Cook County were black (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2002). According to the Sentencing Project, recent figures show that an estimated 1 in 10 African-American males in the age group 25-29 is in state or federal prison, compared to just over 1 percent of white males. If black male inmates in local jails are added to this count, the proportion rises to nearly one in seven (Sentencing Project: 2001).

Not only are minorities overrepresented, but minorities from specific geographic communities. These trends are particularly obvious in cities like Chicago. There are six communities that the majority of offenders return to in the Chicagoland area: Humboldt Park, Englewood, Oakwood, North Lawndale, Austin and Auburn-Gresham. In the North Lawndale Community, 70 percent of males 18 to 45 years of age have a criminal record (Street et al., 2002). "Criminogenic forces are strongest in inner-city areas of concentrated poverty, where incomes are low and families unstable, and unemployment and welfare dependence are high. Blacks are far more likely than whites to live in such neighborhoods" (Tonry: 128). These same neighborhoods that have high numbers of their community members involved at some point with the criminal justice system are some of Chicago's most impoverished areas.

The ramifications of involvement with the criminal justice system are far-reaching, impacting the individual, family, and community. Following jail or prison experiences ex-offenders will struggle in obtaining employment, housing and education in addition to addressing psychosocial needs and family restructuring. Sizable economic and smaller ethnographic literatures convincingly

show that imprisonment reduces ex-offenders' subsequent incomes and employment (Fagan and Freeman: 1999, Tonry and Petersilia: 1999). Some literature suggests that the effect of involvement in the system is a portion of what contributes to recidivism rates. "According to findings of criminal careers research (Blumstein et al. 1986), the negative effects on ex-prisoners' incomes, employment prospects, and family involvement predict increased offending probabilities" (Tonry and Petersilia: 1999). It is hard to deny that being on probation or parole and having a criminal record has potentially severe consequences for an individual's quality of life. The goal of probation and parole is to limit recidivism<sup>1</sup> rates of offenders, but the success of these methods is threatened due to the circumstances prisoners encounter when reentering communities. The difficulties involved in reintegrating into society can be harsh when reintegration is happening in an underdeveloped and impoverished community with few to no resources.

#### THE GROWTH MACHINE

One way to conceptualize the structure of the criminal justice system is to view policy formation and implementation within the context of the city as a growth machine. Viewing the city as a growth machine involves understanding the role of different players and powerful stakeholders. According to Logon and Molotch (1996), "For those who count, the city is a growth machine, one that can increase aggregate rents and trap related wealth for those in the right position to benefit." The growth machine theory is based on the premise that cities have physical space or land value. The value of the city is placed on its capacity for the use and exchange value of this land or space.

The growth machine perspective assumes a city is made up of "elites" who work and live in the city and "others" who do not count because they do not contribute to the development process. According to Logon and Molotch (1996) these private and public actors, "the elites," are part of the growth machine. These actors have the strongest exchange value interest in the city because they have the most invested in the city. These actors include: property owners, real estate developers, construction, public sector actors-government at the local level and federal-media and universities. These groups act to control the political agenda. One argument is that cities are shaped by competition between cities. The growth machine theory, on the other hand, suggests development of the city is not shaped as much by competition between cities but by growth machine members' attempts to maximize the value of land and maximize benefits to growth machine members. Logon and Molotch (1996) stress

that “the activism of entrepreneurs is, and always has been, a critical force in shaping the urban system, including the rise and fall of given places.”

Another factor supporting the growth machine theory is the issue of prison privatization. The privatization of prisons has changed the face of incarceration. In 2002, the Illinois Department of Corrections had a budget of \$1,303,219,800. What was once considered a public need may now be considered a commodity. With a more than \$1 billion budget for one state’s department of corrections, it is clear that incarceration has value. It is valuable for a city to use its space for corrections purposes. In fact, it is possible to buy stock in prison companies in America. As Tonry and Petersilia (1999) report, “Prisons are now often managed by private corporations that operate hundreds of institutions and provide comprehensive services, such as medical-care systems ... communities now compete for new prison construction as a local economic development initiative.” The mental-health facility of the Cook County Jail, for example, is actually the largest mental health facility in the state. The services provided within the jails are becoming privatized at an increasing rate.

The powerful stakeholders in a city who influence and implement the policies that determine who is caught up in the criminal justice system have little concern for mass incarceration’s effect on specific communities. The people interested in these numbers are the people that are negatively impacted, the people that make up the communities that see a majority of their male members ensnared in a nebulous system. Elite stakeholders have no desire to see a change because they have nothing to gain from change and everything to gain from the system staying as it is. Logon and Molotch (1996) refer to the elites’ influence upon development, saying, “This competition, in addition to its critical influence on what goes on *within* cities, also influences the distribution of populations throughout cities and regions, determining which ones grow and which do not.”

Crime also has been used by elites as a political tool. Logon and Molotch explain this action as “symbolic” politics that depends upon media involvement. Misrepresentations of crime and the necessary modes of dealing with crime in the media sway public sentiment and lead to reactionary policies that can have long-lasting effects. Politicians often include “getting tough on crime” in their campaigns not because of a tangible need to do so but because it plays upon public fear and drums up support for candidates. Crime rates and incarceration rates rarely have been significantly correlated in the United States. This “symbiotic ‘dance,’” as Molotch calls it, allows politicians to avoid issues that may offend growth machine interests, and the result “often misleads public about the real stuff of community cleavage and political process. ... [T]o

the degree that rentier elites keep growth issues on a symbolic level, they prevail as the 'second face of power' the face that determines the public agenda" (L&M: 302). Crime in particular is an issue that has been sensationalized and manipulated through media.

Additionally, the power of elite stakeholders and the overlap of public and private interest are evidenced on a federal level. The two major private corrections companies are major contributors to the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a Washington-based public policy organization. "ALEC's members include over 40 percent of all state legislators. ... One of ALEC's primary functions is the development of model legislation such as privatization. Under their Criminal Justice Task Force, ALEC has developed and helped to successfully implement in many states 'tough-on-crime' initiatives including 'Truth in Sentencing' and 'Three Strikes' laws" (Sentencing Project: 2001). It appears these parties have a vested economic interest in seeing the population remain high in the criminal justice system. There is a direct connection between the legislation related to incarceration and private investment.

Criticism of the city as a growth machine has pointed to the ways in which this form of development benefits the elite group without having significant positive effects upon the "others." Logon and Molotch (1996) claim that "under current jurisdictional and ecological patterns, growth tends to intensify the separation and disparities among social groups and communities" (L&M: 325). This is evident in the situation of communities in the Chicagoland area. As the country experienced an economic boom in the 1990s, there was a simultaneous boom in the incarcerated population. Certain communities benefited tremendously from the successful economy while others experienced little if any development and fared worse. The effects of the criminal justice system compound the separation among social groups. A cycle is established whereby individuals involved in criminal activity are returned to their struggling communities with fewer resources than they had previously and yet face societal expectations to succeed.

## ONGOING POLICY AND INITIATIVES

A number of policies laid the groundwork for the current state of the criminal justice system. In 1984 President Ronald Reagan signed the Comprehensive Crime Control Bill into law. Within this bill the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 created the United States Sentencing Commission. The responsibility of this commission was to create sentencing guidelines to which every federal judge was held in order to ensure all defendants would be treated alike. In addition, mandatory sentencing statutes were included in the Omnibus Drug

Control Act of 1986. This mandated form of sentencing resulted in disproportionate incarceration of those committing crimes involving narcotics and immigration offenses (Kaufman: 1999). These legislative actions were major forces that led to the increase in rates of incarceration and criminal justice system involvement.

The result of these policies has been remarkable. The United States is now the operator of the largest prison system on the planet (Currie: 1998). The Federal Bureau of Prisons budget has increased by 1,400 percent between 1983 and 1997 (BJS: 1997). The impact upon low-income, minority communities must be noted; while African-Americans constitute 15 percent of the drug-using population, they represent nearly 40 percent of those arrested for drug violations and 55 percent of those convicted (Barry: 1997). The number of low-income minorities in the system grew exponentially while the amount of money spent in the system tremendously increased.

Once the groundwork was laid, the country experienced remarkable growth of the incarcerated population throughout the 1980s and '90s. Policymakers paid attention to crime control policies as additional proposals attempted to deal with a perceived increase in criminal behavior. Specific pockets or communities were associated with high levels of crime, gang and drug involvement. The approach for dealing with this issue was to target these areas with increased surveillance and community policing.

Community policing is considered the modern approach to reduce crime in neighborhoods and has become the prevailing force behind crime reduction efforts throughout the United States. Local and federal governments have been endorsing this approach, specifically through the passage of The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in September 1994. This act approved \$8.8 billion for local law enforcement agencies "in the fight against crime through the enhancement of community policing capabilities" (COPS: 2002). At this time the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) was created. Over the past eight years, the COPS Office has contributed funding to law enforcement agencies allowing them to hire over 110,000 community police officers, purchase crime-fighting technology and support innovations in policing (COPS: 2002). While the prison population was on the rise and the rate of incarceration was multiplying, more funding was put toward increasing the amount of policing.

In 1998 Chicago was officially recognized as a Federal Weed and Seed site. According to its mission, "Operation Weed and Seed is foremost a

strategy—rather than a grant program—which aims to prevent, control, and reduce violent crime, drug abuse, and gang activity in targeted high-crime neighborhoods across the country” (Executive Office Weed and Seed: 2001). Apparently the strategy involves a two-pronged approach: law enforcement agencies and prosecutors cooperate in “weeding out” criminals who participate in violent crime and drug abuse, attempting to prevent their return to the targeted area. It seems the weeding does not involve rehabilitation efforts; its purpose is to remove negative behavior from the areas. The “seeding” brings human services to the area, encompassing prevention, intervention, treatment and neighborhood revitalization. The weeding involves a community-oriented policing approach. When the contrast between weeding and seeding is broken down financially, the approaches seem less equally split. The “weeding” or law enforcement approach was appropriated \$162.7 million dollars for Illinois in 2001. The “seeding” approach, addressing community “revitalization,” was appropriated \$3.2 million dollars for Illinois in 2001 (COPS: 2001). While the program claims to have the interest of communities in mind, it ultimately fails its mission to revitalize neighborhoods. Obviously the revitalization programming is not a priority; the weeding approach, which contributes to the disempowerment and breakdown of communities, receives a tremendously larger amount of funds. This fiscal disparity between policing versus development programming is a terrific example of the lack of investment in these communities.

The remarkable rise in the prison population at the turn of the century is now producing a dramatic increase in the numbers of offenders returning to communities. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 6.5 million Americans are now incarcerated or on probation or parole, an increase of more than 240 percent since 1980 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). Funding for rehabilitation programs is targeted to the behavior change of the individual and fails to address community needs. For example in October 2002, the Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson awarded grants totaling \$33.9 million to provide substance-abuse treatment along with HIV/AIDS services in African American, Latino-Hispanic, and other racial or ethnic communities affected by both substance abuse and HIV/AIDS (SAMHSA: 2002). While these funds are useful, they are targeted toward individuals already involved in the system and demonstrate a lack of funding aimed toward prevention and community development.

Numerous studies have shown that in-prison programs help reduce recidivism among reentering prisoners, but there continues to be a shortage of vocational, educational, and substance-abuse programs in prisons (Bureau of



Justice Statistics 2001). In 1996, 6 percent of state prison spending was allocated to support rehabilitative prison programs—vocational, educational, treatment—and 94 percent was spent on staffing, building prisons, and maintaining and housing prisoners (BJS 2001). Of the reentering prisoners with substance abuse problems, only 18 percent received treatment while incarcerated (BJS 2001). While studies show that community supervision combined with some form of rehabilitative program following a prisoner’s release helps reduce recidivism, more than 100,000 prisoners are still released each year without any form of community correctional supervision (BJS 2001).

The greatest response to crime and poverty in Chicago’s communities has been an increase in funding toward policing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been put into the Office of Justice Programs & Office of Community Oriented Policing Services Grants for Chicago. More than \$11 million was given to the city of Chicago COPS-AHEAD program, with more than \$1 million put into the Local Law Enforcement Block Grants Program. It has been demonstrated that building more prisons does not reduce criminal activity, yet the majority of funding is directed toward programs that attempt to control criminal behavior without addressing the antecedents associated with it.

## ANALYSIS OF POLICY

The legislative changes that came about to target crime included sentencing mandates, in an attempt to bring uniformity to the system and eliminate possible discrimination. At the same time crime and drug control policies introduced harsher sentencing and stricter sentencing guidelines, leaving less discretion for judges for individual cases. According to an analysis of federal sentencing guidelines, “Mandatory minimum sentencing has forced us to build many new prisons to house low-level and non-violent offenders for long periods of time” (Kaufman: 1999). Mandatory sentencing guidelines have failed in their initial claimed attempt to reduce discriminatory patterns. These sentencing mandates have been successful only in reducing discretion by judges, thereby incarcerating greater numbers of low-level offenders. This has led to the increased incarceration of minorities overrepresented in this population.

Sentencing guidelines and crime-control policies have been created, supported and enforced by elite members who rarely experience the consequences of their establishment. The elites are the interested parties in establishing severe crime laws and increasing spending on corrections, but they rarely are the individuals involved or impacted by these policies. Anti-drug laws clearly

have resulted in staggering increases in the imprisonment of members of inner-city communities. Yet policymakers and stakeholders seem to ignore the association between low-income underdeveloped areas and crime.

Law enforcement strategies contribute to the marginalization of already disadvantaged areas instead of focusing efforts on community development. The result is that impoverished areas continue to struggle, with dwindling resources. For the majority of individuals released from prison, the mandatory condition of probation or parole is that they return to the community from which they were arrested to be monitored for a specified length of time. Recidivism rates remain high and are correlated to rates of homelessness. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 62 percent of those released from state prisons will be re-arrested within three years and 40 percent will be re-incarcerated, many for technical violations of parole (Davis: 2002). Once involved with the system, it is extremely difficult to reintegrate into the community.

Increased levels of law enforcement through community policing in neighborhoods experiencing high crime rates is the main response to communities struggling with a host of problems. Instead of putting funds toward community development, millions of dollars are put into increased security through policing. This may seem initially imperative, but fails to meet the intended goal of establishing safer communities and lowering crime rates. Unfortunately this approach seems narrow and shortsighted as it ignores the greater system in which these neighborhoods function. By increasing community-policing efforts, populations in jail and prison are increasing, the reintegrated population is increasing, and communities are left undeveloped. One researcher found that concentrated neighborhood-based law enforcement strategies (like New York's Tactical Narcotics Teams) have turned Rikers Island, a New York City jail, "into a neighborhood block party" (Moore: 1999). Increased police involvement has left communities like Woodlawn with 70 percent of their male population having been involved in the criminal justice system. Members of communities most in need of development continue to suffer at the hand of policies that focus on reactionary punishment instead of prevention.

Current initiatives perpetuate the stifling effects of an already flawed system, holding individuals and communities responsible without recognizing the greater contributing systemic factors. Policymakers must not just punish the crime but also understand why the crime is present. In areas with few resources, criminal involvement is often a form of economic as well as social survival. While minimal funding has been targeted toward improving community resources and increasing treatment, policy proposals have fallen short of

responding to the needs of communities with high rates of crime and substance abuse.

The loss of power of individuals involved in the criminal justice system is one of the most serious and least addressed impacts of incarceration. The involvement in the criminal justice system contributes to the lack of power of individuals as well as their communities. Power of the individual is inhibited both directly by the system and indirectly. Policy literature shows that various state and federal laws deny ex-offenders in some places the right to vote or hold office, the opportunity to engage in certain occupations, and the right to receive various public benefits and services (Fellner and Mauer 1998). Losing the right to vote is a direct consequence for some, while impaired ability to obtain employment, housing or supportive family services are effects for others.

Assuming the city is a growth machine, powerful stakeholders determine policies that enable them to experience the benefit of urban development. Communities with a significant amount of their members involved in some level with the criminal justice system are considered powerless. They will neither contribute to policies that will affect them nor will they benefit from the experience or influence of urban development. With a hindered ability to be politically involved it is nearly impossible for these communities to be politically powerful. "A steady flow of political demagoguery stigmatizes the poorest of African-Americans and Latinos, groups with little capacity for political influence" (Moore: 1999).

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

One way to attempt to explain urban development is to view the city as a growth machine. The growth machine paradigm suggests the value of the city lies in the ability to use land and its exchange potential. Urban development and consistent growth is obviously beneficial to interested stakeholders. These stakeholders encourage development in order to reap the benefits. An unfortunate dichotomy results separating those influential stakeholders from "others" who are merely impacted by and work within the growth machine. The growth machine theory articulates the power dynamic within a city between groups as it explains why development is pursued.

Historically in the United States there has been a connection between crime and poverty. This "other" group thus has been entrenched in the criminal justice system. Stakeholders have taken advantage of this connection for their benefit. Through the maintenance and development of an oppressive criminal justice system, elites have benefited financially. Additionally, the

system enables stakeholders to maintain power and secure their position as powerful elites in society. The lack of development of certain communities in the urban setting is intertwined with the members of these communities involvement with the criminal justice system. Stakeholders do not need to reap the benefits of the development of these areas because they reap the benefits of the developing criminal justice system.

Obviously, continued evaluation of the criminal justice system is essential, as individuals reentering the community are on the rise. "Tens of millions of people are directly affected by prisons. Any social institution affecting so many people should receive much more attention from scholars than prisons now do" (Tonry and Petersilia 1999). Many underdeveloped communities experience high rates of incarceration. These communities are often targets of community policing plans and reintegration strategies for offenders.

Current drug control and crime policies have helped to maintain the underdevelopment of certain areas of the city and perpetuate inequality. Minorities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and underrepresented as members of the growth machine. Powerful political stakeholders have endorsed policies that have had tragic impacts upon the African-American population. These stakeholders have little invested in these communities and thus make no effort toward changing policies that have created the current system. Instead funds are put into increasing law enforcement because this seems like an immediate solution. Probation and parole programs attempt to deal with the number of individuals returning to communities. Reintegration programs are ineffective because they place all responsibility on the individual and the community to which the individual is returning. Change needs to focus on the communities as a whole by targeting schools, increasing job opportunities and providing housing.

It is difficult to separate sustainable community development from reducing criminal involvement. A more comprehensive analysis is needed to understand the interaction between crime and poverty. The criminal justice system can be considered a microcosm of the social ills and inequality within a nation, state or city. Emphasis also needs to be placed on understanding communities within the context of the city as a developing entity. Viewing cities as a growth machine means understanding the different parts necessary for functioning. Communities cannot develop independently. Reform of the criminal justice system can be realized from a growth perspective if change occurs on the systemic level as well as the community level. ■

## FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup>Recidivism refers to the tendency for ex-offenders to reoffend and reenter the criminal justice system. A large amount of research supports therapeutic programs and alternatives to incarceration that have lowered rates of recidivism, especially with drug-related crimes.

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