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Editorial introduction

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It is better to prevent crimes than to punish them. This is the fundamental principle of good legislation, which is the art of conducting men to the maximum of happiness, and to the minimum of misery, if we may apply this mathematical expression to the good and evil of life.

Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*¹

This series of edited books—The Agenda for Social Justice, The Global Agenda for Social Justice, and the Rapid Response Volumes—is our contribution to making widely available scholarship and the best scientific evidence produced by academics, applied researchers, and experts in the field. It is a project in public sociology spurred by the passion of Professor Robert Perrucci, the 48th President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP),² who challenged us to bring our knowledge outside the academy and our professional organizations into the public sphere. He called for us to be activists in the form of writing for the public to advance an agenda for social justice. With this volume, we—the Justice 21 Committee of the SSSP who serve to curate and realize these volumes—continue to respond to Dr. Perrucci’s call to infuse the public discourse with science-based alternative visions for the future. It is a future in which we work toward solving social problems to create a more equitable, inclusive, and just world.

This rapid response volume, produced by SSSP in partnership with The Sentencing Project, is a call to arms to

end mass incarceration and respond to the devastation it has caused in the United States. The year 2023 marks five decades since the United States embarked on a failed experiment by using mass incarceration as the primary strategy to control crime and the communities experiencing it. Instead of heavily investing in solutions to prevent crime, the United States opted to put more of its citizens in prison for longer and longer periods. Since 1973, the prison population has grown 500 percent and disproportionately affects Black Americans. While political rhetoric and public demand to be “tough on crime” ebbs and flows, the number of Americans in our prisons and jails and the massive probation and parole population are a result of misguided sentencing laws and policies. These laws and policies did not produce the panacea of crime reduction that one would have expected from one of the world’s leaders in incarceration.

Beyond Bars: A Path Forward from 50 Years of Mass Incarceration in the United States is a solutions-driven agenda for social justice to address the harms of mass incarceration and chart new pathways to improve community safety and the criminal legal system. Reflecting on the work of renowned criminologist Cesare Beccaria, it is better to prevent crimes than to punish them, and punishment should not exceed what is necessary. It is time for the United States to reverse course on its failed sentencing laws and policies. It is time to end mass incarceration.

This volume includes nine topical chapters examining different facets and ramifications of mass incarceration in the United States. It also includes one think piece about the end of mass incarceration and our opportunities for reform. The contributors are an impressive group of scholars from public and private universities, including graduate students, postdoctoral students, and university faculty at all ranks. There are independent scholars and applied researchers. This group also includes the past and current Executive Director of The Sentencing Project and the current President of the SSSP.

While each chapter in this volume can stand alone, in combination they define a social problem related to mass incarceration, rigorously survey the evidence, and then propose timely and practical solutions. Readers will learn

about problems related to the severity and cost of punishment (for example, life sentences, monetary sanctions), problems during imprisonment (for example, prison labor, access to higher education), problems with release and reentry (for example, parole, housing instability, employment challenges), other persistent punishments like the exclusion from voting, and the collateral consequences for children of incarcerated parents. Because mass incarceration intersects and contributes to so many social problems, we would be remiss not to note that this volume's coverage of mass incarceration in the United States is far from complete. While making a contribution to public sociology and providing a vision for a better future without mass incarceration, we acknowledge the need for more discussion.

As the Chair of the Justice 21 Committee of the SSSP and on behalf of The Sentencing Project, where I work as a Research Analyst, I hope this volume will spur public discussions, inform law and policy makers, provide advocates and advocacy organizations with research from the field, teach students about the deleterious effects of mass incarceration on justice-impacted individuals and our communities, and so much more. We hope that our readers will use this evidence and these solutions to pivot away from mass incarceration—to find new avenues to improve the health of our communities and the lives of our community members—in order to elevate the humanity of all Americans and our capacity for change.

Notes

1. Beccaria, C. (1963) *On Crimes and Punishments*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
2. Perrucci, R. (2001) "Inventing Social Justice: SSSP and the Twenty-First Century." *Social Problems*, 48(2): 159–167. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2001.48.2.159>