Class #6: Mass Incarceration
Discussion Questions for September 12
Readings: Provine; Alexander

Because writing assignments are meant to prepare you for class discussions, you must post a draft question on the Moodle Forum for this date if you want your submission to count. After posting a draft, you must revise and resubmit your final response for a grade by the following Sunday night. In the case of questions posted below, the final draft of your question is due by the end of the day on Sunday, September 15. Include your name, the full question number, and the text of the question on both your draft and final submissions.

Discussion Questions

6-1 Explain what institutional racism is. Are mandatory minimum sentences for crack cocaine institutionally racist, or just plain racist? This is not just a game of words. Does it make sense to you to say that the United States government is overtly racist and structured to be sure that African Americans as a group cannot progress economically (because of the barriers to advancement that are posed by rules that limit opportunities for convicted felons)?

6-2. One of my colleagues attending the Alexander talk who did not know anything about the book said going in, “What’s the big deal? Everyone knows minorities are locked up in prisons more than white people. I think that’s a bad thing but I don’t see what is new here.” What’s the big deal and what, if anything, is new?

6-3 Pragmatic Liberalism claims that Americans share a consensus that it is important for us to live in and to maintain a civil society. In addition to having public life that follows rules of decorum, civil society involves a balance between rights supported by the state and responsibilities on the part of citizens to support state action and to be politically engaged, advancing one’s interests and one’s political views as effectively as possible. What challenges does Alexander offer to this view that we live in a civil society and, within the framework of civil society, are there things that could be done to reverse the impacts of mass incarceration?

6-4 Provine tells us that crimes are social constructions. If this is true, how do we, or should we, justify laws that are not objectively necessary?

I know, this is a vague question. It applies to the War on Drugs and to the implementation of harsh laws related to cocaine. Provine suggests that we should measure laws against the problems they were mean to solve and that we should judge them in terms of whether they are effective. Drug laws are not effective, and you could explain what we mean by that in your answer. Drug laws also create conditions of institutional racism. If you looked, you could probably find neither research to support harsh drug laws or convincing academic writings favoring harsh drug. If
these things are true, drug laws do not seem to be objectively justified since they do not work and they have terrible effects on minority populations in America. While this may be true, most people would not argue to make cocaine legal. What's going on?