Event Transcript

Decarceration and Community: COVID-19 and Beyond (Part I)

Thursday, June 11, 2020
Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Description

Part I of this discussion series, cosponsored with the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, focuses on people who are incarcerated and their families, exploring how systemic racism and mass criminalization threaten both incarcerated individuals and their communities. The participants will consider how recent events, including the COVID-19 crisis and the police murder of George Floyd, highlight and magnify historical inequities—with deadly results.

The panelists work directly with people affected by incarceration, including several who focus on the all-too-often neglected plight of incarcerated women and their families.

SPEAKERS

- Gina Clayton-Johnson, executive director and founder, Essie Justice Group
- Soffiyah Elijah, executive director, Alliance of Families for Justice
- Andrea James, founder, Families for Justice as Healing; executive director, National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
- Zach Norris, executive director, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

MODERATOR

Dehia Umunna, clinical professor of law and faculty deputy director of the Criminal Justice Institute, Harvard Law School

Transcript

TOMIKO BROWN–NAGIN:
- Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Tomiko Brown-Nagin, Dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. I'm pleased to welcome you to the latest installment in our Virtual Radcliffe discussion series exploring health equity in the time of COVID. Today's program is the first of two sessions exploring the pandemic's impact on incarcerated people and their communities.

Before we begin, let me thank our co-sponsor for today's program, the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School, and its managing director, David Harris. I'm so pleased to be in partnership with you on this important endeavor.

I also want to acknowledge the members of the Radcliffe Institute Leadership Society and all our annual donors. Your generosity keeps Radcliffe programming free and open to the public, and we thank you.

As I've mentioned at the outset of each of our webinars, this series reflects three critical elements of the Institute's mission. First, it reflects Radcliffe's commitment to examine and address pressing issues facing our society. Second, it reflects our commitment to cross-disciplinary research and our conviction that insights from across academic disciplines can advance public discourse and reveal innovative solutions to complex problems.

Third and finally, this series reflects the Institute's commitment to equity and opportunity. We know that COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting vulnerable and marginalized communities, particularly communities of color. Together we have a responsibility to examine the deficiencies that this crisis has revealed and exacerbated, and to help chart a more equitable way forward. This series is one part of our effort.

Today we turn our attention to the people and communities affected by incarceration in the United States. American prisons and jails were crowded and susceptible to outbreaks of disease long before COVID-19. Now, despite early warnings and compassionate releases in some states, many prisons and jails have become incubators of the virus. According to the Equal Justice Initiative, seven of the 10 largest outbreaks in the United States have been at correctional facilities. The New York Times reports that at least 59,000 people have been infected with the virus in American jails and prisons. And due to low rates of testing, that is almost certainly an undercount.

The virus's spread has profound effects not only on incarcerated people themselves, but also for their communities. And these are disproportionately marginalized communities and communities of color. This fact takes on special salience today as our nation struggles to reckon with longstanding racial injustice in the wake of yet another brutal and senseless police killing of an African-American man, this time, George Floyd.

To explore these vital issues in greater depth and to help us envision solutions, we're joined this afternoon by distinguished experts who work directly with individuals, families, and communities impacted by incarceration. Gina Clayton-Johnson is Executive Director and Founder of the SE Justice group. Soffiyah Elijah is Executive Director of the Alliance of Families for Justice. Andrea James is founder of Families for Justice as Healing and Executive Director of the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls. And Zach Norris is executive director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.

We're also joined by Dehlia Umunna, who will moderate today's session. Delia is Clinical Professor of Law and Deputy Director of the Criminal justice institute at Harvard Law School.
I'm so grateful to each of our speakers for being with us this afternoon. And now it's my pleasure to give the floor to Delia. Thank you.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so very much, Dean Brown-Nagin, for that kind introduction. And before we begin today, as your moderator, I want to give you just a quick overview of the format for today's program. We're going to do two things very shortly. First, I want to moderate a conversation among our four experts for about 35 minutes. And after that, the group will respond to questions that you, our fantastic audience, will have for the remainder of the program, which we hope to wrap up by 2:15. We encourage those of you watching today to use the Q&A function on Zoom to submit your questions at any time throughout the program, and we'll respond to them as soon as we can.

Before we actually get into the program, I really want us to do this. On behalf of the over 100,000 people who have lost their lives to COVID-19 and on behalf of Ahmad Aubrey, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, I'm going to ask the audience to join me, and the panelists, as we observe a moment of silence and reflection.

Thank you for joining us in that moment of sober reflection. I only think, panelists, at this point, that it's very fitting that I start by asking you the question that is on everyone's mind, quite frankly. How are you doing? If you can respond just briefly to how are you doing given what we've experienced not only in the last three months, but specifically in the last two weeks? And Miss James, if I can start with you. How are you doing?

ANDREA JAMES:

- Thank you very much, and thank you for this opportunity. We're always grateful, it always makes us feel better when our voices are included and we're able to speak from the experience of directly affected women and girls. And so it's been difficult. But it's been a difficult road for us long before the death of Mr. Floyd and so many other black lives, and also long before COVID. The issue that we deal with in ending incarceration of women and girls is one that is a difficult road, but we're always grateful and uplifted when we have an opportunity to be a part of the dialogue. So that's making me feel better already, thank you.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you. Miss Clayton-Johnson, same question.

GINA CLAYTON-JOHNSON:

- Hi, everybody. It's so good to be in this community seeing familiar faces, my professors, Dehlia and Soffiyah, my movement family, Andrea, Zach. This is really a pleasure.

I'm feeling a lot of things in this moment. I'm feeling grief, energy, focus. I think every day, as my work puts me into direct contact with black death and the caging of black people and our bodies, the degradation of our lives, there's always grief there. But there's something that is different when the world is paying attention, and all of the sudden we have it plastered in every single headline and it is part of our collective consciousness. And it's kind of unpeeled some layers, and I'm feeling that.
But I'm also feeling into the energy of this opportunity. We are in a moment, y'all, a moment. There is a potential, a political potential here today that we have not seen that we did not see in 2014, that we did not see in 2016, a potential to completely reimagine the way that we think about safety and health and wellness of our communities.

And that is why I am in this work. I got in this because I knew that cages were not the way, that harm on top of harm, that punishment on top of punishment and trauma was not the way. And so the fact that we are now having conversations earnestly and authentically about transformative solutions, not merely tinkering ones, are what give me energy.

The thing that gives me my focus right now is the concern around that window of opportunity narrowing. There are some very real threats of cooptation. There are some very real threats of going for quick fix solutions that we have tried and that have failed and that are not evidence-based that threaten to close the window on that opportunity.

And so that is calling upon my focus as a strategist, as a leader within the movement for black lives, policy work, and within my own organization to make sure that this is a moment where we draw upon our vigilance as well as upon our passion and vision.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Indeed. This is a time to really, really take advantage of that window of opportunity. So Mr. Norris, I have the same question for you. How are you doing?

ZACH NORRIS:

- Thank you, Dehlia. I appreciate the question and also appreciate the opportunity to be on such an esteemed panel. I am sitting with a lot, as I'm sure all of us are. I am recognizing that I have my own set of privileges as a light-skinned African-American male who has a job in this moment.

I'm thinking, also, about my father, who's 69 years old, darker skinned African-American male who works at the juvenile hall cleaning the juvenile hall. And as we know and we'll talk about, prisons were public health crises prior to COVID. And he was taking time off, trying to kind of avoid going back to work for as long as he could.

Then he started to go back to work, and then I had a different fear, which was the fact that our Sheriff, the Alameda County Sheriff, declared a curfew, which thankfully has since been rescinded. But I was thinking about him going to and from work, being worried about him at work, thinking about him driving home from work. And these are the kind of ever present threats of death that we're dealing with and have been dealing with since the founding of this country. And so COVID-19 is an exposure to the roots of this country in ways that, as Gina said, I think and hope and believe that we can transform this country and have it be about some of the values that were proclaimed in its founding.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you for that response, Mr. Norris. And Miss Soffiyah, how are you doing, ma'am? How are you?
SOFFIYAH ELIJAH:

- Well, first, like my fellow panelists, I am very thankful to be able to participate in this conversation. It's not often that you have this esteemed collection of black brilliance together, so I'm glad that we can do this. I am in the boxing ring while also dealing with the reality that I lost a sister recently to COVID-19. That was not an easy thing to navigate.

But at the same time, the grief and challenges that the family members that our organization, Alliance of Families for Justice, serves, and the people who are incarcerated, their and strife is much more than mine on a personal level. As everyone else has said, the challenges that the people we serve face long preceded COVID-19. And the pandemic has only increased the demands on the work that we have to do. I thought that I understood what it meant to work 24/7, 365. But now I've quadrupled all of those numbers. I won't try to do the math because I'll fail. But we've been in the trenches around the clock trying to address those concerns.

As happened across the country, New York suspended in-person visiting for family members back on March 13, and that's meant that our family members haven't been able to see their loved ones for several months. And the reason I said that I'm in the boxing ring with several different opponents is that about a week and a half ago, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision here in New York, called DOCS, announced that they weren't going to reopen visiting before the beginning of August and only if all of New York state had transitioned into phase three of reopening.

And at that time, if it reopens, visits will be restricted to only two hours at a time, only two family members visiting, and people will not be allowed to touch their loved ones. This lit a spark across the state for our family members. And our organization has been besieged with emails, texts, and phone calls from family members around the state expressing their outrage. So at the same time we're in the boxing ring, I'm inspired by the fact that our family members, who generally are marginalized and dismissed and not heard, are fired up and ready to fight back despite the concerns about COVID-19 and the reality that of the 25,000 people in New York state who've died from COVID-19, the overwhelming majority of those deaths have been experienced by black and LatinX communities.

But our families are not backing down, and I'm encouraged by that. So I always say our main goal is to transform pain into power. And as Gina said—I agree with her totally—it's a special moment, and we have to, as they used to say back when I was in my 20s, seize the time.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so much, Miss Elijah. And on behalf of everyone watching and listening, we just want to extend our sincere, heartfelt condolence to you and your family on the loss of your sister. I remember when it happened. You're one of the strongest women I know. And so I'm grateful for you and for the strength that you've displayed even through very difficult times. So let me ask this. You say that we—a phrase that you talked about, that we transform pain into power. Miss James, I go back to you. What are some of the challenges for incarcerated persons during this COVID-19, and how do these reveal the larger, long-term issues raised by incarceration in general?

ANDREA JAMES:
The issues that are most affecting incarcerated people at this time are issues that they were already dealing with. The system of incarceration and the inequities and the inadequacies and the absolute dysfunction and harm that it causes has been exposed for, really, everybody in the world to see. And these are issues that we have been struggling and fighting for as abolitionists. We come into this space not under the strategy of reform. We come into this work as women who know what it's like to live on a prison bunk, to know what it's like to be separated from our children, to know what it's like to see the generational harm and economic and familial disruption that that has caused because we have decided to use prisons and jails and carceral systems in place of helping people and investing in communities, that we have decided, instead, to pretty much disappear.

And so we come into this space from a place of abolition, saying that yes, we do. We know what it's like to live in a prison. We know the harm that it causes. Even before a crisis, a pandemic like COVID, we say that there was the pandemic of prisons. And so it's very difficult to try and even begin to describe to people what it's like on a normal, regular day in a prison, or at 3:00 in the morning to hear the cries, the gut-wrenching cries the sobs of a woman on a prison bunk near you who is literally just devastated because she has not seen her children.

Many women do not know where their children are. Many women are hearing news of harm that's being caused to their children, children who are being hurt in other ways. And so if you've ever had that experience, you would know how very difficult it is and why we work to end incarceration of women and girls.

Now enter in women who haven't seen their children for six seven, eight, nine, 10 years. We have the Adoption and Safe Families Act in this country that has decimated black families in particular, separated permanently mothers from their children due to incarceration. And these things most people aren't even aware of. And now you add to it. You usher into, already, that culture of incarceration, of causing further harm, of separating families, of disrupting communities economically and familially and culturally.

And now you enter into that already difficult arena this pandemic called COVID-19, which now, where it was already almost impossible, as you know and you will hear from families represented by Gina's organization and Soffiya's organization, who already struggled to see their families, already struggled to travel miles and miles, and to find the scarce resources to get babies to see their mothers and their fathers, to scrape up the money to afford phone calls, to scrape up the money to help to purchase a canteen that's necessary, all of these things that are struggles already that people are enduring.

And now COVID-19 has created an even further separation. Our prisons are locked down 23 and 1/2 hours a day still. That, we are afraid, is going to become the new normal. Visits have ceased in prisons and jails across the country. That, we are afraid, is going to become the new normal. People are let out very short periods of time, and they don't have the time to make phone calls. And what very few people understand is that even when you are able to get a few minutes to make a phone call, for women in particular, who 85% of them were the primary caretakers of their children prior to incarceration, they have been separated from children who often are scattered amongst family members or within the system, the child welfare system.

And one, now, what's turning out to be five- to seven-minute phone call is only one opportunity to figure out which one of those children or loved ones or family member you're going to
actually call. And then in a prison, you can't make back-to-back phone calls. You have to hang up and wait an extended period of time before your PIN resets itself so that you can call again. And so the window that is usually 30 minutes now, that people are let out of cells that they're sharing, where there's no social distancing, and they're having to share with two and three other people and to scramble to shower, to eat, to find resources to get on a line, hope you get through the line before you have to go back into lockup, and then figure out how to communicate with your family, is almost—it is impossible.

And so the levels of complexity of the lives of any incarcerated person are extreme prior to a pandemic like COVID, and then all of the things that have been implemented very ineffectively to address this pandemic has only made matters worse.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so much. That is clearly indicative of the fact that the response to this crisis has been inadequate. And so Miss Clayton-Johnson, based on what you've just heard Miss James talk about, and just how woeful the response has been, what does inadequate response to the pandemic illustrate for us, and how does it relate to mass incarceration? I know we don't have enough time.

GINA CLAYTON-JOHNSON:

- Well, you know, yeah. We don't have enough time. But also, I think I'm just really sitting with what Andrea just shared because it's real for people. And just hits here. And if you did not feel into that as she was speaking, then you need to check in with where your heart is and if it's correctly placed in your body.

And so for me, to answer your question, Dehlia, this is a moment where we feel into what is happening to our people and to our neighbors and to our communities and ourselves and our collective body. And then we need to act. We need to be smart about the fact that this is not a moment where we are simply going to be asking for accountability, back end accountability of bad apples.

Like this prosecute killer cops is not the demand of this moment. Today in California, the judges, the Judicial Council, just rescinded their order to direct all the judges across the state, across our 50 counties, to put zero dollar bail into effect, which means that right now, they are encouraging the incarceration of people simply because they do not have the money to pay, ensuring that this pandemic will cleave across socioeconomic lines and racial lines.

And the reason why I say—I want to be really clear that these are the impacts, this is the pain that you just heard Andrea talking about. But what feels important to me is to uplift the fact that there are people in positions making these decisions who have power to prevent black death, who right now are making the wrong ones.

And there are a host of system actors that we as a general body of citizens, of people who live here and care, need to start attuning ourselves to and extending accountability beyond the most egregious quote, bad apple within a department, and look at the structures that have perpetuated, and in fact encourage, the wholesale harm, sickening, and death of millions of people.
I'd also just like to say, I know there are a lot of people in the audience here. And not everybody, I think, is as aware of what the pandemic of incarceration is. Just basic facts. Over 2.3 million people in cages in the United States. That was not always the case. We've seen a 500% increase of our incarcerated population over 40-year period of time. And that has not in any way correlated with an increase in crime.

We have seen huge amounts of money from the federal, local, and state bodies go into corrections, cages, cops, policing, and that sort of thing, from JAG programs and COPS programs federally to how we see budgets in cities and counties completely rework themselves so that over 50%, 60% of budgets are going to incarceration rather than going to mental health, rather than going to youth education development programs, rather than going to schools and parks and all the things that we know that keep us safe.

And so I think that this is the moment to reimagine the possibilities. And what I want our loved ones inside to know right now is that we are fighting a fight to free not only them, but their children, from the inevitability of harm at the hands of a system that is already set up, ready to go and rearing to incarcerate that next body, to kill that next black person.

And I'd also like to just uplift Tony McDade, who I know has yet to be mentioned. But the death of black trans people is very real and is its own pandemic. And as we talk about Ahmad Aubrey, as we talk about Breonna Taylor, as we talk about George Floyd, we have to also uplift Tony McDade. But this is absolutely a crisis on top of a crisis. But it is being brought about—I think my point that I want people to leave with—it is being brought about by decision makers who are people in positions that we must be vigilant about holding accountable in a much bigger sense than simply demanding somebody's conviction.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so much, Gina. This is a good point, excellent point in terms of the fact that this moment is bigger than just a conviction. And I also thank you very much for making the point that there are so many countless other folks that you keep fighting for, those whose names don't make it into the media or on social media, and that we need to be particularly aware of those individuals.

Mr. Norris, so I will ask you this question. Are there lessons that we can learn about hurdles facing the emergency return home of incarcerated people during this pandemic? Gina said it's a pandemic within a pandemic. And how should this point us to the work that we need to do within the communities to which they are returning?

ZACH NORRIS:

- Yeah. I first want to just lift up and build on the wisdom of Andrea and Gina and just appreciate them for really exposing, I think, the audience. And to me, COVID-19 has been about exposure. The murder of Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Aubrey, George Floyd should be an exposure to each and every one in this nation. This nation was founded in slavery and genocide. And so much of the animating motto of the country and its founding is centered around this idea that the only good Indian is a dead Indian.

And what we see today aren't just vestiges of that past. It is a continuation of that past. Here in California, we have—and across the country—really seeing this idea of small government and
limited government. But the reality is that that motto should now really be understood as the only good government is a death government, because that effectively is what neoliberals, neoconservatives are saying in their policies and their politics.

And what do I mean by that? Here in California, before Ronald Reagan ran for president and started his campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where civil rights leaders and activists were murdered, he was the governor of California. And we still feel the legacy of his governorship. Over the past 40 years, each time there's been a recession, everything that's been cut except for policing and prisons, things that accelerate the morbidity and mortality of black and brown people.

And so as Gina was lifting up, like in California, from 1980 to 2000, we had 23 new prisons built and just one new university. The lion's share of resources at the city level go to policing. Here in Alameda County, our county just gave $300 million to a sheriff's office that has retweeted the alt right, that has hosted the Oath Keepers, that is responsible for the deaths of 30 plus people inside of his jail in the last five years alone.

And so what I would ask folks to do is really understand that for our communities, there isn't a 911. The public health infrastructure is not existent in our communities. It is, if anything, a governance that is mediated through the fear of punishment and through the fear of death. And so we have seen some 3,000 deaths inside of California prisons. Just yesterday a woman died inside of the California Institute for Women. And this is an ongoing crisis that has to be dealt with with systemic and structural reforms.

In the '60s, we saw anti-colonial struggles around the world. And we participated. Many of our ancestors, some of those who are elders, participated in that movement. It was called the Civil Rights movement. It was called the Freedom movement.

We are still seeing that legacy today. And as we see statues around the world come down, from King Leopold to Christopher Columbus to some of the Confederate generals, we know that a transformation is needed in this country. And so that means supporting people as they come home. That means, quite frankly, advocating to get them home now.

That's some of the work that the Ella Baker Center is doing, is really pushing the governor to let people out of prisons, to let young people out of our juvenile hall and our probation camp so that they not be ongoing public health crises and centers of public health crises, but we have an opportunity to actually heal from the harms that are in the past and in the present in this moment.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so very much for that answer, Mr. Norris. And so before we open up the question session, before we pivot to getting questions from the audience, Miss Soffiyah, I do have a question for you. If you were to have a discussion with the Director of Corrections, for example, if you were to have audience with him, say the Director of Corrections in New York, for example, what would you say? What would you advise him should be their response to the current pandemic?

SOFFIYAH ELIJAH:
- Thank you for that question, Dehlia. It's quite possible they wouldn't want to talk to me, but that wouldn't keep me from talking, for sure. I might start by suggesting that it would be time thing to polish up his resume and look for other employment because we're coming to take that institution down. I might inform him—him or her. In New York, to him, who, actually, I do talk to from time to time—I would probably informed him that it's a new day, that no longer are people in the streets and people in their living rooms hiding from the discussion about the underpinnings of racism in this country, and how it's contributed to every inequity that we experience here.

I would certainly focus on the fact that in New York and many other places, people who are incarcerated are not being uniformly tested for COVID-19 so that when they do come home—and about 95% of the people who are incarcerated do return to their communities—they are coming back to their communities not knowing whether or not they're infected with the virus and whether or not they're going to infect their family members.

I would challenge the Department of Corrections head about the fact that not enough people are being released in New York. Governor Cuomo has released not one soul as a result of any compassion tied to the fact that, as many people have already acknowledged, the prisons are a Petri dish for this pandemic.

I would inform him that it is a new day, and that reform, criminal justice reform, should be off the table. Just like you couldn't reform slavery, you can't reform a racist criminal injustice system. And so they've missed an opportunity. The decision makers have missed the opportunity to push for reforms, that now it's about taking it down, overhauling, and creating a better world that centers people as the most valuable natural resource in any country. No better place to start than in America, where we've completely indicated our lack of valuing people and their lives, and particularly the lives of the black and brown people in this country.

I do want to say that the point that Zach was making really resonates with me. We've experienced the following in New York. We've had a reduction in the prison population here from a high of 72,000 to now under 40,000. So you would expect, with such a drastic drop in the number of people in the prisons, you would have a similar reduction in the number of people who are working in those facilities. However, those numbers have remained almost exactly the same. Barely a reduction that could be noticed.

You find the same thing with respect to the police departments throughout New York state. New York has enjoyed a 40% drop in the crime rate. And those are numbers that come from law enforcement. However, like we see in most states, the budgets for police continue to accelerate. The militarization of the police as an occupying force in Black and Latino communities continues unabated.

So I would say to the head of corrections and to Governor Cuomo and to anybody in law enforcement, including district attorneys, they should probably look for a new career because this arena is going to come down because the people are calling for it. The call in the streets includes the murders and deaths of George Floyd and so many others. But I'm old enough to remember when James Byrd in Jasper, Texas was tied to the back of a truck, a black man, and dragged all over that community. And those people who did that to him functioned with impunity for the longest.

We're not going back to the times of James Byrd. We're going like on a rocket ship in another direction. So they need to get ready because it's a new day.
DELIA UMUNNA:

- Wow. Thank you. Just listening to that, it's so easy—it's unfortunate, too, how there have been so many of the deaths that just remembering Jasper, I'm just like, wow, that did happen. Wow, Soffiyah.

All right. So we're going to, as hard as this is, to pivot to questions from our audience. And Miss James, this first question is for you. It's from Erin. And Erin is asking, in my state—I believe she's from the state of Colorado—the largest outbreak has occurred—largest outbreak of COVID-19, I assume she's referring to—has occurred in one of the largest correctional facilities, and three men have died. She wants to know, are there any recommendations for ways to safely reopen in-person visiting when the virus is as active as it is, both in the facility and in the community?

ANDREA JAMES:

- I think that the response to that is to release as many people as possible so that people can get out of that prison. The people who are incarcerated cannot self-isolate, cannot social distance. They cannot isolate themselves from each other. They are using harsh, made-up remedies such as solitary confinement, and even putting people in kitchens and all types of spaces within prisons that shouldn't be used to house people anyway, let alone during COVID-19.

We have corrections officers that come in and out every single day, three shifts, coming in and out, going back to their families. People should want to use this opportunity to immediately reduce the population as significantly as possible before we try and figure out what else to do in a prison where there is absolutely no opportunity.

If I were incarcerated today, I would not want my children to be brought into that prison. I would not want to expose them to the prison at that time. I would feel very uncomfortable about doing that. We're desperate while we're incarcerated, always, to see our family members. And I don't think that they are going to release the restrictions on visiting anytime soon.

I think that the answer—what I really am trying to say is that we have to shift the narrative. We have allowed prison officials and power brokers and legislators and governors to shape the narrative around what needs to happen during a pandemic, and also how it relates to incarceration in general. It's the time now that we have to stand up and shape that narrative for ourselves and begin to make those demands.

We need to get people out of prisons. We need to stop allowing this false narrative of the fear mongering that has been perpetrated against us as a people that has allowed mass incarceration, and incarceration in general, to exist in this country, and allow for the continuation of what we've just heard Soffiyah lay out for us.

In cities and states across the country, it is budget season. And we have seen this infusion, over and over again, of money, millions and millions of dollars. She talked about New York state. Here in Massachusetts, where Harvard University is and where I live, the governor is proposing $40 million increase to the DOC, millions of more dollars, $50 million, to build a new women's prison. We have one of the smallest incarceration populations of women in the country.
We can and are going to be a model of how to end incarceration of women and girls in this country. It is absurd. They just tucked in a stimulus bill—I'm sorry, in a supplemental budget bill in Massachusetts—$95 million to purchase state police vehicles. They are proposing another million dollar package to build a third county jail in Suffolk County, which is the black community, predominantly, and which also has the corridor within it, in my neighborhood of Roxbury, which is the most incarcerated corridor from Nubian Square to Franklin Hill, Franklin Field housing development.

It is outrageous that we are making proposals like this. We need to decarcerate immediately. We need to create the force. You've showed your hand. The budget proposals are out across the country. They all look to give millions more dollars to police and to prisons. Use that money right now. You're not going to get it.

This is what the cities are fighting for, not over how you define defunding police. People on the ground are fighting for we'll talk about that. We'll come to the table, and we'll have all of those conversations with how you want to twist and turn words and define defund or not fund or reform policing.

What we want right now, and what should not stand in the way as you are going to develop a longterm strategy that will ultimately continue to give money to police to retrain them—we want the money now, directed into our communities so that we can reimagine our communities, so that we can build up our people because as Gina said, the current state of incarceration and the use of incarceration in this country, and law enforcement in the way that it is unfolding, is just sitting and waiting for our children and grandbabies to fill the beds that we fill.

We are not having it. We are not going for that any longer. And we are focusing laser sharp on the budgets. And this budget season, we will not allow for the money to be allocated to police and to prisons, and we want that money immediately, immediately moved into our communities.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you, Miss James, for that just very impassioned rendition of just the state of affairs. It's kind of embarrassing for someone who is in Massachusetts. And it's funny, as you were speaking, I was recalling on Monday a conversation I had with my two teenagers as we marched-

ANDREA JAMES:

- I live in Roxbury as well—as we marched from Malcolm X and marched all the way to the jail in support of public defenders.

And my 17-year-old looks and says, why do we even have this jail here? What's this jail doing here? And in a country where you have more people who are black and brown people who are more likely to go to prison than to college or do anything else, it is really, really shameful.

Gina, I have a question for you. And this actually is directed particularly to you from Quinn. And Quinn is asking, what strategies do you recommend for addressing elected officials presently making these decisions who we can't remove immediately for being racist? What do we do with these elected officials, kind of the type of official that Soffiyah talked about?

GINA CLAYTON-JOHNSON:
- Right. And so many others. What do we do with them? So I think there's a few things. I think that you need to join up. This is a moment where we need to be in deep coordination with movement strategy. There are organizations who have been working on this fight for a long time who have sophisticated strategies and tools to be able to put the pressure, have power mapped, have analyzed the internal inconsistencies, the weak points inside of these spaces, and can exploit them.

If you sign up and show up—so this is a moment where you need to go and join up with an organization that is ready to position you in the movement and deploy you for good. And there's a long list. I could name a bunch of different places. It kind depends on where you are, both national and local organizations. I would say, to me, organizing is ultimately hyper local. So show up at where you are. And make sure that you start to build your own list, and figure out who's putting pressure on those folks and those people.

I would also say that how you read explicit racism, it varies from person to person. And really, the system is racist. Everybody in it—even if they are well-intended, and maybe even black folks inside of this system who are put in these positions where we said we need to control other bodies, we need to cage people, etcetera—are operating within a racist system and structure.

And so it's important, also, for us to expand our understanding of who we are targeting, and that we're targeting not just individual actors and electeds, which is important, and that we're seeking accountability there, but that we are we are really looking for wholesale system structural change, which is what I think a lot of folks on this panel, everybody really has been speaking to, but making sure that our demands stay crystal clear, away from kind of the traps of going in the direction of bad apples, and really focusing on systemic change.

Now one quick thing because I'm actually really concerned about this. I'm concerned that we're going to get it wrong and fumble the ball. There is a certain type of education that I think we all need to be a part of making sure that we are taking part in around what has worked and what hasn't, and what is a quote, solution and what is a distraction.

There are some very cutely packaged solutions that people will uphold and say, what we need is body cameras. What we need is police to be better trained. Can they just read Michelle Alexander's book and maybe they'll be nicer? We have all of these kind of new folks who are showing up in this moment right now who are like, I'm just now aware of this, and I don't like it and I'm coming from a heart place, and maybe, maybe training.

This is where you need to join up and educate yourself because those things have been tried and they have failed. And what has happened is they have not only miserably failed, but they have pushed money and resources directly into the heart of the problem that has exacerbated the situation, exploding budgets of law enforcement agencies, exploding the budgets of prisons and carceral solutions, so that now public health is struggling to find the pennies they need to make sure that we have ambulatory care, that we have mental health services, that we have all of the things that we all rely on, and that we need in this collective society to keep us safe and well and healthy.

And so in this moment, and the last thing I'll say, is that—I'm just going to be explicit because this is not a moment to hide behind all the things and oh, no. Let's talk about this justice in policing act. This is the bill that has been lauded as kind of the solution in this moment. And I am
not going to say that I am—I'm against portions of it, but wholesale, there's some good stuff in there. There really is some good stuff in there.

But we have to be careful because if we say that we can all leave our protesting behind if this thing gets passed, or gets passed even on a local level in smaller ways, if we sit down after seeing some incrementalist, marginal, distracting solutions take hold, we will be right back here where we are now in six months, a year, two Years, However long it takes until we realize, again, that those things don't work.

So it's time to join up, to educate yourself, and to not be distracted by kind of tinkery solutions, but know that there are, in fact, solutions, and there are many examples of those that you can get behind. So I'm not simply trying to tear down what is because I think those are some good intentions behind them. But there is actually a lot of work out there that is moving in the right direction that deserves and needs your support in this moment. So go find it. I don't know where you are, but I know it's there.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you, Gina. And speaking of solutions, Zach, Charles is asking about reform. And I want to combine that with another question that says, how do police unions effect and impact some of the troubling issues we're seeing today in policing, particularly under COVID-19? What we saw very starkly was how police officers still policed black men very differently from the way they policed everyone else during COVID-19. And so what is your thought on reform, and also, what impact do you think police unions have on what we see today?

ZACH NORRIS:

- Thank you for that question. I resonate with Andrea and Gina in really saying that we need more than reform. We need a transformation of this system. And that has been a learning journey for me. I went to Harvard University, grew up in East Oakland.

And one of the things that strikes me is that Ella Baker would say, who are your people? And at Harvard, I had a hard time finding people who were trying to really transform what I saw around me, which was injustice. I saw young people my same age, when they were arrested or involved—not even arrested. If they were having a drug use or abuse problem or mental health crisis at Harvard, they got the systems, the support they need, they got, at worst, time off. And they were able to continue with their studies.

Meanwhile, folks in my community were being locked up and losing years of their lives for doing some of the same things. And so that is systemic, and that needs to be transformed. And when Andrea talked about decarceration and immediately moving resources to communities that have been harmed, historically and presently, by structural racism, some people may think that that sounds radical.

And I think that they would be both right and wrong. They would be right if they understand that radical means getting to the root, and they would be wrong if they think that radical means crazy or a fringe because what is common sense is that we know the things that make us safe are good schools, quality education, having job opportunities, having health care. Those are the things that actually make us safe and we need to invest in.
And the reality is that we can decarcerate. I was involved—in one of my greatest lessons as an organizer—was being surrounded by families of young people who were incarcerated in the California Youth Authority youth prison system. And they said we're traveling, as Andrea described, 250 miles on average just to see our kids, only to be told we can't visit because we have on the wrong color pair of pants, or because our kids' entire unit is on lockdown.

And they said, we don't want to just reform this system. We actually want to close these youth prisons down. And as an organizer, I was like, whoa, I'm not sure we can do that. That is a big challenge. But I had the good sense to listen more than to try to organize. And organizing is really about listening. And because we listened as an organization, we took up that demand. And over a nearly decade-long campaign, we closed five of eight youth prisons in coordination with the Youth Justice Coalition, the Center for Juvenile and Criminal Justice, and so many other amazing organizations.

And guess what? As we closed those five youth prisons down, youth crime continued to decline during that same period. And so this was a win for human rights, but also a win for just public safety generally. And that's the thing I think sometimes people lose in this conversation, where they may just hear the idea of defund the police and get scared by those three words.

But the reality is we do need other first responders. We need to shift resources away from people who are trained in tactics of fear and death to actually addressing mental health, actually addressing school discipline. And we can do that by actually funding a robust public health infrastructure and beginning to expand the options available for people who are seeing harm in their community, that they don't just have a 911, but maybe they have a 311 and a 211 and other response mechanisms that will help identify that there is systemic racism and implicit bias in all of us, and we should have a set of tools appropriate to the harms that are actually happening in our communities.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so very much, Zach. And Soffiyah, there's a question about could you briefly talk about through parole boards and mechanisms for release, as well as questions of returning parolees to communities of harm?

SOFFIYAH ELIJAH:

- Certainly. I'll talk about parole boards first. The parole system needs to be overhauled. The people who are on the parole boards need to reflect the members of the community to which people who are being released are coming to. And they need to be social workers, teachers, people who care about the people who are incarcerated. But I will say that that is an interim measure because ultimately we need to get rid of prisons. If you get rid of prisons, we don't need parole boards.

Certainly the percentage of releases needs to go up drastically. States where people are not allowed to have a representative with them when they appear before the parole board, that needs to be overhauled immediately. There's no reason why someone shouldn't be able to have a lawyer or a representative or just someone holds your hand if you appear before a parole board, since anyone who has appeared before a parole board knows that they spend a good amount of time retrying your case. But you're defenseless there while being questioned about something that may have happened 30 or more years ago.
But again, all of those are interim measures because ultimately, we need to get rid of this system of putting people in cages. And I'll ask you to remind me about the second half of the question was?

DELLA UMUNNA:

- The second half of the question is, what recommendation do you have, then, on those who are returning to communities of harm?

SOFIIYAH ELIJAH:

- I don't know if the recommendations are to the people who are returning to communities of harm. They've been victimized and demonized and oppressed and repressed in so many different ways, the last thing I'd want to do is say they're responsible for fixing the problem at all.

I think it is incumbent upon everyone who's in a place to bring about change in society to do that, to infuse the communities that have served as the feeder communities for these what I call weapons of mass destruction prisons, that it's incumbent upon all of us to infuse those communities with all of the quality services that more affluent communities have available to them because that's why you have such disproportionate numbers.

The things that little Johnny gets if he lives in an affluent community, if he's acting out, the laundry list of services and supports and opportunities and second and third and 25 extra chances that little Johnny gets if he lives in a white, affluent community don't look anything like what Jamal gets if he lives in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Brownsville, Watts.

So talking about leveling the playing field is much more, I think, a focused response as opposed to what do we tell the people who are coming out of prisons, other than that we've failed them. We have failed them miserably. We've failed the communities that they come from.

And while I'm on this, I want to just add another point. As the conversation has been elevated about racism and injustice and inequality, you hear a lot of people saying, people didn't care. And I want to challenge that. It's kind of like Columbus discovered America. There's lots of black and brown people who have been raising these issues for decades and decades. And the people who quote, unquote didn't care and people didn't know didn't look like me. It was convenient for them not to care and not to do anything about it.

But my people, people in my community, knew and cared and shouted to the rafters for decades and decades. My ancestors and their ancestors have been calling out injustice for a long time. The response in this country has been lynching, firing, vigilantes, and police militarization. So I want us to get rid of this idea of quote, unquote people didn't care, and people didn't know. My people knew and my people cared. And I'm glad that other people are joining the conversation, and have been educated, and hopefully, will continue to push against the systems of oppression and repression and challenge—challenge those who are in power to control the narrative.

I think that it is amazing that we can live in a country where people who challenge and say fascism is wrong are labeled as terrorists, that people who are fighting their own oppression inside prisons, that the response of this country is to lock them down, that a man who is 83 years old who's been in prison for almost 50 years could contract COVID-19, go to a hospital, barely
survive, and then be returned to a prison cell. If we live in a country that does that, reform is not an option.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Soffiyah, it is taking everything one can just to not completely break down into tears at this point. And so we have time for one last question. But actually, what I would rather do is I want to give each and every one of you a minute or so to actually just speak. We have several questions, and I'm not going to belabor the point, but if you can just use your minute to let the audience know what it is that you want them to know.

Andrea, there was a specific question about another group of people that we are failing, children of incarcerated people, and maybe in your minute or so, if you can find some time to maybe just talk briefly about it. Well if we can start with you, and everybody has a minute to just speak to the audience whatever it is that you wish to let them know.

ANDREA JAMES:

- Thank you. And just to say thank you again, really reflecting upon what Soffiyah, who is always teaching us so much and reminding us about the importance of understanding the historical context, that we must keep ourselves centered in as we do this work. I can't find words sometime to express the level of disruption and pain and disruption that incarceration of mothers and fathers have had on their children, and how much it has affected black and brown communities in this country.

There is a diagnosis called an adverse childhood experience that we have explored in an effort to paint an accurate picture for people who just don't understand the magnitude of the effects of incarceration on our communities. And the children are able to articulate very well for themselves the cost that having a parent incarcerated has been for them and their families and their communities.

And one of the messages that I always try and share—there are organizations that do this work, Ebony Underwood, We Got Us Now has been leading this work. Gina's work, Soffiyah's work that are working in censoring families have done this work. And so I would just say that as the organization that's representing women and girls—many of them who are part of our membership because they are daughters of incarcerated people, or they are children who have been incarcerated themselves—they want the message and the world to know that they don't want to be painted as the next generation of landing on a prison bunk just because they are the children of people who have been.

They want the world to know that they are here and they mean business, and they are going to create the change so that not another generation is put into prisons and jails and churned into this criminal legal system that we have.

I would just like to—just in closing, just please encourage people, don't get caught in this discussion and off center by how we define how we are going to defund police departments. The focus needs to be on our communities and how we are going to move immediately the money to decarcerate people and to build up and reimagine our communities. So thank you again for this opportunity.
DELIA UMUNNA:

- Gina?

GINA CLAYTON-JOHNSON:

- I don't have a lot more to add. I think I would encourage people to get involved. I put in the chat a number of organizations that you can get involved with, either through donating or joining or following their work. The other thing I would just uplift is the Movement for Black Lives is one of the most brilliant, strategic, coordinated spaces that right now is doing a lot to keep the political opportunities open in this moment for changes on the ground.

And so you can go to the Movement for Black Lives, check out the policy platform and vision, and also keep your eye on what's going to go down on Juneteenth in Washington, DC. We're calling for a Trump resignation. We're asking that folks come out and really be with us as we reimagine what safety and what our communities can look like without policing and cages taking up so much of our budgets and our energies.

And so I encourage you to check out the phenomenal organizations that are represented on this panel, Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Alliance for Justice in Families in New York, and the Council are all some of my favorite organizations. And so join up, get involved, and we'll see you in the streets, in the courtrooms, and at the policy making tables.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Thank you so very much. And briefly, Zach, and then we'll get to Miss Elijah.

ZACH NORRIS:

- Yeah. I also want to lift up the Movement for Black Lives and Soffiyah's incantation of the history that is with us right now in the present. I just want to say to the audience, think of three 25s. We have 5% of the world's population, but we have 25% of the world's COVID cases, 25% of the world's pollution, 25% of the world's incarcerated people. And that is because we have treated people and the planet as expendable.

Thankfully, we have said we need to divest from fossil fuels and imagine a different energy future. And that's not going to happen overnight, but we've started to lay out the steps for how that could happen over time. And I think similarly, we need to imagine a different community safety future and begin taking steps towards making it real.

Here in Oakland, we developed a new center called Restore Oakland, which is a model of community safety grounded in economic opportunity and restorative justice and keeping people in their homes. The work of Devone Boggan and Advance Peace has shown that you can drastically reduce homicides not based on a law enforcement approach, but based on a mentorship, fellowship, and community building approach.

So I think that we can reimagine, as Gina said, what safety looks like. And we need to take steps toward it right now. So thank you all.

DELIA UMUNNA:
- Miss Elijah, if you can close us out.

SOFFIYAH ELIJAH:

- I, first of all, agree with what everyone else on the panel said. I will add that we have to be vigilant to pay attention to everything that is going on around us. Having lived through several periods in this country when people took it to the streets to express their outrage about injustice, I've witnessed each time a right-wing rollback and massive military and misuse, I'll say, of the so-called justice system to criminalize voices of dissent.

We cannot miss the fact that the Joint Terrorist Task Force has been revitalized and is involved in prosecuting many of the people who've been arrested in the past several weeks in protest against the various forms of injustice that has happened in this country. There are still many people who are locked up for decades for expressing dissent from several decades ago. That's the way the country has responded time and time again to justified expressions of dissent.

And so we have to recognize that that is the way this country is going to respond again, and there'll be another wave of pushing back against the expression of our human and civil rights. And we cannot sleep on that. We have to be prepared to push back and resist in every way possible. Thank you again for having me.

DELIA UMUNNA:

- Oh, my goodness, Soffiyah. We Promise that we will heed your word and be diligent. I want to, from the bottom of my heart and on behalf of the Institute, thank you, Gina, Andrea, Soffiyah, and Zach for participating in our program today. I thank you for your very thoughtful perspective and just terrific views. And I thank you for the critical work that you do on behalf of marginalized people every single day.

I also want to thank our audience for your fantastic questions. And I hope that you'll be able to join us for Radcliffe's next virtual program, Incarceration and Community: COVID-19 and Beyond, Part 2. So this was only Part 1. And that's happening next Tuesday, the 23rd, at 1:00 PM. And we'll have further information about this program and others. And that can be found on Radcliffe's website, Radcliffe.Harvard.edu. We hope to see you then. Thank you all very much. Please be safe, take care of yourselves, and goodbye.