

The state of the prison system has destroyed my faith in the institutional integrity of today's federal governmental bodies. Abysmal conditions for prisoners, abnormally high incarceration rates, and legal stressors point to a deeply broken system that is failing U.S. citizens.

Our prison system perpetuates a cycle of violence rather than interfering with one. Within prisons, inmates are subject to frequent sexual and physical abuse. In California, videos surfaced in June 2023 showing guards punching inmates, an inmate being forced to deliver a baby on the jail floor, and severe abuses between inmates being allowed to continue under jailer supervision (Blakinger). These types of incidents are unfortunately not isolated and seem to go unaddressed, even when given media attention like the LA Times article I previously cited.

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rates in the world, with a staggering 1.9 million people currently incarcerated ("Initiative"). For a country with a collective interest in liberty, it makes no sense to have the highest rates of removing our own citizens' rights. Those who are incarcerated are not experiencing rehabilitation, in fact, 1 in 4 of those who are lucky enough to be released will be arrested again within 1 year ("Initiative"). The violence and stressors that occur in this system exacerbate the elements of poverty and mental illness that often land people in prison in the first place.

The failures of the prison system are compounded by failures in the justice and legislative systems. Bryan Stevenson's book, *Just Mercy*, details dozens of wrongful convictions that landed his clients on death row. He explains the common pattern of lackluster court-appointed attorneys being matched with overzealous prosecutors, a recipe that often left uneducated and poor defendants with abhorrently high sentences for nonviolent crimes that they were often not guilty of (Stevenson). He also explains his efforts to change legal precedents in favor of

rehabilitation for incarcerated juveniles. He made great efforts to get the Supreme Court to put limits on juvenile sentencing and even greater efforts to get judges in individual cases to enforce these sentencing caps (Stevenson). Our system should be built to protect and support juvenile offenders rather than condemning them for life for mistakes that are often made due to a lack of development and parental supervision. Cases like this show the failure of the justice system to enthusiastically embrace updated rehabilitation efforts and represent failures in the legislative system to provide these protections in the first place.

While I am appalled by the inhumane treatment of fellow Americans, I am even further upset by the systems that have allowed this to go on for decades. I believe that personal integrity is based on basic respect for other people and that our government organizations should be held to the same standard. I hope that continued coverage of this issue will create enough public pressure to encourage legislative, judicial, and prison authorities to collaborate toward a thorough restructuring of our current prison system.

Works Cited

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Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. One World, 2015.