

Introduction

IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the United States embarked on an experiment in crime control that was both globally and historically unique. In response to rising rates of violence and unresolved matters of race and class, policy makers built and expanded a prison system to control social problems and impose group-level punishment. Today, nearly one in three Americans has a criminal record—about 110 million people in the United States.¹ From 1948 to 2010, criminal courts convicted more than 19 million people of felony charges.² By the close of the twentieth century, the US incarceration rate had grown by 500 percent over just a few decades. More than 7 million people had gone to prison or jail.³

During this unprecedented rise in incarceration rates, going to prison became a normal life event for many young Black men living in poor communities.⁴ Researchers uncovered a shocking reality: nearly a third of all Black men would go to prison during their lifetimes, compared to 17 percent of Latino men and 6 percent of White men.⁵ At a time in American history when so many people of one race will go to prison, scholars began to describe the US system as one of *mass incarceration*, in which the criminal justice system punishes entire communities rather than individual criminals.⁶ Today's criminal justice system follows from the historical legacy of racism that underlies American public policy.

This astounding growth in the prison system represents a significant shift in how American society governs social and economic marginality, affecting poor communities in every region and state across the country. The extreme demographic concentration of punishment suggests *where* the most important effects may be felt by American communities and neighborhoods.⁷ The enormous footprint of the criminal justice system and its ramifications

now extends beyond prison walls. Punishment saturates households, neighborhoods, and communities. As millions disappeared from communities and entered prisons and jails, mass incarceration fundamentally impacted American community life, including those people left behind. Millions of children lost parents. Partners and family members lost loved ones. And neighborhoods experienced the hollowing out of entire groups as the cycle of incarceration destabilized their populations.

The immeasurable costs of these policy choices for disadvantaged communities, both in a fiscal sense and the human toll, outweigh any of the possible benefits. Uncovering, questioning, and addressing the profound historic injustices of mass imprisonment is both a scholarly and a moral imperative. As the consequences of this failed experiment will be felt within disadvantaged communities for decades to come, this book aims to chart and map the conditions of mass incarceration in those neighborhoods and communities across the country.

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When I began exploring those neighborhoods most affected by mass incarceration, I noticed a tendency to discuss urban neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas such as New York City or Chicago. As scholars in the last thirty years aimed to explain the causes and consequences of mass incarceration, their sociological research agenda seemed crowded with concurrent social problems. The decline of labor in US cities, the rise (and fall) of violent crime, the concentration of poverty and housing insecurity, untreated mental illness and the closing of asylums, and the crack and heroin epidemics all begged for attention to the nature—and mitigation—of postwar social inequality. In hindsight, it became clear that incarceration was a primary policy response to this host of social problems.

In the public mindset and the scholarly research agenda, the social problems of violence, substance use, untreated mental illness, and poverty were intimately linked to the social structure of America's major cities. The policies and politics of crime control that emerged in the early 1970s linked crime and violence to specifically *urban* social problems, leaving little room for a more complex reality. The urban focus gained and sustained traction, and little attention was paid to the growing imprisonment rates found within small cities, suburbs, and rural areas. As a result, hyperincarcerated communities are often imagined almost exclusively as racially segregated neighborhoods with

very high levels of poverty, violence, and other markers of socioeconomic disadvantage—in other words, part of a deep core of disadvantage in major urban cities. Such a place is envisioned as being marred by gang violence, substance use and sales, and public social disorder. And while this neighborhood signifies only a very narrow set of places, it has come to symbolize the relationship between neighborhood poverty, violence, and the criminal justice system, including policing and incarceration. These places’ social problems—real or imagined—became public justifications for harsh and punitive policy responses, including a concentration of surveillance, frequent police contacts, and removals from the community to the criminal justice system.

Recent examples show the durability of the city as a metaphor for disorder. During Donald Trump’s presidency, for example, Trump often used “Chicago” and “Baltimore” as shorthand for disorder, violence, and depravity, and to justify his reprise of law and order politics. For example, in 2019 he called Baltimore a “disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess” and said that its residents were “living in hell.”⁸ During a law enforcement roundtable in 2020, Trump called violence in Chicago “worse than Afghanistan.”⁹ These references to big cities ultimately served the purpose of justifying unbridled support for the police and later, their military-style deployment during Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests.

At the same time, cities like Chicago, Baltimore, and New York received the most attention from researchers and reformers. As scholars pointed to these places on maps, few questioned the urban character of mass incarceration. In 1992, the *New York Times* cited an extraordinary finding from a study by Eddie Ellis to convey the spatial character of mass imprisonment: “75 percent of the state’s entire prison population comes from just seven neighborhoods in New York City.”¹⁰ About ten years later, a study replicated Ellis’s earlier work, investigating the same seven neighborhoods: the Lower East Side, the South Bronx, Harlem, Brownsville, Bedford-Stuyvesant, East New York, and South Jamaica.¹¹ Ellis’s discovery—and studies like it—proved durable; policy makers, prison reform advocates, and scholars have all seemed to embrace as gospel the idea that the spatial dimension of mass incarceration across the United States clearly highlighted a cause-and-effect cycle of urban problems and urban punishment.

The emphasis on urban neighborhoods and large cities pervades research and policy decades after Ellis’s observations. It is etched into the entire theoretical discussion on the community-level causes and effects of mass imprisonment. Certainly some scholars have deliberately chosen urban imagery to

draw attention to and critique the deleterious conditions of intense formal social control (by social control, I mean policing, court processing, and incarceration in prison or jail), particularly for Black populations living in segregated urban places. Across a number of disciplines, urban scholars have made explicit claims about the relationship between place and punishment, between Black urban spaces and policing and incarceration.¹²

At the same time, researchers studying mass incarceration tended to favor analysis of national and state-level trends; very few with a reform-minded research agenda have actually examined the local conditions of punishment, and fewer still the local conditions anywhere outside cities.¹³ While urban scholars helped me to see the importance of *place* for understanding mass incarceration, I became increasingly curious about places beyond big cities and how place might be shaping population-level inequality in incarceration.

The realities of the place-and-punishment connection suggest that the narrow focus on urban centers overlooked emergent trends in nonurban areas. As of 2020, the majority of jail and prison admissions in the United States come from *non*metropolitan areas. In some places, these patterns have existed since the height of mass incarceration in the late 1990s. My investigation of the geographic contours of mass incarceration led to a surprising truth: the prison pipeline extends far beyond the bounds of inner-city neighborhoods and deep urban poverty.

A spatial perspective on punishment has several unexpected outcomes that I explore throughout the chapters of this book. First, it takes a full and unconstrained spatial view of punishment to see where mass incarceration flourishes today; the highest current rates of incarceration are in America's small cities and nonmetropolitan counties. Small cities, suburbs, and rural areas outside of American metro areas have the highest rates of incarceration (in either prison or jails) today, and in my case, Massachusetts, this has been true for at least the first twenty years of the twenty-first century. I find astronomical and unyielding incarceration rates in places like Lawrence and Holyoke, Massachusetts—small cities largely unknown to those who live outside the state. A deeper look at these places draws our attention to the effects of isolation and remoteness that locate the working population far from job centers. Stigmas associated with poverty and drug use stymie community supports to help people with housing and sobriety. Persistent economic decline leads to abandonment and population loss. The intuition of prior research that place matters holds true—but *where* place matters for punishment in America has evolved in recent years beyond large urban cities.

A second crucial implication, however, is that acknowledging mass incarceration unfolded in a broad set of places does not undermine the central role of race in American incarceration rates. Indeed, the central argument of this book is that *mass incarceration should be conceptualized as one of the legacies of racial residential segregation*. The criminal justice system arrests, convicts, and surveils people in *places*. The spatial organization of social control is embedded in the long-standing hypersegregation of American communities. Like neighborhood rates of poverty and violence, incarceration is a uniquely racialized experience in the United States. I find Black-White and Latino-White neighborhood disparities are significantly higher for rates of incarceration than for poverty or violence. I call this profound concentration of punishment in Black and Latino neighborhoods *communities of pervasive incarceration*. Thus, while mass incarceration evolved during a period of geographically broader social disadvantages, it also took hold during a period of deepening racial segregation. A broad spatial view, in fact, only enhances our sense of the disparate and racialized experiences of community-level punishment; when we look beyond big cities, not only do we observe the highest rates of incarceration, we also observe the lowest.

Third, this community-level study of imprisonment provides deeper insight into the largely unmeasured political and social effects of mass incarceration for communities. For example, I demonstrate mass incarceration's toll on communities by combining the total years in which the criminal justice system sent people to prison in a community. I find Massachusetts sentenced people to nearly 170,000 years of state prison in just a small portion of years under mass incarceration (and keep in mind that Massachusetts has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the country). This measure of *community loss* at the neighborhood level shows profound disparities by race and class. This time lost to imprisonment affects the economic stability of neighborhoods, family structure and connection, and the health and well-being of those communities. This level of loss expands upon previous conceptualizations of excessive incarceration that focus solely on counts of people and raises further moral objections to the current system of incarceration.

All of these findings expand our thinking away from individual understandings of crime and criminalization to the larger social forces of segregation and inequality that give rise to criminalizing and *punishing places*. This reframing asks not how to stop individuals from engaging in behaviors that will lead to their incarceration, but rather how policies could meaningfully improve community life under conditions of mass incarceration. Taking a

broader view of the spatial context of imprisonment and its historical evolution adds much-needed precision and context as we try to understand the causes and consequences of mass incarceration.

Thus, the book's title, *Punishing Places*, has a double meaning. The main goal of this book is to describe the conditions of mass incarceration in communities, because rather than just punishing individuals, the American system of incarceration has been punishing neighborhoods on a globally and historically unprecedented scale. Moving beyond the individualized framework of the consequences of mass incarceration for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people to think instead about the community-level effects points us toward a very different set of questions regarding the sources of inequality and injustice. Even more, it suggests radical changes in our ideas about how to ameliorate injustices. The second meaning embedded in the title, *Punishing Places*, is that living in a community where incarceration has become a normal experience produces durable disadvantages for *all* community members.¹⁴ Punishing places deepen and compound the deprivations within and damage the well-being of America's most marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

STUDYING COMMUNITY RATES OF PRISON ADMISSIONS

Bringing a long-neglected spatial lens to the problem of mass incarceration helps me identify a key tension between urban inequality and social control perspectives, which I explore in detail in chapter 2. A largely urban focus in the research literature on the spatial pattern of incarceration simply does not fit with the overwhelming evidence presented by the sociology of punishment, which shows mass incarceration has taken hold in places far beyond those described in the urban disorder narrative. Thus, on the one hand, mass incarceration has affected areas significantly removed and distant from the places at which criminal justice policies have been aimed. On the other hand, a major theme from my research is the long-standing and deeply unequal exposure to punishing environments associated with one's home address. The pervasive incarceration that marks *punishing places* indicates the tension between punitive practices' concentration in neighborhoods and broad geographic distribution across states, bringing empirical and theoretical clarity to the unequal imprisonment rates across the country. This persistent neighborhood inequality in a context of changing geographic patterns speaks to the remarkable

consistency of deprivation and state violence associated with segregated and disadvantaged communities in the United States. But we have to look beyond big cities to capture, understand, and end punishing places today.

In these pages, I aim to answer this question: How do inequalities of *place* produce disparities and high rates of *punishment*? To answer it, I embarked on an unprecedented data collection of geographic information about where individuals were living prior to their incarceration for an entire state and spanning the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Using a combination of qualitative, quantitative, and spatial methods, in this book I bring two distinct literatures—place disadvantage and punishment—to a single analysis, revealing how mass incarceration is a distinctive, place-based harm to a diverse set of communities across the United States. This effort has yielded several key findings that should change how scholars and policy makers think about mass incarceration's stubborn persistence and help identify pathways to its demise.

Throughout the book, I use spatial tools and concepts to analyze patterns of imprisonment. Mapping spatial patterns of incarceration by race and ethnicity sheds light on the differences in clustering by groups. This spatial clustering offers a way to analyze mass incarceration as it is experienced in communities, rather than just in terms of broad racial categories. Spatial regression analysis further elucidates the degree to which incarceration in one area affects the patterns found in surrounding areas. Spatial methods and concepts provide the necessary tools to resolve two seemingly paradoxical trends: incarceration is both more spatially diffuse in recent years and, in some neighborhoods, durably spatially concentrated. Prior to this study, incarceration had been primarily studied demographically—at the level of groups, states, or nations. Thinking *spatially* about punishment provides greater granularity and specificity that unlocks answers to important questions about where and why punishment occurs so commonly in one place and hardly at all in another.

What does it mean to study neighborhood prison admission rates? Figure I.1 is a simplified model of the links between community and prison. In this book, I observe neighborhoods immediately prior to a prison admission as recorded in the intake process. The corrections officer who conducts the prison intake registers background information, including the incoming resident's place of birth, race and ethnicity, educational background and religious affiliation, and last address prior to entering prison. The last item allows me to dig into geographic data to study the prior neighborhood environments of incarcerated people and community rates of imprisonment. The addresses