

## **On The Legacy of Slavery in The Prison System**

### The Legacy of Slavery in the Justice and Prison System

People in fields, picking cotton, watched by men on horses with guns. If the people didn't pick the cotton fast enough they were put in "the hole" where they were starved, and occasionally tear gassed. You would have thought that that scene was something out of the pre civil war era, something completely unrealistic to the time we are living in, something far in the past. But no. This happened in the 20th century at Angola, a prison and penitentiary that is up there as one of America's most horrible and violent. This prison resides on land that used to be slave plantations. Ironic how we abolished slavery 100s of years ago but we still see the effects in the prison and justice system. The American justice system has never fully recovered from slavery and its effects still linger today.

Sharanda Jones was only 16 when she was put away in prison for life. Life without the possibility for parole. The only crime she had committed was transporting cocaine, she had no record whatsoever previously. It was mandatory for the judge to put Sharanda away for life, where she is still today. ("13th documentary) Do we want children in prisons for nonviolent offenses serving life sentences tried as adults? It doesn't make much sense does it. The US has the highest rate of incarceration of any other country in the world. In the 1970s our prison system had less than 300,000 people but now we have more than 2.2 million, and nearly 5 million people on probation or parole. The number of people incarcerated in federal and state prisons increased 9.7% between only 2000 and 2015. Almost half of those people are nonviolent offenders ("The Sentencing Project.") The war on drugs in the 1980's led to a dramatic growth in the prison population. At the federal level, people incarcerated for drug or substance abuse offences make up almost half of the prison population. ("The Sentencing Project.") Most of those people aren't big deals in drug rings, but are first time offenders and have no violent offences. Sharanda Jones, who was mentioned earlier is a prime example, the minimum sentences for all offenders, even first time offenders, the life without parole. In 1986, when a person was released from incarceration they had spent an average of 22 months incarcerated, in 2004, people would spend up to 62 months in prison. Nearly triple the length.

Now let's take it back to the pre civil war era. By 1729, the state of Maryland allowed punishments of slaves such as getting ones hands, head, arms and legs cut off. The supreme court of Alabama said in 1861, that enslaved black people were capable of committing crimes and in that way were considered human beings, although in every other sense they were "incapable of performing civil acts" and seen as "things, not persons." The 13th Amendment of the Constitution is what is have said to have ended slavery, but it still managed to have a loophole. That loophole being people that were convicted of crimes. As slaves, black Americans were seen as less than a human, as free people they were seen as criminals. Laws that used to be about slavery were substituted for laws about free black people. Which then made the justice system a new way to promote a racial agenda. Even after slavery was abolished racism continued prominently in the justice system, which continues to this day.

Bryan Stevenson once said "Ultimately, you judge the character of a society not by how they treat their rich and the powerful and the privileged, but by how they treat the poor, the condemned, the incarcerated." And that's completely true. When you think about it, a society that makes efforts to better itself, and improve upon itself is more likely to be seen in a better light than one that does nothing and stands idly. But the question is, do you care more about how future people will see you, or about your personal biases. We can

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improve our legal system, we can get rid of mandatory minimum sentences and cut back on maximum sentences. We can impose 20 year maximum sentences. We can shift money and resources to preventions and treatment for substance abuse. Put resources into researching ways to promote youth development and help with delinquency in early age. We can address the policies and practices, whether we are aware of them or not, that add to racial inequality. Once we as a nation can come to terms with what's happening the nation can put a stop to it. One step at a time.

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