

Connecting the Dots Between Mass Incarceration, Health Inequity, and Climate Change

Mass incarceration is a social problem with severe public health consequences. This is slightly different from calling it a public health problem. It might sound like splitting hairs, but the distinction has ramifications for how public health positions itself in this moment of political, economic, and environmental crisis. Perhaps unexpectedly, climate scientists are leading the call to address social inequality and the climate emergency simultaneously or face catastrophically worsening inequities.¹ We have only a decade to roughly halve carbon emissions or risk calamitous levels of warming that would cause hundreds of millions to suffer and die prematurely.¹ Indeed, the climate movement has mainstreamed the idea that we cannot avoid environmental catastrophe without fundamentally transforming our economy and society. Prison abolitionists and public health advocates have long made analogous arguments when they describe the fundamental causes of mass incarceration and health disparities as systems of extraction, exploitation, domination, racism, and heteropatriarchy. But mass incarceration, health inequity, and the climate emergency are all intertwined, in more than an analogy and in ways that no single field can address on its own.

THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF RACIAL CAPITALISM

Most incarcerated people come from a handful of neighborhoods, primarily communities of color, in US major cities, yet most new prisons are built in rural hinterlands.² Both sets of spaces have experienced chronic disinvestment over decades of deindustrialization, deregulation, and economic austerity. The result is “organized abandonment”²: poor urban communities of color, with few jobs and crumbling transit and housing; and poor rural landscapes, ecologically and economically devastated, first exploited and then abandoned by industry. Police flood the former with arrest quotas and quality-of-life ordinances while prison boosters descend on the latter promising jobs via new correctional facilities on former farmland or industrial properties.² At each end of the prison-industrial complex, fragile communities and delicate ecologies bear the brunt of expanded carceral infrastructure rather than investment, regeneration, and cultivation.

The extractions involved in forcibly removing residents from their neighborhoods to be warehoused in massive, faraway, high-security institutions cause enormous injury to humans and habitats alike. These processes

undermine the health and well-being of people of color, indigenous people, and migrants—the same groups that are then targeted by the criminal justice system as the state’s favored mode of crisis abatement. These same groups will bear the greatest burdens of climate change. In cities, in the neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates, residential segregation makes it significantly more likely for people of color to live in high-risk heat-island conditions than for White people, who are more likely to benefit from cooling greenery.³ During a summer 2019 heat wave, a New York utility intentionally cut power in a majority-Black neighborhood to avoid larger blackouts (<https://nyti.ms/2Z8LIR2>).

At the same time, eco-gentrification is displacing lower-income residents of color with wealthier, typically White gentrifiers.⁴ But this green urban affluence is misleading. Even accounting for reductions in transportation or building energy emissions, affluent residents have

much larger consumption-driven carbon footprints.⁴ The result is eco-apartheid (<https://bit.ly/2K1fvGc>): the rich benefit from luxurious adaptation and mitigation while everyone else faces deteriorating environmental and social conditions. Displaced poor and working-class residents end up on the street, incarcerated, or pushed further to the urban periphery. And if they do end up incarcerated, climate change directly threatens their health and safety. During Hurricane Katrina, those in the Orleans Parish Prison were abandoned without power, water, food, or proper ventilation and chest-deep in water.⁵ During Hurricane Sandy, New York City had no evacuation plan for Rikers Island jail, even though it was in an evacuation zone (<https://bit.ly/2pnuW3O>).

For rural communities, the economic benefits of prisons are dubious. Warehousing urban incarcerated people in rural communities acts only temporarily as a “hidden subsidy”⁶: inflated population counts in otherwise shrinking areas increase the amount of state aid that host counties receive relative to their tax effort. But this short-term economic payoff also creates a dependence on correctional jobs and ultimately deters “alternative forms of development, instead fostering cycles of

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base subsistence and dependence on continued incarceration rates.”⁶

Meanwhile, carceral infrastructure causes direct environmental damage. In Alabama in 2014, the Black Warrior Riverkeepers successfully settled a lawsuit after finding that the Donaldson Correctional Facility dumped 800 000 gallons of sewage into nearby creeks. In Letcher County, Kentucky, local antiprison activists and environmental groups blocked a new federal prison on the grounds that it would contaminate local watersheds, pollute the air, and threaten endangered wildlife habitats, including a rare old-growth forest.

TACKLING FUNDAMENTAL CAUSES

Yet, despite the grave urgency we face, this is also a moment of unprecedented opportunity. Virtually all of the most ambitious proposals to tackle the climate emergency implicate fundamental social determinants of health. These include massive public investments to decarbonize the economy by 2030; the creation of millions of new jobs to achieve decarbonization and a just transition; targeted investments in environmental justice communities for decarbonization and adaptation; and fully funded social services such as universal health care and housing. These exact same measures also could be the route to decarceration and the elimination of health disparities in the United States.

In the 1990s, when mass incarceration was accelerating, one third of men sent to prison were unemployed. Today, the

unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated people is 27% (<http://bit.ly/37ltSig>). Full employment, based on the expansion of renewable energies, ecosystem restoration, expansion of social services, and major new public works, can make a huge difference in the lives of people in or at risk for contact with the criminal justice system.

Stable housing is a prerequisite for maintaining employment and enjoying decent physical and mental health.⁷ Yet people ensnared by the criminal justice system are systematically excluded from both private and public housing.⁷ Furthermore, they are at higher risk for numerous health problems that often require supportive housing, which can cost-effectively reduce reincarceration rates.

Unprecedented investments in social and supportive housing will dramatically improve health and criminal justice outcomes if they include people affected by mass incarceration and provide support for their specific needs. High-density, mixed-use, low-carbon, beautiful public housing enables poor and working-class residents to live close to where they work and engage in low-carbon collective consumption (e.g., public recreation, art, music, theater) rather than high-carbon private consumption (e.g., shopping, travel). This is central to actually, and democratically, decarbonizing cities and rebuilding communities devastated by mass incarceration.

Finally, for decades, hyperpoliced communities have demanded the reallocation of resources away from the police and toward public health and social infrastructures. Intersectional, feminist antiracism activists have developed their own comprehensive models of restorative justice in their

communities. Feminist organizers make up the front lines of the prison abolition movement, in which Black women in particular lead the struggle for a new society as the struggle for a decarcerated future. Similarly, around the world, women are already leading the fight against climate change, especially in the highest-risk places. According to the latest climate-science modeling, feminist social-help policies drive the deepest carbon emissions reductions and greatest resiliency from extreme weather.¹

POLITICAL COURAGE AND MOBILIZATION

The crises we face share the same fundamental causes, rooted in a system that rewards exploitation and privileges profit over well-being. The proposals in this editorial are only a starting point for an extraordinary, intersectional social and political mobilization. The time for political equivocation and calls for more research has passed. We do not have time to continue adhering to the neoliberal doctrine that there are incremental technical solutions to these structural, and interconnected, problems. We should bring our political capital, skills, and expertise to the broader movement, to ensure the public's health during the transition. **AJPH**

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Both authors contributed equally to this editorial.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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