Criminal justice is a trending topic in developed and developing countries, as officials confront high rates of incarceration and seek appropriate custodial, non-custodial, and financial solutions. According to the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime, globally over 10 million people are incarcerated (UNODC, 2013). Moreover, the world prison population has increased by approximately 10% since 2004 (UNODC). While the rate of incarceration has remained constant in some countries, as populations have swelled, in other countries, sharp spikes in the rate of incarceration have occurred over the last 15 years. For example, there has been a 183% increase in incarceration rates in Indonesia; a 125% increase in Colombia; and a 16% increase in the United States (US) over the past 20 years (Walmsley, 2003), with female rates of incarceration driving the increase in most countries (Bastik & Townhead, 2008). Further, the World Health Organization (WHO) found that 80% of incarcerated women in custody have an identifiable mental illness (van den Bergh, Gatherer, & Møller, 2009).
How incarceration issues are addressed in-country might result in human rights violations and concerns about costs. In regards to current global policies addressing the issue of incarceration worldwide, the United Nations (UN) has developed and contributed to multiple documents. Some examples of existing policies include the following:

- The 1955 Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, which were adopted by the UN as a set of guidelines for international and domestic law for citizens in custody (ECOSOC, 1955).
- The United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (or the “Bangkok Rules”), the first set of international standards aimed at reducing the number of women in prison and improving conditions for women in custody (ECOSOC, 1990).

While these documents have significant policy implications regarding criminal justice, rates of incarceration continue to rise in many countries and alternatives to incarceration are lacking (PRI, 2015).

The purpose of incarceration has waivered between punitive and rehabilitative philosophies (Phelps, 2011), a distinction that can have significant implications for the treatment and services received (or not received) by incarcerated persons. For example, in attending a meeting at the UN, representatives discussed alternatives to incarceration related to drug
crimes. What I found particularly interesting were the two simultaneous and divergent conversations: drug offenders were considered individuals in need of treatment and deserving of a second chance contrasted by drug offenders were simple criminals seeking impunity. While there are some crimes that are inexcusable and warrant incarceration, we must also consider the social and psychological indicators of criminal behavior. For example, incarceration has been linked to unemployment (Pager, 2003), increased suspicion and aggression (Wheeler, 1961), and poor social integration (Rindfuss & Stephan, 1990).

Incarceration is not only an issue of safety and crime, but also one of social justice, as many incarcerated persons are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities (PRI, 2015), based on in-country demographics. Criminal justice system-involved individuals encounter negative social consequences including stigma, lack of rights, and familial breakdown. Further, reintegration can prove challenging, with few prisons providing counseling in anticipation of the transition to a civilian lifestyle (Haney, 2003)

**Youth and Female Offenders**

My work with the Community and Oppression Research and Engagement team at NYU attempts to understand incarceration, with a particular emphasis on youth and female offenders, within a larger social context in the US. Often, detention does not take into account the significant psychological challenges incarcerated populations face prior to and as a result of incarceration. Studies estimate that between 75 and 93 percent of youth entering the juvenile justice system have experienced some form of childhood trauma (Adams, 2010). Further, studies of trauma symptomology in a sample of juvenile justice-involved girls, found that 16%
met full criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and 46% met partial criteria for PTSD (Smith, Leve & Chamberlain 2006). Moreover, detention facilities often fail to address the contextual factors that influence rates of incarceration.

Specific to youth detention, my team has concluded overwhelmingly, that the youth we work with come from disadvantaged neighborhoods, have limited access to resources, and often suffer from significant mental health challenges, which are often perpetuated by incarceration. In understanding these pathways to delinquency, we attempt to better understand juvenile delinquency by considering multiple contexts (e.g., local and national policy, race, inequality), addressing psychological needs (e.g., considering trauma and gender specific needs), and developing prevention and intervention programs (e.g., Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), advocacy, community partnerships) that consider a youth’s unique needs within a greater social and political context.

**Conclusion**

While there have been significant gains in criminal justice reform (especially in the US), there remains much to be accomplished. Improved understanding of the context and histories of incarcerated individuals can serve to inform policy and practice. The UN provides significant documentation in support of the human rights of criminal justice-involved individuals, and organizations such as Prison Reform International (PRI) seek to highlight and address inequities within this population. A more effective and responsive criminal justice system will not only improve human rights conditions, but will also reduce the monumental cost to society incurred in the cost of incarceration and reduction in productivity.
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