

## PsySR Statement on Mass Incarceration for Berkeley Conference, 2019

Dear Attendees of the Mass Incarceration Conference and the Public:

We are honored to convene the *Healing Justice: Ending Mass Incarceration* conference at The Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA taking place in November of 2019. Our intention is to create a space of learning, strengthen existing social connections, and build a broader community toward social transformation around mass incarceration.

Mass incarceration is a tool inextricable from white aggression and capitalism, used to control, exploit and disappear predominantly Black, but also Brown people, those who are indigenous, who have disabilities, or are perceived as different from the mainstream in any way. This phenomenon is a direct continuation of slavery, as outlined in the 13th amendment of the US constitution. To truly end mass incarceration, we need to address it at its deepest roots in racism, colonialism, pathology, and greed. Our psychological theme of *Healing Justice* asserts that to approach healing we foremost need justice. The need for reparations is at the core of the concept of *Healing Justice*, not as a cure all—certainly not as a naïve presumption that White aggressive authority will magically end, or that it is meant to indefinitely persist—but as a first step in correcting a longstanding imbalance.

Psychology is a form of power, for good or bad. Unfortunately, many psychologists and mental health professionals hold positions entrenched within systems of injustice and incarceration. Many of us therefore possess the access and a platform that can create unique opportunities to end mass incarceration—or to at least to refuse to contribute to it. The concept of mental health and its professionals has been used to cause harm. We find ourselves situated in a professional field that is still largely patriarchal and Eurocentric, informed by the dominant and often misguided ideas of the global north. We have witnessed the well-intended but tragic failure of deinstitutionalization, where the lack of government funding abandoned people with severe mental illness to the streets and to incarceration, rather than places where they could effectively heal.

Among the many areas that need to be addressed include:

- *psychological diagnosis*, particularly constructs such as "anti-social personality disorder, intermittent explosive disorder, conduct disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder", language and labeling often used to stigmatize and dehumanize;
- *psychological trauma* and its potential to place people at risk for incarceration, and how the carceral system creates and perpetuates trauma, as well as its dangers of stigmatization;
- *psychological assessment* and the power this flawed tool has to wield control over crucial decisions, e.g. parole;
- *professional ethics*, including the need for health professionals to name names and act when witnessing the persistent abuses in our prisons;

- *education*, needed to ensure that clinicians in training gain justice-oriented structural competencies to work with people impacted by the carceral system and to advocate within powerful systems;

and

- *research and program development* that can be used to understand and design alternatives to incarceration, and focus on safety, rehabilitation, empowerment, and well-being.

As we convene this conference, among the many questions we pose include:

- What does a mental health professional need to know to work with people impacted by incarceration?
- What is currently most urgent in the struggle towards ending mass incarceration?
- Where has our profession caused harm, and how can this harm be addressed?
- What research and other envisioning questions must be addressed to move toward transformation?
- What skills and knowledge can mental health professionals contribute?

In this, we intend to maintain that work towards ending mass incarceration must:

- Be informed and rooted in anti-racist, decolonial analyses.
- Critically question the dominant narrative of who is the expert; remain intentional about the removal of barriers, often including ourselves.
- Recognize the leadership and power of impacted people; remain accountable to impacted people.

As such it is crucial for us to leave the ivory tower, seeking guidance from, and opportunities for service to, impacted families and community organizers. We acknowledge and honor the myriad organizations currently working toward this end, both inside and outside prison walls, from whom we learn and with whom we hope to collaborate.

In solidarity and justice,

Psychologists for Social Responsibility

October-November, 2019