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Linking it Together

As of 2018, a staggering 3.54 million Americans were on probation in the United States of America (Source: Statista, PEW, The Sentencing Project). In 2019, while those numbers saw a slight decrease (3.43 million, Source: BJS), they remain high. As of today, those on probation continue to be in the millions. When seeing these high statistics, I am compelled to ask myself the following question, “Why are so many people in America under probation supervision?” While this question is not an easy one to answer, it does raise eyebrows and compel us to look deeper into a problem that has impacted many lives.

The concept of probation owes its origins to John Augustus, a 18th-19th century Bostonian bootmaker who came to the aid of people in court accused of committing crimes. While this practice itself can be traced back to the 13th century, it did not gain notoriety until much later in English common law with the implementation of judicial reprieve, the process where a judge could suspend a sentence of the accused with the condition of good behavior. Although the practice of judicial reprieves still exists today, with so many people under supervision, it is much harder to have an effect. However, as this week’s video attests, there are places like Hawaii’s H.O.P.E. Program that have seen minimal success.

In sum, the system of probation has, historically, been utilized as an alternative to incarceration. The question is can this system continue to render quality services to such a large demographic? Furthermore, will this system operate in the spirit of John Augustus who advocated for leniency of the accused, or will it be retributive in nature?

