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In 1891 the United States federal prison system was established (nicic.gov, 2021). The intended use of most prisons before 1891 was to hold inmates "until the actual punishment could be carried out. This was usually in the form of corporal punishment that was intended to cause the guilty person pain, such as being beaten with a whip, or capital punishment which used a variety of methods to claim the lives of condemned individuals" (crimemusuem.org, 2021). In other words, prisons temporarily held inmates until they paid for their crimes with their bodies or lives. With the birth of the federal prison system, congress passed the Three Prisons Act. The legislation permitted the creation of the first three federal prisons, known as USP Leavenworth, USP Atlanta, and USP McNeil Island. Before forming federal prisons, Fort Leavenworth's military prison housed federal inmates and used them to construct the base (nicic.gov, 2021). Of the three original federal prisons established in the early 1900s, only Leavenworth and Atlanta are still functioning under the BOP. BOP is the Bureau of Prisons, and "it was mandated to manage and regulate all federal correctional institutions to offer more progressive and humane care for inmates in federal prisons. It was also mandated to ensure consistency and provision of centralized administration of federal prison facilities" (hcsdmass.org, 2021).

The BOP might have lost McNeil Island, but it still controls 122 other federal institutions throughout the United States. Federal crimes are any offense that breaches the United States constitution. The types of crimes that land an individual in federal court are "piracy, treason, counterfeiting, drug trafficking, violation of securities laws, [and] violations of interstate

commerce" (guywomack.com, 2021). Today federal prisons have a 90% conviction rate. The high sentencing rates of federal courts mean that a person facing a federal judge is almost certainly going to serve time. When federal officers show up to arrest an individual, the investigators most likely already have solid evidence that a crime took place. This evidence might be information gathered by an undercover officer or an informant, recording from a wiretap, video footage from a stakeout, or a confession from a co-defendant. As of December 2021, BOP.gov states that "134,384 federal inmates [are] in BOP custody, 6,605 federal inmates [are] in privately managed facilities, [and] 15,861 federal inmates [are] in other types of facilities," bringing the number of federal inmates to 156,850.

The BOP website paints a wholesome picture of the establishment. Correction officers shown on the federal agency's site look intimidating and professional, but they also appear compassionate toward inmates. And the site claims that its goal is to provide healthier alternatives to rehabilitating and managing federal inmates (BOP.gov, 2021). They claim to be an agent of positive change, but according to Walter Pavlo (2021) of Forbes.com, the formation of the "it was the beginning of an industrial boom in incarceration." In the 1940s, the BOP had 24 facilities and only about 1000 inmates per prison. This number stood basically the same until the 1980s. When the BOP increased its institutions to 44, the number of inmates housed also doubled. Since the number of inmates held steady for about 40 years, there's no indication that building additional prisons was necessary. "If you ask some criminal justice reform activists, the 1994 crime law (The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act) passed by Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton, which was meant to reverse decades of rising crime, was one of the key contributors to mass incarceration in the 1990s. They say it led to more prison sentences, more prison cells, and more aggressive policing — especially hurting Black and brown

Americans, who are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated" (vox.com, 2021). The BOP continued to build facilities until it controlled the 122 mentioned previously.

The United States has imprisoned more people between 1970 and 2010 than any other country (Thompson, 2010, p. 703). Because of mass incarceration, 7.3 million Americans had encounters with the legal system by 2006 (Thompson, 2010, p. 703). America's history is plagued with cruelty toward black Americans, and the prison system is no different. Of all ethnic and racial groups in the United States, Black men are the most highly incarcerated. The rate at which black men were imprisoned by 2006 was "6.5 times the rate of white males and 2.5 times that of Hispanic males [...] One in fifteen black men over the age of eighteen were behind bars as were one in nine black men aged twenty to thirty-four" (Thompson, 2010, p. 703). The sad reality is that by the early 2000s, more Black men were in prison than in colleges.

It's time for American society to re-think its prison system. Our current federal prison system does little to rehabilitate inmates, and in many cases, it does more harm than good. Take the abuse of solitary confinement. Inmates spend 22 to 24 hours a day in isolation. Their cells are usually no bigger than 60-80 square feet, which is about the size of a parking spot. Some prisons only illuminate cells from the outside, so inmates potentially spend most of their days in darkness. Prisoners are treated like animals and only permitted showers every 3-7 days. When corrections officers feed inmates in solitary confinement, prisoners receive the worst kinds of food, even if they have commissary funds and can afford better.

Inmates, current and former, suffer life-long effects from imprisonment. Some lose the ability to regulate their emotions, function in social settings, mature intellectually and personally, and cope with life outside of prison. Instead of rehabilitating prisoners and teaching them how to exist successfully in society, our prison system reduces our men and women to childlike beings.

Resources that could help inmates mature and become their best selves are limited in some institutions and non-existent in others. We are all more than our mistakes. Everyone should be allowed to do and be better. If we don't begin to reassess our federal prison system, we'll continue to lose the people we love not just to a failing legal system but also to its aftermath.

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