

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Are prisons separate from society?

Featuring Matt DelSesto, David Sellers, and Allison Pyo with Stanton Wortham (host)

Original Air Date: November 22, 2021

Stanton Wortham 0:05

Welcome to another episode of Pulled Up Short. Today we have a unique structure. We have three guests with us to talk about the program that we're going to discuss. First, we have Matt DelSesto. Matt is a sociology doctoral candidate at Boston College. He's also the coordinator and instructor for the Inside Out program here at BC, and he will describe that to you. David Sellers is a formerly incarcerated graduate of the Inside Out program who's experiencing a successful reentry. In addition to completing other college courses, he is a writer and musician who was consulted as a legal researcher and advocate. Allison is an undergraduate student at Boston College. She participated in the Inside Out program in Fall 2019, and worked as a research assistant for Matt in Spring 2020, when she helped to write an evaluation report about the program. She's currently in her senior year at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development here at Boston College, studying Economics and Applied Psychology. So we're very pleased to have Matt, David, and Allison with us today. Matt, I'd like to invite you to go ahead and kick off the episode with the insight you think should pull us up short.

Matt DelSesto 1:20

So our focus today is on prisons and incarceration in the United States. This is a topic that is in fact central to the United States, as we have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. We have more than 2 million people in prisons or jails, and although we have just 5% of the world's population, we actually have more than 20% of the world's prison population. It's critically important to see that it hasn't always been this way, right? So since the 1970s, the incarceration rate has increased by 500%. There's often a dispute in the sociological and chronological literature on how and whether or not this is actually related to reductions in crime. In this context of the United States, where there are so many prisons and its prisons are such a part of our culture, our media, our movies, in the news, and the narratives we see, a lot of people may think that they already understand what prisons are for or what incarceration is. But despite this exposure that we have to mass incarceration and its circulated narratives, I'd argue that for those who either haven't been incarcerated or don't know someone who has, prisons are still something that's constructed as if they're "out there," separated from our daily lives. We come to learn about or understand them, but at a distance. This separation, however, is not entirely true.

I'm going to argue today with some of my students that there isn't this huge gap between prisons and the rest of society. We can think on a fundamental level, where the very fact that the majority (in most cases, 95-96% of people) who are in prison now are going to be released. So that is the very obvious way, but then also in a lot of other ways. Prisons are deeply connected to what happens in society, both in our everyday lives and in our institutions. I came to this conclusion, in part, through teaching in the Inside Out program at Boston College. Now Inside Out is a semester-long course that brings a group of undergraduates from BC campus together with incarcerated students to study as peers at the Suffolk County House of Correction in Boston. Today, I hope to discuss what the Inside Out model offers to us all with two former students. Together, we hope to pull you up short, by arguing for this potential lack of separation between what goes on inside and outside of the prison system.

Stanton Wortham 4:02

That's very interesting. So you're arguing that from the perspective of someone who does not have experience with the prison system, we imagine that it's a separate world - that there are perpetrators who are inside prisons and victims who are outside prisons or people who have no experience with it. But in fact, there are many interconnections between the two worlds, and it's not at all two separate entities. That does pull me up short, this notion that prisons are part of my life or influencing my life in a way that I'm not really aware of and that I have connections with people inside and outside. It's great that you're joined by these two former participants in the program, Allison and David, and I'd love to invite them to jump into the conversation at this point. It would be great if you could tell us a little bit about what was transformative for you about participating in this program that brought together Boston College undergraduate students and incarcerated students who are also participating in the learning experience offered by BC inside the prison. Could you tell us what you experienced and whether your experience aligns with Matt's claim about how inside and outside of prison is not as separated as we tend to think? Allison, why don't we start with you?

Allison Pyo 5:23

Yeah, absolutely. I would definitely agree that the Inside Out program affirmed the lack of separation that Matt was talking about between prisons and the rest of society. But even more so than the lack of separation that we might be thinking of between the locations - the physical location of prisons and then the rest of society - is the lack of separation between the concept of who the perpetrators and victims are. Today, I think that we're really quick to label people in jail and in prison as criminals and as perpetrators, and then people who have not been to jail or have not been a perpetrator of a crime as a victim for whom justice must be served. I think if I took a step back, and I asked anyone if they see people as multidimensional and as a whole person rather than labels, definitely no one would tell me no. But the second a crime occurs, I've heard so many times around me that the perpetrator needs to be locked up, and we need to throw the key away. The victim receives ultimate sympathy. We say, "Oh, we feel so terrible for them. Their family must be suffering so much, and it's just a terrible thing that happened to them."

In the course, we did an activity that I took a lot away from. The purpose of it was to give everyone a chance to reflect personally on their own experiences of harming others or being harmed. Matt gave us a list of various harmful actions, both legal and illegal. All students filled that out anonymously, both if they had been victims or causes of the harm. This could be anything from lying to someone to stealing things from someone, and like even worse things. Then, Matt collected everything and tallied both sets of values. It was abundantly clear at the end, as we saw all the results, that both BC students and incarcerated students had all been both the perpetrator and the victim of a situation. This really helped me realize the false distinction between the two groups and how fallacious my previous thinking was that they were so separate, because everyone has both aspects of the perpetrator and the victim, and we lose a lot when we try to categorize people in the binary.

David Sellers 7:50

I concur. With Allison and also with Matt. I came into the course curious as to what the psychological position of students coming to the jail would be. I automatically assumed that they would reflect the idea and belief of individuals locked up like myself that's projected in our society. Instead, though, I learned that many don't have information about the realities of the criminal justice system, as it relates to mass incarceration. My whole philosophy is freeing ourselves from programmed social responses, which basically is the foundation of the perspective of individuals who have never experienced criminal justice from any standpoint. The course is focused on dialogue and discussion. Everyone sits in a circle, which was part of a design I recently learned of as a part of the social psychology course that Matt taught. In Peter Block's idea of learning, the circle represents the community. In the Inside Out program, our first experience - the introduction, icebreaking portion - we all sat in a circle, and we participated in answering questions that allowed us to reveal some of the deeper parts of our thinking. In more serious discussions, all voices were valued. We acknowledged everyone had an opinion that should be considered as equal. Everyone was open in these discussions to hear the perspective of the other individuals. The structure and the willingness of the students to be honest was what allowed us to begin to free ourselves from preconceived notions we had. So for me, breaking down the separation was breaking down the psychological separation that's programmed to individuals through our society. It occurred, and I saw it. I witnessed it from the beginning statements to what was stated and what was contributed in writing at the end of the program. I was blown away by what I witnessed coming from the college students, also what I witnessed coming from some of my peers who were locked up.

Stanton Wortham 11:18

That's very interesting. So when you started the program, Allison, you had no clear expectation. You sort of brought with you the stereotypes that many people would bring who have no experience with the criminal justice system about what the incarcerated individuals would be like. But as you experienced time with them, you came to see that, in fact, the question of being a perpetrator is more complicated than we think. We all perpetrate various injustices against different kinds of people in our lives, and people who are inside and people who are outside share that in that we all do this. We all have some responsibility for it, and we also all have been victims, no matter whether we are incarcerated or not. By starting to break down those stereotypes about who these fellow students were on the inside,

and who you are coming into it on the outside, you started to see that the boundary blurs between people who are inside prison and people who are outside.

Stanton Wortham 12:24

David, it sounds as if, in your experience, you also came in with some preconceptions about what a college student might be in terms of their views of the world, their lack of understanding of what was going on inside the prison, and their fixed ideas about victims, perpetrators, blame, and other things. But it sounds as if once you had an opportunity to engage with them in this more egalitarian context where everybody got to speak and everybody tried to share and listen to others deeply, you too came to see them as different than you might have expected when you began the program.

David Sellers 13:06

True, definitely.

Stanton Wortham 13:08

So it's great that both of you are able to come and testify from your own positions as participants - one college student, one individual who was incarcerated and participated as a student in this BC program. It sounds as if both of you are agreeing with Matt and his claim that despite our preconception that these are two different worlds and that they don't really engage much with each other, but in fact, they're much more connected than you might think. So Matt, can you elaborate a bit on this claim you're making?

Matt DelSesto 13:40

Yeah, absolutely. A motto of Inside Out is actually "Moving beyond the walls that separate us." I've actually discovered some of this, which I think both Allison and David are speaking of, though my teaching experience. Especially when I describe the course to others and especially at the beginning, there's often a question among colleagues or even friends around what it's like to teach such different groups of students together in the same classroom. For instance, some people have even suggested in these conversations, "Well, you must have to make it a little less rigorous for the incarcerated students because they're at a different educational level." I've found that in my teaching, especially in the beginning, I too had some expectations about the type of student I would have and the perception of there being these two groups of students that I as a teacher I'm trying to bring together. There's something off about that I found in my experience. In fact, it often is the incarcerated students who raise the level of rigor, ask for additional sources, and are keeping up with the reading in a much more in depth way than the students from campus are. It was in my own teaching that I began to learn to see the complexity of that, to see beyond these two fixed types of students, that I may have even unconsciously had some assumption going in, but that I often hear about when I'm speaking about this course with others.

As David was saying, he used this word "programmed," right? And we're, in a lot of ways, programmed to think that because of these physical walls that isolate prisons and incarcerated people, that there are

somehow different people, that there's somehow something fundamentally different about people who are inside prisons because of these physical walls. Maybe we do this because it makes us feel like we are the good people. If I'm on the outside, then the people in there must be the bad people. Maybe it allows me to kind of put things which feel uncomfortable or things that maybe even have harmed me personally out of sight, out of mind. But above all, the separation allows me to go on with business as usual. It's kind of very much just something I don't consider.

So I'm suggesting that it takes effort and intentionality to see the world differently, to do this kind of bold claim of *Inside Out*: "Moving beyond the walls that separate us." I would argue that there's actually a big incentive to try to cultivate this disposition and attention, to begin to move beyond the walls that separate us in this way because it harms us all. The many separations harms our interpersonal relationships, where we increasingly live in bubbles of like minded people, neighborhoods of like minded people, in schools of like minded people. Often, not always, it harms our institutions. Our classrooms at many schools suffer from a lack of diversity of students and experiences. Even for a whole society, we're missing out on the leaders, the scientists, the innovators, who are on the other side of the separation, who are excluded because of the separation that we maintain.

Stanton Wortham 17:37

So it sounds as if you're claiming that there are at least two different ways in which our preconception about a rigid separation between the incarcerated and the rest of us takes effect. First of all, you, together with Allison and David, are saying that there isn't that big a difference. There certainly isn't a difference in kind between these two groups of people. We are all perpetrators in various ways, and we are all victims in various ways. We are also all capable of participating in intellectual conversation, as you say, often with the incarcerated students doing that in a more intense, deeper, or insightful way. So the first point - our presupposition that we're separate and different and that prison doesn't affect those of us who are outside - forces us to engage in stereotyping, as if these are two fundamentally different kinds of people. That's wrong.

The second thing you seem to be claiming is that prisons and the exterior of the society that we all live in are not really that separate. The presuppositions, the ideas circulate into prisons and out, rules of society trickle into prisons and what goes on in prisons trickles out into the larger world. You're saying not only are there things that move back and forth across these physical boundaries, but that we should be trying to build more intense and deliberate connections between people who are incarcerated and others who are not. Because by doing that, we're going to be able to benefit all of us, building on what we have in common and hoping to address this issue of mass incarceration. More directly, participating in this program, *Inside Out*, sounds like an intense experience, but also a great opportunity for the BC undergraduates and also for the incarcerated students who are able to participate in the courses. I'd love to hear a little bit about the experience that Allison and David have had and their reflections on what kind of implications this experience has once our listeners accept the fact that prisons are not separate from outside society quite as we expected. What should they be doing differently, or how should they be thinking differently? David, could we start with you?

David Sellers 20:13

Yes. The theory of justice that we embrace as individuals or as a society is a hurtful one. It's punitive. In the east, through studies I've learned from Inside Out, they practice a community resolution form of justice, where a group of the community comes together, and they don't just deal with the issue of the victim, or they don't seek to punish the perpetrator. They don't even use that type of language. They don't use those labels. They see it as a harm that affects the whole community and that's brought about by something lacking in the community, a need that needs to be met by someone in the community who may not have voiced it, but acted out upon it without coming to the community for assistance. So they sit in a circle and they resolve it through non punitive means. Typically, justice - as something that the entire community is involved with, where people participate in identifying human needs - is something that I would definitely push for seeing in our society as part of the transformation.

As individuals, we tend to automatically go to punishment when something happens. That is because we've been programmed that way. That is my sincere belief. I believe I can prove my theory or hypothesis, simply by asking questions... about why our automatic response to individuals who committed the most menial offense is that they should be punished. It's programmed. As a society, we give away the project of justice to the state. We know what the state's idea of justice is: they want to win. They don't want to find truth. They don't want to really get to the root of the problem. The boundaries we create, as a society, encourage us to embrace an individualistic approach to justice, as opposed to the interdependent approach where we again, look towards the community to relate and deal with the needs that caused the problem of justice. The interdependent approach is practiced by some indigenous traditions, [as described by] people like Howard Zehr.

Howard Zinn explains how the idea of separating poor white workers from enslaved blacks came about because the aristocracy, the hegemony of that day, saw a potential threat with the situation of discontent. Irish indentured servants who had been released from their two-, three-, or four-year indentured servitude had nothing: no place to live, no food to eat, no horse, nothing. They found themselves in slave quarters seeking the scraps that the slaves were eating, which were scraps that they got from the master. When the common situation was realized by the aristocrats, they realized the potential for an uprising during Bacon's Rebellion. So the idea of a community-based approach is one that I think is realistic and probably beneficial to us as a whole with race.

Stanton Wortham 24:35

Great. So you're saying that there are two pretty deep assumptions in the way that we in this society engage in incarceration and justice that we need to rethink. One of them has to do with community and one of them has to do with punishment. So your notion is that as opposed to just focusing on individuals, we need to think about crime and victimhood is something that's distributed across a community. It takes place within a system for reasons that have to do with something more than just individuals. You're also saying that we need not to think of justice as just a matter of punishment, but a matter of trying to heal some of those Blacks or "problems" in the larger community.

David Sellers 25:26

Very well put.

Stanton Wortham 25:28

How do you think about the notion of individual responsibility? So if people do perpetrate something that has a victim, does that mean that we don't think about punishing them at all? Or we punish them, but we also have a community response? Are these two things mutually exclusive?

David Sellers 25:44

Well, I would say that they're not mutually exclusive. In my view, in my perspective, an individual who perpetrates any type of social disobedience. They are either operating from hurt or harm that they themselves have experienced or been victim of, which then would meet the criteria for some form of help, instead of punitive response. The victim of that individual's conduct or actions right now, from the way the state approaches, receives very little attention. They don't even get an opportunity to participate in the sentencing of a perpetrator. The state takes over, and they kind of leave them out to the side, whereas the community approach would involve them. The perpetrator would have to make some type of compensation, recompense for his or her conduct and would have to do it within the community working, which then would give the victim a better healing process, in my view.

Stanton Wortham 27:22

So you're saying that, of course, there is individual action and individual responsibility, but our response to it shouldn't be just punishment. It should involve the victim, plus the community, in some engagement where they try to figure out what an appropriate response should be to that individual action. So Alison, could you tell us a little bit about your reflections on the implications of this fact about the interconnections inside and outside of prisons?

Allison Pyo 27:53

Yeah. So I think my implication is maybe something more personal. I think I'd really encourage people to observe and question how they use the victim/perpetrator binary in their lives, even if it's unrelated to the criminal justice system. For example, if someone harms you, how do you retell the story to both yourself and others? For me, I feel like I'd be lying if I said that I haven't ever told the story a certain way to make sure it was clear that I was a victim, and someone else had done me wrong. But I think we could benefit a lot from shifting away from the idea that having made mistakes ourselves takes away from harm having been done to us. Then we also have to remember that everyone has also been the perpetrator, and it just that in this society, some harm that's considered illegal somehow negates a chance of you ever being the victim again.

Stanton Wortham 28:54

So you're saying that we have a tendency to divide people into these two categories: people who are perpetrators, and people who are not, who are either victims or just bystanders. You think that our

tendency to essentialize, as if a perpetrator is just bad and a victim is just good, overlooks the fact that we all perpetrate various injustices. People who perpetrate injustices that are illegal also are victims of various sorts of injustice, and we have to see ourselves as much more hybrid. It's a much more gray situation as opposed to a clear situation, where we have one group on one side and the other group on the other side. So Matt, could you give us some reflections on the kinds of implications you think we should take away from this argument you've made?

Matt DelSesto 29:51

Yeah. As David and Alison are suggesting here, I think it's fair that we can actually apply this model - the way of seeing through Inside Out that we're describing here - beyond just a specific course and to our lives more generally. To see the incentive to see beyond these categories, to see with more complexity the situations that we're confronting. In this, Inside Out is inviting us all - whether we're participating in it as a course, or just hearing of it as a way of teaching and approaching the world - to create spaces in our lives and move beyond these kinds of many physical and social walls that separate us. This can take so many forms, whether it's the kind of self reflection about the labeling language that I use about myself or about the world, or about how I respond to a specific situation that happens. Is my automatic reaction to go straight towards punishment, and why is that?

In seeing the world with more complexity in this way, it's actually also an invitation, as David was suggesting in the beginning, to encounter each other as whole human beings who are more than our thoughts and actions in a particular moment. That pushes us towards a place of acting and being in the world that works towards more mutuality and reciprocity, which means valuing the many kinds of knowledge there are in a particular moment or situation, whether it's formal academic knowledge or just the fact that everyone is an expert in their own life experience and that we need to value the contributions of these different perspectives. We can engage across the divides of today, but I think this does mean thinking and acting in ways that do run counter to the norms of our peers and often society.

One famous quote that people often turn to when thinking about acting differently in this way is by Martin Luther King, who famously said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." He said, "We're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." You know, I think many of us hearing that, who are proponents of Martin Luther King's message would wish this were true or want it to be true. But in fact, we don't apply this to how we construct our lives in society all the time. We do create and maintain a separation, even if it's in these mundane ways, the kinds that Allison is talking about. So there's this quest, this challenge, I think that we're all being offered here: What does it mean to live as though this kind of statement were really true? How do we move from putting that which is fearful, unpleasant, feels dangerous, out of sight and out of mind? How do we move from doing that to actually engaging with the different perspectives on issues today? I think it's this fact also, that Inside Out brings us to, which is that responding to harm, to create safety and justice is everybody's concern. It's not just the concern of people who work in criminal or legal occupations or

professions, but it's everyone's concern. It takes all of us to actually bring about the kind of community safety and justice that that many of us desire.

David Sellers 33:43

Well said.

Stanton Wortham 33:44

So incarceration is a way that the society - those of us who don't think about it much - try to just push out of our minds, as if it doesn't affect us, these issues of crime, reconciliation, distribution of resources, and injustices in the society. You all have been trying to convince us that, in fact, we need to try to think about how the prison system is connected to all of us, partly because of the humanity and fundamental similarity of the people who are inside the system, as they are perpetrators and victims, just as all of us perpetrated justices and are victims in our lives. Also, we could have a much better society if we were able to engage with each other about questions of punishment or recompense, the social conditions, the questions in our community that lead us to have injustices of various kinds.

It sounds like this program that you all participate in is a wonderful experience to be able to work on interesting intellectual content with people who are in a very different situation, whether that be outside as an undergraduate student or inside it as an incarcerated individual. You are able to discuss some of these issues and participate in learning about each other's humanity and about how the system that we've created could be designed in a way that would allow us to come together much more effectively. I appreciate your participation.

Allison, David, Matt, it's been very interesting to learn about this program and your experiences in it. And it's certainly pulled me up short and given me an opportunity to reflect on the larger issues that you've raised. Thanks very much.