

Transcript: Decarceration Nation Episode 21 Bruce Western

Hello and welcome to Episode 21 of the the corporation nation podcast, a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system.

I am Josh Hoe, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated, a freelance writer, a criminal justice reform advocate, and the author of the book writing your own best story addiction and living hope.

First the news I'm still trying to get folks to sign the petition for Matthew. Charles clemency commutation, I guess actually and also to get folks to write the Illinois Department of Corrections to ask them to reinstate the state Ville debate team and will include both links in the show notes again, you can find those at DecarcerationNation.com or through the aggregator you use.

I also wrote an article this week explaining how Securitas if you remember my episode about Jpay, Securus is the parent company of Jpay. So I wrote this article about how secure leverage is free tablets in a way that creates a partnership with tartans, Department of Corrections that create an incentive for the end of in person visitation. I think this is one of the more terrible things the Department of Corrections and jails throughout the United States are engaging in they're starting to use tablet visitation and then replacing in person visitation so I'll include a link to that article as well.

Not much else in the way of news today. So let's get right to this week's interview with Bruce Western.

Very excited to interview brutes Western today, a man whose work I followed for many years.

Mr. Western is a Professor of Sociology at Harvard University, a visiting professor at Columbia and the author of many important and influential books and stories about criminal justice. Today, we will be discussing his most recent book "Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison" about the Boston Reentry Study. Mr. Western was the principal investigator of that study.

Hello, Professor Western. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

Hi, Josh. Thanks so much for having me.

Really enjoyed the book. So I guess my first question is, can you set the stage about your book for us a bit by providing a quick review of the Boston re entry study maybe with a focus on what motivated you to start the project and the short form of what you discovered?

Sure. Um, well, I I've been doing work in this area for a long time trying to understand the causes the scope, all the different effects of the emergence of mass incarceration in America. And these were big, sorta statistical studies using large national Social Survey data set, I felt I learned a lot from doing that sort of research I learned a lot about particularly how people were doing in the labor market, how people were getting with their families after incarceration. But in many ways, I thought the kind of research I was doing lacked realism, it wasn't representing very well the kinds of lives I knew people were leading during, and after incarceration lives that I was learning about, through

other sorts of contacts. I was having, like teaching in prison and, and getting to know people who had been in the system and I felt in in Bryan Stevenson term, I felt I needed more proximity to the problem. And I thought I really needed to be out into the field and talking to people in a systematic way, and trying to collect data in a systematic way, and so with Anthony Braga who's now head to the criminal justice school at Northeastern, and Rihanna Cole, who heads the Research Unit department of correction. In Massachusetts, we designed a study where we would interview 122 people, we wound up interviewing who had been incarcerated in state prison in Massachusetts, and we're returning to neighborhoods around Boston.

I was mostly trying to understand people's conditions of living their income, their employment, their relationships with family, their health and housing. That was our main intention. I think the main funding there was that there's a lot of material hardship immediately after incarceration. The average annual income the median annual income after people are released from prison in our diet was about six and a half thousand dollars a year in that first year after prison and that so an income level the poverty researchers called deep poverty, about half the federal poverty line for a person who is living alone. So a lot of material hardship, deep income poverty, immediately after prison release. We also learned the people in many cases were in quite poor health, they struggled with chronic conditions, infectious disease, chronic pain, mental health problems, and we learned that people had great exposure to trauma that often dated from early childhood. And to me those last two findings about childhood trauma and the really serious health problems that people were struggling with, they were two of the most important things I felt I learned from the study.

So I think, you know, if, you know, if I were, it's hard for me to take this position, but to take the position of a tough on crime advocate, they might say that this is an acceptable outcome, because that, you know, for instance, if that is if we had a we had mass incarceration, and they'll say we had a declining crime rates over long time, a period of time that maybe that's an acceptable outcome of the reduction in crime, what would you maybe say to that?

I think that is not an accurate reading of the research evidence, you know, so, there are, there are lots of studies that have tried to estimate the effects of incarceration on crime. Most of these studies show that there is a small negative effect of incarceration on crime. So if you increase the incarceration rate, crime goes down a little bit. And, and so, and typically, the research estimates show if you increase incarceration, 10%, crime goes down by 1%. Um, but I think we have to understand exactly what those studies are telling us. And what they're saying is, if we increase incarceration this year, by 10%, we reduce crime next year, by 1%, they don't tell us very much about the long term effects of incarceration. They don't tell us how people will struggle to find work for many years after they've been released from prison. They don't tell them about all the effects on health, physical health and mental health after people leave prison. And they say absolutely nothing at all of the social costs that are born by families who are supporting people who are being released from incarceration. So I think the research when you take account of all the different social consequences and long term consequences of incarceration, the research shows that it can't be justified by a reduction in crime rate, there are social costs that greatly exceed the short term reduction in crime. The other thing I'd add is that none of those studies take account of violence. Now, the crime that goes on inside prison, and it seems to me that you really have to want to wait that if you're trying to figure out the effect of incarceration on crime.

Yeah, I thought that was one of the really interesting parts of your book is your inclusion of the notion of crime and environments inside of prison within the statistics, which I hadn't seen people do before.

What makes a lot of sense to me, when I read the book, I noticed that you spend a decent amount of time talking about the care you took in constructing the study team, I noticed that you included people who'd worked extensively with formerly incarcerated people, but I didn't notice necessarily, if there were any formerly incarcerated folks on your team did you also include some of the voices of people who had first hand experience?

Um, we we didn't, we didn't end. So the first thing I would say is it you know, this was the first field study of this kind that I had done, I worked on a couple of other projects that had a big field component in them. And the New York hiring discrimination study with diva pager that I worked on, we had formerly incarcerated people working with us on there on that research project. And we didn't do this in Boston, in part because I had when the study got off the ground, I had only recently moved to Boston, I still getting my feet wet with that that environment and but I will say this, we were the pre test sample in our study of 10 respondents. And they went through the whole interview protocol about six months before the main sample and we would talk to them a lot about not we wouldn't just try out our interview questions would talk to them a lot about what they thought about the questions were asking what questions we should be asking and they became a de facto advisors on the research and I've since kept in contact with a number of people on that pre test sample. And and I think the instinct behind your question is exactly right. I, our research definitely would have benefited from a more direct, more substantial involvement of people who are involved in the system. And I think if I were to do it all over again, this would be very not a priority in the design of the study.

So a topic that we've returned to pretty often on the podcast is what I consider to be a mostly political distinction between what are called violent and non-violent offenders, quote, unquote, your book kind of delves into this a lot. Can you expand a bit about your thoughts on the distinction between violent and nonviolent offenders?

Yeah, yeah, I mean, as you suggest, this is an enormously important distinction for the political debate. And we we sometimes seem to be in a place in the criminal justice reform conversation where we quite readily focus our reform efforts on people who have been convicted of drug crimes and other non violent crimes me as well, I think this is very much a political political distinction. The reality is the people we were talking to, regardless of their criminal conviction had been involved in violence in different ways over a lifetime. And, but their involvement was really it was really quite complicated. And, and their first exposure to violence was often in early childhood, in many cases, growing up in fairly chaotic homes where they witnessed a lot of violence as as young kids violence among their parents are exposed to the victimization in their childhood, childhood homes, the neighborhood to stay grew up in, often had a lot of crime on the street, and they would, they would see crime in everyday life in in their neighborhoods, nearly all of the people we spoke to got in fights a lot as kids. And so they were certainly deeply exposed to violence. And their involvement in violence was took many different forms, they were victimized by it, and they saw a lot of violence as well in some cases as being engaged in violence. And I think this distinction that we draw in the political conversation between nonviolent and violent offenders just doesn't map onto the reason

reality that people are living and the violence that people spoke to us about emerged really in context to poverty, everyone we spoke to, more or less grew up in a low income family in a low income neighborhood, in which the risks of being exposed to violence in different ways were higher. The violence they spoke about was of a very contextual kind, if anyone lived in those same context says how respondent day two would be likely exposed to violence as witnesses, victims, and sometimes participants. And this is this is the reality of the harsh conditions of poverty and racial inequality in America. And, and, and so I find the way in which we reserve compassion and mercy and leniency only for nonviolent offenders. That That to me, I think, really profoundly misunderstand violence as a social problem, its connection to conditions of poverty, and how we should respond to it as a as a question of public policy. So I think that one of the things that's interesting about that is that we have a really hard time it seems having discussions about crime as a complex issue, we seem to want to simplify it and almost make it binary so that everything everyone's either an offender or a victim when often Yeah, we represent at different times in our life, all of those different positions.

Do you feel like there is a way to discuss the some people can grab on to?

Yeah, I I hope so. I hope so. I think um, it to me it's a really difficult and open ended question I I look at a our public conversation about crime and it's very dehumanizing of people who are involved in the system and it draws all sorts of bright moral lines between the innocent and the guilty the violent and the nonviolent and and the reality is more is more complex the way I've tried the way I've tried to address it in this book I'm is to try and humanize people who were tangled up in the criminal justice system and and I've tried to do this by, as best I can, painting a rich picture of of what people are like and I think we can we can dehumanizing people in two ways. And and I think there are problems on the liberal side as as well as on the conservative side of this debate, I think conservatives dehumanized people by reducing them to all of their floors. But I think equally liberals can dehumanized people by reducing them to all their virtues. And and certainly the people that we were interviewing were very complicated, were confronted, in many cases with tremendously difficult choices and context that was often holy, beyond their control. And so this is the story I try and tell in the book. And I think my my ethical position in the book is that we should try and extend compassion and decency to everyone, we should try and offend a everyone's everyone's human dignity and that acknowledges, you know, our basic capacity, our potential virtue. And so sort of at a at a metal level, I think that's kind of the politics of the book is to try and make a case for this humanizing perspective on people in which our systems of punishment have off ramps and have a built in capacity for leniency and mercy and aim to draw people into the social compact after they've come into conflict with the law rather than cast rather than cast them out of it.

I think one of the I think you call that human frailty in the book and a lot of ways it's a way that you deal with that, is that fair?

Yeah. And, and, and so funny human frailty described the pathway to poor physical health that people were struggling with. And so we did see a lot of infectious disease, chronic pain, chronic conditions, some of these were related to long term drug use somewhere, just diseases of poverty, asthma, diabetes, and, and so on. People were also struggling with mental health problems, mood disorders, a lot of depression, PTSD, anxiety, substance use disorders. And these things tended to clump together people who are struggling with physical health problems. In many cases, we're also

struggling with mental health problems as well. And, and it made the people's capacity for, you know, intervening in their own futures, often very challenging. And, and this is one of the great paradoxes of a system of punishment built on incarceration. For me, we we are asking the people turn their lives around and come out of prison, refrain from crime and rejoin society, we give them very little help to do that. And so from my point of view, we're often asking for really tremendous acts of agency from people whose capacity is often very limited and has been undermined in many cases by the system of punishment itself. So that's a I think that is a deep paradox, you know, in our system of punishment and human frailty is is deeply implicated in that.

Yeah, I think one of the things that I found interesting about the book is there's a couple of times that you seem to be making the argument that criminal justice outcomes are almost demonstrations of a failure of our social systems, including our safety net, is that fair?

Yeah, yeah, I mean, I think that's right, right. The I think, you know, two thirds of our two thirds of our sample had histories of drug addiction, mental illness, and another 30 or 40% were also struggling with chronic physical conditions as well. And often if people were able bodied, they heard histories of failing in school and, and problems with school discipline, which ultimately drew them into the juvenile justice system, which ultimately drew them into the adult system. And, and so, you know, we could look at where people wound up not as the the product only of them being involved in serious crime. And in in the case of the people we spoke to, that was, that was nearly always the case. But also it was the product of a whole sequence of institutional failures. And people were just falling through the cracks falling through the cracks, a failed school system of fail, public health, failed public health, my mental health system, and then the prison of course, becomes the social policy provider of last resort. And, you know, it's the backstop in many ways of the American welfare state, particularly for Prime age men who are strongly connected to families. The US

I usually say about the podcast, the notion that my project if I have one is to radically reimagine America's criminal justice system. In a sense, I'm not an abolitionist. I just want a system that has good outcomes by the end of your book, this seems to be what you're calling for...you seem to be calling for a system that still signal social dissatisfaction, but also does something different. Can you talk a little bit more about how you envision the system reimaged?

Yeah, yeah, I agree. I did. This is very much my project as well, if we were to reimagine the foundations of the system, what would it look like? And I, as you say, I I do think there is a necessary place for the way in which society signals its its disapproval, its disapproval of crime, I think there is also a place for, for victims in this reimaged system and accountability processes in which we're actively calling upon the moral agency of people who have done harm to others. Now, system of incarceration, I think, does not do that remotely, it renders people a very, very passionate complete start decent...

sorry to interject real quickly. But one of the things that I always say it's the system actually dis-incentivizes people to take accountability and a lot of ways

Yeah, yeah, I you I, I agree with that people can be a suddenly passive in, in accounting for their own their own moral action. And so a system of genuine accountability, I think, would look quite

different from our current system only, it's only really based on incarceration. But then I think there's also this, this issue of the enormous hardship, material hardship that happens in context of poverty, where, you know, the footprint of the criminal justice system falls most heavily. And so I think we certainly need active methods and institutions that are providing accountability and we should be attending in a very active way to the homes suffered, suffered by victims, but I think we need systems particularly under the really unusual conditions of American poverty that we have we need systems that draw people back in to the social compact or find ways integration avenues to the mainstream of American Opportunity. And I think in part two, in the context of, you know, the massive racial disparities that we have, this also means, you know, settling accounts with history and counting for the harms done by the criminal justice system, historically, and today in particularly in disadvantaged communities of color in so you're talking about, you know, people who would often times have three generations of people who've been incarcerated or more, I suspect, yeah, yeah. And so something is out to such family. So I think justice, we ask for people who come into play conflict with the law to account for their hands to victims, I think the system owes an account of the harms that it is cause to families and communities that have suffered the generations as he suggests, at the hands of a very punitive criminal justice system.

So I'm going a little bit off script here, but I'm sure you've answered this question a million times. How did you end up doing this work? I mean, where did you come to American criminal justice in your journey?

Yeah. Um, so I'm, I'm Australian, and I came to the United States 30 years ago now. And as a graduate student, as a sociologist, I was interested in, in poverty and labor markets and work and I was working on that problem at graduate school. And then after I left graduate school, and, and after a few years, it sort of became clear to me, you know, I was going to make America my home, my, my wife and I were, you know, she's Australian to, we're starting a family here, our kids were growing up American, and I felt it was important to do something on American society. And I think the American penal system is so unusual. So I'm such a dramatic signal of what are racial and economic inequality was in America, I was very drawn to it as a student of poverty and inequality. And I started doing these large scale statistical studies. And then I at the encouragement of a colleague of mine, back at Princeton back then I started going into prison to teach and it was just a very absorbing and human reality for me to try and come to grips with, and I felt it held some sort of key as to what American society really was, as someone who's been incarcerated.

Of course, my curiosity, when you say that is, what do you think you learned most from the experience of walking into a prison teaching prisoners?

Wow, that is a great question. Um, I think for people who are, have not been in do if not been into prison, you know, that there's very little to compare it to prison is unlike any other social institution, it's, it's not like a hospital or a school or other institutional settings like that. The The, the social life of an institution like the prison is built it around control and authority and walking into prison for the first time. That was the thing that really struck me and, and, and, and still strikes me we we just don't have any any comparable way in which sort of human relations a socially organized and this is kind of what's what's strange of it remained strange to me about it incarceration after going into prisons for many years, we, we, we think of incarceration as a deprivation of liberty, and it is certainly that

of course, but more than that, it's this real distortion of a human relationships, it a normal human relationships severed and strained when people are incarcerated, the relationships inside the prison, I feel it the struggle to have normal human relationships inside prison. It's a very challenging environment in which to just relate to people in a normal way. Does that sound fair?

I mean, you can Yeah, yeah, for sure, there's a book by the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Gambon that talks almost exclusively about that it's in the context of world war two Germany. But it definitely talks about the relationship between, you know, just the whole notion of the course of a car, several environment and a lot of ways. So what's the next step? I mean, are you are you done with this? Or is it or is there something that will happen with the Boston reentry study? Or do you still have relationships with those people?

I am in conversation with and and number of people and I suspect and would like to think, you know, they're going to be very long lived very long lived relationships. I think that the particular study has wound up though I hope there are policy discussions that might might lead from it. I'm moving into other kinds of field studies at the moment. I've a research team where we've been in solitary confinement unit in another state prison system, which has been also a real a real education. I'm also very interested in jail, incarceration, many more people go to jail than prison that often only for a few days at a time. And I want to understand that, that that is also very unusual feature of the criminal justice system in America, that that doesn't happen on the same scale, as in other countries. And I'd like to understand all of the social disruption associated with jail incarceration.

Yeah, I think you'll find that very interesting. Having spent a little time in both jail in prison. So for anyone who hasn't read the book and is thinking about picking it up. Do you have any last kind of words you'd like to talk about, about "Homeward?"

Um, well, if if you if you do read it, I hope it might move you to think about the the problem of criminal justice in the country somewhat differently, how how closely it is connected to problems of racial inequality, and American poverty. I hope everyone can join me in a critically evaluating the system and figuring out how we might reform it.

Well, thanks so much for doing this. I can't tell you how much of a pleasure it was to talk to you after reading your stuff for many years. Thanks again,

Thank you so much for inviting me Josh,

thanks again.

Talk to you later.

Thank you.

Bye Bye.

Thanks so much to Bruce Western for being my guest this week. It cannot really explain how much I thank him for taking the time. So here is my take on the interview. And on his book *Homeward* and the year after prison, which I highly recommend. Our prison system is not designed to return people to society in better shape than one way when they were first incarcerated. People who are already in crisis return homeward even more broken and broke saddled with massive criminal justice debt, usually with untreated addiction or other issues and with little hope of securing a meaningful job safe housing, and they often return to a life of social exclusion, and shaming homeward amplifies all of these points, but offers an even deeper critique of the system as it currently exists. This book keeps at its core, the notion that incarceration is more than simply the result of personal failings and explains why a system built to punish the exceptional can't or the exceptionally violent can't possibly create the systemic change needed to address the omnipresent violence which generates criminal behaviors in the first place. This is from the concluding chapter of *Homeward*. Opening the window wider requires that we asked by pervasive incarceration has failed to greatly reduce crime. It is not police courts, and the threat of punishment to create public safety, but rather the bonds of community produced by a raft of social institutions, families, schools, employers, churches, and neighborhood groups, and regular arising social life and promoting daily routine. These institutions engage the attention of neighbors, co workers, spouses, teachers, and employers who monitor conduct and stand as a normative reminder of order. In other words, in communities in belonging is the hope create, in the hope created by togetherness, peace and emotional prosperity become possible. But for this to take root for this to really matter. community members have to find common cause with people in crisis in their community, with people incarcerated from their community, and with our returning citizens when they return to communities. That is, for all of this to work, we will have to as Bryan Stevenson says, both have proximity to the problem, we have to know the people, we have to be near them. And we also have to find common cause with them in the realization that we are all broken, maybe not in the same ways but broken, I cannot tell you how many, many times I've had conversations with people randomly after I was incarcerated, who told me of all the things that they did in their lives that they could have been incarcerated for. I can't tell you all the times I've looked back at my own life and thinks of the things that I've done that were good in the things that I've done that were bad and didn't get punished. I might be, for instance, from a family that is middle class, I might be educated. But I also have struggles with memories of violence from my childhood problems with creating intimate bonds, problems with isolation, I've struggled with addiction, I've struggled with frustration, and I've struggled with anger over my lifetime, I've had to deal with all of these problems. Every time I see someone in the community who's in crisis, there is some part of my experience that allows me to see myself in them. And it's in that process that something powerful happens in emphasizing commonality instead of difference. And reaching out to instead of fleeing from I have found that real change can come and powerful bonds can be created. I am part of a church community that Welcome to me back and the welcomes and fights for other formerly incarcerated people to come home that goes into prisons to talk to people from our community and the works together it open hope, offer hope and support for all people who seek community and seek to make a better life for themselves. This is not a call to ignore wrongdoing. In fact, if you listen to this podcast, I talked about responsibility and accountability is key elements and moving forward effectively all the time. But it is a call to help create community connections and support for people when they are in crisis. To be there for them when they are needing treatment, or to be there for them when they face consequences, and certainly to help when they're returning home from incarceration by sharing love and connection. The book "*Homeward*" continues on the final chapter

for pundits and policymakers who conjure up shadow we street criminals, protection is offered only by the deterrent and incapacitated forced a punishment, the harsh conditions of poverty, and the close link between violence and poverty are largely missing from this thin conception of public safety. In reality, the violence that derails people's lives does not usually occur in random confrontations with menacing strangers, instead of emerges in family homes and neighborhoods, victims and perpetrators are known to each other violence because it's endemic and attaches to conditions of poverty is itself a kind of deprivation, thick public safety is clearly in short supply environments of racial inequality, poverty and contextual violence. The great failure of mass incarceration is that tends to weaken the social bonds that produce order and predictability in daily life violence ruptures, social bonds, incarceration, on a massive scale offers nothing for such a challenge. In other words, only by rejecting the over simplistic and binary stories like victim, you know, simple victim offender binaries that we've been telling ourselves for decades to make ourselves feel tough, or to feel more safe. Can we find meaningful healing because it's in our communities that the problems start, it's in our community connections, that the problems can be addressed. And it's only through stronger communities that these problems will be fixed. How can taking someone who has been a witness to violence, a victim of violence and a perpetrator of violence and then subjecting them to even more violence and even more isolation, heal anything or fix anyone, or make sure that anyone comes back in better shape than when they left our prison system is broken. It's designed to fix a problem that doesn't really exist to isolate and punish us human monsters. Until we pick humanity back at the center of prisons, they will not work until we offer hope to so called violent prisoners, they will not work the majority of the people in prison are under a sentence called violent our re entry system is broken. This is designed to make people who have who often have few employment skills and even even fewer opportunities payback society for their entire incarceration and their entire court system experience. The end result is predictable and sad. People often turn back to crime out of depth or desperation or lack of hope. Our parole and probation system is broken. Too often we rely on a trail them nail them in jail and philosophy where we pile so many conditions on parolees, and probationers that is almost impossible for them not to fail, where we should be offering hope, healing, programming and opportunities, recreate miles and miles of traps and tests. And finally, our communities have been trained to reject instead of embrace our returning system citizens, our communities are broken. No longer do people pay their debt to society Upon release, but people like me are held forever at arm's length, with little hope of earning a living wage, living in safe housing or fully reconnecting with society. Bruce westerns, research has shown us that there is a way home the question will be if we have the courage to broaden our sense of community to reinvigorate our community methods of dealing with violence, our community methods of bringing people back our community methods of healing each other, to really open our hearts wide enough and to take the emotional risks to see the entire picture of poverty of lifelong cycles of violence and to offer people hope that return from prison can mean new and better life in communities of caring and connection. As always, you can find the show notes at the corporation nation dot com. If you want to support the podcast directly. You can do so from Patreon dot com slash on pirate satellite. You can also support us by leaving a five star review from iTunes or Stitcher or like us on Spotify, or any of the other aggregators. Thanks so much for listening to the nation podcast. See you next time. Thanks.