

63 John M. Eason

Hello and welcome to Episode 63 of the Decarceration Nation podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system. I'm Josh Hoe, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated freelance writer, criminal justice reform advocate and the author of the book *Writing Your Own Best Story: Addiction and Living Hope*. We'll get to my interview with John M. Eason and author of the book *Big House on the Prairie* in just a second. But first the news:

I spend the end of the week attending the second meeting of the governor's Task Force on jail on pre trial incarceration here in Michigan, I presented written testimony on pay to stay, which allows county jails to charge and cart to charge incarcerated folks up to \$60 a day for the privilege of pre trial detention, about why we should end cash bail, and about mental health care in our jails. The meeting was held in beautiful Traverse City, Michigan, which was about a four hour drive. But it could not have been more beautiful drive. And there could not have been more beautiful weather, weather and in Traverse City. I'll include a picture to at the end of the show notes so you can share in my adventure. Some things I want to say about the task force, one of the things that's really important to me is that multiple members of the task force or formerly incarcerated, it's really, I think, symbolically and actually important that the governor and the Speaker of the House and the Senate Majority Leader in the Senate, all put together the task force and chose to include formerly incarcerated folks. I also just think it's really important that it's talking about jail. So often, when we talk about criminal justice reform, we talk about prison much more than we talked about jail, and at least in my experience, will admit is anecdotal. While prison was almost, I mean, in so many ways, was filled with brutality. Most of the things that I really remember from my journey through incarceration, that were just truly horrific, where things that I encountered in jail. So anyway, I'm really glad that the task force is happening, it was a real honor and a pleasure to participate. It was also great that there were, literally am easily 60 or 70 people there. And while over 20 people testified, which was really awesome, a lot of just, you know, regular folks were just telling me about their experiences with the criminal justice system and with jails, in the state of Michigan, I guess the final thing I want to say here is that I think every state needs to have a task force, working on improving jails, and pre trial incarceration, because so many people are brought into that end of incarceration, even if they don't go on to the rest of it. And it's really the primary way there, which almost everybody experiences incarceration. In fact, everybody who goes on to prison starts in jail. And then probably most important, when you think about a jail, the problem is, is that they're generally run by the county instead of the state. And the county generally has less funds. And yet, we expect very high amounts of programs and support in all of the counties and all the jails. And unless we find an answer to that problem, we're going to continue to have problems at the jail level, because especially in small counties, they can't afford all the things that we need the jails to do. And so there has to be a partnership between the state and the county, when it comes to making sure that people when they're in jails are treated the way we need for them to be treated to make sure that their rights are especially since you know, the vast majority of people who are in jails have not been found guilty of any crime, their their pre trial, which means that, you know,

there's a pretty decent chance that they're innocent that and that's a reason why we need to make sure that people are taking care of while they're in pre trial incarceration and attention.

Okay, over the past several weeks, despite having almost been evidence for their claims, multiple members of the US Department of Justice, including and not limited to, Attorney General William Barr have been attacking criminal justice reform and the progressive prosecutor movement. I think this backlash probably means that we're succeeding in our goals as a movement. But it also means that we really need to be even more vigilant and calling out the nonsense whenever we see it. Recent evidence suggests that the reform prosecutors in Philadelphia and Chicago, all of the reforms have happened at the same time that crime is decreasing. And we have seen across the country that reform goes hand in hand with decreases in crime. So we should, when people start to say things like when you know, Attorney General Barr was talking about how progressive prosecutors are putting our cities at risk, we need to call that out. And we need to call it out in our neighborhoods, we need to call it out the cities, we need to call it out from the rooftops we do call it out across the country, because it's just not true. There's a reason they're trying to do it. And the reason is that because they're invested in a system of tough on crime, and mass incarceration, and we are actually making progress at trying to break the logic of tough on crime and mass incarceration. And so the Empire always strikes back and we need to make sure that we keep on them to call out their nonsense whenever they they start saying things that aren't true. Anyway, let's get to my interview with John M. Easton.

John Eason has a Bachelor's in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, a Master's in Public Policy from the urban be Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, and a Master's and PhD in sociology from the University, University of Chicago. He's an associate professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin Madison, and he's the author of the book Big House on the Prairie, which will be discussing here today. Welcome to the decarceration nation podcast, Professor Eason.

Thank you so much for having me on. It's a real honor.

Oh, thank you. I always ask this first question, what life experience took you from where you started to where you found yourself moving to Arkansas, to write the book, Big House on the Prairie?

Um, I think I started the question for me started, actually write about this in the preface of the book. I was a community organizer, community and political organizer in the south side of Chicago. And I was heavily involved with getting a lot of drug houses shut down. And we were we were actually trying to get Chicago designated is a Haida high intensity drug trafficking area, a designation through the Office of OMD CPE through the Office of National Drug Control Policy. But in the process of closing a drug house, we had a conversation, some of the church leaders and I about what we were learning from me are all black people, right? or do some of the priest that were involved were white, but it was overwhelmingly black people who were

shutting down drug houses trying to take back their neighborhoods, reclaiming their neighborhood. And in the process, they would say things like, you either get a job or you become a job, we're sending our black children downstate, to white communities, for these white communities to benefit economically, from their incarceration. I think, the breaking point for me, and when I decided I was really going to go back to school, to learn, you know how to fix the criminal justice system, is when we shut down a drug house. And I found out that in the process, it was one of the church members that we were going after her kids. So this was just all pretty Heartbreaking Work with black people trying to reclaim their neighborhoods that had been dis invested in and everything else, but in the process. You know, there were poor black people who were getting hurt in that process. So that's what led me to Arkansas to figure out why any community will want to prison, given them pain and suffering that incarceration causes. Um, that's why I ended up in Arkansas, besides the fact. You know, I was from I'm a native of Chicago of the Chicago area. And I didn't think I had anything terribly new to say, from an urban sociological perspective about Chicago. I didn't think I had anything terribly new to say, but I think there were a lot of new things to be said. So

Well, I have one question about your work in Chicago, which is, you know, I think recently, there's been some writing about efforts to close drug houses that end up kind of becoming cover for gentrification, since you've sort of done the work in this area. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Um, I can see that those Chicago hasn't. It depends on where those drug houses are. And Chicago hasn't. Certain I was just I visited Chicago regularly, especially this past year, not and I'm a little closer. Although I know people there been massive changes in Chicago. I think it hasn't been gentrified to the extent that DC or New York or even San Francisco has been, but I can certainly see drug house closing of drug houses being key to that. But I think in Chicago, the real, the real gentrification, the real the bigger issue around gentrification has been about public schools, and the takeover of public schools. But I can certainly see, to a lesser extent on a much smaller scale, maybe within a block or to a drug house strategy being drug house closing strategy being deployed.

Your book is in a sense about what many have called the prison boom, would you like to explain what is meant by the prison boom, what you mean by it in the book?

I really appreciate this question. Because when we talk about the prison boom, we frequently think that 2 million people, 2 million plus people who are annually incarcerated, and that's really, that phenomena is mass incarceration. And what I described as the prison bone is related to but quite separate from mass incarceration. The prison boom is to build up from 1970, about 1100. prisons, right in a 35 year period. So we built over 1100, prisons, and at 3035 year period, which is unprecedented. And so that's what I refer to specifically as the prison book. And the conventional narrative was that prison, Scott cited important minority communities are the poor and minority communities didn't have the power to stop prisons for moving in. But you think that conclusion is problematic, right?

So the conventional wisdom was actually, if all of the literature I'm not only including the scholarly literature, but the popular conception, I think. Eric Schlosser wrote an article in 1999, it really influenced my thinking influenced the field. I mean, it's still being cited. And Atlantic Monthly article is being cited around prison building, right. And what he argued was it these are white communities that are poor, that have higher unemployment rates, and they're smaller. And then what I did was look at, I used census data, to look at where these places were actually, where prisons were actually being built in there and larger communities that have higher percentages of blacks and Latinx folks living there. So that was a low, they are poor can be poor communities, but the demography otherwise doesn't fit with the popular narrative around these places. Yeah, so that, that the conventional wisdom, some of my earlier work sort of pushes back against that, but in academic circles, that my work still hasn't really been accepted by certain folks who study prisons, because it doesn't exactly jive with the standard story around, you know, prisons being racially and that being strictly about racial and economic exploitation. Although I do argue that the prisons are about racial and economic exploitation. It's just the timing of that exploitation.

Yeah, I think that one of the problems that telephone happens is that we get kind of we forget about paternalism a little bit. And I think that one of the interesting things about your book, is that your work seems to suggest that people had agency in the process that the the prisons didn't just drop on their head, prayer that

That is incredibly accurate. And I think we we don't give enough. We think about broad structural things like prison boom, or mass incarceration, and we forget, you know, being from Chicago, being reared in Chicago, Chicago land, I just believe that all politics are local. So people, they may have constrained choices, they may not have a lot of choices, but they always have agency. Otherwise, I don't think we could have. I don't think that, you know, slavery, Jim Crow, any of the systems of racial and economic oppression could have been defeated. Right. And so I think if you take away people's agency, you limit the possibility for social movement. And that's why I've tried to reframe the debate in a way where you can see the agency I'm hoping to, you know, highlight the agency of, of local actors, so we can know how to talk to those people, as we decarceration because if you go with this narrative, there's a false narrative for these people who are making decisions in these communities. And you don't respect their agency. It can be very, very problematic.

And what were the economic, historical and social problems facing for a city if they were making the choice to build a federal prison in their town,

So for city was they had gone through, they had gone through a whole series, most recently, in the early 80s, a series of really terrible event that included that included you know, they had a strike were against against Sanyo plan, which made national news where, where a window, a car window of a Japanese executive was broken. The black and white, local locals who were trying to unionize, they, they were holding signs, the red jackets go home. This doesn't look good on the national stage. There was a guy who was accused wind du monde, there's a book

written about him. Ties is some conspiracy theory tie in and Clinton, the Clintons to shady business and Arkansas, where this guy basically he's accused of raping and killing one of the local, local town fathers, his teenage daughter, his 14 year old daughter are raping her I should say he just raped her. He would later go on and rape and kill someone in the neighboring state after he's after he's released from prison. This is all tied if you Google for city This is all still tied to their image on he was castrated by the local sheriff and for city or accused or the local sheriff was accused of castrating him is just a lot of shady business that went on on the May discounts reputation sink into the toilet. And this isn't a backdrop of, you know, there's deindustrialization, there's the mechanization of farming all of these broader structural changes that are affecting this place on so you have like 18 months where you have the rate, castration OY and demands home was burned down. He was his family was chased out of town he was arrested is just a whole bunch of shady business with the share, who was eventually convicted of he was eventually convicted of running a gambling rain out of the back of his out of the back of the sheriff's office. So it's it's in windy mom was convicted of the the rape and everything but it it just really marred the image of our city. And so I think one of the things people don't realize is the stigma of being rural and southern and having a lot of poverty and being and having a large black population. On they were being called a filthy town. Much, much the language is being used now by the president to call, you know, certain countries, I'm not sure if this is a family friendly show. But the reference you're making, yeah, so the referring to certain countries, in a very derogatory manner. That's how for city was being labeled, right, they literally there were people who call it for city of filthy town, right. Because of all of this, all of these events, but also because they had a lot of poor black people who were living in public housing. So in the poor black people living in public housing, didn't ask to all be concentrated, and, you know, more or less third of a square mile, they didn't ask for all of the public housing and be put there. Um, but nonetheless, they were living in those conditions. And so when you have those conditions that are you, it's a rural ghetto. And these places, it's a ghetto, you, when you have a lot of public housing, a lot of poor people concentrated, it doesn't matter if was in an urban space or rope, rural space. So two people there ended up getting stigmatized, marginalized, that fit all within the image of the town. So you have to ask yourself, when we're doing this home, do you want something in your backyard? Not in my backyard versus please in my backyard? The first question you really need to ask is, have you seen my backyard? And that's everything I just ran through for you. It's where I sort of centered the book. Right? Have you seen my backyard? is a question I think, isn't asked that often. On for us to really understand why. Why places wherever they are. Once something it's considered really hideous by most people. If you think about prisons, they're not nice looking. facility. So this is I think this goes to the agency, right, and the limited choices that these places have. But it's still a prison is still better than a lot of other things.

So, I know, in your case, well, let me back this up for just a second. There's, I think that a lot of times when we hear, you know, you'll hear a lot of people talk about things like colorblindness and stuff like that, but what they seem to a lot of times miss is kind of the legacy and history of things like housing discrimination, what you were just talking about. And when you first moved

for city, you had some problems finding housing true to right, can you talk about what that was like, and what you learn from the experience?

So I, so I tried to approach this as a researcher, right, so, um, I, I looked at the universe of housing and possibilities, there were only eight realtors. So when I say the universe, I mean, this isn't a sample, this isn't just based on this is my experience. But I don't think it just I don't think I'm the only person that would experience something like this trying to move into a town like Forest City, if I didn't have relatives who could easily circumvent all of this stuff. So I, I, I tried to call, we drove down, I drove down with my family, this is after I was even staying in a motel there, a hotel there, I was staying there trying to make contact to secure housing. And I was repeatedly treated like a drug dealer. As you can tell by this point, I have a very Midwestern a black accent, right. So I didn't sound like I was from the south, on and one of the stories that always I always tell is my wife, who was serving as my guy who really didn't want me to go south by myself, because she didn't think I could comport myself correctly. But that's a whole other. That's a whole other issue, right. But my wife decided to call one of the realtors, we saw an advertisement for home in the Forest City times here, which is still my homepage to this day on my web browser. So we saw advertisement, my wife calls in the guide lays out the potential realtor lays out a great description of everything. In terms of the houses, three bedrooms, it's on an acre, so a couple of Bad's and my wife is from the south, and she has a racially ambiguous Southern accent. And so she's discussing all the details with them. And when he she asked where it is, he says, awesome Cherry Hills. So Cherry Hills is about 10 miles out of town. And my wife says, Oh, well, we don't want to we want it to live in, we want to live in for a city. He He informed this, you know, you don't want to live in four city. And she says Why? He says was, you know, is too many colors there. She she tells him well, you know, you may not want to rent to me, because I'm African American, you know, and he says, You know, I don't have a problem with you. You know, I'll rent to you just fine. It's a problem when you get too many of them. Right? So that's a, you know, this is the type of colorblind did that I wouldn't even say that's necessarily color. Color specific in your face, but he's it pointed towards after that conversation. That's how started looking at a census data to look at how many what was the poverty rate? And what was the poverty rate for African Americans, right, and how had that changed over time. So even though the poverty rate had fallen since 1970, it went from 50% of people below poverty, to only about a third of the population below poverty, the number of black people in poverty went from 40% to 80%, right. And when I met this, they were all concentrated in public housing, right, most of the poverty is concentrated in public housing. And about a third of a square mile, which in the process that took to get all of those poor black people concentrated in such a small area is similar to what I had been reading. I didn't purposely go out and look for this, right? Even though I'm from Chicago, and I studied at the University of Chicago, which is famous for urban sociology, I didn't go out looking for a ghetto, on I didn't haphazardly, I don't want to think of myself as a bumbling ethnography, either. I saw all of the signs, but we typically don't talk about a ghetto existing in small rural communities. 14,000. Um, but all of the all of the signs pointed towards that, right. And this was one of the first signs that pointed towards that are experienced trying to move in. And so there's a whole bunch of other stuff in terms of how we were discriminated against personally, which I don't think I don't

think it just speaks to our experiences. Well, where the Chamber of Commerce director, he's passed, I have several respondents who have who have passed since the steady, but one of them this guy, David David done, who was a real life person I didn't. I only use pseudonyms with respondents who I felt I needed to protect your identity. But all of these people are public figures. And David done, I'm pretty sure was holding a list of houses is for rent. They were in the white part of town. But he even though I met with him at least three times. He wouldn't give me the list. He wouldn't allow me to contact people to rent in for city and from one or white owners. I can't prove it. But based on what I know about the place, I'm pretty sure he was doing the end. And given the fact, you know, this is after the book was done. He said on Trump's committee is voter.

Was the the Chris Kovac committee?

Yes. He sat on that committee in Arkansas. He was part of the he was investigating voter fraud in Arkansas. He's one of those people. So because, you know, there are so many people who there are so many more people who are voting illegally in Arkansas, as opposed to those whose votes are being suppressed in place. So that's

Yeah. So you approach the research ethnographicly, Can you discuss some of the people you did sort of already but some of the other people you met at Forest City and how you got to know the people in the city.

It was from Chicago and my it all sort of started from my dissertation chair, his research doing development in Arkansas, Richard cow. He had been interviewing people across the state of Arkansas related to shore bank in Chicago and doing development, looking at ways of increasing economic development in places like for city and he had talked with the net, a couple of people, including Andre Stevenson, he's from Chicago. And so I, I called him and this is years after he had talked with Richard Taub. But he he served as my end, he's the king form and introduced me to a he had connections on within the black, the black middle men are black elite, the key people in town as well as because he had worked with the banks. So he knew the Chamber of Commerce director and other other white elites in particular. So I could get my foot in the door, but really, one of another key informant named coach to really see so clearly he's also pass on his one of his best friends, for years, had just had died. I think the year before I got there, his name was John Easton, as well. He was a state senator, an Arkansas State Senator. So when I called him and said, I was John Easton, I, it was he he treated me like we were old friends. And he did everything he could to make sure the study was successful. I couldn't have done this study without many of the many of the people in town being willing to open their doors and sit down and talk with me and trust me. And I think my name, which is ironic, not just my surname, which did help, because Easton is a common name in the area. But also my name, in particular being Johnny said, I got in a lot of doors that I may not have gotten in otherwise. But I also had carte blanche around town because of the connections I had coming in. So that made it the the fact that I had to travel and move my family across the country to conduct a study, the fact that actually had an end before I even did that made it a lot easier to conduct the work and

ethnography people people believe is just about convenience. So people will, you know, this is why there's so many ethnography, these big northern urban centers, right, because that's where the universities are, that have the resources to support those types of those types of studies. But to do the study I did. It was almost like anthropological and not sociological in that way. Not like a lot of people would know those disciplinary bonds, but anthropologists typically leave the country, sociologists will study something close to them, typically, after using ethnography as a method. So to conduct a study, I felt really fortunate to have all of the people, I did contribute in so many ways, what office space with, you know, just small things like that the ability to have access to, at that time, fax machines, phones, computing, internet, anything, I need it like that those were all, when you're in a rural community. Those are precious resources. There are places in this country, which I found out along the way, they didn't have phone service, there are places in the country right now they don't have reliable internet service. And these are a lot of rural areas who don't have reliable internet service. So that makes on I think, my I really, I tried to not only give people agency in these communities, but show their struggles in a way where I wasn't demeaning them. So I think that's a real, that's a real tricky thing for an ethnography to try and do. You don't want to make make your subjects seem like they're hapless, and like, they don't have any, they don't have any control over their lives. But you also have to provide a picture or give a portrait of just what their struggles are like. And not just on an individual level, I tried to show what the struggles were like for this community. So even rich white people in this community, who really love their community, they faced a lot of challenges and trying to and they all they, they always didn't have the best answers, right. But they also weren't foolish. So trying to present that nuanced and complicated picture, talking about it now as an ethnography and saying, Oh, that's why I used ethnography is a little different than if it actually comes across, I hope when people read the book that comes across clearly because that's, it took a long time, not only to do this study, to write it up, in a way, because there are some of my subjects who, you know, like I just talked about David done. He was a racist, right? But I don't want people to think, oh, you hate this guy. And he's a racist. Now, he gave me his time. But I also know what he was doing, how he was contributing, positively and negatively to the community, he was the center of a lot of enemies with the mayor's office. So also, I tried to present him as a whole person. And even though I can have my own personal beef, you know, because I that was a real inconvenience, he straight up discriminated against me, I didn't figure out figure it out until I was writing everything up. Um, but I don't want people to think I hated that, dude. He wasn't my favorite person, but at the same time, there there are, you shouldn't generally speak ill of the dead, right. But at the same time, you have to understand people's legacy. Right? And what he did and what he also what he contributed to in terms of problems in the community, right. I mean, I can even I love coach twirly. But you know, I think I round him out a little bit. I talked about him agreeing with the Bill Cosby pound cake speech. Right? So that's a, that's a way to black black leader was being colorblind as well, right? saying, hey, Bill Cosby was right about the pancake speech, which is just, you know, that's one of those, I can't forgive you sort of things, right, Bill Cosby, talking about poor black people, and how they deserve to be shot in the head sort of thing. And then coach agreeing with that, um, you know, that's problematic. But I wouldn't have been able to round those people out if I didn't do an ethnography. And if I couldn't get close to them, and show not only their agency and their positives, in terms of their love for

their community, which I hope I did for for all of the responded, I think they love the place they lived in. But ethnography allows you to look at people up close, and I hope I was able to portray that for for the readers.

So you mentioned that, that just a second ago, somewhat about the pound cake speech, you talk about the damage that can be done by the politics of respectability, I certainly remember this playing out in prison, can this notion of acting right or speaking right become a different form of kind of surveillance and discipline?

Yes, I mean, it is. It is it is for a certain it, not only is it I definitely agree with that, it is for for certain people, right. And it's a way to reinforce, reinforce hierarchies didn't exist, right. So there's the politics of respectability, you know, you can look at it across gender lines, or racial lines or whatever women need to stay in their place. That's not how lady speaks for poor people or black people. You shouldn't wear those kind of clothes, you should care, you should care yourself in this moment, Enter. And that was a constant thing. And for city they always talked about take that back to the south. And in the south end is the area that I just described earlier, the third of a square mile where there were a lot of public housing unit, and that something that middle class or people were striving to be middle class black people, or what mere Portillo labels as middlemen, or, or what Drake and Katyn have referred to as race leaders, that because these people are in charge of the image, or they feel like they're in charge, and the image of the black P of black people and representing that to the man. And they want only the best, right? So there's this conflict between poor black people and black people more means or poor black people are willing to express, you know, cultural things that may not jive well with middle class black people. And that changes from year to year, as you know. But the politics of respectability is a way to keep people in place. Keep people in line, but it's only for certain people. Right. So that's always the issue. That, you know, I think he Franklin Frazier or 90 Franklin Frazier, that's really Oh, but john, john Hope Franklin, I should say I, I was at a one of the last talks he gave at University of Chicago. He He's being interviewed by Jesse Jackson. And Jesse Jackson was trying to throw poor black people under the bus. And, you know, it was kind of funny what john Hope Franklin response was, and it's, it's been more than it's been, like, 13 and 14 years since this talk. And it sticks with me today. And his response to Jesse Jackson was, you know, how do I know you're talking about their behavior? How do I don't know that they're not? Right. Right? How do I know that their response to the extreme oppression they're suffering isn't to react, however, they're reacting, and deal with it as best they can? Who am I to judge that? Right? Um, so that's a, this is a constant struggle. Because I was a grad student at the time, you're living in poverty, you're living in a very gentle poverty. But as I've gone on, become a tenured professor. You have family members that you, you don't want to, you want to try and you want to try and encourage them. But you never want to even be you never want to judge them. And the same thing with other colleagues, with people you meet on the street, on, I think that really stuck with me. And that's why I didn't directly there was no citation for this right. But that when I write about the politics of respectability, I remember this conversation that john Hope Franklin was having with Jesse Jackson. And it's it sticks with me, it's something that sort of, it's been stuck in my craw since then. And I think it's a real issue for middle class black

people who can, whether they're cognizant of it or not, they can serve as oppressors of but of poor black people instead of liberators. And I'd like to be on the side of liberation. So I think that's, that's why I think your podcast is really important. Where we can discuss the this is a very thorny, these are very complicated issues, right. These are supposed to be issues internal only to the black community until we figure it out. But I don't think we're really having this conversation. Which is another reason why my book that the nuance that I add, by talking about the politics of respectability, and the role of middle class black people, in wanting prisons and seeking prisons, and even wanting incarceration, right, um, it's not, it's not white people who are always calling the cops on the police. I mean, calling the cops and calling the cops on poor black people, it's not always white people calling the cops on poor black people. It's a lot of black people who are calling the cops on poor black people, right? or other black people getting the criminals getting them involved with the criminal justice system. So, um, it's very, it's a very complicated issue to politics, respectability, allows us to get into a lot of thorny areas.

I kind of think I probably specialize in getting into thorny areas. You say your book answers two broad questions. The first was, what was the source of prison demand? And you answer that question, or?

Um, I think I do answer that question. For for a city. The, the source of prison demand. So people will say, Oh, I know, I went as I was writing the book, everybody would tell him, oh, it's just jobs. Like, yeah, but there are better jobs, you can give to other industries, there are better jobs, or you can get worse industries. How did they end up on the prison? And this goes back to the question of Have you seen my backyard, they made sense of getting a prison and it wasn't just any prison. They got a a federal public prison, they were being private prison was being the potential for private prison is where they got the idea to pursue a public prison. Alice, Alice, Waltons Alice Walton had a speculative group that was looking at private prisons, right. Alice Walton is one of the richest women women in the world, she's part of the Walton family. And they came for city to sell them on the idea of a private prison. And the Chamber of Commerce director at that time period, web took the idea and refashioned it and worked with people locally and across the state. And they they worked on getting a public prison, because they didn't think the private prison would help them. But the reason they explained to me what I garnered from talking to people about that whole process was they were trying to protect their image. And, and they thought the prison would help them protect their image. And I think that all of the data, and by data, I mean, all of the different ways that people talked about this, how they made sense of getting a prison is what I used to support that client. So yeah, it was jobs. But it was, that wasn't the main or the only impetus, right, it was a certain kind of job. And it was a certain kind of institution that they felt would help them rebuild the image of the town. And many of the people who supported the prison, even if they didn't think it did everything that it was originally built up to. Those people all feel like for city has turned around. Since it got the prison in 1997. They feel like their image is better across the state. They're far removed from the days of playing to mine and other people tarnish their image. They actually use the prison as a source of pride and don't way, which is weird. But yeah, there are certain people who love the prison. They look at the prison lights, glowing is a way that, that that that signifies process and progress that signifies

that the town it's moved on to bigger and better things. Um, it that that I found really weird. But yeah, that broad question. Um, I think in the case of Forest City, it's about reputation management. And I can see that being a case beyond Forest City. So I'm going to in my next book, it's tentatively, and this is good for this show, especially, is tentatively entitled, bringing down the big house, where I'm trying to come up with strategies for decarceration. On, I'm actually doing a quantitative test of what I found from the ethnography. So I'm looking at whether or not the rural ghetto calls prison proliferation. So I can measure every place to get a prison versus every place in the US it didn't and look at if increase in poverty and other measures, like residential segregation predicts prison building. And what I can't do directly is, it would take a large scale survey, which is a whole other thing. I can't survey all 1600 1700 places that have had a prison or have one and ask why you decided to get one that may be something someone else wants to do or a student. But that would be able to more directly answer the question about reputation management. But I think I can measure and my preliminary results are showing it the rise of the rural ghetto, an increase in disadvantage, because I've already run some analyses around is an increase in disadvantage has certainly cause prison building. So communities did have high levels of poverty and residential segregation I'm more likely to be

The second question you say the book attempts to answer is how prisons impact rural towns. So how do prisons impact rural towns?

So the that asked me to answer a little bit of that question, when I talked about the people who see positive benefits from the prison coming. Um, ironically, I didn't find many people. And it wasn't just a key informants. It was people I talked with around time, I didn't find many people who either they didn't know much about the prison, right? Because it didn't impact their daily lives, because prison was nearly five miles out of town, or it didn't really bother them. Um, so that was kind of odd for me, they weren't worried about someone escaping, right? Like there's this fear of, if you have a prison, you're going to be dealing with breakouts all the time. That's not even a thought on what I did find was people more so having a positive. It was overwhelmingly positive response to the prison being built. You're going to get a little background, I think, from the sirens passing me now. Yeah.

The the immersiveness there must have their ears must have been burning or something about

Yes. Yeah, the the quantitative Lee, I have a paper and I do some, I think some stuff in the appendix showing that prison when you build places to get a prison towns, disadvantaged towns to get a prison, versus those that don't see an increase and see an increase in median home value and median family income and a decrease in poverty and decrease and unemployment. I'm given the way to given the state politics for city they called them turned back dollars. But basically, for city only has about 1100 and 11,500. People, roughly, I'm forgetting the exact numbers, but their population is 14,000 Plus, right. So they have about 2800 prisoners or 3000. prisoners, I'd have to check the average daily population, but those prisoners are being counted.

And inside the city, right. And those prisoners, they provide money from the state. So the state gives an portion back to each locale based on the size of their population. And I can't really I can't remember the exact number. Given this question. I probably probably should have pulled this before. But I calculated that annually. There's hundreds, if not millions, hundreds of thousands of dollars coming back in the Forest City based on the prisoners, right on his prison gerrymandering, Yeah, off of prison gerrymandering. So prison gerrymandering also throws off the ratios in town. If we're looking at the census, it also throws off the ratio. The ratio composition, there are really only about 100 or 200, Latinx people living there. But it looks like there's probably 2000 or 50, I'm sorry, about 1500 because they're all in federal prison on, which is if you think about it for that town itself, just kind of crazy. It looks like there's way more men, and there's way more Latinx people there there should be. Um, it because you don't really at least when I was there, you didn't see a lot of Latinos and Latinas walking around town, right? Um, there was like a Mexican restaurant and a boars headline. And so some of them worked at the Boers a plant, and some of them worked it like the Mexican restaurant, right? They own a random Mexican restaurant. But other than that, there wasn't a real presence of like, you know, it's there. So that's just thinking about how prisons, impact places. I know that from a macro level, yeah, you're better off a town that gets a prison. It's better off than one that doesn't. But it's a lot of weird ways that prisons provide benefits. The overwhelmingly, if you read any, anyone else in the literature, any any most of most scholars and activists around is try and highlight all the bad stuff about prison building and negative ways they impact places. I just didn't find a whole lot of that. And if we want to understand agency and why places, you know, of course, the mayor and Chamber of Commerce and everyone wants these things. If they were that terrible, we wouldn't have built that. Right? If they were that terrible for places. So if we can just admit that then we can start to deal with Well, okay, how do we get people? How do we give towns that have limited options, better options in prisons, especially if we want to take their presence? Because right now on, there's some literature has come out in the last few years back at Thor, at, at University of Washington, a political scientist shows that when you places that have prisons are against decarceration. They're against any efforts to minimize or to reduce mass incarceration. There are that's definitely true, because they become invested in the they become pretty, pretty invested in continuing the process because they have an economic stake. Yes, they have an economic state, they also have a political stake, like the president gerrymandering just isn't about the economic economics of it is about the politics of it, you have more representation, the prison also gives you there's a certain amount of clout, you can will the warden can act on if the word and works with the mayor. That's a powerful force, in terms of regional economic decisions, right. And so it's beyond people trying to just oh, this is exploitation, this is about money. This is about the political economy a place. I'm not saying it's not about exploitation and money. I'm saying it goes far beyond that. There's so much going on when you get one of these facilities and so much power that can be wielded, right. So if we want to decarceration we really have to go to these go to these towns and speak to them in a way that they we can have these. I think there's these idealized conversations. The activists can use this as a, as a former community organizer, if I want to rile up my base. There's propaganda you use, right. So you know, that's what I learned in closing drug houses. There's a narrative that came from that, which was, we are sending our our black children to more or less be widget and

a whitelist premises factory downstate, we're sending our black children from the city of Chicago to far flung places downstate, and they will be exploited by poor whites for their jobs. And if we rethink the narrative, because there's over 450,000 corrections officers now, right, I think the last kind of was force for 70, that's 10 times more than the co workers right across the country. And, you know, about a third of them are black or Latino. So that means a lot of black and Latinx. People are getting jobs in as corrections officers. Right. So how do we tell people? How do we tell towns that have a lot of black and brown people who have these prisons, and who work at these prisons, that they're bad for them? When this is their lifeblood? And because they believe in the politics of respectability? We're not speaking their language, right? These are bad people, they went to prison, I have a job because of that. Right? You're you're not speaking a language that they will fully understand that you say, hey, what if I could get you a better job? And everybody in town a better job? What if we got like, some type of green industry here? And you can pick your green industry? What if we could give rural communities options that are better than a person? Right? That's that's what I'm trying to work on now. So what what are the better options to give communities so they don't have to rely on a prison? And we can slowly wean them off of a prison? Right?

Yeah. Earlier this year, I know we met I in a bunch of other activists met with the correction officers union here in Michigan, around a lot of this exact same conversation. So it's very interesting to have this with you.

Now. I always ask the same last question, which is, what did I mess up? What questions should I have asked, but did not?

I think you've asked this is this this is this question right here. How do we decarceration I think the fact that you're, I don't think you messed up. I think its inherent, it's implicit in what the podcast is about. Right. If, if I can't figure out to answer that question, that's a whole other thing. But yeah, that's the question. I think that's the conversation that we need to have corrections officers. I think they respect their work. They believe their professional, right? Should there be should it be 400? Should it be 450,000 corrections officers, million police officers, right? Should we have we have over invested in these in these industries? And to now say, Hey, we're going to cut you off at Denise, because of this idealized notion of prisons are bad and prisons are wrong. For who is the question, right? Who are prisons bad for? And who are they wrong for? If you talk to a corrections officer, they believe in a lot of them are very religious, you know, a lot of them go beyond just thinking this is just a job. This is an identity for the ones that are doing their job properly, properly. And they have a certain amount they respect themselves, they try and respect the people they care for. Right? The fact that I think Michigan's one of the states, they don't call them inmates or offenders anymore. Am I correct in that? What it duty?

Well, officially? Yeah, that's true. I think they're they've tried to change the language around how they're dressing. The people they care for, I think that's one of so even, I mean, I notice, the cynic in me is like, whatever, that's nonsense, but I think if you've, if you've done any job, if you've done any menial job, right, I've been a fry cook, I've clean toilets. You, you want to find

some pride or, or level of respect in the work for yourself. So even if you're a corrections officer, right there, at imagine most of them, not all of them all the time, right? Because there are some really terrible ones. And we have plenty example examples of those. And I'm not even saying it's a bad apple thing, I think is something inherent in the culture of corrections officers just like police officers, right. So don't don't take the Don't take this the wrong way. I think if we want to respect those, those industries, we have to say, What if we could give you an alternative to this job? Did you imagine yourself as a corrections officer when you were four years old? You know, I don't think many people did, right. But they make sense of it. When they're grown and they're doing a job. We have to reimagine incarceration. Not only the scale of it, but the quality of it not only for the people who are being incarcerated, but for the people who are doing the job of incarcerating. And I think, you know, you said, What did you miss? I think everything your podcast is about is leaning leaning towards this, and it's not what you miss. I think we need more conversations like this, to go after, to go after prisons and go after these different ways that we incarcerate people. And I think this is a very creative outlet. So I don't think you've missed anything as much as you know, you just have to keep pushing the conversation forward. So I want to thank you, Josh, for having me on.

Oh, it's my pleasure. And I really enjoyed it. And I looking forward to the next book.

Thank you. And I'll make sure I send you a copy. Before its way you may, I may have to send you an advance copy. So yeah,

You're obviously welcome back on when it comes back out to talk about it.

All right. Thank you again.

Thanks so much for doing this really appreciate take the time,

No problem.

All right, bye. Bye, bye.

And now my take. One of the things I really enjoyed about me reading mystery science book is the feeling you get after reading it, the conventional wisdom has been turned on its head by experience and evidence. Everyone, for instance, knows that the prime drivers of new prisons don't come from within impact communities, right. Except apparently when they do, John does a great job of remaining open to the implications of his data in this book, there's so much for us to learn about how all kinds of communities become convinced that in the face of economic failures that building prisons can become a route to salvation. I think we also need to be aware that part of the problem of Community Investment in structures of control, like our prisons and jails, is that the community becomes invested in creating structures of control, like our prisons and jails. And often as a result, you know, they become invested in the politics of mass incarceration. Once people's mortgages, education for their kids, or car payments become tied

up in the continuation of incarceration, it becomes increasingly hard to reverse the systems of incarceration, because there's a lot more people so invested in continuing it, that they're not going to help fight against it, and they're actively going to fight to maintain it. That is why for instance, is hard to roll back Cavan cash bail, an entire industry full of people who put their entire economic insistence existence at the service of the continuation of bail don't want reform, and they're going to fight tooth and nail to stop it not because it's a great idea, not because it's necessary, but because it's necessary to them continuing to provide for their families. One thing we really need to do is we work toward reversing the legislation. And the structures that caused mass incarceration is also to address the economic dislocation that will be the result of freeing up more prisons and jails and reducing services dependent on the mass in mass incarceration, we need to make sure that there are off ramps for people who work in these fields and real possibilities for them moving forward. Otherwise, they're going to continue to be some of the strongest opponents of the reforms that we're trying to put forward. And you may say, Well, we shouldn't work with people like that. But unfortunately, those people are the people we have to convince. Those are a lot of the people who are the harshest opponents, and the ones who are bringing the most fire when we get into these situations. And it's not like their vote count any less than our votes. That's not like you can't even understand where they're coming from. We may disagree with them. And we may have ethical problems with their stance. But at the end of the day, you know, you have to understand that we have to change hearts and minds and a lot of times the hearts and minds we have to change the most will happen when we provide alternatives that make sense for the people not just most impacted inside or the people most impacted who are incarcerated, but also the people who are most impacted because they're invested in the mass in mass incarceration

As always, you can find the show notes or leave us a comment at decarceration Nation com make sure to check out our new t shirts, sweatshirts and hats. If you want to support the podcast directly you can do so from patreon.com slash on pirate satellite, and also support us by leaving a five star review from iTunes or like us on Stitcher Spotify. Special thanks to Andrew Stein who does the editing and post production for me and Robert Alvarez has been helping with the website. Thanks so much for listening to the decarceration nation podcast. See you next time.