



# YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2019 Volume II: The Problem of Mass Incarceration

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## Introduction

by James Forman, Professor of Law

What does it mean to live in the most incarcerated nation in the world? Our seminar focused on issues like the war on drugs, gun control, racial disparities, mandatory minimum sentences, and stop and frisk policing. The curriculum units didn't stop with defining the problem; instead, Fellows focused on how to reform the current system, including how students can become involved in the movement to dismantle mass incarceration.

Mass incarceration is an enormous topic, and no curriculum unit can tackle it all. Fellows limited the scope of their units in two ways: each chose a specific aspect of mass incarceration (e.g., police, prosecutors, juvenile justice) and a specific locality (in each case, the city or state where the Fellow teaches). **Brett Plavchak** examines the history of police militarization with a focus on Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. **Laura Gillihan** studies police brutality and its effects on children in Chicago, Illinois. **Sally Cannizzaro** looks at the war on drugs and sentencing (including mandatory minimums) in Oklahoma, while **Krista Waldron** examines the juvenile justice system in that same state. **Alex de Arana** studies the history of the criminal justice system in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania through the lens of that city's reform-minded District Attorney Larry Krasner.

While all of the units emphasize opportunities for reform, **Anette Norona** does so most explicitly, through her examination of how California youth mobilized to combat overcriminalization. In a similar vein, **Trace Ragland** seeks to equip her Washington, D.C., students with the tools to reduce and resist the violence pervading their lives. Finally, **Jolene Smith** reminds us that restorative justice, sometimes described as a fresh alternative to prison and punishment, isn't new at all. To the contrary, it has deep roots in the Diné Nation.

Together these units tell a compelling story about one of the most profound human rights challenges of our time. They are unflinchingly honest about the scale of the crisis, while resolutely hopeful about the possibility for change.

James Forman, Jr.

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