



DREAM BIG: JUSTICE FOR ALL

INSIGHTS FROM A PUBLIC DIALOGUE

OCTOBER 23, 2018



With 2.3 million people imprisoned, the U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Focusing on incarceration and education, the Cambridge Public Library Foundation's signature event examined the causes and implications of historically high levels of incarceration in the United States. **DREAM BIG: Justice for All** featured a distinguished panel - the **Honorable Leslie E. Harris**, Associate Justice, Dorchester Juvenile Court (retired); **Elizabeth Hinton**, author/historian/Associate Professor at Harvard University; and **Michelle Kuo**, author of *Reading with Patrick*, and Assistant Professor at American University in Paris - and was moderated by **Kim McLarin**, Associate Professor at Emerson College, author and regular guest on WGBH-TV's *Basic Black*.

Providing context, Hinton traced a pattern from Emancipation through the Civil Rights movement and beyond: whenever rights are extended, new forms of criminalization emerge. "It's a carrot and stick approach to domestic policy," she noted, describing the co-existence of the War on Poverty and the War on Crime to address urban challenges in the mid-60s.

But by the mid-70s, "there's systematic disinvestment from social welfare, and an investment in punitive programs." The prison population shifted disproportionately from majority white to majority black, and skyrocketed.

Reflecting on her experience teaching a young prisoner in Arkansas, Kuo urged a refocus on creating a system that eliminates poverty. We must "have hope in individual changes that happen within the walls, but then have a plan for people outside." She explained that her student was transformed by learning but, as a convicted felon and impoverished black man, faced crushing obstacles upon his release.

All the panelists underscored the need to think broadly and address a range of issues, including early intervention, de-criminalization of youthful behavior, reassessment of the aim of incarceration, and educational access for all citizens.

Harris noted that urban schools often send kids to court in lieu of more appropriate discipline, setting the stage for failure. Once an individual is incarcerated, the aim is "retribution, not transformation or...restorative justice." But people can and do change, and 90% of prisoners will re-enter society. "Restorative justice is one of the oldest forms of justice...when harm was done, [indigenous people] didn't throw the person away. They tried to find a way to restore balance in their community."

Educational opportunity is a key concern. The most significant predictor of imprisonment is one's level of education. Moreover, the recidivism rate for those who earn a bachelor's degree is 1-2%, compared with over 50% for the less educated. As college degrees supplant high school diplomas as basic qualification, free or nearly-free college tuition—





as exists in many nations—may be essential if we want all citizens to survive and thrive. Hinton observed that universal access to higher education would lessen public resistance to providing college programs for prisoners. Musing on the example of a teen who ran an illicit drug market, she commented, “Instead of saying ‘Wow, you’re a prodigy entrepreneur...let’s figure out how we can channel those skills,’ we say ‘we’re going to lock you up and throw away the key.’ There’s so much untapped talent behind bars... and we’re unable to benefit from that talent.”

Library Director Maria McCauley pointed out that “these complex, longstanding issues constitute a great threat to our ability as a nation to live up to the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all.” With your support, **DREAM BIG** and other Cambridge Public Library programs will spark the dialogue, learning and action to counter that threat.

A video recording of **DREAM BIG: Justice for All** can be viewed on our website: www.CPLFound.org

TAKE ACTION!

Many of the **DREAM BIG: Justice for All** attendees left the discussion wanting to know how they could help. Please contact, support and volunteer for these organizations working for justice:

- Emerson Prison Initiative (<http://epi.emerson.edu/>)
- The Bail Project (<https://bailproject.org/>)
- Prison Scholar Fund (<https://prisonscholars.org/>)

The following books, available at the Cambridge Public Library, will help you learn more:

- *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women* by Susan Burton & Cari Lynn
- *College in Prison: Reading in an Age of Mass Incarceration* by Daniel Karpowitz
- *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison* by Ellen Condliffe Lagemann
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander.



DREAM BIG, the Cambridge Public Library Foundation's signature event, brings together Cambridge residents and thought leaders to explore timely issues confronting citizens and civic institutions. Established in 2015, the Cambridge Public Library Foundation supports Library programs that EDUCATE, INSPIRE and RESPOND to the needs of our diverse community. To join our efforts, visit us at www.cplfound.org.

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