

# In Search of Ubuntu: Ending the Racial Caste System Via Societal Reentry Reform to Restore Our Community to Wholeness, a Commentary

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## Abstract

Global political unrest, systemic racial, gender, and religious violence led Bishop Desmond Tutu “to whisper in God’s ear, for goodness sake, why don’t you make it more obvious that you are in charge?” [13] The purpose of the quote was to inform the world that we need unified help to resist oppression and restore our fragmented community to wholeness. Using the theoretical framework of Ubuntu to demonstrate that we human beings are part of one interconnected community under Ubuntu. Therefore, if one human suffers or experiences injustice and hatred, we all suffer, and we must act together in solidarity. The rationale for this project is to further one criminal justice reform that highlights racial disparities within our criminal justice system that has lost integrity. The ban-the-box campaign is an attempt to provide previously incarcerated men and women with a shot at a new beginning as they re-enter society after serving time in prison.

## Keywords

Ubuntu, Criminal Justice System, Fragmentation

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## 1. Introduction

From a psychological standpoint, the Biblical narrative in Exodus about the golden calf symbolically represents a fragmented community that needed codified laws. [4] Moreover, most of the narratives in the Bible provide details about human psychology. There are many examples when the faithful are being called to mete out justice. Modernly, we face emergency life and death situations within our community. In fact, according to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s criminal justice fact sheet, African-Americans are: policed, arrested, charged, and incarcerated at almost six times the rate of whites. [9] The NAACP criminal justice fact sheet also reflects that 1 in 100 African-American women are incarcerated. [9] We can only assume that these numbers have risen significantly based on the incidences of police

brutality and police murders of unarmed African-American men and children. Clearly, the interests of justice can only be served when one is on the side of oppressed unarmed African-American men and children. If anyone is searching for a moral voice of protest and lament, he or she need only turn on the evening news broadcast to see what’s going on in the streets. Further, the NAACP 2014 annual report lists the names and ages of unarmed African-Americans killed by police. [10] The writer lists the names by age to highlight how tragic this is and to elicit empathy from our community to stand against murder committed by police governmental officials: Tamir Rice (12), Kimani Gray (16), Trayvon Martin (17), Michael Brown (18), Sheneque Proctor (18), John Crawford (22), Victor White (22), Jonathan Ferrell (24), Kajieme Powell (25), Ezell Ford (25), Jordan Baker (26), Akai Gurley (28) to name a few. Now, ministers are working to expose truths the NAACP is bringing greater awareness to.

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W.E.B. Du Bois said, “the battle we wage is not for ourselves alone but for all true Americans...stand taller knowing that you are part of the NAACP.” [2] Moreover, civil rights are really human rights since any expansion of these rights benefits all freedom loving people who believe in doing what is fair and what is right. This raises questions and issues relative to the rights of those who were previously incarcerated and are now re-entering society as their time has been served. Surely, our community has a vested interest in helping these community members to flourish rather than end up returning to prison.

## 2. Method

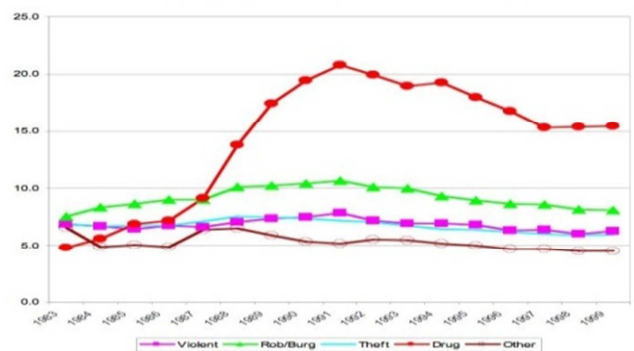
For this commentary, the focus is on one adverse economic effect, in particular, stemming from mass incarceration of African-American men and women. In fact, when post incarcerated African-Americans are labeled as felons, they lose access to: education, voting, housing, and employment because of a criminal record. Here, the issue is that in order to combat discriminatory societal reentry barriers to employment, it is necessary to inform clergy, business hiring officials, and legislators about the ban the box campaign. This is the space that the project is working in. The space is the state boundaries because each state legislative body has its own policy whether it supports the ban the box campaign or not. The purpose of the ban-the-box campaign is to remove questions about conviction history from initial employment applications.

This project is necessary since, through awareness, employers will view formerly incarcerated people as contributing members within our shared community. Therefore, the activities involved in this project are designed to make societal reentry reform a part of needed criminal justice reform to give the criminal justice more integrity. The system can be reformed and citizens have to work together to bring these problems to the attention of public officials that can legislate to address the fairness issues. The codified law is supposed to protect every community member and insulate community members from others who commit hateful acts. Therefore, justice will always mean that every community member in this national community of human beings is entitled to equal protection under the law. True justice is for everyone in this nation. Economic hardship, violence, and racial prejudices are major problems within our society today. The ban- the- box campaign is one solution in an attempt to help previously incarcerated men and women to gain a fresh start in life.

Moreover, to be successful, it is necessary for ministers to link different identities into one whole unified community with a sense of belonging to avoid fragmentation. While, the

values involved are helping our community understand this is a human dignity issue because our community needs to be restored to wholeness and integrity. The community standing together in solidarity has resources. We have more influence over government policy officials when we are united. This unification of the community means that we are standing as one against oppression. Our community objective is peace or to live peaceably with each other. The community must be mobilized toward the greater good and communication lines need to remain open. This leads to quality of life and fairness issues and resource re-allocation consistent with the communal shared vision of what a community that follows the law and morality can be transformed into. This commentary joins the conversations that are already taking place. In fact, Phillip Thompson’s recent article in *Urban Affairs Review*, entitled, *Place Matters, and So Does Race*, paraphrases Cornel West’s assertion that race matters more than geography. [12]

It is important to gauge the impact of race by viewing the chart below that exemplifies how race impacts incarceration. Environmental factors do lead to crime and a certain hopelessness that stems from recidivism. Clearly, the message embedded in the chart below depicts how certain members within our national community are denied the American dream.



**Fig. 1.** Chart shows ratio of black to white rates of new prison sentences by offense group. Calculated by Pamela Oliver from National Corrections Reporting Program data on state prison admissions.

Further, Thompson’s insightful article explores the question whether Sanders and Clinton’s campaigns mean that whites are ready to unite with African-Americans and Latinos to force equitable distribution of resources. [12] Other commentators continue to discuss these issues including Cedric Johnson seminal chapter entitled: *Bearing Witness in: Race, Religion, and Resilience in the Neoliberal Age*, which highlights that there has not been enough critical discussion regarding traumas that African-Americans incurred relative to the emergence of the neoliberal age regarding the after effects of the modern Civil Rights and Black Power

movements. [7] And Cedric Johnson defines neoliberalism as part of an interpretive means for pastoral theologians, and counselors to use as we identify and try to solve these critical problems. [7] Strong recommendations were made in *Bearing Witness: A Nation in Chains: A Report of the Rev. Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference Justice Commission Hearings on Mass Incarceration (2014)* which need to be carried out. [1] According to the Report, Rev. J. George M. Walters-Slevon, Founder of The Center for Church and Prison stated, “this report captures the existential plight of multitudes languishing in the United States prison system. Reforming the system will require a collective engagement that transcends race, creed, crime.” [1]

### 3. Ubuntu as Social, Political and Theological Concept

Ubuntu is used as the hermeneutical lens to frame the issue because humans are linked together: I am because you are, you are, therefore I am, I am, therefore, we are.” [11] Ubuntu is relevant now and central to this discussion because all of humanity is linked together and many are calling for communal social justice efforts. Ubuntu is urgent and important for this project because the communal bond has been broken leading to fragmentation disease that must be healed in order to restore wholeness and harmony. [11] Fragmentation is a form of disunity and disease that allows systems of oppression to flourish as exemplified by the following: “I am not connected to you, I am over you.” [11] For example, here, the problem or disease is that business officials refuse to hire formerly incarcerated community members because they mistakenly view them as dehumanized individuals not part of our shared communal bond. Therefore, the role of clergy and legislative officials is to restore healing, provide spiritual counseling, and accomplish social justice acts that re-humanize our oppressed community members.

### 4. Developing a Theory and Plan of Action

In this project, Ubuntu is a useful and relevant tool that allows for the exploration of our ministerial formation in terms of: place, power, and purpose. The citizens hear the laments from African-Americans and clergy leaders within our community who continue to report suffering. Using Ubuntu as the hermeneutical lens, the Bible comes alive as examples in human psychology reveal the suffering of those who are oppressed. There is hope when we examine the Bible as a call to stand against oppression and rise up to the challenge of social justice. The question that we tend to ask

community members is: where are you and where is your brother/sister in this place or more aptly, regarding this issue? [6] The decision to call for legal reform and reform to the criminal justice system is a quality of life issue since our community is under duress because of: domination, exploitation, and oppression. This project will impact men and women who were formerly incarcerated and cannot secure employment. The project partners and audiences include: formerly incarcerated men and women, legislators, business officials, clergy, and individuals that form the communal bond under Ubuntu. The biblical narrative in Exodus presents Moses as a prophetic leader that creates a vision for the future as he overcomes doubt and leads the slaves out of Egypt near the promised land. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King emulated Moses’ leadership style and carried out peaceful acts of civil disobedience to challenge racial injustice. Dr. King provides the steps to carry out this ministerial plan of action in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Further, Dr. King advises that social justice activists like me must: (1) collect facts, (2) organize at the grassroots level, and (3) take action. [8]

Further, Dr. King’s message is that we can be the orchestrators of social justice change and stir people and officials to act. In fact, there is no theological basis that oppression is normal. White supremacy, for example, is an evil force or disease that must be resisted and stopped to restore healthy communal wholeness. A social justice activist has to consider the question, what is in your hands and where is the power to lead? The power comes from our shared sense of community as human beings since Jethro told Moses that he could not sustain justice alone without communal efforts. [3] The community gives Moses the power to lead them to the promised land. It is a justice to transcend the individual to include generations. Further, more specifically, the Biblical narrative in Exodus reveals that slaves can be freed from dominant and oppressive power. [3] Another question to consider is: whom shall I send, and who will go for us to carry out this purpose? [6] Well, justice is brought about through people who use social justice measures to heal our fragmented and diverse community. At times, ministers and officials do not adhere to their callings to alleviate human suffering. In short, one universal message is that Caucasians, especially females, need to resist oppression and oppose racism to restore wholeness to our community. If we look at both stories from an intergenerational standpoint, Moses and Dr. King both came within sight of the promised land but neither leader experienced it. The violence that plagues our national community today is further evidence that African-Americans are not in the promised land. In essence, the community needs to work to bring about transformative change.

## 5. Creating and Forging Structural and Institutional Networks

We can continue to work on grass roots organizing and projects leading to peaceful mobilization. For example, the project implementation process includes: (1) using educational institutions to provide knowledge to everyone within our national community about: disease, fragmentation, and social injustice (2) writing to legislators to forge bonds with legislative institutions and (3) lobbying business officials to create institutional networks within business leading to greater understanding of the problem. First, it is useful to conduct lesson plans for required college courses and for religious education classes. Second, a form letter should be used for community members to send to elected officials requesting support for the ban- the- box campaign. Finally, an informational brochure should be circulated to garner support from business officials appealing to our shared humanity.

## 6. Conclusion

In order to assess the effectiveness of this type of project, it can prove useful to monitor the implementation and usage of the ban- the- box campaign in each state to see if the implementation process is working. There may be some movement since Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said she would support a proposed expansion of the ban the box legislation to now include government contracts and bids. In some respects, this represents the final frontier for the project as it furthers an executive order that President Barak Obama already signed relative to individuals. The Executive Order has loopholes and is not followed in all states by private corporations and organizations with fewer than 15 employees. Our criminal justice system is need of reforms in

a democratic nation. As citizens who are part of this national community, we have a moral obligation and imperative to act to resist oppression in all of its forms. People across our nation have to stand together directed toward one purpose to address a wrong and to afford others with the opportunity to pursue happiness and freedom.

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- [3] Exod. 4:2 NRSV.
- [4] Exod. 32:27 NRSV.
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