

# Important Announcement

20 August, 2020 at 10:27 AM

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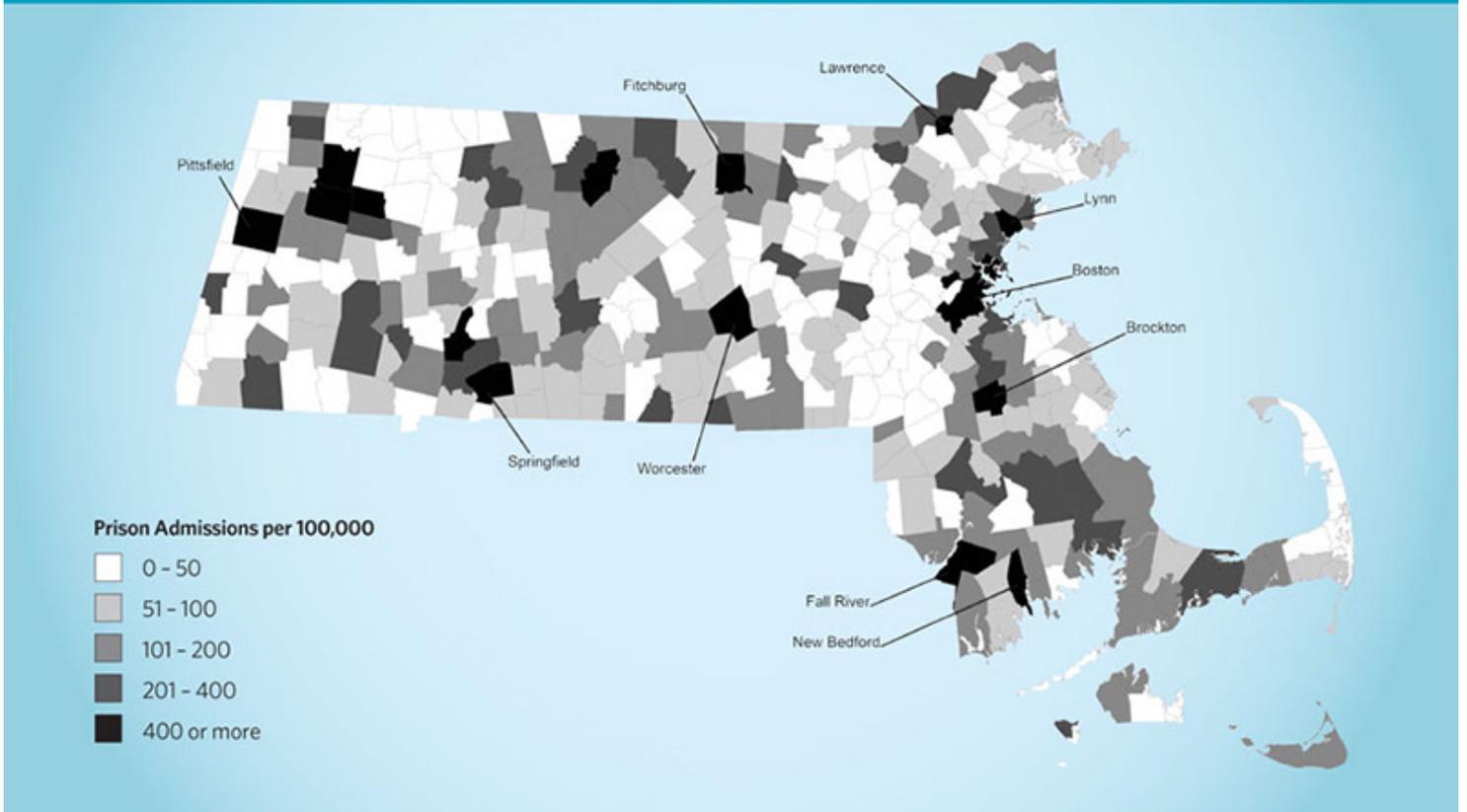
## Mapping Mass Incarceration

How Massachusetts is failing its smaller cities and towns

Mapping Mass Incarceration

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## DIVIDED WORLDS: PRISON ADMISSIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS CITIES AND TOWNS, 2009–2014



Courtesy of Jessica Simes

NOVEMBER 6, 2017

BY **JULIE BUTTERS**

1 COMMENTS

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Massachusetts has a reputation for being one of the nation's most progressive states, but scratch beneath the surface and the Bay

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discovered that the Commonwealth is locking up a disproportionate number of residents from smaller, more disadvantaged towns and cities.

The primary target of mass incarceration research has long been large cities. But Simes has used reams of data to build detailed digital maps showing Massachusetts' incarceration rates down to the street level. She found that areas covering only 15 percent of Massachusetts' population make up about half its prison admissions. Most of the people going to prison are from economically depressed places, such as Lawrence and Fall River, with populations under 100,000. The impact on these communities can be stinging: families are deprived of income as primary wage earners serve time, former inmates bring in thousands less than their peers (up to 9 percent less for black men), and children of prisoners are more likely to be suspended from school (23 percent versus 4 percent), according to the 2010 Pew Charitable Trusts report, [“Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effect on Economic Mobility.”](#)

“We could talk about these statistics ad nauseam, but I think it’s hard for people to understand just how profound mass incarceration is for communities,” says Simes. “Mapping is a great way to show that. Mapping the data helps us understand what communities experience punishment at extreme, and perhaps excessive, levels.”

Simes, who is among the first researchers to investigate the connections between a person’s home, socioeconomic status, and criminal record, hopes her maps will help convince policymakers to rethink their approach to crime and punishment. And she may find a receptive audience. State Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz, speaking to NPR station [WRIIR in February 2017](#) about the need for prison

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that we are locking up five times as many people as we did in Massachusetts in the 1970s.”

## On the Hunt for Data

Simes grew up in Arcadia, an ethnically diverse suburb of Los Angeles. As an undergraduate at Occidental College, she heard civil rights activist and historian [Angela Davis](#) speak about the connection between prisons and racial inequality. More than a decade on, the picture is still bleak for many minorities: blacks make up just 13 percent of the US population, but some 40 percent of its prison population; although blacks are less likely to sell drugs than whites, they are around three times as likely to be arrested for that crime, according to the [Brookings Institution](#). Davis' speech inspired Simes to study the link between prisons and inequality as a graduate student at Harvard, and now at BU.

“I became really aware of urban sociology and began thinking about how neighborhoods and communities can have a net effect on you beyond your own individual life chances,” she says. “No one had really looked in a systematic way at levels of incarceration as a potential neighborhood disadvantage.”





Jessica Simes took an unpaid internship at the Massachusetts Department of Correction to better understand its incarceration data. Photo by Cydney Scott

That's because getting access to prison records is notoriously difficult, says Simes. Some institutions are reluctant to share data they fear could undermine privacy or be used against them. Officials may be slow to dig up old files, or under no legal obligation to release information, such as procedures used by correctional officers during law enforcement efforts. Then, there's the chore of

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"Prison records are not meant to be studied by social scientists," says Simes. "They're bureaucratic tools to understand a person and how risky they are and what kind of prison we should put them in. And so a huge part of [my work] is trying to take data that

wasn't meant for social science and turn it into data that can be used for social science."

To find the data—and better understand the prison system generating it—Simes secured an unpaid internship at the [Massachusetts Department of Correction](#), compiling reports on topics such as the average length of time prisoners stay in a single institution, and became a Harvard Kennedy School [Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston Policy Fellow](#) with the department's Research and Planning Division. She dug through old computer files for admissions information, such as a prisoner's race, most recent address, and court sentence, and gathered additional data from the US Census Bureau, the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, the Boston Police Department, and other sources. Then, she used statistical models to analyze prison admissions, inmates' addresses, and factors such as race and ethnicity and rates of local crime, poverty, and unemployment for the period between 2009 and 2014.

Her results support existing research showing that locations with greater populations of minorities and people from economically disadvantaged households have higher prison admission rates. What was surprising was that about half the state's roughly 14,500 prison admissions came from only 15 percent of its census tracts—and that most weren't in the big cities that had been the focus of previous sociological research on incarceration.

Prison admissions *are* high in big cities: within an average census district in Boston, 4.5 out of 1,000 residents are sent to prison.

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90,000. Pittsfield's admissions rate, for example, was 9.9—twice as high as Boston's.

## Small Places, Big Problems

Once Simes had the data, she wanted to share it, and she knew maps would be a good way to get the attention of city officials and policymakers.

Using software that automatically finds geographical coordinates for addresses, Simes created a map showing prison admissions across Massachusetts. She assigned a color to each city or town according to its prison admission rate. Locations with low rates were absent of color; those with higher rates were deeply shaded. While sections of the state, such as most of the northwestern border with Vermont, are uncolored, others are saturated.

“We could talk about these statistics ad nauseam, but I think it’s hard for people to understand just how profound mass incarceration is for communities. Mapping is a great way to show that.” *Jessica Simes*

“Over three quarters of the neighborhoods comprising Brockton, Fall River, and New Bedford—small cities in the southeastern region of Massachusetts—have the highest levels of incarceration in the state,” says Simes, winner of a University Provost Career Development Professorship in 2016 to support women in data science. “These places bear the disproportionate brunt of imprisonment rates. This map shows divided social worlds—for some places, imprisonment is part of the social milieu, and for other places, it is essentially nonexistent.

“A large portion of people end up in prison because they live in conditions of deep material hardship—communities suffering from



resources to move into less disadvantaged areas when they’re released.

## From Maps to Solutions

Now that Simes has mapped the data, she's trying to figure out why smaller, working-class cities, which haven't been studied in depth, have such high prison admission rates—especially considering New York, Boston, and other big cities have decreased their prison populations over the last few decades.

Simes notes that working-class cities “are changing economically, racially, demographically.” Could those changes be a factor? She's looking at police departments—are they expanding and arresting people at high rates? And she's studying racial inequality. “Is it worse,” she asks, “to be a racial minority in a small city with a police department that is sort of looking for you versus in Boston, where that idea has been really challenged and the police have focused a lot on addressing racial inequality?” In other words, are these small cities failing their residents with ineffective and discriminatory policing; insufficient halfway houses, drug treatment centers, and other social services; and punishment that doesn't address underlying issues such as poverty and addiction, especially in light of the state's growing opioid crisis?

Simes hopes to use her maps and future research findings to work with local governments on reducing high incarceration rates.





A digital time-lapse map created by Jessica Simes shows mass incarceration in Boston. Every dot that lights up represents someone who went to prison between 2009 and 2014. See the full map at [Carto](#)

“Broadening our response to problems of poverty and violence would mean creating a set of policy instruments directed at social and economic insecurity,” says Simes, who is on the board of directors for [THRIVE Communities](#) in Lowell, which gives returning prisoners a support network of community members to discuss

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rehabilitation centers.

“But this could also mean reshaping our criminal justice policies to end the punishment of poverty, such as revising bail and pretrial

detention, fines, and fees so people are not incarcerated because they cannot afford to pay. It is the mothers and siblings who are often providing free housing to people leaving prison; a solution could be to support families of the incarcerated as they provide services currently not met by state and local institutions.”

Though Simes’ research focuses on Massachusetts, there’s work to be done elsewhere in the US. As she notes in one paper, 97 percent of US cities have a population under 50,000, but there’s been little research about inequality and criminal punishment in these locations.

Addressing these issues is about “having really honest conversations about the role of violence and pain and mental illness and drugs in people’s lives, and responding with therapeutic and rehabilitative plans for their existence in society.”

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**Julie Butters** [Profile](#) 

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## There is **1** comment on *Mapping Mass Incarceration*



**JOHN** JULY 21, 2017 AT 3:15 PM

“[prison admissions] most weren’t in the big cities that had been the focus of previous sociological research on incarceration.”

I think there is value in studying incarceration for small towns because it can mean a positive impact for many people.

Also, I am astonished Simes is among the first researchers to investigate the connections between a person’s home, socioeconomic status, and criminal record. That’s hard to believe. Glad to have read this.

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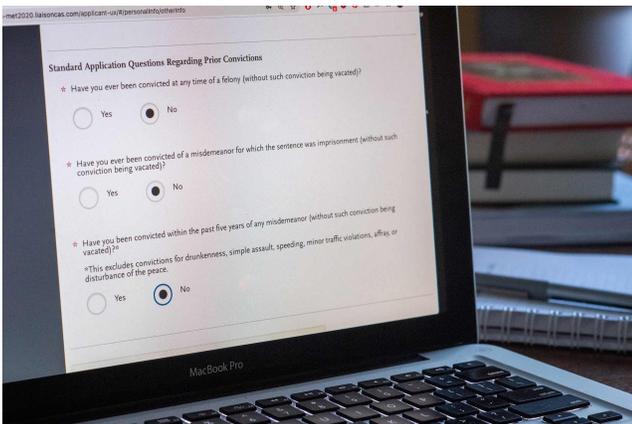
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