Talking about Racial Disparities in Imprisonment:
A Reflection on Experiences in Wisconsin
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Abstract
The United States has the world's highest incarceration rate and, atop a White incarceration rate that is several times higher than that in Europe, has an astronomical Black incarceration rate. Wisconsin has the highest Black incarceration rate in the US. I have given over 60 PowerPoint lectures to various audiences and am on the board of several local groups addressing these issues. Key points of this paper are: (1) Sociologists can provide detailed data analysis to gives a concrete factual base to the discussion that is essential for moving beyond the exchange of political slogans. (2) Accessibility of the presentation is critical. Graphical displays of time trends convey information with clarity and power that far exceeds the impact of words or numbers. (3) Immediate "publication" on the author's web site has permitted data to be used and shared by many others. (Search Pamela Oliver sociology to see the site) (4) Audiences vary, including White and Black citizens, criminal justice professionals, and politicians; their concerns should be addressed with respect. Dialogue requires avoiding alienating rhetoric. (5) Working for change in advocacy and policy advisory boards involves complex interpersonal and political dynamics. Changing structures is harder than changing opinions.

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This is not a formal paper, but an informal reflection on my experiences doing "public sociology" in Wisconsin. In this paper, I summarize what I have done and address several issues that I believe are important for sociologists who are speaking to public audiences. I begin by describing how I got involved in this project and what I do. I then stress several points that I believe may be helpful to others. Finally, I address the question of the relation between public sociology and professional career advancement.

The Project

Since 2000, I have given over 60 Power Point lectures to a wide variety of audiences demonstrating the patterns of racial disparities in imprisonment in the US and Wisconsin. In the appendix, I provide some important examples from the hundreds of slides I have prepared. These slides have an impact and tell a story about racial dynamics in the US that cannot easily be conveyed in words. They show not only that there is a racial disparity, but they show that it increased in the last quarter of the 20th Century, that the drug war was a major source of the disparity, and that Wisconsin even worse than the rest of the country. After seeing the presentation, audience members may still disagree about appropriate social policies, but they do not disagree that there is a very serious issue to address.

I could not do the presentation if I had not first analyzed data and prepared the presentation. Acquiring and processing the data and generating the graphs for the slides is something I can do because of my skills as a sociologist. My previous work has been on social movements and collective action. Like many sociologists, I have a longstanding interest in US racial politics, and I teach a course called "Ethnic Movements in the US" which is a social movements approach to race relations in the US. In 1999, a local advocacy group advertised a conference entitled "Money, Education and Prisons," raising concerns that money was being diverted from education into prisons and stressing that this was a double disadvantage for African Americans, who were both being incarcerated at high rates and suffering from cuts in education. I attended this conference, thinking it would be helpful for my teaching. The local group had done an impressive job in organizing. The conference had over 400 in attendance and a dozen impressive speakers. I saw some of the claims in the conference materials and wondered if they were generally true, and what the situation was in Wisconsin. In particular, I doubted that the statement that "one in three Black men is under the control of the correctional system" could possibly be true. That is an incredible even unbelievable claim, and the materials that cited it seemed to imply it was only true in some areas. I thought I would want to check that fact out before using it in lecture. It turned out to be true, by the way. The most recent estimate from the Bureau of Justice Statistics is 40%.

I had been wanting to become more involved in the community now that my children were older, and the work-family schedule conflicts were less severe. I had been attending some
forums on social issues sponsored by Madison Urban Ministry (MUM), a progressive group whose motto is "planting the seeds of social change." Some people from MUM had been part of the Money, Education and Prisons conference planning group, and they asked MUM to put on a series of forums about prison issues. I volunteered to be on the planning team for that forum series. As part of that, I volunteered to acquire and present information on patterns of imprisonment. I argued that people would want to know what people were in prison for and other information about the patterns of imprisonment. I knew I wanted to know this. Although this did not necessarily seem the most important thing to everyone else, they thought it would be an appropriate component of the forums.

I am not a criminologist by training, and my first efforts were hit and miss, but I eventually found information, first summary statistics on government web sites. At that time, it was easy to find the total imprisonment rate for each state, and the national imprisonment rates by race, but not the race-specific imprisonment rates for different states. Because it is primarily Black people who are being incarcerated, the strongest predictor of a state's total incarceration rate the proportion of the population who are Black. Predominantly-White states with small Black populations saw Black imprisonment as especially bad in the former slave states in the South. But the first statistic I calculated by dividing numbers imprisoned from Bureau of Justice Statistics web sites by population figures from Census Bureau web sites showed that my state, Wisconsin, was much more disparate in its imprisonment patterns than was the nation as a whole. In fact, Wisconsin's Black/White disparity was 20 to 1, compared to about 7 to 1 nationally. I prepared a handout with this and other information for a presentation at the forum. It had tables with numbers. Some people noticed and expressed concern, but many ignored it. I tried to give my handout to people at a couple of other forums on prison issues, but there did not seem to be a lot of interest. I continued working on the data analysis for this project for several years before it received much public attention.

Two different sources of support made this project get bigger. First, the Institute for Research on Poverty accepted a small proposal from me to pay a research assistant to help process data on this issue. Because I am at a university that is a member of the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), I could download data from the National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP), which provides annual information on prison admissions from participating states. It takes some skills to know how to process these downloaded data sets so they can be used. We did a lot of work digging through the code books and figuring out how to group the hundreds of offense codes so that we could answer the question, what are people in for? We also did a lot of work acquiring arrest data and processing it so it could be compared with imprisonment data. (Arrest data proved to be less helpful in the long run for a variety of reasons.) I applied to the National Science Foundation and the National Institute for Justice for larger grants to support the sociological side of the work. Most were too ambitious, given my professional inexperience in the area, and most were turned down. However, I did receive one grant from NSF that paid a graduate student and a summer month for me to work on the project. This line of work, what I call the "sociology side," has allowed me to do a variety of analyses comparing the time trends for the US states to each other, seeking to ferret out the patterns that might contribute to understanding the larger processes at work.
The second source of support fell in our lap. A legislative staffer called me up and said they had gotten the Department of Corrections database on computer disks, and wondered if I could help them process it. A year before, someone had given a copy of the forum handout to Gwen Moore, an African American state senator from Milwaukee. She had made a short angry speech on the Senate floor that week about locking up all the Black people, and nothing more was said. But she had filed an open records petition with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections about the race and offenses of prisoners sent out of state. The DOC had refused the request, saying the open records law did not require them to do analysis to generate information they did not have. Then she read the answer to her question in a Tennessee newspaper and asked the reporter where he'd gotten the information. He said: from the Wisconsin DOC. So she re-filed the petition, asking for whatever they had given the reporter. She got back six floppy disks and a code book with no other explanation. As DOC expected, she and her staffers could not do anything with it. But we could. DOC did not return calls asking for help parsing the code book, but an experienced and talented graduate student – Jim Yocom – did the work on a volunteer basis. We had all prison admissions and exits in Wisconsin 1990-1999. We built on the work we had done with the NCRP in grouping and coding offenses, and were able to do a detailed analysis of patterns in Wisconsin. Because my work was local and the database gave county of sentencing, we were able to compare counties in their patterns. It turned out the Dane County – the home of the University of Wisconsin – was actually very bad for Black incarceration. Local people did not know until we dug it out of the data. This detailed analysis of Wisconsin imprisonment patterns is the core of my presentations to the public.

As I have gotten involved in various local boards and advocacy groups around these issues, I have also processed data from a variety of other sources, including arrest reports from several agencies, prosecution records, court records, and surveys of juveniles. Each of these additional data projects has also involved a lot of time and skill. The audiences for this work have typically been the boards and projects, not the general public.

The sociologist's role: skills, ideas, and resources

In many circles, "public sociology" seems to be equated with writing opinion pieces in the New York Times or organizing an advocacy group for the oppressed or dispossessed. These are important things to do, of course. But there are some who seem to contrast public sociology with quantitative data analysis which is by implication seen as inherently irrelevant and apolitical. This I would disagree with. Our training and skills as quantitative sociologists give us the ability to make an essential contribution to public discourse that many others simply cannot make. There is a great deal of public data that could be analyzed to hold public institutions accountable, but very little of this data is analyzed and publicized. Like many public agencies and despite open records laws, the Wisconsin DOC was not particularly eager to publicize information about incarceration patterns by race. For me to have this information and to process and present it was considered a real coup by local activists. At the time I began the project, it was difficult to find information comparing states in their racial patterns of incarceration. In the six years I have been working on this, such information has become much more accessible on the Internet as many advocacy groups are recognizing the power of facts.
Some of the basic descriptive patterns that I have uncovered have surprised and even shocked both sociologists and public officials. Although most of what I have found (not surprisingly) replicates what is in the criminology literature, I have even managed to surprise criminologists with some of the results.

Analyzing data involves ideas about what to look for, an agenda about what is important. This does not necessarily mean following the lead of political activists. Our sociological understandings of social processes often point us to issues not immediately seen by others. When I started working on this project, the sociologists were generally more interested and enthusiastic than the activists. Most White prison activists were against prisons, but they were not sure they wanted to get into the racial disparity issue. They were concerned about human rights violations at the Supermax prison and elsewhere in the system, they were concerned about the "prison industrial complex" and the connections to capitalism and imperialism, they were worried about Wisconsin's foray into the "truth in sentencing" movement, and they thought that the spiraling costs of incarceration were a better way to persuade people that to focus on race issues. A lot of people – Black and White – were not sure which way the race issue would cut.

Data on the disparities in imprisonment could be seen as just confirming the racial stereotypes about Black criminality. There was great fear that documenting the racial imbalance would just lead Whites to say: "Good. The system is working the way we want it to." Many thought that the only hope of making [White] people be opposed to high incarceration rates would be to focus on Whites who were incarcerated. Most of the Black activists felt that they knew there was a race problem and they did not need any more information about it. A lot of their emphasis was on trying to get more contracts for Black service providers serving the needs of at-risk youth: they complained that White providers got most of the contracts, even though most of the youth being served were Black. At one point, the advocacy group Money, Education and Prisons (whose board I joined) actually voted against making race disparities one of their key issues. They reversed this stance several years later, I might add. I kept working on the racial disparities issue because that was where my heart was, regardless of the opinions of others. In this, I was acting very much as academics do: we study what seems important to us, regardless of what others think.

To say that we have our own agenda is not to say that we distort the facts. I have tried to organize my professional career as a sociologist around a slogan first articulated by one of my graduate school professors who was frustrated when everyone in the class got a different answer to the homework problem: "The point is not to get some answer, the point is to get the right answer." The point is not to warp or selectively mine the data in support of a political agenda, nor is it to run one analysis and send it off to the journal regardless of whether it supports theory A or theory B. The point is to use data to diagnose what is going on, to reveal patterns that are otherwise obscured. It takes a great deal of talent, skill, insight and persistence to make data reveal important social patterns. It is what we learn to do, and what we can do that others cannot. We contribute to public debate when we use our professional skills to find these patterns and when we insist on honesty and integrity in our presentation of information to others. As academics, we are committed to unearthing and communicating the facts, wherever they lead us.

This is not to deny that one's social position or social or political concerns influence the
perception of facts. A great deal of research underpinning the imprisonment boom has been focused on trying to measure the "incapacitation effect," the number of crimes prevented with each additional month or year of incarceration. This research has assumed that "crime" is bad and that "criminals" have no existence except as perpetrators of crimes. That is, incapacitation research has been grounded in the perspective of affluent elites, who view themselves solely as the targets of crime and agents of the state, not as the perpetrators of crimes. My research starts from the premise that mass incarceration of African Americans is inherently bad for African Americans, and I seek to document the patterns of disparity as a first step toward understanding how to change them. My starting point leads to different questions. One underlying question is: how much of the disparity is due to differences in the rate of committing crimes, and how much to discrimination in the system? It becomes rapidly apparent that both are factors, and these point to different points of intervention. Another question is: are the disparities higher for some offenses, some subgroups, or some locales than others? It turns out that the answer is yes, and this points to the different ways the system is operating in different spheres and places. So our social concerns and our sociological knowledge tell us what questions to ask, and certainly influence our understanding of the policy implications of the answers we get. But we never stop being academics. We never stop valuing the facts, whether or not they seem to say what we want them to say. In fact, I believe we care more about getting the "right" answer to what the facts really are precisely because we care about being correctly guided in seeking solutions to the problems we care about.

The public presentation of information

The turning point in my public presentation of statistics has been the shift to graphical displays of information. I had not used media prior to my involvement in this project, and had never even made the transition to overhead transparencies in my lectures. I pulled together PowerPoint slides for a sociology talk when I realized I was going to have an enormous amount of visual information to present. Once I made the jump, I realized how important it was. The greatest stumbling block for presenting sociological information to public officials and the general public is the general lack of statistical literacy. Many people's eyes simply glaze over when they see a table of numbers. One of the things we learn to do as sociologists is "read" tables. But even for those of us who are comfortable reading tables of numbers, a graphical display can convey information that can be much more readily absorbed. Information visually displayed can "tell a story" in a way that numbers or words cannot. Consider, for example table 1 and figure 1 (in the appendix). Both contain exactly the same information. In fact, table 1 is the data source for figure 1. But figure 1 tells the story quickly visually in a way that table 1 cannot: the Black/White disparity for drug offenses was initially lower than for other offenses and rose steeply in the 1980s and remained high in the 1990s, while that for other offenses was much lower and more stable.

Figure 2 conveys the trends in prison admissions 1926-1999. Verbally, I can say that Black and White admissions were relatively stable until the mid-1970s, when there was an acceleration in admissions for both races but especially for Blacks, so that the disparity rose
substantially, but the picture conveys this store much more powerfully than the words. Note also that in an attempt to get the disparity curve higher than the Black incarceration curve (as they are on different axes due to having different scales), I have had to artificially adjust the minimum and maximum of the axes. Often, the "natural" way to display data leads important graphical elements to overlap with or block each other, so it can take some effort to get a graph readable.

Figure 3 is the first slide I use as I dissect Wisconsin prison admissions. Again, I can say that Blacks are admitted to prison at 20 times the rate of Whites in Wisconsin, and that Hispanics and American Indians also have disparities, although lower than Blacks, but the graph conveys both the disparity and the time trends. In this graph, as with the others, I had to make substantial adjustments to make the graph legible in black and white for this paper.

Getting the display laid out so the story can be "read" quickly is often difficult, but it is worth the effort to experiment with different approaches. This is a new skill for most of us. It is a matter both of what information to present and then getting it formatted so important distinctions can be visually absorbed. It is much easier to do this in color on a PowerPoint slide than in black and white on paper. One problem is that different formats are best for different media. Dark backgrounds and color work best for slide shows. White backgrounds, uncluttered displays and monochromatic patterns and markers are best for paper. Slides that use color are generally incomprehensible if printed out and photocopied in black and white. Instead, black and white graphs need to make use of marker shapes and line patterns. Another pitfall for paper graphs is that photocopy machines lack the definition of most printers, and will blur distinctions that are legible in the original. Fonts for textual material and numbers have large to be legible in a slide show, and the font settings in a spreadsheet do not always translate reliably when the graph is pasted into another program. Getting the formatting right for each particular medium has been difficult and time-consuming at times, and my own skills have progressed. Many of my slides have an amateurish and inconsistent look. Nevertheless, I could not convey half as much information without them.

Another important aspect of my work has been extensive use of the Internet. I set up and maintain my own web site at the university. This has allowed me to "publish" reports and statistics quickly and to make them widely available at little cost. I have posted raw data on the Internet, and spreadsheets with data and graphs showing time trends in imprisonment by race and offense for the different states in the United States and the different counties in Wisconsin. I have also posted copies of my PowerPoint slide shows and PDF files with screen shots from the shows. The PowerPoint slides have been downloaded and incorporated into lectures all over the country, and the PDF files have been printed out, copied, and circulated widely.

Early on, I generated an on-line slide show tutorial on these issues. It rapidly become out of date and I did not update it. But this is another medium than can be explored.

Engaging audiences: expertise, legitimacy, accessibility, respect

My initial presentations were to audiences specifically concerned with criminal justice
issues. I was interviewed by reporters about these issues several times after these presentations, but the story never made the papers. I suspect this was because reporters had relations with police, who felt this would be undermining their position. However, after I made a presentation to a local group of Democrats, including the newly-elected District Attorney, I responded to a request from an attendee and sent a copy of the handout via email to those who had been present. This email got forwarded to a reporter who normally writes home and garden columns, and the local disparities (which are huge) made front-page news in the Saturday paper. This led to meetings with police (who were upset and defensive) and then a presentation to the mayor and other city officials. The summary of that talk was: this is a national problem, not just our problem, but we are contributing to the problem. I wrote up a report with text and graphics which was sent to attendees and posted on my web site, and also the IRP site.

Since those early years, I've been speaking to an accelerating number of groups. As this is my advocacy work, I usually say yes to any group who asks. I have spoken to many church groups, to anti-racism groups, to community forums on race and justice, to the School Board, to Court Commissioners, to Public Defenders, to inter-agency criminal justice task forces, and to a large number of classes whose instructors have invited me. I've talked to criminal justice professionals, elected officials, relatively apolitical middle-aged White churchgoers, and Black community activists. I mostly focus on presenting the facts in my slides and responding to audience questions. Several local officials, including a relatively conservative White school board member and a Black police officer who is now the police chief (but was the assistant chief at the time) have told me that seeing my presentation was a shattering experience that altered their perception of local issues and gave them different priorities in their public work.

It is very important to attempt to understand the preconceptions and concerns of the audience. You cannot influence people by insulting or attacking them. I have sought to convey information and engage the audience in a dialogue about what the information means. In the process, I have learned a great deal. Different audiences have different things to say, and different concerns about the implications of the information. It turns out that many public employees are worried that any evidence of disparity is tantamount to an accusation of illegal discrimination that may cost them their jobs. Objectively, it seems to me that this fear is unrealistic, at least in Wisconsin, but they certainly feel threatened. In dealing with this concern, I have found that it is very important to remind people that a "disparity" is a statistical pattern. Whether this disparity is due to discrimination or some other cause is the next question to ask. When making the presentation to the Mayor and others, I used a medical analogy. The disparities are like a patient's fever of 105°. We do not know what is causing the fever, but we know the patient is very sick and we have a medical emergency. Every Black official I shown the data to has been immediately and viscerally affected, but many White officials' first response is defensiveness. It is important to stay in the dialogue, and this means respecting all people even when you disagree with them, and even if they are public employees.

As a sociologist engaging the public, it is important both to speak with authority and expertise where the evidence warrants, and to speak with humility and caution where the evidence is silent or ambiguous. If they are to be influenced, people need to believe that what you tell them is true and that you are not distorting the evidence to make a point. This is a
delicate balance, and experience as a teacher can help. You do not want to bore people to death with a pompous lecture. The material needs to be lively and accessible. The speaker needs to care passionately about what she is saying. But at the same time, it is important to convey the researcher's concern for the facts and evidence and adopt something of a stance of neutral detachment in weighing the evidence for and against various explanations.

Of course, the language and rhetoric that makes the presentation more acceptable and legitimate for one audience can be inflammatory or alienating to another. With conservative White groups or public officials, I work very hard to be neutral and factual. I do not want to delegitimize myself by rhetorical excess. I stress that I am presenting the patterns in the data, and that what responsible people must do is try to understand how to respond to these patterns without denial, but that honest people can disagree about how to respond. But other audiences can be alienated by precisely this stance. Left-wing and Black audiences often criticize me for not calling the patterns "racist." I say, "of course this is racist." But then I often give a short exegesis on "the R-word." I have learned (I tell them) that most Whites respond very defensively and even angrily to being called racist, or to having something they are involved with called racist. Most Whites interpret racism as an individual attitude of racial prejudice, hostility and bigotry toward others. If they are liberals, they view prejudice as an individual failing as a human being. Thus, to call them racist is to accuse them of being defective as a human being. Nevertheless, for the left-wing and Black audiences, my credibility and legitimacy depends upon shifting rhetoric, and being willing and able to use the R-word and address their concerns.

Most of my audiences are what I would call racially-naive White liberals, for whom my presentation is a wake-up call, a shock, a jolt to their complacency. It calls attention to a massive problem of racial injustice that they have been ignoring. But Black responses are different. Quite a few Black people, particularly those who work in the system or who are ex-prisoners, have praised me for my "courage" in speaking up about the problem. I cannot deny that I like being praised, but I find it nevertheless unsettling. Because, of course, it takes no courage at all for me to do what I am doing. I am White, privileged, tenured. The only risk I am taking in making my presentations is to my prestige in sociology as I divert energies from professional publications into this service activity. There is absolutely nothing bad that can possibly happen to me from doing what I am doing. It is depressing and sad – but a clear symptom of the problem – that my speaking up repeatedly on this issue gains me prestige points among many Black people in the community. It is also evidence of just how oppressed and beleaguered many Black people feel.

The other Black response is impatience and anger. "They are locking us all up!" is one common response. Even though they know there is a problem, even Black people often do not know its full contours. But much more rapidly than Whites, they say: "Stop telling us about the problem, we want to know what to do about it." Especially when I give talks in other Wisconsin cities with larger Black communities, the audience is more likely to be militant and combative. Audience questions are more likely to bring up CIA control of the drug trade, incarceration as genocide, or challenge me to explain what I personally am doing to solve the problem.
As I talk to different groups, I try to listen to what they say and use their comments in talking to other audiences. I explain to challenging Black audiences about how Whites react to the "R-word," and I tell White audiences the kinds of issues that Black audiences are likely to raise. I tell everyone that there is a debate about probation and parole revocations. The data show that revocations on "technical violations" without new offenses are a large share of prison admissions. Many community people close to offenders claim that the revocations are often for trivial or trumped up violations. Some court commissioners have told me that many probation and parole officers revoke people on trivial charges, or essentially trick them into waiving their rights. But the district attorney and some corrections officials insist that people are revoked only for serious infractions, and that many have actually committed a new offense at the time of revocation that just has not been processed yet. I do not have the data to adjudicate these claims. I just repeat them to different audiences. On this and a wide variety of other specific points, I try to further communication and open debate across the usual lines by telling one group what sort of issues are important to another group.

**Becoming involved: cross-pressures in community service**

My involvement in this issue began with community service, as I worked on the planning committee for two community forums and prepared information for those venues. For this work, I scrambled around and acquired data from a variety of sources, which I processed and turned into tables and then graphs for presentation. As a member, not an organizer, I joined the advocacy group that formed after the initial conference, and became a board member. I never took a main leadership role in that organization, as doing the racial disparities work remained my major preoccupation. After a few years, as copies of the work circulated and I gave more presentations, I was asked to serve on the advisory board for a federally-funded local initiative to reduce disparities in the juvenile justice system. This group met monthly for two years, and then bimonthly for another two.

Many different groups I have become involved with through this service have asked me to help them analyze and summarize data for grant proposals and reports. I also undertook several substantial analyses of juvenile data for the juvenile justice advisory committee. There is a crying need for data and data analysis in a wide variety of non-profit and governmental agencies. Cutbacks in the public sector have led to substantial reductions in "administrative staff," which includes data analysts, and wage differentials have led many of the most talented analysts into the private sector. As a result, although there is a huge amount of information collected by public agencies that could be used to monitor them and hold them accountable, there is a profound shortage of analyzed information. Many agencies are protective of their data and keep their reports internal and private, unless forced to disclose by very specific open records petitions. But even when there is a willingness, even eagerness, to use data to address social concerns, there is a deep inability to do so.

Leaders of agencies and non-profits often wonder aloud whether there are students who would like to do analysis of their data for a master's thesis or something. The answer is generally "no." There are several reasons for this. The timing is wrong. Agencies need answers immediately, preferably yesterday. But students plan their research agendas a year in advance.
Moreover, a sociological master's thesis (or dissertation) needs to address an important theoretical question of interest to the student. Agencies usually want fast answers to practical problems that interest them. Undergraduates are actually interested in doing any research just for the experience, and would be delighted to take on this kind of job. But undergraduates are untrained and require extensive supervision and instruction. In many cases, it is faster and easier to do the work yourself than to train a novice to do it. Most of the people in agencies and non-profits lack the ability to do the analysis themselves, that's why they have the problem. Thus, anyone who gets a reputation for being willing to do data analysis in the service of good causes gets asked to do it, and gets asked to do a great deal more than you can do unless you is willing to abandon all your other work. Eventually, no matter how committed you are to contributing to important community issues, you have to tell people "no." You have to choose your priorities and set your limits.

One role universities could play that would be of immense social benefit would be to create structures to facilitate the analysis of public data for public use. In the racial disparities area, there is a need to construct accountability measures at every decision point so that they can be monitored and assessed. This is not a panacea, of course but doing this is one step toward specifying problems and identifying solutions. Police agencies that undertake to record the race of all drivers in traffic stops both find evidence of disproportion and can then ask what steps to take to address the patterns. My analysis of juvenile arrests pointed to the importance of missed court dates, assault charges, and arrests at schools as key sources of disparity. This led the juvenile project to implement a program to address the problem of missed court dates, to engage the schools on the question of police calls to the schools, and to conflict resolution programs in the schools to address the underlying causes of fighting.

At the same time, leaving the lectern and getting involved in local groups leads to conflicts and dilemmas. I have already alluded to one. The pace of research in the academy is relatively slow and deliberate. You plan a project based on theoretical interests, you accumulate resources and collect data, then you take time to analyze and write to get a well-crafted article. But community work is here and now. You get the data today, and they'd like the answers tomorrow. You spend six months doing a careful detailed analysis of 2003 arrests, and they want to know what the patterns were in 2004.

Another is the shifting and amorphous character of community groups, coupled with competing interests and tensions. The advocacy group was peopled by strong committed activists who had well-formed agendas that were not always compatible. Most meetings were spent in people telling about and discussing their various activities. There were race issues that surfaced several times, as most of the Black people left the group early on. After the period in which the group rejected racial disparities as one of its central priorities, it re-engaged the issue, only to fall into a major organizational crisis arising from a dispute that occurred in a social service project it launched with inadequate organizational infrastructure or fiscals controls.

The juvenile justice advisory committee seemed to have the same meeting over and over, as a shifting group of public officials and community members attended irregularly and voiced their concerns. The hard core of regular attendees were a much smaller group that included the
district attorney, the assistant police chief (who became chief during the project), school district representatives, the chief public defender, the head of the juvenile detention facility, the juvenile court commissioner, several key social services administrators, and a couple of judges. Most of these people see each other regularly in the normal course of their work lives. Even as a regular attender of the meetings, I knew them less well than they all knew each other. In this group, there was agreement that the disparity problems were real, but there was less agreement about exactly what to do about it. Over and over, discussions danced around the question: is the disparity arising because Black kids are doing more bad things, or is the disparity arising because Black kids are being unfairly treated? Are more Black kids charged with assault because they assault more, or because fights between White kids are treated differently than fights between Black kids? Are more Black kids being suspended because they act up at school more, or because the teachers over-react to Black kids when they act up? Are more Black kids arrested because they commit more crimes, or because the police are policing them more? It was easier to recommend and implement programs that addressed the kids' problems than to recommend and implement programs that addressed points of discrimination in the system. Periodically, tension would arise as the representatives of one institution felt "attacked" by implications that discrimination might be a problem.

These local groups are embedded in the larger social structure. It is really not possible for any one local group to solve problems that originate in the deep structures of inequality in the nation. People have to work together for the long haul, at the same time as they seriously try to address issues of inequality and discrimination in their systems. They are real human beings struggling to deal with real issues under real constraints. It is one thing to give sociology lectures and write papers that provide an analysis of the racial structure of society. It is quite another to get down into the trenches and try to figure out what can be done in your own corner of society. As a sociologist in the trenches, I find myself shifting back and forth between criticizing the limitations of the groups I work with, and sympathizing with the people who are trying to change things. I know how to analyze data and provide information, but I don't think I know any more than they do about what might work to promote change.

Professional issues

We are whole human beings, and my academic job is a central part of my life, just as being the district attorney is part of the district attorney's life. He is worried about managing his office and getting reelected. I am worried about publishing, teaching and – now that I'm serving a term as department chair – administering. Analyzing data, formatting slides, preparing reports, giving lectures, attending meetings and all the other activities of my "public sociology" have taken a deep bite out of the time available for professional sociology. In particular, I have been much slower that I had hoped to publish sociology articles from all the research I've done. This is a choice I can make because I have tenure, and I think it is one argument in favor of tenure.

Many people in the community compliment me on doing research that is oriented toward a community issue rather than professional advancement, and I'm willing to take the compliment. I do think we owe it to our communities to put our skills to use. However, I draw the line when people say that such service should be part of getting tenure. I tell people that it is wrong to
seek to extract service from people when they are vulnerable in their careers, that the right thing to do is to pressure people with the security of tenure to make community contributions. I think it is fine if students and young faculty provide community service, but their first task ought to be to develop their skills and knowledge. Just like police and teachers and attorneys and accountants, they have jobs to do and they need to make sure they can do those jobs and earn a living. For the reasons I've explained above, involvement in community groups is something of a swamp. They all have many more needs than one person can satisfy. The people doing most of the work in the agencies and the non-profits are getting paid to do it: that is their job. The volunteer activists either are retired, are supported by someone else, or limit their efforts to what can be worked around their jobs. In my opinion, it is no more inappropriate for an academic to set boundaries on how much volunteer work she has time to do than it is for a cafeteria worker to do so. Perhaps the only real difference is that the academic has a more flexible schedule and so is aware of making those choices, while the cafeteria worker just has to show up for work or get fired.

I think professional sociology is an important activity and that professional sociology yields information that is important to society. In particular, my public work is overwhelmingly descriptive: I show people what the patterns are. I do analyses to pull out more subtle patterns than they may have thought of, but this is just more subtle description. My theories of what is going on contribute to my ideas about what to describe. But as I am trying to write professional sociology about this, I am trying to use data to address theoretically-grounded testable hypotheses about the processes producing the results. It is one thing to say, "The US is racist." That is true, but hardly informative. The real questions are how race plays out in practice. In this case, how and why the racial disparities skyrocketed in the late 1980s. Descriptively, we know it was due to the Reagan-Bush "drug war" and the "crack epidemic." But was crack the problem, or the drug war? Did one cause the other? What social or political factors led them to be worse in one place than another? What were the dynamics as the drug war evolved into the 1990s and drug sentences remained high? Did new social forces come into play? Does it make sense to theorizing the mass incarceration of Black people as repression? If so, what does that imply for how the process worked? Do the patterns look like other instances of mass repression? These are, I think, interesting and important questions. They are sociological questions that require professional sociology to answer. The descriptive work that I have done gives me ideas about these questions, but answering them requires pulling back from community service into the absorbing and often self-indulgent work of the professional sociologist in analyzing, reading, and writing. Intellectually, public sociology and professional sociology contribute to each other. But we are human mortals for whom time is finite, and in that finite world, we have to make choices. My own choice has been to live in the tension between the two, trying to do both and feeling the stresses, rather than going over entirely to one or the other.

In describing my own feelings about professional and public sociology, I do want to acknowledge that my job and identity in a Research I university is different from that of people in different kinds of institutions. I spent the first few years of my career at the University of Louisville, and I am aware that teaching loads can be higher and research resources lower at less well-endowed institutions. This can cut several ways. On the one hand, many sociologists are in positions that allow even less "free" time for community research than I have. On the other,
many sociologists are in positions in which the work they do for or which community institutions can be their sole or primary research effort. In talking about my own values and commitments, I do not mean to imply that my own situation is typical or that my choices should be everyone’s choices. Rather, I describe my own story to enter the discussion with others about their stories.

To sum up, practicing "public sociology" in a local context is interesting and engaging, as well as meaningful and satisfying. But it is not a simple matter of writing an op ed piece and sitting back and waiting for praise. I think sociologists have skills and ideas that ought to play an important role in a public forum. In particular, our ability to access and analyze data and to interpret its social significance is our most important asset that we can offer to the communities in which we live and work.
Table 1. Black/White Disparity in prison admissions, by offense (Source: NCRP)

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Figure 1. Black/White Disparity in prison admissions, by offense (Source NCRP)
Figure 2. Black and White Prison Admission in the US, 1926-1999

Figure 3. Wisconsin prison admissions, by race