

Talking about Racial Disparities in Imprisonment: A Reflection on Experiences in Wisconsin¹
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Since 2000, I have given over 75 Power Point lectures to a wide variety of audiences demonstrating the patterns of racial disparities in imprisonment in the US and Wisconsin. 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 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 agree the problem is serious and that some of their ideas don't fit the data, even as they have different ideas about solutions. My slides are posted on my web site² and have been downloaded by and distributed to people I have never met; my work is regularly cited and discussed within criminal justice circles in Wisconsin.

I have also worked with several local groups around these issues. In 2000, I joined the board of an advocacy group Money, Education and Prisons (MEP). My visibility on the racial disparities issue led to my being asked in 2003 to join the advisory board for Dane County's federally-funded Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) project in juvenile justice. In April of 2007, this same visibility led to my appointment to the Governor's Commission to Reduce Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice.

In his campaign for greater recognition of the value of public sociology, Michael Burawoy offers a 2x2 typology of sociologies where the dimensions are type of knowledge and audience. In his scheme, professional sociology develops instrumental knowledge for academic audiences; critical sociology develops reflexive knowledge for academic audiences; policy sociology develops instrumental knowledge for non-academic audiences; and public sociology develops reflexive knowledge for non-academic audiences. Burawoy acknowledges that the typology is more useful as a stimulus to reflection and discussion than as a rigid classification of types of work. In practice, sociologists often simultaneously engage two or more of the cells in Burawoy's typology, and many of the important debates and distinctions about the relation of sociology to external groups are not encompassed in the typology.

I began my career as a public sociologist somewhat haphazardly in 1999, before hearing Burawoy's presentation his typology. In taking this opportunity to reflect on my work in light of it, I find that the typology provides a useful basis for organizing reflections on my work, at the same time it elides many of the important lessons I feel I have learned in the process of doing public sociology. I organize my essay as follows. First, I tell the story of how I got involved in this issue, where the important lesson is the way that one's commitments "as a person" and "as a sociologist" are complex and cross-cutting in ways that cannot be captured by a distinction between critical and professional sociology. Then I discuss the links between doing professional and public sociology, calling attention to the often-neglected "professional" skills that are important in communicating with the public. Third I dig into the matter of the publics, where I stress the diversity of publics and the need to listen as well as talk. Fourth, I talk about the links

1 Forthcoming 2009 in Vincent Jeffires, ed., *Handbook of Public Sociology*, Rowman and Littlefield. A revision of a paper presented Monday 24 July 2006 at the XVI International Sociological Association World Congress of Sociology, Research Committee 07, "Public Sociology and the Future of Social Existence in a Globalizing World."

2 <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/%7Eoliver/home.htm> follow links to the "racial disparity" section

between public and policy sociology, as one gets involved with groups that are trying to address social problems. Here the important issues are the tensions arising from the different rhythms of professional and policy work, as well as from the much greater difficulty of solving problems relative to acting as social critic. In the conclusion I try to draw the lessons together and reflect on the question of the social impact of my work.

Getting Involved: The Critical Intervenes in the Professional

Burowoy's typology is focused on types of sociology. But sociologists are, of course, whole people, and we come to our concern about social issues "as people" not just "as sociologists." Audiences often like to know how an ivory tower academic came to this issue. I do have some history of low-level activism that I had pretty much put on hold while rearing my children. My interest in activism drew me into studying it academically as a scholar of social movements and collective action, but my past activism was unrelated to sociology.

I was pulled into prison work by the organizing efforts of local community activists, not by sociology. 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. I thought I would want to check that fact out before using it in lecture. It turned out to be true. The most recent estimate from the Bureau of Justice Statistics is 40%!

I was looking for more involvement in social action now that my children were older. I had attended programs 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 MUM decided 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. Although this did not necessarily seem the most important thing to everyone else, they thought it would be an appropriate component of the forums. Thus I began "as a person," a volunteer among volunteers. I offered my sociological skills the way other people offered to do publicity or to make dinner arrangements. In particular, I am not a criminologist and when I started I had very little professional sociology to offer people.

Because I am not a criminologist, my first efforts were hit and miss. I eventually found information, first summary statistics on government web sites, and then individual-level data from the National Corrections Reporting Program. 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. 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. This shocked me. 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. In the second year of the forum series, the issue was juvenile justice, and I did another handout and presentation for that group, with a similar weak response. I continued working on the data analysis for this project for several years before it received much public attention.

Initially, I got much more attention and support from social scientists than from activists as I attempted to develop this as a professional sociology project comparing different states' incarceration rates and looking for the causes and consequences of these differences. Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty provided me with a research assistant for several years, and the National Science Foundation provided a small development grant. We used this funding to download and process National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP) and arrest data; we spent a lot of time grouping and categorizing offenses to match arrest and imprisonment offenses so we could compare them. My larger more grandiose grant applications were rejected by several agencies because they were naive and ill-focused.

My work is not critical sociology. However, the fact that I entered the field with questions coming from a critical standpoint did lead me to ask different questions from mainstream criminology. I was not interested in testing different theories of social control or in explaining away racial disparities by showing they were correlated with other factors such as crime. Instead, I started from the presumption that high Black imprisonment rates are bad and cause problems. But to know what to do about the problem, I wanted to know whether the problem was that Blacks were committing a lot of crimes, or that Blacks were being discriminated against in the system. I tried to bring my professional skills to bear on answering that question.

The data that became the core of my public work in Wisconsin fell in my lap in 2000. Someone had given a copy of my 1999 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, but nothing more was said about it. Senator Moore had filed an open records petition with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections about the race and offenses of prisoners sent out of state and the DOC responded with six floppy disks and a paper code book. Her staffer called to ask if I could help them process it to answer their question. An experienced graduate student, James Yocom, volunteered his time to do the work of keying in hundreds of lines of variable definitions and creating the dataset, which included everyone who had been in prison 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 by race, offense, county, and admission type. Nobody had done this analysis. The information was powerful, and presenting it had an impact. It told people things they did not know and forced people to confront the problem.

In sum, I did not start out to be a public sociologist nor a critical sociologist. Rather, my "critical" sensibilities as a politically-aware person interacted with my professional sociological sensibilities so that when fortuitous events created an occasion that seemed to call for my abilities, I stepped in and tried to figure out what to do as I went along. The fact that I already had tenure at a major research university made it possible for me to do this work. It gave me substantial resources for the work and it gave me the job security to permit risk-taking and the diversion of efforts into an ill-defined path with no clear professional payoff.

Professional skills for public purpose

Often, public sociology involves taking professional sociological research that already exists and moving it into the public forum. I knew little about prisons and crime when I first became involved in this work. Nevertheless, my training and orientation as a professional sociologist made me able to do work that non-sociologists could not do, while learning how to do the work for a public purpose has fed back into my professional skills.

Quantitative Analysis

At the time I began the project, it was difficult to find information comparing states in their racial patterns of incarceration. Today you can find web sites maintained by NGOs that publish such rankings annually. It was being ranked #1 in Black incarceration for 2004 and a resulting ranking as “the worst place to be Black in America” by an on-line Black magazine that finally got the attention of Wisconsin’s White politicians. More and more advocacy groups are employing social scientists to analyze data and publish scorecards as part of their social change strategies.

Many groups 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, including data analysts. 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. In the racial disparities area, there is a need to collect accountability measures at every decision point. Police agencies that undertake to record the race of all drivers in traffic stops and find evidence of disproportion 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, which led the DMC committee to develop programs to address these issues. Madison school analysts found that the subjective interactional charge of “insubordination” accounted for much of the disparity in school suspensions, leading the district to change its suspension policies. 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 willingness, even eagerness, to use data to address social concerns, there is a deep inability to do so in many public agencies. 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.

Data analysis is part skill and part art. The ability to gather, process and analyze quantitative data is a special skill that social scientists bring to public discourse. It takes a great deal of talent, skill, insight and persistence to make data reveal important social patterns and to check for artifacts or omitted variables that might be influencing the results. It is what we can do that others cannot. While propagandists or journalists might grab any figure that fits a point they are trying to make, as sociologists we want to be sure that the results we are reporting are as correct as we can make them.

Presenting information

If we are going to engage public discourse, the public has to be able to understand what we say. The turning point in my public presentations was the shift to graphical displays of information. A major 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. 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. Both contain exactly the same information. 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. Again, the graph is much more powerful than a verbal description of what it shows: Black and White admissions were relatively stable until the mid-1970s, when admissions accelerated for both races but especially for Blacks, so that the disparity rose substantially. Figure 3 is the one of the most shocking slides in my talk. It shows that drug sentences for young people are the major source of racial disparity. This slide is linked with other slides showing that young Whites use illegal drugs at higher rates than Blacks and showing employment discrimination against young Black men with prison records for drug sentences. Together they provide a powerful indictment of the system.

It takes skill, effort, and experimentation to prepare a graph so that it can be read easily. It is an intellectual task, not just clerical, although it has clerical elements. You both decide what information to present and then work to format it so that important distinctions can be visually absorbed. Different formats are best for different media. Dark backgrounds and color work best for computer slide shows, and textual elements need to be large. But color graphs are incomprehensible if printed out and photocopied in black and white. White backgrounds, uncluttered displays and monochromatic patterns and markers are best for paper. Another pitfall for paper graphics is that photocopy machines lack the definition printers, thus blurring distinctions that are legible in the original. Within a graph, it can be difficult to keep all important elements legible. Getting the formatting right for each particular graph so that it can be "read" has been difficult and time-consuming at times. 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 became out of date and I did not update it, but this is another medium to explore.

Finally, good public sociology requires the core skills of good writing and good public speaking: the same skills we need when we teach. We need to go to the trouble to understand and address audience background and preconceptions, to figure out how to explain complex ideas clearly so other people can understand them, and to make our writing or speaking lively and interesting without resort to simple-minded slogans and sound bites.

Engaging publics: expertise, legitimacy, listening, difference

Over the years, I've spoken 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 church groups, anti-racism groups, community forums on race and justice, the School Board, Court Commissioners, Public Defenders, inter-agency criminal justice task forces, and a large number of classes. I've talked to

criminal justice professionals, elected officials, relatively apolitical middle-aged White churchgoers, and Black community activists. I have listened as well as talked, and in the process, I have learned a great deal from the audiences.

It is important to think in a practical sociological way about the problem of locating oneself in a public space and communicating with others. It is very important to attempt to understand the preconceptions and concerns of the audience. You cannot influence people by insulting or attacking them. People need to believe that what you tell them is true and that you are not distorting the evidence to make a point. It is important to speak with authority and expertise where the evidence warrants and with humility and caution where the evidence is silent or ambiguous. At the same time, you do not want to bore people to death with a pompous lecture. You need to speak with passion and make the material lively and accessible. These are also politically contested and sensitive issues, and you have to consider where you locate yourself in relation to political parties and the other political actors in the field. Publicly, I avoid personalizing issues, attacking officials or picking sides in partisan disputes. Instead, I argue that we as a public are all responsible for the political climate that created this problem and everyone needs to take responsibility for his or her part of the problem.

What makes this difficult is that there are different publics and different audiences with different preconceptions and different concerns about the implications of the information. 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 try to be neutral and factual. Many White officials' first response is defensiveness. Many public employees are worried that evidence of disparity is tantamount to an accusation of illegal discrimination that may cost them their jobs, or at least embarrass them. In dealing with this concern, I have found that it is very important to remind people that a "disparity" is a statistical pattern. 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 solutions. I stress that discriminatory patterns can happen without discriminatory intent.

But other audiences are alienated by precisely this stance. Left-wing and Black audiences often criticize me for not calling the patterns "racist." To them 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 (and many Blacks) 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. Some Black people, particularly those who work in the system or who are ex-prisoners, have praised me for being willing to add a White face to the people talking about the problem. Many appreciate the information: even though they know there is a problem, many Black people often do not know its full contours. "They are locking us all up!" is one common response. But the most common Black response is impatience and anger. Much more rapidly than Whites, Black people say: "Stop

telling us about the problem, we want to know what to do about it." Audiences that are half or more Black often become 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. (I tell them that what I am doing is analyzing data and giving these talks, mostly to White audiences.)

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 explain that all the professionals agree that racial differences in drug arrests happen because of where the police concentrate their efforts, but that people disagree about whether this is fair or not. 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 attorneys 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.

From public sociology to policy sociology

Burowoy suggests that the difference between public and policy sociology is whether the agenda is set by the sociologist or some outside group, and by whether the sociologist works with grassroots organizations or elite institutional actors. In my experience, these distinctions are not so neat. For all three of the groups that I have worked with, I have done specific data analyses because they asked me to. However, at the same time, I have also stood apart and pursued my own agenda within each of them. And the elite/grassroots dimension was blurred by race.

Setting agendas

I got little initial support from grassroots activists for my work on racial disparities. Most Black activists felt they knew there was a race problem and saw no value in getting more information about it; their main concern was to get more contracts for Black and Latino service providers (rather than the larger White-dominated agencies) to serve the needs of at-risk youth. Many people – Black and White – were not sure which way the race issue would cut, and feared that disparity data would just confirm racial stereotypes about Black criminality and increase White support for prisons. White activists were concerned about opening of the super max prison, the connection of the "prison industrial complex" to capitalism and imperialism, and the spiraling costs of incarceration. In fact, at one point, Money, Education and Prisons (MEP), the most grassroots and self-consciously "radical" of the groups I worked with, actually voted against making racial disparities one of their priority issues. This occurred when its membership had become all-White after Black members left to work on the social service issues; the decision was reversed a few years later. I kept working on the racial disparities issue despite this vote 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.

My position on the local DMC project advisory board and the Governor's Commission is different. Both were explicitly formed to develop policy to address racial disparity issues and I

was asked to join because I was seen as an important person who had been speaking out on and providing information about the issue. For both groups, I have done a lot of data analysis, not only to answer the questions they ask, but to answer the questions I think they should be asking, and have then explained to them what the answers mean. Policy interventions have to be tied to information and where in the system the problem is happening, and the data show that the disparities vary a lot by offense, by jurisdiction, and by steps of the process. Sometimes the results point to disparate treatment, and sometimes to patterns of offending. I repeatedly have to explain why the disparity and the Black rate are not the same indicator and why this matters: you can reduce the disparity by increasing the White incarceration rate, but that does not necessarily reduce the Black incarceration rate or the harm it does.

I have done dozens of ad hoc data analyses in support of these two groups, and I have been asked to do many more by other NGOs. The real problem about doing data analysis for local policy groups is not about who poses the questions, but their volume and timing. These requests are typically made on a very short deadline and fulfilling them can be very time-consuming. The people asking for help don't understand how to formulate good questions or to be sure that the data are in a reasonable form for analysis. Even with official sponsorship and a court order, getting the data is often an organizational obstacle course. Anyone who has data and gets a reputation for being willing to do data analysis in the service of good causes for underfunded NGOs or local agencies gets asked to do a great deal more than it is possible to do unless you are 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.

Leaders of agencies and non-profits often wonder 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 and professors 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 interested in doing any research just for the experience, and would like to take on this kind of job. But undergraduates are untrained and require extensive supervision and instruction. It is usually 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. Devising a structure to involve undergraduate students in data analysis for NGOs and local agencies would be a great academic-community partnership.

Real groups

Doing the kind of organic public sociology that puts you in ongoing interaction with real groups raises a host of issues. It is a lot easier to document a problem and the social forces causing it than to figure out how to intervene to fix it. People who volunteer their time for an issue all have their own ideas about what to do, and voluntary groups have a shifting and amorphous character that makes it hard for them to act in a concerted fashion. Much of "organic public sociology" involves sitting through meetings that often seem to accomplish little. And racial dynamics problematize easy distinctions between grassroots and elites.

The grassroots activist group, Money, Education and Prisons (MEP) focused on advocacy around prison issues. MEP met with corrections officials, ran workshops for corrections employees, put on public forums, organized protests, and networked with other organizations.

Although over a hundred people attended an organizational meeting after its successful 1999 conference, membership rapidly declined. A handful of people did the core work of the organization, and its direction shifted depending upon the agendas of this core. Most MEP members had some other prison or justice advocacy work they did outside MEP, and most meetings were spent in people discussing their various projects. Although I attended meetings fairly regularly over the years, MEP had little impact on my work, and I did little work for it, except to present data at forums and to report on my work in other venues. Race was an ongoing problem. All of the Black founders of MEP eventually left it because of a divergence of goals. After that, the core of MEP was a changing pool of less than a dozen White activists with one American Indian and one Latina, with the periodic participation of one or two other Black activists. A venture into providing services for returning prisoners blew up in a racially-charged conflict amidst inadequate organizational structures and lack of financial oversight.

The DMC Board and the Governor's Commission are both dominated by people who have leadership positions in the system: police, district attorneys, public defenders, judges, court commissioners, school officials, heads of social service agencies, politicians, corrections managers. Leaders of grassroots organizations serving people of color are also present. These would appear to be more like the elite institutions that sponsor Burowoy's policy sociology, and in some ways, they are. But along the race axis, they are different. Both are fairly evenly balanced between Blacks and Whites (with a sprinkling of Hispanics and the occasional Asian or American Indian). The head of the DMC project is a Black assistant district attorney; the co-chairs of the Governor's Commission are a Black state senator and Madison's Black police chief. Both are appointed boards, and everyone there believes racial disparity is an important social issue. I'm the only academic.

For its first two years, the DMC board 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 attendee, I knew them less well than they all knew each other. There was full agreement that racial disparity problems were real and important, 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? Tension at meetings would sometimes arise when the representatives of a particular institution felt attacked by implications that discrimination in their institution was a problem, but people kept the working relationships going. Even though virtually everyone on the Board agreed that both kids' behavior and discrimination were problems, it was organizationally 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.

It is too early to know how the Governor's Commission dynamics will play out. Appointed by the Governor, it is a heavily partisan group, with only one or two token Republicans. The Commission has been publicly attacked as pointless by people who insist that all of the problem is that Blacks commit too many crimes. Within the Commission, there is no disagreement that there is a real problem – everyone on the Commission gave a self-introduction explaining why they cared about the issue. But, as with the DMC board, different people have

different ideas about what the core agenda should be and about what kinds of information the Commission should consider. Sorting all this out is made more difficult because of shifting attendance at meetings due to the tight timetable, travel distances, and competing job commitments of the commissioners. With a substantial presence of Black legal and criminal justice professionals from Milwaukee, where public political discourse has a more combative tone than in Madison, overt complaints about discrimination in the system are on the table, but there is also a deep recognition that there are real problems with Milwaukee's recent homicide wave and the broader problems of drugs and crime and young people who seem to have no interest or stake in a legitimate lifestyle. We also had a serious debate about issues of tone, as some of us (primarily Whites but some Blacks) stressed the need to use language to invite Whites into the solution instead of just attacking them as racist, while others (primarily Black politicians) stressed the need to assure angry Black communities that the reality of discrimination is admitted and that real changes are going to be made. This debate is not over yet.

While data analysis can document problems and can be a useful tool in combating discrimination within the system, I find it much harder to imagine how to undo the damage that has already been done and restore social health. It is really not possible for any one local or state-level group to solve problems that originate in the deep structures of racial 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.

Conclusion

Has my work had an impact? In terms of raising discussion of the issues, I think the answer is yes. Of course, I am not the only one working on this issue and it is the accumulation of voices that have impact, but my detailed public presentations about Wisconsin's patterns are widely cited in local debates. I know that seeing my presentation had a galvanizing impact on a number of key officials. I gave an early version of the presentation to a group of Madison Democrats that included the newly-elected district attorney, and was invited early on to work with the DA's office in addressing their disparity issues. One relatively conservative White school board member told me that it completely reoriented her orientation toward the schools. Madison's Black assistant police chief (now the chief) was visibly shaken the first time he saw my presentation, which shows how Dane County's Black (but not White) rate of incarceration for drug offenses skyrocketed after Madison got a big drug enforcement grant. After somewhat justifying the policy by discussing the association of the drug trade with violence, he said to the audience assembled at the Law School: "I just want to say, I'm not going to tell you that this is not racist." I met later with him and the Hispanic head of the police drug task force to have a long frank conversation about the challenges of policing, from which I learned a great deal. They talked both about how they felt that police were often on the front lines acting almost as social workers in trying to deal with problems in troubled minority neighborhoods, and about their frustrations with the political pressures that prohibit heavy-handed responses to the disruptive drunk Whites who are the major source of assaults and rapes in the community. After having

debated Milwaukee's district attorney several times in panel discussions, he finally asked to meet with me just as he was retiring, and brought along his soon-to-be-elected replacement. I showed them the PowerPoint presentation on my laptop while sitting in a coffee shop. The new Milwaukee DA is working with the Vera Institute to set up a data-based monitoring system to address their disparity issues. So there is definitely movement. But at the same time, inequality is rising, social services are being cut, and young people who have grown up in households and neighborhoods already disrupted by incarceration have launched lives of crime. Pushing back against these social forces is very difficult. Sociologists can contribute toward pushing back, but we have to work with and listen to the others who are also trying to push back.

Table 1. Black/White Disparity in prison admissions, by offense (Source: NCRP)

1983	6.9	7.5	6.9	4.8	6.6
1984	6.7	8.4	6.7	5.6	4.9
1985	6.4	8.6	6.8	6.9	5.1
1986	6.7	9.0	6.8	7.2	4.9
1987	6.6	9.0	7.1	9.1	6.4
1988	7.1	10.1	7.6	13.8	6.5
1989	7.4	10.2	7.5	17.5	5.9
1990	7.5	10.4	7.4	19.5	5.4
1991	7.9	10.7	7.2	20.8	5.2
1992	7.2	10.1	7.1	19.9	5.6
1993	6.9	10.0	6.8	19.0	5.5
1994	6.9	9.3	6.4	19.3	5.2
1995	6.8	9.0	6.4	18.0	5.0
1996	6.3	8.7	6.2	16.8	4.7
1997	6.4	8.6	6.0	15.3	4.7
1998	6.0	8.2	5.9	15.3	4.5
1999	6.3	8.1	6.0	15.4	4.5

Figure 1. Black/White Disparity in prison admissions, by offense (Source NCRP)
 B/W Disparity Ratios in Prison Admits, by Offense. All States in NCRP

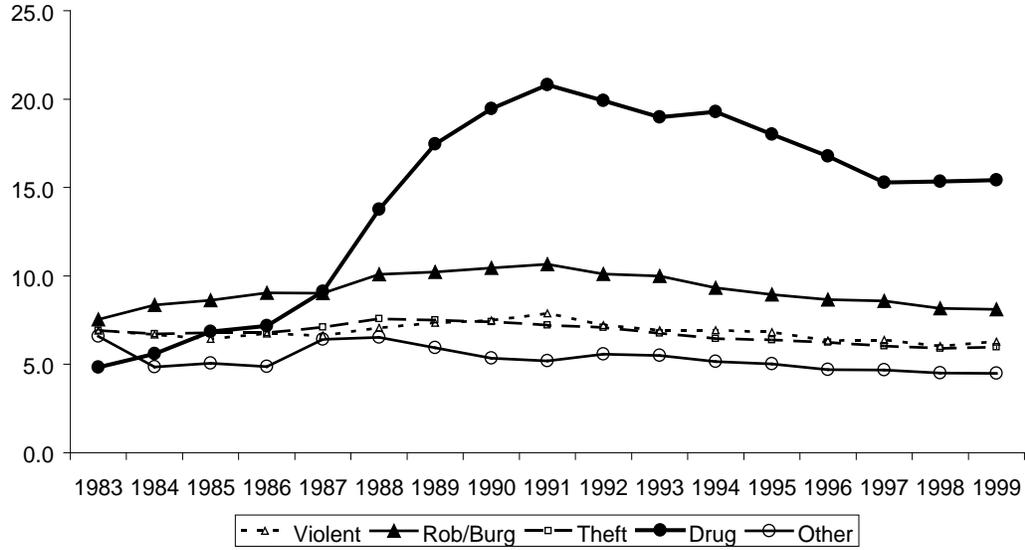


Figure 2. Black and White Prison Admission in the US, 1926-1999

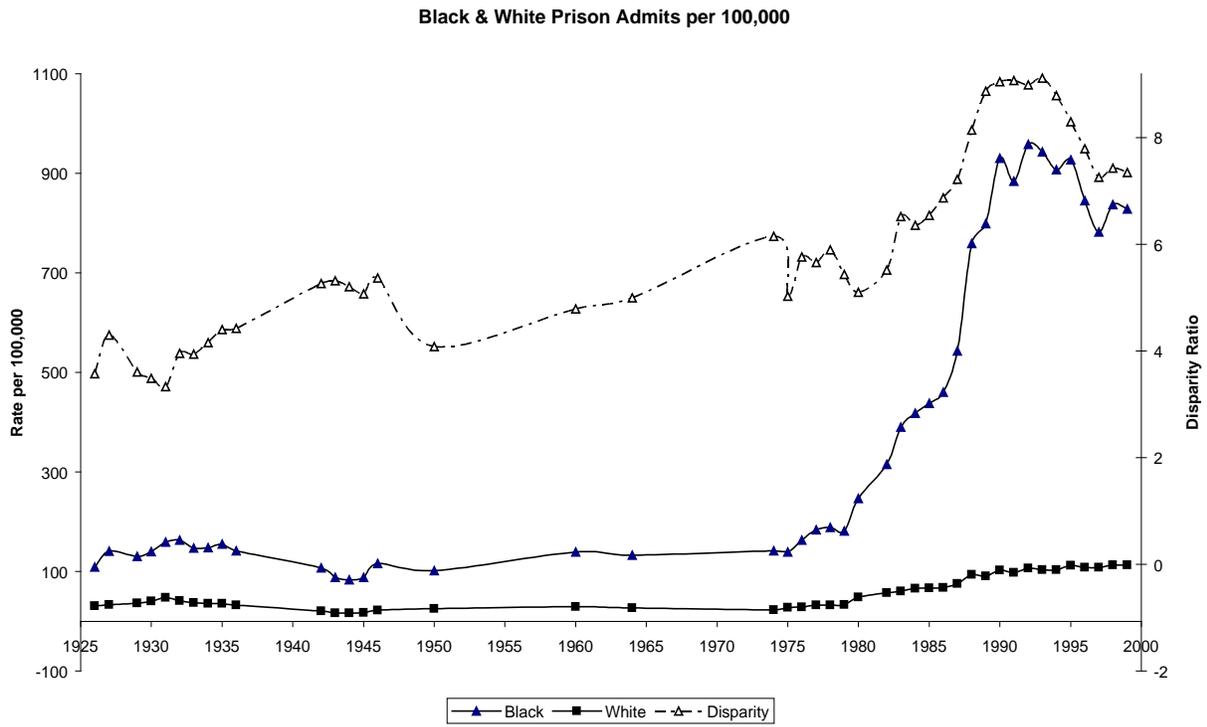


Figure 3. Black/White disparity ratios in prison sentences by age and offense group, Wisconsin Total (Inmates with no prior felony or prison admission only)

