

Challenging the ‘Social Death’ Of Incarcerated People through Storytelling and Advocacy

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Abstract

Incarcerated individuals are under the authority and care of the corrections system from the period in which they are apprehended until released. Within the penal state, everyday procedural practices result in incarcerated people feeling as if they are subordinate-human entities. Mainstream media often portrays individuals who commit crime as demons, nefarious by nature and incurable beyond repair. Social Death Theory (SDT) is a useful way to conceptualise how incarceration subjugates individuals. It is argued here that social death occurs as a consequence of suffering pains of imprisonment, as established by Sykes (1958). In an effort to create a counter-current and shift the negative narrative, Humans of San Quentin, a humanitarian non-profit organisation, was established in 2018. The aim of this organisation is to give a voice to incarcerated people by illuminating vulnerable narratives from within the prison walls. Through the organisation’s website and social media channels, incarcerated people are able to tell their life stories thereby raising community awareness and fostering empathy. Storytelling allows incarcerated people to discuss and explain their life trajectories which often brings clarity to painful memories and assists in the healing of trauma; thus ameliorating the pains of imprisonment. Additionally, the community gains a greater understanding of the complexity involved with being imprisoned, re-creating a new and more humanised image of incarcerated people - thereby challenging the commonly held stereotypes of prisoners and prison life. Through this storytelling the community and incarcerated people collectively heal from the trauma and harm, as per restorative justice principles.

Keywords: social death theory, prisoners, pains of imprisonment, storytelling, advocacy