

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

Reframing Incarceration as Forced Migration

Target audience: high school (grades 9-12)

Keywords: incarceration

Research by Jeremy Sass (Vassar College)

Have you heard of the term “forced migration?” If you have, what comes to mind? And if you haven’t, what does the term seem to suggest? Typically, people think of families fleeing from a conflict or disaster; of the least advantaged people in a society migrating away from problems and hoping to get somewhere better. These instances are important, but it is limiting to only frame forced migration as being like this: why shouldn’t the definition of forced migration also include migration that is caused by direct and systemic forces, such as incarceration?

One doesn’t typically think of incarceration as a form of migration. But the trafficking of people into prisons by law enforcement, which in the U.S. has primarily been done to people of color and the poor, is a forced movement of people from their communities. These movements directed by the criminal justice system are noticeably different from, for example, refugees of a conflict. Prisoners’ movements are not away from a problem to get somewhere better, they are to a single location where they are held. But this section shows that that difference is not disqualifying.

This section’s resources, which often focus on various health issues, use two methods to outline why incarceration, particularly incarceration of individuals in America, should be considered forced migration. First, the similarities between the problems faced by incarcerated people and those we typically think of as forced migrants are prevalent, such as the separation of parents from children and poor conditions encouraging disease spread. Secondly, if one looks at those issues and specific problems incarceration creates in the communities prisoners are removed from—such as lower life expectancy and higher STI spread—while focusing on how such issues are caused by the movement of people, incarceration’s status as a form of forced migration becomes apparent.

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

The Selective Bibliography has an additional section on this topic, [The United States Prison System Viewed as a System of Forced Migration](#). I recommend reading it as well. That section's core argument, that American incarceration can be considered forced migration, applies to this section as well. But different evidence and comparisons are used here, and when similar points are made, this section seeks to bring new perspectives to the topic.

This section also has "Advanced Reading" sections. These sections contain articles that are academic, not journalistic. They go further into detail on their subjects and are written in ways that can be harder to understand. I recommend anyone who finds the other articles interesting to give the advanced readings a try!

REFRAMING HOW WE THINK OF INCARCERATION

Read: [Tanya Golash-Boza, "Prisoners incarcerated far away from home are effectively denied the possibility of seeing family members," *The Hill*, May 23, 2020](#)

This article focuses on how prisoners can be incarcerated far from home and how this harms them and their loved ones. It focuses specifically on how prisoners from Washington D.C. are often imprisoned hundreds or even thousands of miles from home.

Read: ["Forced migration or displacement," *Migration Data Portal*, June 30 2021](#)

This page provides a thorough, but still incomplete, overview of forced migration. It is useful, but aligns with what is typically meant by forced migration without considering incarceration.

- In the first article, what problems did incarcerated people face due to their forced relocation?
- What aspects of incarceration align with, and differ from, the Migration Data Portal's conception of forced migration? Think about what types of forces cause the migration, and what problems the displaced people can face.
- How do you think that people's perceptions of incarceration and forced migration push them to view the two as unrelated?

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

COVID-19 SPREAD IN PRISON AND AMONG REFUGEES

(For more information on COVID-19 and Forced Migration, see [Public Health and COVID-19](#))

Explore: [“Covid Prison Project – Policy Data,”](#) *The Covid Prison Project, 2021*

This webpage provides clear visuals of each U.S. state’s policies for managing COVID-19 in prison. It is frequently updated with new data. The policies are often insufficient and consequently deadly.

Explore: [“Covid Prison Project – Data Visualizations,”](#) *The Covid Prison Project, 2021.*

This webpage, which is also frequently updated, provides effective charts and maps representing the scale of COVID-19 spread in prison relative to the general population.

- Based on the Covid Prison Project’s data, how much is COVID-19 spreading in prisons in your state compared to others and why? Do you think your state is doing enough to control COVID-19 in prisons?

Read: [Eddie Burkhalter, Izzy Colón, et al., “Incarcerated and Infected: How the Virus Tore Through the U.S. Prison System,”](#) *New York Times, April 10, 2021* (can be accessed with a free NYT account).

This article provides information on how and why America’s prisoners have been decimated by COVID-19, showing the severity of the problem and explaining how COVID-19 has spread far more in prisons than among the general population. Feel free to skim a bit. Focus on the individuals’ stories and what actions prisons did and didn’t do that caused mass infection and death.

- What stories in the New York Times article stood out to you of incarcerated people who became sick with coronavirus because of the prison’s conditions? What caused it, and how could it have been prevented?
- When thinking of incarceration as a system of forced migration, what problems and solutions involving COVID-19 in prisons became apparent?

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

Read: Jan Egeland, "[What we got wrong about Covid and refugees,](#)" *Norwegian Refugee Council*, January 7, 2021

This article explains how despite being vulnerable to COVID-19, the predicted outbreaks in refugee camps have been rare due to effective preventative measures, demographics, and other factors. However, they have been harmed by the pandemic in many other ways.

- How are refugee camps around the world and American prisons vulnerable to COVID-19 in similar ways and for similar reasons?
- What differences are there between refugee camps and American prisons that led to COVID-19 outbreaks being worse in the latter than the former?
- How are both groups of people who have experienced forced migration harmed by COVID-19 in ways other than the disease itself?

NEGATIVE HEALTH EFFECTS ON INCARCERATED PEOPLE'S COMMUNITIES

Read: Emily Widra, "[People with incarcerated loved ones have shorter life expectancies and poorer health,](#)" *Prison Policy Initiative*, July 12, 2021

Advanced Reading: Ram Sundaresh et al., "[Exposure to Family Member Incarceration and Adult Well-being in the United States,](#)" *JAMA Network Open*, May 28, 2021

The first link is an article summarizing and contextualizing the results of the study "Exposure to Family Member Incarceration and Adult Well-Being in the United States," which is linked above as an optional advanced reading. The study found that people who have or have had an incarcerated family member consistently rate their health and overall well being as lower than those without incarcerated family members, and that they lose years off of their life expectancy as a result. Due to the racism of the criminal justice system, communities of color overwhelmingly face these effects. Though forced migration is not mentioned, it is important to keep in mind that these disparities are occurring due to the movement of people, specifically the trafficking of incarcerated people away from their homes.

- The first article refers to past studies with more specific health problems among incarcerated people and their loved ones. What are three that stood out to you?
- What information in this article surprised or troubled you?

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

- What groups are most likely to experience these health consequences?

Read: James C. Thomas and Elizabeth Torrone, [“Incarceration as Forced Migration: Effects on Selected Community Health Outcomes,”](#) *American Journal of Public Health*, July 2008

This paper discusses increased sexually transmitted infection spread in communities that are particularly targeted by the carceral system, which are overwhelmingly poor and non-white. The authors consider this a result of incarceration as forced migration and draw parallels with other migrations. Their main parallel is that in 1930s South Africa, periodic migration of men seeking work away from home caused gender imbalances in their communities, which then caused high STI spread. Similarly, modern America’s forced migration through incarceration leads to gender imbalances and STI spread in overpoliced poor communities of color due to the targeting of black men.

You only need to read the introduction and discussion sections.

- Economic migration occurred in 1930s South Africa and mass incarceration occurs in America for very different reasons, but the important parallel is what they inadvertently have caused. What are some differences and similarities between the effects of these forced movements of people?

SEPARATION OF CHILDREN FROM PARENTS

Skim: Katherine Ellison, [“Why family separation is growing into a ‘global crisis,’”](#) *PBS News Hour*, January 28, 2020

This interview with a developmental psychologist explains how deportation, “wars, natural disasters, institutionalization, child-trafficking, and historic rates of domestic and international migration” are increasingly resulting in children being separated from their families. The interviewee explains how deeply this can psychologically harm children, and how they are not receiving the help they need.

Read and Watch: Eli Hager and Anna Flagg, [“Incarcerated Parents Are Losing Their Children Forever,”](#) *The Marshall Project*, December 2, 2018

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

This article, which also contains a 10 minute documentary, details how easily incarcerated parents can completely lose their parental rights to children put in

foster care, being barred from any contact with their children regardless of the reason for imprisonment. In fact, “Mothers and fathers who have a child placed in foster care because they are incarcerated — but who have not been accused of child abuse, neglect, endangerment, or even drug or alcohol use — are more likely to have their parental rights terminated than those who physically or sexually assault their kids.” The article acknowledges the messiness of these situations in regard to what is best for the child, and still concludes that “Instead of actually responding to the struggles of poor families ... we’ve decided that it’s simpler to take their children away.”

- What is a moment from the stories in the second source that is sticking with you?
- How do the experiences of children in the two articles differ? How are they similar? Consider both the causes of separation and how the child is ultimately affected.
- The first article does not discuss incarceration, but discusses many challenges that children separated from their families in other circumstances face. What problems do you think children of incarcerated parents would experience as well?
- The first article discusses family separation as a “global crisis” and covers many causes for it, but not incarceration. Do you think it should have been mentioned? Or is it a distinct enough instance of family separation that leaving it out was okay?

ADVANCED READING

Martin Sökefeld, [“Forced Migration, the Other Way Round? The Politics of Deporting Afghans from Germany,”](#) in [Forced Migration and Conflict-Induced Displacement: Impacts and Prospective Responses, 2020.](#) [Alternative link.](#)

This paper is about deportation from Germany and does not directly address American incarceration. However, it challenges conventional definitions of forced migration by arguing that deportation should be considered a form of forced migration, and gives context on how the category came to be. The first five pages

THE SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FORCED MIGRATION

A Multi-Media Educational Tool

Summer 2021

and the conclusion are the most relevant. If you found the particular topic interesting, check out the Bibliography's page [Challenges of German Bureaucracy for Syrian Refugees](#) as well.

On page four, forced migration as “not just a descriptive, but also an evaluative category” is discussed.

- What does the author argue are the reasons a situation is or is not evaluated to be forced migration?
- How is deportation not usually being discussed as forced migration an example of the evaluativeness of the category?
- How can we apply these ideas to how incarceration is not typically thought of as forced migration?

OVERALL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why might it not occur to people to view incarceration as forced migration?
- Why might people be hesitant or unwilling to think of incarceration as a form of forced migration?
- How might the way we commonly view incarceration and forced migration as separate affect how we see the problems with incarceration?
- Forced migration is typically thought of as people fleeing from a problem to get somewhere better. With incarceration, people are directly relocated by the state through legal means to be kept in a new location. But due to the similarities between the experiences of migrants, prisoners, and their communities, incarceration could be considered a form of forced migration. Are there any other problems that you would argue are also forms of forced migration that are not typically perceived as such?