



Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

All players in the criminal justice and prison-industrial complex* system. This includes incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people (in jails, prisons, and detention centers*), law enforcement officers and officials, court system members (DAs, judges, lawyers, etc.), and correctional officers and authorities.

HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Color Of Change's "Normalizing Injustice" report found crime shows greatly shape public perception of our U.S. criminal justice system and that they wrongly portray prison and law enforcement reform as unnecessary when many parts of these systems are fundamentally broken, corrupt, and racist. One devastating result is a society that repeatedly absolves criminal and negligent behavior by police. These inaccurate stories also decrease empathy for incarcerated people and their various experiences, convincing audiences they deserve the harsh punishments and conditions they face.



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of the global population
but nearly 25% of the
world's prison population.*

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **The Stereotypical Criminal:** All criminals as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color), immigrants, and poor.
- **"Good Guys" Doing Bad:** Police and law enforcement doing bad, even criminal things like entering residences without warrants or using coercion to gain information. These depictions normalize wrong and dangerous behavior and absolve those in power of any wrongdoing. (Also see "Bad Guys Doing Bad" in the next section.)
- **Cops as Judge and Jury:** Violence against and/or murder of suspected criminals by police officers, as though this is justified because the suspect is/might be guilty. This reinforces the idea that cops have full power to judge and punish on the streets.
- **White Stories:** Stories about incarcerated BIPOC told from the POV of white characters (e.g., judges, lawyers, and police or white-behaving BIPOC characters—for more information about the latter, please see our African Americans factsheet under "Colorblind Existence").
- **Getting Out is Getting Free:** Release from jail or prison as a complete resolution. Parole conditions and lack of support lead to long-term problems and, potentially, recidivism* for formerly incarcerated people, despite their immense efforts to manage their lives and behavior.
- **Jail is Fun:** Glamorizing jails, prisons, and incarcerated people. These narratives ignore the very real and inhumane challenges incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people face.
- **Trauma Porn:** Assault and violence inflicted on arrested or incarcerated characters, especially Black characters, that serve no larger story.
- **Bigshot Lawyers:** Accused persons often depicted as having savvy, high-end lawyers when, in reality, a majority use public defenders.

THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** Nuanced, intersectional portrayals of incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people told through their own POVs.
- **Racism is Real:** Address mass incarceration, racial profiling, racist sentencing practices for BIPOC, and the school-to-prison pipeline*. BIPOC are more likely to be searched, convicted, and harshly sentenced than their white counterparts, especially for non-violent drug offenses.
- **The Inside Truth:** Highlight the injustices incarcerated people face (e.g., they often lack access to education and proper healthcare and are paid subhuman wages for work).
- **Reformative Stories:** Explore the end of and alternatives to the prison-industrial complex. Even the *mention* of reformative justice solutions (e.g., mental healthcare, community service, and prison abolition*) and calls for better education and re-entry programs can sway the public.
- **Money Bail:** Tell the truth about bail, which is often set at a level out of reach for BIPOC, poor people, and disabled people. This means they remain in jail while legally presumed innocent, unable to work and raise their families, perpetuating poverty and criminalization cycles.
- **Bad Guys Doing Bad:** Stories that expose (and do not romanticize) the corrupt, dangerous, and greedy practices by law enforcement and prison-industrial complex players (e.g., stories that openly critique law enforcement violence and militarization* for the threat they pose to public safety).
- **Local Elections:** Characters who run for local office, DA, sheriff, etc. These offices, especially the DA, greatly shape a community's policing and incarceration pipeline.
- **Better Language:** Whenever possible, use "incarcerated people" rather than "inmates," "offenders," and "prisoners." Also, avoid jokes about "prison rape."

*Denotes a term in the glossary

QUICK FACTS

- ➔ Across criminal justice shows in 2017-2018, 64% of characters acknowledging their wrongful actions were depicted as BIPOC and/or women, meaning white men characters were less likely to acknowledge their bad behavior.
- ➔ In criminal justice shows, the “good guys” (law enforcement) behaved badly at a ratio of 8 to 1.
- ➔ America is home to 5% of the global population but nearly 25% of the world’s prison population.
- ➔ 90-95% of criminal cases are defended by public defenders who generally meet with clients for only 6 minutes before their trial.
- ➔ U.S. incarcerated people make on average between \$0.33 and \$1.41 an hour; it costs them on average \$5.61 to make a 15-minute phone call (it costs \$25 in Arkansas).
- ➔ Since 1980, there has been a 716% increase in the number of incarcerated women in the U.S.
- ➔ 66% of people in jail at any given moment are there because they are too poor to post cash bail.

ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- ACLU:
[Criminal Law Reform](#)
[Prisoners’ Rights Project](#)
- ACLU and Color Of Change: [“Selling Off Our Freedom: How Insurance Companies Have Taken Over Our Bail System”](#)
- [Centre for Justice & Reconciliation](#)
- [The Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights](#)
- Color Of Change: [“Normalizing Injustice: The Dangerous Misrepresentations That Define Television’s Scripted Crime Genre”](#)
- [Essie Justice Group](#)
- [National Association of Community and Restorative Justice](#)
- [National Bail Out](#)
- [Prison Policy Initiative](#)
- [The Sentencing Project](#)

GLOSSARY

Jail vs. Prison vs. Detention Center:

Jails are locally operated short-term facilities that hold people awaiting trial, sentencing, or both, and incarcerated people serving shorter sentences. Prisons are longer-term facilities for incarcerated people run by the federal or state governments. The term “detention center” commonly refers to facilities where detained immigrants are kept while awaiting a deportation hearing or where minors serve a sentence or await trial.

Police Militarization:

The use of military equipment (e.g., armored tanks, grenade launchers, and assault rifles) and tactics by police officers, often doing “normal” police work.

Prison Abolition:

A movement to reduce or eliminate the prison system and replace it with systems of rehabilitation and community safety.

Prison-Industrial Complex:

The rapid expansion of U.S. prisons and incarcerated people driven by the political influence of private prison companies and businesses that supply goods and services to federal prison agencies for profit.

Recidivism:

A person’s relapse into criminal behavior that results in re-arrest, reconviction, and return to prison after their release.

School-to-Prison Pipeline:

The tendency for non-white, poor, and disadvantaged youth and young adults to become incarcerated because of harsh disciplinary and over-policing practices within schools.

For in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms (DA, money bail, parole, racial profiling), please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#).

In-kind support and materials for this factsheet were provided by the following partner organizations. Please contact them for additional information, story guidance, and in-room consultations.



Hollywood.ColorOfChange.org



ACLU.org



StorylinePartners.com



A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:
WriteInclusion.org/factsheets

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

