Episode 212 - Dr. Matthew Epperson and Dr. Carrie Pettus-Davis: Smart Decarceration

[00:00:08] Welcome to IN SOCIAL WORK the podcast series at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at Dabby WW dot in social work. Dot org we're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research we educate. we connect. We care. Are in social work.

[00:00:37] Hi from Buffalo. Did you know that Buffalo has a thriving theater district and theater community? Well yeah we do. Downtown Buffalo has one of the largest concentrations of performance venues in the United States from live in musical theater comedies drama and the classics. They're all here for your choosing which is something for everyone. You can check it out at www.TheTheaterAllianceofBuffalo.com. I'm Peter Sobota. Sometimes the society gets really good at something that we probably would rather not be. In this episode our guests Dr. Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis wonder why we incarcerate people on such a large scale and if we're going to change what would that look like? they argue that our current system of mass incarceration should be replaced with effective and sustainable alternatives that balance the tension of both protecting society and assisting people who committed crimes or those who are at least at risk to do so. Our guests are academic scholars and leaders of the Smart Decarceration Initiative. And here they describe their mission and goals. Drs. Epperson and Pettus-Davis also discuss the opportunities for social work leadership in this process and how to influence change. They conclude by summarizing the implications of their current research. Matthew Epperson Ph.D. MSW is associate professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. Carrie Pettus-Davis Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the George Washington Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis. Our guests are interviewed by own Patricia Logan-Greene Ph.D.. She is an assistant professor here at the School of Social Work. Their conversation was recorded in October 2016.

[00:02:40] Hello this is Patricia Logan-Greene at the University at Buffalo and I'm here today with Carrie Pettus-Davis and Matt Epperson to talk about their initiative for smart decarceration. So I want to start by asking you both to weigh in about what sparked your interest personally in the topic of decarceration and the criminal justice system.

[00:03:01] Thanks Patricia. Well for me I really became interested in criminal justice system and social work's role in it about 20 years ago when I took a job as a social worker a mental health social worker in a county jail. And prior to that time I hadn't really engaged a whole lot with the criminal justice system but working in that jail for six years really highlighted for me how much so many of our social problems and our failure to address social issues in a responsive way leads folks into involvement in the criminal justice system and really unnecessary involvements I think from that experience I've Created some questions for me about why do we do this on such a wide scale and how could we do things differently.

[00:03:52] And Dr. Pettus-Davis?

[00:03:54] I really became interested in issues that were going on in our criminal justice system at a pretty early age in high school and I always kind of looked at them or watch the system from the systemic and structural perspective. At the same time as working with individuals at social worker practitioner and a researcher over the past couple of decades and I kind of came of age in the era of mass incarceration and the climate has significantly shifted over the past few years. And Matt and I both simultaneously noticed that and have tried to stay on top of and or get in front of that potential changes positive changes and that we'd like to see happening over the next decade or so.

[00:04:38] So what do you mean when you say smart decarceration?

[00:04:43] Smart decarcertion as opposed to just decarceration to us really mean a number of things. And one is that it has to be not only effective and sustainable but also socially just whatever kind of reform efforts we take during the era of decarceration. But in addition to that we think that smart decarceration will not be achieved until 3 interelated goals have happened and I guess another way to say that is three interrelated outcomes and that is that one the most obvious and the one that can occur just with decarceration not with the smart in front of it is that the incarcerated population has to be substantially reduced. But in order to be smart and effective about decarceration we say that you can't only reduce the incarcerated population. You must simultaneously reduce the social disparities within our criminal justice system. Specifically dramatic racial disparities economic disparities and behavioral health disparities. And finally we also think it's insufficient to decarcerate without simultaneously improving public well-being and public safety.

[00:06:01] I think the one thing I would add is that Carrie's point is a good one that sometimes when folks talk about decarceration it's simply about a statement that there needs to be fewer people in prison and in jail which we wholeheartedly agree with. But I think when we're talking about smart decarceration really talking about building different kinds of innovations, different kinds of responses that can replace incarceration whenever possible. So it's not simply about the act of not incarcerating it's about developing more evidence driven more responsive approaches that can replace incarceration.

[00:06:43] When did the need to decarcerate become an imperative or reach a tipping point?

[00:06:48] As Carrie mentioned she and I sort of started to notice some changes in the criminal justice system that we started to notice these around 2009 which was the first time in nearly 40 years that the incarcerated population actually reduced slightly for the previous almost 40 years about 37 years. It was increasing often by leaps and bounds in the era of mass incarceration. And so I would say that the tipping point started to happen around 2009. And much of that folks would say and I would agree that it was driven by the recession and by states and localities having to really critically examine how they spend public funds and the fact that incarceration is usually a large portion of discretionary dollars that states and local and counties spend. And so I think there was a real financial imperative to reduce the use of incarceration. But I think part of what makes it a real tipping point in terms of the opportunities for decarceration for smart decarceration is that this sort of financial imperative was happening at the same time that there was just growing social disillusion with our criminal justice system and with incarceration in particular and the way that it affects people of color people in poverty people with mental health and substance use disorders just a much stronger social awareness about these issues and that they needed to change. And I think related to that is also a real political seat change where it's really no longer in most circles politically popular to just take a sort of tough on crime build more prisons kind of approach. And so we're seeing real in many cases a bipartisan kind of support for the idea that we need to change our criminal justice system and not incarcerate as much as we have in the past.

[00:08:47] So how is this a social work issue?

[00:08:50] This is a social work issue really in a number of ways. One social justice is a driving mission of social work. And I think it's been quite clear that social justice issues have been threatened by who and how we incarcerate people. It's also a social work issue because almost every social condition and population that social work cares about intersects with the criminal justice system in some way. And because our most vulnerable and marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by incarceration confinement and just processing through our legal

system the other way that this is an excellent opportunity and why social work is uniquely positioned to begin to work on decarceration is because social workers are trained with Multisystemic and a multilevel view of what's going on with any kind of social factors. So we look at the person's interactions with their social environment and the social environments policies and structural factors that impact individual and return and that kind of multifaceted view is going to be really really important to move the country through this really complicated process of untangling the set of social factors that have led to mass incarceration. And then finally social workers are trained as simultaneously intervention developers intervention deliverers and intervention researchers. Whether that's through just evaluating their own program as a professional master's level social worker or as people with research Ph.D. to evaluate interventions that are primarily delivered by social workers. So I think that the tougher question to answer would be how is that not a social work issue.

[00:10:37] What do you see as what social work needs to do to better address decarceration?

[00:10:43] Both Carrie and I have talked over the years about how even before we really engaged in this decarceration work that there's so much potential for social work as a profession and for social workers to have real influence in the criminal justice system and some of the deficits I've seen have to do with the way that we're trained social workers and largely in bachelor's and master's degree programs. The extent to which criminal justice is a focal point in the curriculum. And I think that's changing. I think there's more and more development of courses in concentrations in criminal justice. But some of the research I've done on MSW programs shows that the majority of schools don't have coursework focused on criminal justice so I think some of it is just simply exposing the next generation of social workers to the system and the real challenges and opportunities within it. This question of how we can be better equipped to address decarceration is actually the question that this grand challenge that promotes smart decarceration is taking up and Carrie and I have helped to form with some partners three working groups to address these questions so we have a working group on social work research. We have a working group on social work practice and that's micro clinical to macro policy practice. And then we have a working group that's focused on education. So how can we better within social work education systems prepare the next generation of social workers. So this question is actually playing out right now in terms of these groups. We have over 100 individuals social work scholars practitioners policy engaged folks who are wrestling with these questions and developing action plans that we hope to take back through the Grand Challenges network and come up with some real strategies for how we can be developing some better approaches in terms of our social work approach.

[00:12:42] Some of what Matt with just talking about in terms of what the field can do better to prepare themselves really gets at the intersection of Matt and I's work as well as with the grand challenges work that the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare has taken on. So I'm going to try to distinguish those two just for a minute. So the American Academy of Social Work in pairs of welfare has 12 grand challenges that the field is organizing around for the next decade or so. One of those grand challenges was a challenge that Matt and I put forth as a part of our research agenda. And then again watching the field and that grand challenge is called Promote Smart Decarceration and some of the working groups and other profession based work that social work is doing is really around organizing behind the Grand Challenge Promote Smart Decarceration. Matt and I have our own body of work called The Smart Decarceration Initiative and although we're providing some leadership to promote smart decarceration grand challenge we have opened up our own inner related and independent working agenda as well. And with the Smart Decarceration Initiative which is housed at the University of Chicago social service administration and Washington University center for special development and in the school of social work here it bridges across those two institutions the smart decarceration initiative that focuses on three things and those three things are that one we engage in applied research that creates innovations and policy

and practice interventions. So practice intervention for example might be improving the ways in which probation officers interact with probationers with severe and persistent mental illnesses which have some work that Matt really focuses on or a practice innovation could be creating multi-component integrated re-entry programs which is a facet that I work on. The second type of work or category of work that we do through the Smart decarceration initiative is generate viable in a continuum of exit points of the criminal justice system. So right now a lot of times what happens is a person receives a charge a conviction and a sentence. And that's not revisited at any point they just kind of are pushed along the criminal justice system. So Matt and I are working together to identify exit points such as deferred prosecution whereas prosecutors work with defendants to identify alternative options than just doing a pure kind of sentencing and now you go under correctional supervision and then finally through the smart decarceration initiative Matt and I are working to cultivate networks across the country that brings in multiple organizations and our perspective to work on different kinds of actionable strategies around smart decarceration. So we had our first conference in September of 25th here in St. Louis which we brought together researchers advocates practitioners all representatives of criminal justice system segments of the criminal justice system as well as individuals with incarceration histories to generate some guideposts and actionable strategies for reform. We codified that work back in Prass with our parred University Press and then we're also moving to have our second national conference on decarceration in the fall of 2017 and that I'll be at University of Chicago. So there's a lot of work within the profession of social work and then also just three that night on a research agenda through the Smart Decarceration Initiative I hope that helps.

[00:16:25] What differentiates this marked incarceration initiative from other organizations and initiatives that are focusing on addressing mass incarceration?

[00:16:34] Well I think there are certainly organizations out there that are doing complementary work. And you know we have shared goals and we collaborate with several of those organizations. I would say what differentiates us is that we are three searchers we're both scholars that are based in universities and so evidence building and having an evidence driven approach and doing applied research is at the core of what we do. But we're also doing that with the social justice orientation. And so we're going at this with a predisposition to move towards decarceration kinds of outcomes. Part of that is not just about developing interventions and evaluating them. It's about as one of the sort of guiding concepts that we've defined that we want to shape the work that we do is called, we call it changing the narrative on incarceration and the incarcerated. So when we engage in our research studies when we have a conference where we pull together folks from multiple disciplines we try to actively discuss what we mean what's useful about incarceration what's not. We really try to bring relevant questions to question the utility of incarceration and why in so many cases we incarcerate folks when the evidence shows that it's not effective, when common sense would say it's not really the best approach to take. And we also are trying to work at changing the narrative on people who have been incarcerated and so too often I think whether it's in research or in policy endeavors. There's this idea about there might be good motives about reducing the use of incarceration but people who have been incarcerated are often viewed as just sort of the recipients of new policies the recipients of new practices but not leaders and not active solution makers. And so the work the mismarked incarceration initiative takes on really is trying to advance the view that people like one of the partner organizations we work with is called Just Leadership USA and they're sort of slogan is people that are closest to the problem are often furthest from the solution are closest to the solution. But furthest from resources and power. And so we've actively partnered with them this is an organization founded and run by all formerly incarcerated people. And you know when we speak with different segments of the criminal justice system or policy makers we ask and sort of advocate for a more inclusive approach that doesn't just include maybe a person who is incarcerated on a board or on a decision making body but actually has some place of power and influence over those kinds of decisions. So in a way we're trying to bridge the sort of applied

research with the particular social justice orientation. That's how I would see it as being different from other kinds of initiatives.

[00:19:46] Who needs to be at the table in order for smart decarceration to happen?

[00:19:51] There's lots of different categories of people. First and foremost we believe that individuals who have experienced incarceration and as well as their family members when they're interested and willing need to be driving a lot of this conversation one of our partners Just Leadership USA that is almost entirely comprised of people with the conservation histories and often points out that can you imagine another major social movement which the individuals most impacted are not at the helm and they give that example of can we imagine the women say that without women participating. We also know that a lot of what drove mass incarceration will also need to drive smart decarceration and that's policy making so people who can influence local policy state level policy and federal policy. It's really important that they're involved. Practitioners who work within and outside the system. So there's a whole range of practitioners that work at every segment of the criminal justice system from law enforcement to courts in jails and prisons parole and probation offices that then also as we've mentioned a couple of times people with behavioral health challenges such as substance use disorders or mental illnesses are disproportionately impacted. So practitioners and just general community support settings around mental health and substance abuse will have an important voice. We think that researchers are critical because we live in an evolving and fluid world and some approaches that may have been that at one point are perceived to have been effective. Data are continuing evaluation might suggest otherwise. And then of course there are a range of the different advocates who have kind of a bird's eye view on what's been going on in the system and we think that that's kind of blurred when it comes to incarceration of who is victims and who is perpetrators. And what I mean by that is a lot of people who are in prison or in the criminal justice system have also been victimized at some point in their life as well as engaging in victimization around other people but groups that are really specifically identify as representing victims perspective we think are often left out of conversation and need to be at the table.

[00:22:00] How can researchers and practitioners work together to promote smart decarceration?

[00:22:04] Well I think this is the question to address almost any major problem or major issue is better addressing the research and practice gap. I think that's the challenge for any kind of applied research. And so I think some of the principles are probably not different from other kinds of efforts so we definitely need to have an approach that doesn't have a siloed agenda in terms of research and separation with practice. Maybe the best way for me to answer this is to talk about the project that the smart decarceration initiative is doing. Carrie mentioned earlier with looking at deferred prosecution programs in three different states where Lincoln County Illinois Milwaukee County Wisconsin and in St. Louis Missouri we're very interested in this sort of innovation about deferred prosecution programs. But the way that we're engaging with practitioners is we're identifying a whole range of what we're calling key stakeholders so this has everyone from prosecutors themselves to public defenders treatment providers the actual participants in the deferred prosecution programs and also victims if there is an identified victim in the charge for which the person is going to defer prosecution. And we're doing a series of interviews and focus groups with these individuals to better understand sort of how the idea of deferred prosecution was developed and implemented and also what it means on the ground. So we don't want to go in as researchers and just assume that we know what's happening because you know we've read a couple policy manuals about the programs we actually want to see it in action. Understand it from multiple perspectives and then through that process we're developing and collaborating with these sites to think about how we could develop a rigorous research design to generate the evidence that could help to convince other jurisdictions to think about this kind of innovation. And so again we're not

holed up in our offices writing up some research design and then delivering it to these sites we're doing it in collaboration with them thinking about the realities of what it would mean to what kinds of measures we would have to use how we may or may not be able to randomize these programs. What are the realities of the settings and what they can realistically do. And so to us that approach is going to yield evidence that is generalizable not just because it's a multi-site study but because we're doing it in a real world setting and in effectiveness study kind of way and one that the practitioners themselves have a large say and how we go about doing this and their active partners. And we're hoping that that kind of approach to decarceration work can happen not just with us but all over the country to this Grand Challenge and really produce exciting innovations that have the evidence behind them that can really help to shape and advance this Grand Challenge.

[00:25:05] What are the practical implications of your current research?

[00:25:08] There's a whole host there are complications and I'll highlight a couple of them but I think just kind of an umbrella statement is one of the things that have been empirically supported and established is that mass incarceration was bad for national progress in the United States and work towards smart decarceration is going to help us to kind of overcome some of those limitations. Like Matt was just talking about through the Smart Decarceration Intiative we do applied research and development work where interventions around the ways in which people actually engage with the criminal justice system or are able to be diverted from the criminal justice system actually happen in real communities in real jails and prosecutors offices. And that same intervention work that we do on the back end the system as well that there's often more of a narrative shifting that has practical implications as well. And that is you know we're trying to help the country to develop a shared language and focus from moving away from mass incarceration and toward smart decarceration and that shared language is really important across the general public as well as people that really have expertise in the field so that as people locally or in federal government are making decisions around criminal justice that they're making a similar framework.

[00:26:38] Yeah I would just echo that. I think especially on the shared language piece we intentionally chose the word decarceration to name both our initiative and this grand challenge because I would say before you know just the last year or two it was not a word that was actively used in general or even specifically in criminal justice settings. So to insert language like that you know brings up a question what does it really mean to decarcerate and how do we do that. It's trying to bring in a different idea instead of just thinking instead of focusing on incarceration itself it's trying to define a new area of work and a new approach. And I would say also some of the work that we did like at the conference that Carrie mentioned last year. We really pressed the attendies the participants at the conference to think about their own action steps. Many of those we asked them to write them down on a card and we mailed those ideas back to the moon later and we've heard responses from participants that you know lead pretty active boards and organizations who are now reaching out to formerly incarcerated people to serve in leadership positions on those boards. We've heard from funders who are trying to take some of the language of decarceration back into their requests for applications and thinking about how they can think about grant making in a way that would produce better outcomes for decarceration. So we've seen several practical results from the work that we've done it's been pretty exciting how it's rippling out.

[00:28:10] What are the potential consequences if we do not decarcerate?

[00:28:14] Well I think you know as we spoke about earlier there's sort of a bit of a perfect storm of social and political and financial realities that are making decarceration possible but we're not naive to think that that sort of context is permanent. And so I think even now say in our presidential election there's pretty clear evidence that we could be easily moved back toward the very punitive approach to folks and so if we don't decarcerate in a way that upholds public safety and advances

public well-being then we can easily go back to a punitive approach and lose this opportunity. We see this as a window of opportunity a moment that we're trying to engage in the work and partner with others to make it more of a sustained movement towards a long term era of decarceration.

[00:29:03] And I would just add that there's a growing number of voices that they claim to be the social movement of our time. And you don't really get that opportunity twice in a short period of time. I think the political will fiscal will moral will is here and we've both got to be thoughtful and plan for it.

[00:29:24] That was very optimistic.

[00:29:25] Yes we will see this as a positive opportunity for sure.

[00:29:30] Do you have anything else you wanted to try to squeeze in here?

[00:29:33] To get more information about the work that we're doing we do have a Web site for the smart decarceration initiative and that is smartdecarceration.org. And also if folks are interested in work related to the grand challenges that is at the American Academy for Social Work and Social Welfare and that Web site is aaswsw.org.

[00:29:55] Thank you very much for talking to us today. We really appreciate it.

[00:29:59] Thank you very much.

[00:30:01] Yeah thanks for having us.

[00:30:03] You've been listening to doctors Matthew Epperson and Carrie Pettus-Davis discuss Smart Decarceration on inSocialWork.

[00:30:20] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.