

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

By Jacqueline C. Ouvry

The State Bar of Michigan Prisons and Corrections Section presents this issue focused on mass incarceration because “[t]he criminal justice system has gotten so big, and so vast, that virtually every American has some exposure.” Think about that: virtually every American. That statement was made by Vikrant Reddy, senior research fellow at the Charles Koch Institute, in an April 2017 interview for the Vera Institute of Justice’s *Think Justice* blog. The interview followed the release of a poll that found vast bipartisan support for criminal justice reform. Specifically, conservative voters showed strong support for reform and were also the group most likely to report knowing someone incarcerated or someone who has been involved in the criminal justice system.

Regardless of whether our law practices directly involve criminal justice, we as attorneys have a responsibility to understand this system that touches so many. Contributors to this theme issue provide background on the policies that created mass incarceration, report on the prisoner experience resulting from those policies, and propose solutions.

Peter Martel explains the effect of mass incarceration policies on the conditions of confinement. Kimberly Thomas highlights the effect of mass incarceration policies on a special population of prisoners: juvenile offenders serving life without the possibility of parole. Heidi Washington shares developments at the Michigan Department of Corrections intended to address problems identified in the mass incarceration era. Finally, Barbara Levine from the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Spending details the data behind the problem of mass incarceration and identifies potential policy solutions to smartly and safely reduce prison populations. Patricia Streeter and Paul Reingold offered important edits. The Prisons and Corrections Section is grateful for the time and talent given by each contributor.

Please also note the artwork on the cover and throughout this issue. Works are donated by artists participating in the University of Michigan’s Prison Creative Arts Project. In other words, the art you see was created by prisoners while incarcerated.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, the Prisons and Corrections Section has been involved in identifying problems with mass incarceration. The section has taken public positions on issues such as prisoner access to vital records, exorbitant phone rates for prisoners’ family members, and judicial veto of parole, which previewed significant changes in those



policies. The section brings together judges, attorneys, Department of Corrections staff, and community advocates to address policy issues around incarceration to educate and inform.

To that end, we hope the following articles explain the complex problem of mass incarceration, how we got here, who is affected, and ways to address the problem. The art shows what we know about persons sentenced to serve time—their individual humanity. The human connection in the artwork drives home Reddy’s point: virtually every American is touched by the criminal justice system.

If you are especially touched by the issues raised in these articles, we hope you will get involved in the Prisons and Corrections Section. Please join us at an upcoming meeting or educational event. ■



Jacqueline C. Ouvry is immediate past chair of the SBM Prisons and Corrections Section. She has served on the section’s council since 2012. She practices criminal defense at the State Appellate Defender Office and presently focuses on the representation of juveniles sentenced to serve life without the possibility of parole.