

“Instead of driving me to the police station, the officer opts to call an ambulance”

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 *Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem* 

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What I Know, Right Now, About Incarceration in The United States:

A History of Learning Through Experiences and Exposure

part 2

Ava DuVernay’s 2016 documentary 13th provides important historical context and contemporary commentary on the use of mass incarceration as a new form of slavery, segregation, and discrimination used against people of color in the United States (DuVernay, 2016). According to the Prison Policy Initiative, Black Americans make up 40% of the nation’s prison population (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

I am 15 years old, and in the midst of my rebellious phase. I bought marijuana for the first time at school earlier in the day and was smoking behind the church in town with some people I had just met. I begin to feel odd, my heart racing and my vision blurring. The group I am with announces they are going back to the concert we had been attending earlier in the night. I attempt to follow them across the street but suddenly I am frozen in fear. I cannot cross and can no longer move my feet. The group leaves me behind, and a police cruiser stops in front of me. The officer exits his vehicle and begins to question me. I cannot understand what he is saying, and I recite my mother's phone number over and over again. He pats me down and finds paraphernalia and a bag with marijuana in my purse. I am handcuffed and led into the back of the cruiser. Instead of driving me to the police station, the officer opts to call an ambulance. I spend the night in a hospital room with the understanding that I'll have to face legal consequences eventually. The next day, my father drives me to the station. I meet with the police chief, a woman who ran the DARE program when I was in elementary school, and she informs me that I will be enrolled in the Impact Program which is offered to co-operative minors charged with misdemeanor offenses. Pending the successful completion of this program, all charges will be dropped against me and I will face no further legal consequences.

In the decade since this incident, I have met countless people charged with similar offenses as juveniles. Not one of them had even heard of the Impact Program, and many faced crippling legal consequences which directly affected their ability to successfully graduate from high school and pursue higher education. A few had even spent time in juvenile detention for less serious offenses than those I faced. The main difference between these people and me? They were not raised in the suburbs and most of them were not white.

second part in a series . . .

