CONTINUITIES OF CONTROL: EXAMINING PRISON CONDITIONS AT THE MISSISSIPPI STATE PENITENTIARY

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Significant sociological works pertaining to crime, punishment, and mass incarceration often neglect to mention how macro-level theories explain the day-to-day conditions inside penal institutions. To address this gap, this study examines how theories on punishment and racialized social control are relevant for understanding how the lived realities for those incarcerated at a specific penal institution—the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP)—have changed over time. This study employs a qualitative historical analysis of archival sources, media accounts, legal records, and historical reports to examine how penal ideologies influenced prison conditions at MSP across distinct historical periods. Findings show a shift from a strictly profit-driven institution based on racialized labor where ensuring the physical capability of its inmates was an economic necessity, to an institution focused on incapacitation and punishment for punishment's sake. By tracing the evolution of conditions and punishment at MSP, this study demonstrates how shifts in penal ideology impact an institution's practices, without necessarily improving the lived conditions of those incarcerated, raising broader questions about the legitimacy and humanity of contemporary penal systems and legal reform.

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Introduction

The United States incarcerates a higher proportion of its citizens than any other country, and yet, the general American public often does not give much thought to those who are incarcerated. Removed from the public eye, the day-to-day lives of incarcerated individuals are a mystery to a healthy proportion of the population. Unless one has a loved one in prison, in which they too are often impacted by incarceration due to the removal of economic and emotional support in the family and community, most people are likely unaware of what it is like, or historically has been like, to be incarcerated in America.

Subsequently, it is important for scholars to study the conditions within prisons and how they may have changed over time. This thesis focuses on conditions within the Mississippi State Penitentiary (MSP), the oldest and largest prison in Mississippi, a state that consistently lands in the top ten states that incarcerate the highest proportion of their citizens. In 2022, Mississippi incarcerated the most people per capita not just in the US, but in the world (Mitchell, 2022). Once a plantation, MSP was established in 1901 and has operated not only as a prison, but as a political and social institution shaped by broader criminal policies in the US. Upon opening, the facility relied on inmates as a replacement for slave labor, and even now, inmates at MSP provide 100,000 hours of free labor per year to state agencies, municipalities, and counties (MDOC, 2026). The racial aspect of incarceration at MSP deserves particular attention. Despite making up only 13 percent of the state's population in 2023, Black men accounted for 56.74 percent of the state's prison population (MDOC, 2023). MSP is notorious due to a torrid history of inmate mistreatment, violence, and poor management and is an important subject of research to examine the motives and effectiveness of penal reform.

Despite growing acknowledgement that the US incarcerates a disproportionately high number of its citizens, far less attention has been given to how shifts in penal theory and racialized social control impact the day-to-day conditions for those incarcerated. While there is a substantial body of research on the broader impacts of mass incarceration, less attention has been given to how shifts in macro-level theory have intersected with micro-level experiences within a single institution. Changes in penal philosophy are bound to impact the structures and practices of institutions and attention should be given to how this alters how incarceration is experienced on the day-to-day. This project seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the changes in MSP, situating the prison within the context of mass incarceration and the evolution of criminal policies and punishment across the 20th century. By comparing historical and contemporary records, this thesis will assess whether the conditions inside MSP have meaningfully shifted over time or if they continue to reflect long-standing patterns of racial control and punitive punishment.

To discuss the conditions within prison, it is key to frame analysis in the context of how and why individuals ended up incarcerated. While committing a crime is the basis for facing incarceration, societal attitudes and policies surrounding crime can influence who is at a greater risk for incarceration. Though this thesis will provide a historical account of conditions within the MSP from its opening in 1901 to the present, more recent sentencing practices and attitudes towards incarceration within the era of mass incarceration will be focused on. The motives for incarceration at the start of the 20th century are important, but to answer the question of how conditions inside the prison have changed over time, research must be oriented in theory based in more recent decades to determine if there has been any substantial change. This thesis seeks to take preexisting discourse on the purpose of prison and apply it to a particular case study, MSP,

to provide a comprehensive analysis of conditions within the prison and how they may have shifted over time alongside the evolution of punishment in the American penal system.

Many of the contemporary sentencing practices paint a picture of the current justice system, which is not only rooted in punishment but is the most recent and current racial project that exists for the purpose of maintaining a racial caste system. A racial project is "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 125). Racial projects provide context for how social structures and everyday interactions are shaped by what race means in a particular society or ideology (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 125). The concept of racial projects is used in data analysis to interpret how specific conditions within MSP reflect and reproduce racial meanings enmeshed into the broader American criminal legal system.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes research on sentencing practices and racialized punishment to generate a framework for evaluating continuity and change in the conditions inside MSP. Though this project focuses on prison conditions rather than sentencing practices, this literature review provides context for who enters prisons and under what assumptions about punishment they find themselves incarcerated. These factors fundamentally shape the daily conditions inside MSP, such as crowding and the treatment of people inside. The studies cited below incorporate a range of empirical methods including quantitative analyses of federal and state sentencing data, comparative policy research, and peer reviewed sociological papers to document the development and consequences of mass incarceration. Connecting mass incarceration to prison conditions is straightforward. Large increases in prison populations lead to worsening prison conditions due to overcrowding. Prisons can become more dangerous, unsanitary, and less conducive to rehabilitation when they are overfilled. A brief history of incarceration and notable sentencing practices in the US reveals racist bias and an overemphasis on punishment. These two factors have a direct impact on who is in prison and, therefore, impact how they are treated while incarcerated, as well as how much people in general society care about how these individuals are treated.

Purpose of Punishment

Understanding the purpose of punishment is essential to interpreting how the prison system justifies and structures conditions of incarceration. Legal and philosophical scholars have argued that America overpunishes and overcriminalizes. To state the country does something "too much," a baseline must exist. Legal scholar Douglas Husak claims this normative baseline, and what punishment in America should aim for, is justice (Husak, 2007, p. 4). When framing

crime and punishment in the terms of justice, the drastic increase in incarceration, disproportionate rates of black imprisonment, and unjustifiably long or harsh sentences for nonviolent crimes, one can contend the US is doing "too much" punishing and criminalizing as it pertains to obtaining justice for crimes committed. While it likely can be agreed that at least some punishment is necessary, the sheer amount of punishment and criminalization in the US undermines productive intentions of punishment, such as deterring criminal activity and guiding law abiding behavior (Husak, 2007, p. 12). For example, seeing as there are around 300,000 federal regulations that are enforced via civil or criminal sanctions, people may be unaware their behavior is considered criminal and subject to punishment (Husak, 2007, p. 11).

Punishments have shifted away from justice as the purpose of punishment, and it is debatable if this was ever the purpose for non-white Americans. The focus within the past 50 years has been on retribution, incapacitation, and racialized social control, which are exhibited through mass incarceration. Punishment extends beyond incarceration and encompasses all of the individuals who are under correctional supervision, like those on parole or probation. Despite these tactics often being incorrectly seen as more lenient, they perpetuate the vast amount of punishment in America, as they too are modes of punishment that lead to people losing fiscal and personal autonomy. Further, individuals who violate strict parole or probation requirements are then subject to incarceration (Husak, 2007, p. 5).

The vast scope of criminal law also relates back to police discretion, as the high number of criminal laws gives police an increased power to arrest due to the large quantity of legal prohibitions. Subsequently, though staggering, the number of civil and criminal sanctions are not solely responsible for too much punishment. Other members within the criminal legal system must cooperate for these statutes to result in overpunishment (Husak, 2007, p. 19). This includes

not only the police, but also prosecutors, judges, and juries who influence the outcome of criminal proceedings, as well as those who have an impact on prison policy such as prison architects, correctional officers, and the Department of Corrections. All facets of, and actors within, the criminal legal system work as a holistic unit that encourages punitive and disproportionate punishment.

Michelle Alexander's Theory and Timeline

A central framework for evaluating the evolution of prison conditions is Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. This book contextualizes sentencing practices and racial disparities of incarceration in a theoretical framework that supports the idea that the criminal legal system is intentionally designed to perpetuate punishment and racial inequality.

America has gone through episodes of racial control, starting with slavery, which was disrupted by emancipation. Racial projects are first followed by a period of transformation, and then a new racial project that fits the new "rules" of society (Alexander, 2010, p. 26). After emancipation, slavery was prohibited, so there had to be a new way of enforcing racial control. This is where the implementation of Jim Crow came into play. As it connects to incarceration, when slavery ended, white people were forced to substitute punishment for other forms of control. People who were previously enslaved were arrested for petty, nonviolent crimes and forced to work on the same fields they had been emancipated from, known as the convict leasing program (Sered, 2019). Jim Crow was disrupted by the Civil Rights Movement and Civil Rights Act of 1964, leading to the need for a new racial project.

War on Drugs

Introduced in the 1970s, the War on Drugs aimed to limit the use and trafficking of illegal drugs in the US by imposing harsh punishments for even non-violent drug crimes. Minor traffic infractions and a lack of understanding that individuals can say no to unreasonable searches were used to search people the police found suspicious for illegal drugs, a tactic mostly deployed on people of color. Areas populated with greater proportions of black people are associated with perceptions of higher crime rates and thus more heavily policed (Gaston, 2019), leading to more arrests of people of color and their subsequent overrepresentation in drug arrests. Whether due to inherent racial bias or not, this form of policing greatly increases racial inequality. For example, in New York City, even after accounting for crime rates, police stopped black Americans two times as frequently as white Americans (Das & Bruckner, 2023). Police have a lot of power in these situations as they act as a mediator between "law-on-the-books," i.e., the written law, and "law-in-action," i.e., the enforcement of the law (Grattet & Jennes, 2005).

In the mid-1980s, at the height of the War on Drugs, the incarceration rate for black people quadrupled over the course of three years. In 2000, the rate was 26 times what it was in 1983 (Alexander, 2010, p. 98). Regardless of racial identity, people use drugs at similar rates (Gaston, 2019). The disproportionate imprisonment of black people for drug crimes cannot be explained by the statement that black people commit more crimes or use more drugs, especially given the fact that people typically purchase drugs from someone of the same race; black people sell to other black people while whites sell to other white people (Alexander, 2010, p. 100). Policing, surveilling, and sentencing practices that target black people, particularly black men, are what contribute to them being imprisoned at rates 13 times that of their white male

counterparts (Alexander, 2010, p. 100). The War on Drugs not only intensified policing practices but also reshaped sentencing through the expansion of mandatory minimums.

Mandatory Minimums

Deeply connected to The War on Drugs, a series of laws established in the mid-1970s to the 1990s enacted mandatory minimum sentences for a series of state and federal crimes, which saw significant increases in the prison population. Mandatory minimums are legislative measures that impose a predetermined, required minimum prison sentence for certain crimes. As they are composed through the legislative system and not the judiciary system, judges must enforce these sentences. Mandatory minimums severely inhibit judicial discretion in sentencing and increase prosecutorial power when determining a prison sentence. Mandatory minimums were created to ensure just punishment and limit sentencing disparities between judges (Schulhofer, 1993, p. 201), but a more analytical look reveals mandatory minimums have increased sentencing disparities along racial lines.

Mandatory minimums perpetuate mass incarceration as they impose swift, harsh sentences that do not allow for mitigating factors to be taken into account. Prior to mandatory sentences, judges, who, in Mississippi, are elected by the people, were trusted to use rational, fair decision-making to act in good faith in determining appropriate sentencing. The lack of judicial discretion created by mandatory minimums limited a judge's ability to tailor punishment according to a person's involvement in the crime, familial responsibilities, criminal history, or other factors that may impact what is seen as a just and appropriate sentence. For example, first-time offenders in a drug deal who were used as a lookout would receive the same amount of prison time as the organizer of the deal, as the mandatory minimum is based on the quantity and type of drug, not mitigating factors such as degree of culpability. In this case, mandatory

minimums decrease fairness and rationality of punishment, as the same punishment applies to two individuals who committed two different offenses. Unequal offenders are treated equally when mandatory minimums are applied. Further, mandatory minimums shift the power away from judges to prosecutors, who have a great deal of discretion in determining whether to pursue a mandatory minimum sentence. Mandatory minimums lead to specific harsh sentences with no variation (Gross, 2008), but only when applied uniformly, which they are not. Judges have to enforce a mandatory minimum for specific charges, but prosecutors are not required to pursue said charge (Schulhofer, 1993, p. 202), leading to potential bias and disparities despite the opposite being the intended goal of mandatory minimums. With all other factors remaining the same, a 2014 study by the University of Michigan Law School found that prosecutors file charges that carry a mandatory minimum sentence 65 percent more frequently against black defendants than they do white defendants (Rehavi & Starr, 2014, p. 1350).

New Jim Crow and Incarceration in a Colorblind Society

The current racial project is Law and Order, characterized by mass incarceration. The law is technically race-neutral, and activists have struggled to prove tough-on-crime policies, the War on Drugs, and mandatory minimum sentences are intentionally racist, as they do not explicitly incorporate racist language to support this point of view (Alexander, 2010, p. 61). Anyone can end up incarcerated regardless of their racial identity. However, mass incarceration disproportionately impacts people of color. In the era of mass incarceration, racial control is seen in the form of felony disenfranchisement and other methods of legal discrimination. The current system is maintained through the "colorblind" ideology, which uses race-neutral language (felon, criminal, convict) to disguise racial targeting (Alexander, 2010, p. 61). Labeling someone as a

convicted criminal demotes them to a second-class status as they lose a plethora of rights, such as the right to vote, find a job, receive government aid, public housing, and educational grants.

Alexander calls this phenomenon, "The New Jim Crow," and asserts mass incarceration is as discriminatory and reproduces racial inequality as Jim Crow did. At the start of the 2000s, over two million people were incarcerated, and in most states, 90 percent of those in prison for drug offenses were black or Latino (Alexander, 2010, p. 72). The policies and laws that landed them there, however, were put in race-neutral terms, making challenging these laws extremely difficult for people of color who fall victim to over policing and high levels of surveillance. MSP serves as a case study to apply Alexander's theory, as the history of the Mississippi State Penitentiary mirrors the American history told by Alexander.

Era of Mass Incarceration

Prison populations have been increasing since the 1970s. In 2020, over five million Americans were under criminal legal system supervision, compared to only 360,000 Americans in the early 1970s (The Sentencing Project, 2024). The growth in the number of people imprisoned consequently led to a higher risk of imprisonment generally. There was an annual decrease in the prison population throughout the 2010s, but beginning in 2022, the prison population has begun to rise again. Mississippi alone raised its population of imprisoned persons by 15 percent between 2021 and 2022 and currently holds the highest incarceration rate in the United States (The Sentencing Project, 2024). Per capita, the United States has the highest rates of incarceration internationally.

Mass incarceration is one of the reasons behind American penal exceptionalism, the idea that America incarcerates both a high proportion of its citizens and is exceptionally punitive in its approach to criminal justice (Sered, 2019). This harsh, punitive approach to crime is seen in

various facets of the criminal legal system, from policing, sentencing, prison conditions, and surveillance after release. America criminalizes social issues such as mental illness, substance issues, addiction, and homelessness (Sered, 2019). These strategies provide evidence of the country's favoring of punitive punishment for individuals who are in need of help, not incarceration. Mass incarceration is increasingly concentrated in certain disadvantaged populations, and white Americans often hold stereotypes that "criminals" tend to be black and poor, leading to an acceptance or expectation of the incarceration of black people (Doude & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 285).

Manifestation on the Inside

Prison policy and procedure

The sentencing practices and purpose of punishment in the US, as explained in the above sections, provide needed context and explanation for why certain people, particularly people of color, find themselves incarcerated. The influence of these policies and practices is seen through who is incarcerated, and thus most impacted by prison conditions, and their daily penal experience. A primary way mass incarceration manifests within prison is through who enforces prison policies and procedures. For example, when punitive punishment is justified in society, prison architects may be more influenced and publicly supported to design a prison that maximizes isolation and solitary confinement (Reiter & Chesnut, 2018). Too much discretion in enforcement of legal policies, leading to inequality, is not limited to policing and life pre-incarceration. Mid-level bureaucrats, particularly correctional officers (COs), continue to enforce policies behind bars that have a significant impact on mass incarceration. Mid-level bureaucrats shape workplace attitudes and practices, which directly impact the conditions and lives of those incarcerated. COs have tangible, everyday decision-making power when deciding who receives

infractions, goes to solitary confinement, and is given privileges (Reiter & Chesnut, 2018). COs hold a mediator role inside prison, delineating between written policy and how it is actually enforced, and deciding how leniently rules are applied. Mid-level bureaucrats also influence correctional policies and practices, such as durations and rates of incarceration, through their ability to financially support victim groups who are likely to endorse harsher, longer incarceration (Reiter & Chesnut, 2018).

While important to understand the roles individuals such as police and mid-level bureaucrats have on mass incarceration and how prison is experienced, it is critical to recognize these people do not exist within a vacuum. Rather, they operate within a much larger system of racial control that normalizes the over-policing and surveilling of communities of color and the acceptance of overpunishment and overcriminalization. Understanding sentencing and policing practices is essential because they shape not only who ends up incarcerated, but what prisons look like internally. Overcrowding, racialized discipline, and punitive design stem directly from the policy frameworks described above. Time in prison can be detrimental to one's physical and mental well-being, due to isolation, fear, and paranoia. People of color disproportionately experience this harm due to their overrepresentation in the criminal legal system. Time spent in prison also has generational effects as time incarcerated limits one's ability to accrue human capital, social networks, or generational wealth, which could be used to help one's family and community.

Overcriminalization and Retribution

A direct way sentencing practices impact life inside is seen in how long individuals are imprisoned for, and thus subjected to potentially harmful conditions. Mandatory minimums are related to the War on Drugs, as drug crimes are the most frequent type of offenses to which

mandatory minimums are applied. The difference in the mandatory minimum sentence for possession of crack cocaine, which was more common within communities of color (5 years for distribution of 5 grams), versus cocaine, which was more common within white communities (5 years for distribution of 500 grams), supports the idea that mandatory minimums target people of color and lead to their overrepresentation in the penal system.

Punishment is used to isolate and hinder members of society, specifically those who are already marginalized or are given stereotypes of being dangerous, violent, or criminal. Since these individuals have been accused or convicted of a crime, their punishment is seen as valid and appropriate, even if it is grossly disproportionate to the conduct they engaged in. Husak argues the majority of punishment in our society is unjust, and fueled by the vast expansion in criminal law and "valid" reasons for arrest, and society must consider a principle of proportionality between one's crime and the corresponding penalty (Husak, 2007, p. 14). Overcriminalization results in too great an injury even for those who deserve some sort of repercussions for their actions due to a lack of proportionality between one's offense and their punishment. This issue becomes complicated rather quickly, as what is "deserved" or "proportional" is easily debated. However, Husak's theory grounds contemporary sentencing tactics in their central purpose, as well as the purpose of those who enforce these policies: to punish. Like Alexander, a significant portion of Husak's theory is based on drug crimes, which he claims to be "the single most important manifestation of [the US'] tendency to criminalize too much and punish too many" (Husak, 2007, p. 16). As explained earlier, the War on Drugs and mandatory minimums for drug crimes produced harsh, punitive sentences that do not consider Husak's principle of proportionality, leading to a stark increase in the prison population, particularly amongst black and Latino populations. These national trends are not abstract.

Mississippi has exemplified many of them, with MSP functioning as a case study to evaluate how racialized punishment practices manifest inside prisons and impact the conditions incarcerated individuals must endure.

Surveillance and Docile Bodies

A notable sociological work that comments on the evolution of prison and punishment is Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Foucault emphasizes that punishment has developed from physical torture to psychological and disciplinary control, based on increased incarceration and surveillance. This may appear to be in opposition with Huask's theory as abandonment of torture could be seen as a step towards more just punishment, but Foucault importantly argues that this shift has not made punishment more humane, it merely transferred the focus of punishment from the body to the soul (Foucault, 1975, p. 16). The goal was not to "punish less, but to punish better" and "punish more deeply into the social body" (Foucault, 1975, p. 82). In an overly surveilled society, people police and regulate themselves, making them what Foucault calls docile bodies. By promoting normalization and maintaining constant surveillance, criminal behavior is no longer the only thing "punished" as people are criticized for deviating from societal norms, extending the potential of punishment and ostracization to other social institutions like schools, the home, and the workplace. Punishment is no longer a brutal physical spectacle, but a more subtle, constant threat, influencing society's behaviors and motivations.

Further, Foucault argues that the elimination of physical torture was not based on promoting the humanity of criminals, but out of economic motive, and that though the body is not physically tortured, it is still the object of control. This greatly relates to Alexander's argument on the maintenance of racial control despite its changing forms. Though the Black

body was emancipated and is not owned in the exact manner it was in times of slavery, mass incarceration still strips individuals of their personal and bodily autonomy. Prison routine itself highly regulates the body in regards to eating times, rations, and lack of privacy. Though Foucault's perspective extends punishment to facets of life outside the criminal legal system, constant surveillance is extremely pertinent for those incarcerated. For this project in particular, as technology became more efficient and effective throughout history, it is important to keep Foucault's framework in mind when tracking the evolution of prison conditions over time.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to frame the analysis of prison conditions in the context of historical and racial attitudes in the US. The emphasis on and acceptance of punishment within our criminal legal system is bound to have an inherent effect on how prisoners are treated and the conditions in which they live. Reviewing the research in this context serves as a reference for any substantive changes over time at MSP. While historical prison conditions could be justified by the racial and political climate of the times, contemporary theories on crime and punishment act as a lens to view the data with to establish the humanity and justification (or lack thereof) of current prison conditions, which one could hope have changed significantly since the eras of slavery and Jim Crow.

Methodology

To answer the question of how the conditions within the Mississippi State Penitentiary changed over time, the research design was a case study based on unobtrusive research consisting of a content analysis of both historical and contemporary documents and a subsequent comparative analysis. MSP was selected as the case study as Mississippi is consistently in the top 5 to 10 states in the nation that incarcerate the highest proportion of their population, and MSP is the largest and oldest prison in the state, allowing for a longer historical assessment of changing conditions inside of prison. MSP was originally a plantation, and in its early days, prisoners worked on the land many of them had previously worked on prior to emancipation, making it a strong case study to apply Alexander's theoretical framework.

Data Sources

For the content analysis, historic newspaper articles, personal and secondary written accounts, historical documentations (e.g. transcripts of oral histories, interviews, and books on the prison's history), and legal documents were the units of observation and were examined to determine conditions within the prison in its early years. These were sourced predominantly through the University of Oregon Library and digitized archives from the University of Mississippi and Southern Mississippi University, particularly archives of the *Inside World*, a newspaper written by MSP inmates. The American Prison Newspaper and The Clarion Ledger archive databases were also used to locate news articles. Other pertinent sources included the Human Rights Watch and MSP manuals to determine any notable policies or procedures that could impact conditions. The legal database Thomson Reuters Westlaw was the primary way of locating relevant legal cases and lawsuits. Keywords such as "Mississippi State Penitentiary," "Parchman," and "prison conditions" guided source discovery. Additional sources included

books not found through the University of Oregon, including *Worse Than Slavery: Parchman fame and the ordeal of Jim Crow justice* by David Oshinsky and *Down on Parchman Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta* by William Banks Taylor.

Coding and Analysis

Data were divided into five major time periods: prison origins (1901-1940), Jim Crow (1940-1950), Civil Rights (1950-1968), the War on Drugs (1970-2000), and the Contemporary Era (2000-present). Time periods were divided in this manner, as each era corresponds to a significant shift in social and political attitudes, which will impact who is incarcerated and affected by changing prison conditions. Further, this temporal division aligns with Alexander's timeframe of racial epochs that serves as the contextual framework for data analysis. Data from these sources was coded as follows:

Metacode	Description	Subcodes
Living Conditions	Captures references to physical conditions of the facility.	Sanitation, clothing, cage/barrack quality, and food/diet.
Working Conditions	Descriptions of the circumstances in which incarcerated individuals engage in labor at the penitentiary.	Work schedule, physical conditions, and supervision.
Medical Care	Quality and accessibility to medical care, of any kind, provided to those incarcerated.	Physical health care (for injuries and illness), psychiatric and mental health care, medication, and screening (i.e. the facility's ability to recognize inmates with physical and/or mental health concerns).

Racialized treatment and discrimination	Instances in which an inmate's race was an explicit, direct reason for their treatment, living conditions, working conditions, and/or medical care.	Segregation, racist language
Punishment and reprimand	Captures instances of formal and informal punishment. What behavior an incarcerated individual engaged in that prompted punishment and how punishment was administered.	Corporal punishment, time in the maximum security unit.
Purpose of incarceration	Captures instances in data that indicate the overarching purpose of MSP and penal beliefs of those in charge as well as the nation as a whole (i.e. institutional and ideological beliefs).	Incapacitation, rehabilitation, and profit.

Table 1: Code Book

This table denotes the initial metacodes, how they were defined, and the subcodes that were used when coding and organizing data.

These categories guided initial research and coding to make the quantity of research more accessible and focused, which could otherwise be seen as a limitation of content/historical analysis, and to pick out the most relevant data. Open coding was also conducted during the initial readings of the data to identify notable themes unrelated to the hypothesized themes/codes.

A comparative analysis was then done to summarize trends in conditions within the prison from when it first opened in 1901, through Jim Crow, the Civil Rights era, and the War on

Drugs, to now, based on the notable themes deduced from coding the content analysis. Within this study, “change” refers to both an increase/decrease in the frequency of conditions noted and their severity, as well as changes in the harshness and quality of racialized discipline and punishment within the prison. Change is also defined as any reasonably notable shift in conditions such as how inmates are housed, treated, employed, etc.

Results

Prison Origins 1901-1940

In 1900, over 3,500 acres of land were purchased to begin constructing what would become the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman. The prison did not resemble a typical penal institution. It was vast and isolated with no walls or guard towers (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 137). Inmates were housed in dormitory-style housing units, which were long wooden barracks with bunk beds lining each side of the building and barred windows. The open layout invited the potential for violence amongst inmates, as there were over a hundred inmates per camp, with no formal classification system. Inmates were separated only by race and lived with fellow inmates of all ages and offenses. Per the Penitentiary Committee's 1936 report, there were 173 men in Camp B with 105 beds in deplorable condition (Lipman, 1974, p. 695). Sanitary conditions were repeatedly criticized as inadequate in various Biennial Reports of this era. The wooden housing units also posed physical safety risks. A 1913 fire in a wooden cage killed 35 black individuals who were housed there (NYT, 1913). The farm had no firefighting apparatus and reports attributed the fire to negligence by prison leadership (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 66). In the '30s, these buildings were reconstructed using brick instead of wood.

Sergeants oversaw each camp, and individual sergeants had a profound impact on the living and working conditions of those they supervised. Some were heavier on punishment, such as whipping and providing minimal food, while others were kinder. The prisons relied on a unique security arrangement, known as the trusty system in which prisoners guarded themselves. Trusty-shooters, also known as trusties, were prisoners selected by sergeants based on their ability to intimidate other inmates and their willingness to use force (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 140).

These individuals were armed and in the tenuous position of guarding the other inmates, known as gunmen, despite being incarcerated themselves.

The prison was built to replace the state's convict leasing program. Those incarcerated at Parchman were forced to work in the cotton fields, resembling an antebellum plantation, with inmates replacing slave labor. During construction, the Mississippi Governor expressed that the facility was intended to socialize young black people who were incarcerated there by teaching them discipline, strong work habits, and respect for white authority (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 110). Days were long, starting at 4:30am and ending at sundown. Inmates had daily field quotas to meet, such as 200 pounds of cotton (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 143). Inmates worked in extreme heat and ate brief meals in the fields. Trusty-shooters stood at the field's edges to form a barrier between prisoners and escape (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 147).

Parchman became extremely profitable due to convict labor, and there was a growing understanding that those incarcerated at MSP would not experience any kind of rehabilitation. Their primary purpose was to work and generate a profit for the prison. The July 1917 to June 1919 Biennial Report emphasized this, as the writing expressed concerns about a lack of a sufficient work force due to a decreasing prison population (Montgomery et. al, 1919, p. 9). Race was an integral factor in the treatment of inmates. Field camps were racially segregated, and an inmate's race dictated where they lived, worked, and how they were treated. Segregation was said to be useful to managers who altered field operations based on differing "cultural traits" of each race (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 47). For example, callers set the work pace by chanting a song verse, followed by the entire line responding with the chorus, a practice with roots in slavery.

Other prison policies and activities were arranged to maximize field work. In the 1930s, sexual privileges were granted specifically to black inmates, regardless of marital status, as they

were believed to have greater sexual needs than white inmates (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 154). The prison's open nature allowed prostitutes to move freely between field camps. White sergeants encouraged and funded the prostitutes as they saw the practices as accommodating what they considered “natural” among black people (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 58). Along with conjugal visits, considered a positive condition among inmates, other favorable practices were used as managerial tools to promote strong work ethic. The prison’s visitation policy was a prime example, which served as an extreme motivator to meet field quotas and adhere to sergeants' rules to visit with their families on the fifth Sunday of every month (Banks Taylor, 1999, pp. 59-60).

In these brutal work conditions, inmates were under a constant threat of flogging, beatings, and shooting. Medical attention was also scarcely available to men who worked in isolated parts of the penitentiary. Whipping was a common form of punishment and held significant racial undertones due to the predominantly black prison population and plantation nature of the facility. Akin to the variability in camp conditions based on individual sergeants, there was no consistency or predictability when it came to punishment (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 151), though commonly, 5 to 15 lashes were administered as punishment for fighting, stealing, disrespecting officers, or not meeting daily field quotas. The penitentiary’s profit-driven focus, however, made it unfavorable to physically incapacitate inmates, as this would prevent them from working in the fields. Thus, a blunt leather strap rather than a bullwhip or other more painful tool was used for whippings. Corporal punishment was selected over solitary confinement, as officials saw the latter as a “reward,” or ability to escape work responsibilities.

Subsequently, the infliction of corporal punishment at MSP was normalized and considered restrained, relative to other penal contexts of the early 1900s (Banks Taylor, 1999, p.

64). A 1936 article even noted that flogging abuses have rarely been reported from the penitentiary (Clarion Ledger, 1936, p. 6). However, it is important to note the press was very trusting of prison reports, going so far as to significantly praise the penitentiary for humane treatment and a healthy environment (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 79). Due to the isolation of the penitentiary, those in charge worked with minimal authoritative checks in place. Biennial Reports initially written by a politically independent board of trustees went from being forthright about needed improvements and inadequacies of the facility to being much less candid towards the end of this era. Improper conditions and mistreatment existed, given the facility's close resemblance to an antebellum plantation, but they were not being reported by a predominantly black inmate population under the watch of white authority. Conditions at Parchman in its early years were structured around a racialized labor system in which punishment, positive behavioral incentives, and institutional design were intended to maximize agricultural profit rather than promote rehabilitation or security.

Jim Crow 1940-1950

Conditions in the early half of the Jim Crow era had many similarities to the conditions of the Prison Origins era. Housing conditions remained largely unchanged, with open dormitory-style cages that continued to enable inmate violence. Due to the Oakley fire in 1913, housing units were no longer made of wood, which was seen as a physical safety improvement. Greater changes in conditions occurred in 1944, when Marvin Wiggins took over as superintendent. A modest rehabilitation program was developed the same year, and in 1946, a program expansion provided elementary education to 900 incarcerated individuals (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 99). Black inmates, however, were excluded from education and vocational programs. The segregation of the education program generated comparisons between white and black students,

with white inmates receiving formal instruction while black inmates were taught informally in the fields, reinforcing racial hierarchies rooted in slavery.

To Wiggins, “the white stuff,” i.e., cotton, was “the bottom line” (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 110). During his tenure, there was an increase in crop production, leading to expanded agricultural operations (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 94). MSP had turned into a self-sufficient plantation. Parchman also began embracing modern agriculture and field work mechanization. The 1948 Penitentiary Act reduced the need for intensive manual cotton labor and shifted the use of incarcerated labor, replacing around half of the laborers with machines (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 102). Consequently, the decrease in incarcerated labor led to an increased need for educational and vocational opportunities to fill the time of those no longer working all day. These steps were endorsed by Fred Jones, elected as a state senator in 1944, who opposed the intense field labor by incarcerated persons which he considered degrading. Those who worked the cotton fields and obeyed rules and expectations received immediate rewards such as visitation, which helped to maintain a profitable operation (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 120). Crop production was so successful during this era that complaints of small rations prior to Wiggins’ superintendency dissipated, and by 1949, those incarcerated reportedly ate as much as they wanted (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 104).

Decreasing the amount of manual labor needed to sustain the farm also aligned with evolving correctional administration and allowed the state to pursue the Federal Bureau of Prison’s correctional philosophies of education and vocational training (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 102). Parole was also implemented in 1946, allowing many longtime inmates to leave the facility. While it incentivized good behavior and helped with overcrowding, parole also brought challenges to the structure of life at Parchman. Those paroled were often elected into the trusty-shooter position due to the trust and respect they earned over the years of their incarceration. The

departure of this group led to an erosion of middle level management, which threatened the security of the cages (Banks Taylor, 1999, pp. 100-101). As a result of the weakened intermediary authoritative structure created by the trusty system, remaining personnel were forced to fall back on whipping as a way to control inmates.

Wiggins also improved internal incentives to provide staff members with new managerial tools, bolster morale, and create good public relations for the prison (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 96). To address the need for security following the departure of paroled old timers, inmates were incentivized to become trusty-shooters, which came with increased privileges like sleeping quarters away from other inmates (Banks Taylor, 1999, p.121). Other incentives included education and religious programs, improved visitation, motion pictures shown at each camp twice a month, and organized basketball games (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 120). One particularly powerful good behavior incentive was the Christmas furlough program, which started in 1944. This program allowed inmates to leave the penitentiary for 10 days during the holiday season. Another exciting change in this era was the debut of the *Inside World*, a newspaper written by those incarcerated at MSP. In 1950, the newspaper received an award from the National Association of the Penal Press for being the most improved prison newspaper and having the best inside coverage (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 105). The purpose of the paper was to "provide [those incarcerated] with a medium of expression and to assist in overcoming the attitudes, misconceptions, and the stereotyped image some hold regarding prisons, convicts, and ex-convicts" (Inside World, 1973, p. 3).

Though these changes led to improved life, their intent was not for the betterment and enjoyment of those incarcerated. Positive incentives were used to control the incarcerated population and appease the Mississippi public. In the late 1930s to early 1940s, a number of

Mississippians thought Parchman should be doing more than making money as a plantation. Based on Northern political ideologies, the public thought MSP should increase its focus on addressing the underlying causes of criminality and emphasizing rehabilitation (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 83). No reform substantially impacted the penitentiary—but subtle changes such as replacing hanging with the electric chair as a method of execution in 1940 and the establishment of a black juvenile offender institution in 1942—reflected important national shifts in public opinion towards a culture of humaneness, rehabilitation, and reform (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 86).

Wiggins discouraged social interactions between Parchman employees and those outside the institution. He was fond of promoting an "us against the world mentality" and particularly discouraged his employees from interacting with politicians (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 110). Along with a desire to appease the public, it is possible unfavorable conditions were not reported by Wiggins and facility staff even if they did exist. Notably, during this era, Parchman had difficulty hiring and maintaining competent medical personnel (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 105), which invites questions about sanitation, hygiene, and physical health in the facility. Characterized by the beginning half of Wiggins' administration, the Jim Crow era at Parchman began to explore shifts from a strictly profit-driven institution towards a more incentive-based penal structure. While cotton profit was still the primary goal, fulfilled by racialized labor practices, national and state attitudes that encouraged rehabilitation seeped into prison life, even though this was for the purpose of public placation and to maintain good appearances.

Civil Rights Era 1950-1968

The start of the Civil Rights era at Parchman was similar to the end of the previous period. The farm continued to become less dependent on manual labor because of increased mechanization. New work policies introduced in 1951 allowed 2-hour lunch breaks, Monday

through Friday, and ended all work at noon on Saturdays (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 107). Administrators and outsiders described those incarcerated as "remarkably content" during this time, attributing their demeanor to the open nature of the facility and ability to get almost anything they wanted, like drugs or sex. In April of 1955, the warden of the Illinois Penitentiary visited Parchman and reported morale amongst those incarcerated was "the finest seen in a state prison" and that Wiggins' agricultural success was extremely impressive (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 149). An article from the July 1953 *Inside World* issue detailed inmates' sense of significant improvements over the last 10 years, including improved visitation, facilities, medical care, and recreational activities (Milner, 1953, pp. 6, 29, 32). There are some ways to verify claims of improved conditions, such as official reports from 1953 to 1955 that support the notion of improved medical services and working conditions due to not one reported case of heat exhaustion or death from tuberculosis (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 149). The prison, and Wiggins' desire for good press, however, called into doubt positive claims made by inmates.

One *Inside World* article wrote "only prisoners know the real prison" and its true isolation and loneliness (Letts, 1954, p. 7). Despite outward signs of improved conditions, some observers were skeptical of Parchman's rehabilitative claims, and public portrayals of Parchman often conflicted with inmate accounts. In 1953, *The Enterprise Journal* described the penitentiary as "an institution of blame and punishment rather than diagnosis and therapy" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 143), suggesting that the fundamental philosophy of the prison remained punitive. Despite Wiggins' assertion that whippings were only administered on his word, a 16-year-old inmate who served 17 months at Parchman declared an opposing view. Upon his release in 1954, the juvenile said he was lashed on two separate occasions for minor infractions (Clarion Ledger, 1954, p. 1). In the height of the Wiggins era, reports cited an inmate who said positive

conditions such as vocational and educational opportunities were “greatly exaggerated” (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 143). Questionable claims included beneficial school work that taught many individuals to read and write, resulting in 25 graduates in the 1949-1950 school year (Enochs and Warren, 1951, p. 31), and the “swell job” electricians and plumbers did during a 1951 winter storm to keep the Women’s Camp warm and water running (Houston, 1951, p. 33).

Not all media accounts were critical of the prison and its administration. A different 1953 newspaper article cautioned readers against trusting the testimony of prisoners, reminding the public “why these people are at Parchman in the first place” and asserting that some of those reporting mistreatment had committed crimes “so heinous that you would shudder to read the true facts” (Hills, 1953, p. 2). These competing narratives unfolded within a prison system still structured and segregated by race. Wiggins was said to treat inmates with compassion, but still held racist attitudes that influenced expectations of different individuals based on their race. He reportedly was partial to black inmates, who he said outworked white ones. He expected more from white inmates who had “no excuse” compared to black inmates who did not have “a chance in life” (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 118).

In 1953, a Maximum Security Unit (MSU) began construction. It was the first time individual cells were used at the facility. The intent of the unit was to house “dangerous and incorrigible inmates” (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 228). The unit was a low-slung brick and concrete bunker surrounded by four guard towers, two razor wire fences, and electric gates, a stark contrast to the wall-less prison inmates were accustomed to. This increased confinement reflected modernization and political pressure to make the prison more secure. The unit was constructed using prison labor and opened in October of 1954, housing 12 inmates, 10 white and 2 black (Clarion Ledger, 1954, p. 1). It consisted of 52 cells with a steel bunk, intended to house

two people in each, and 4 solitary cells (Inside World, 1953, p. 14). Men were fed in their cells, different from the communal style of eating in other areas of the prison. When occupants were brought to the unit, they were stripped of all clothing aside from underwear, and all personal belongings—except a Bible—were taken from them.

The MSU was erected in spite of Wiggins' initial disapproval. The use of solitary confinement went against the very premise of the institution. Those housed in the MSU were not allowed to go to the fields with other prisoners; all they saw were the guards who brought them their meals three times a day (Hills, 1953, p. 7). This experience contrasted punishments of the past that prioritized an inmate's ability to continue working. In Wiggins' own words, "The idea [was] to change bad attitudes, not to incapacitate a man" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 123) and he described the cells in MSU as "10 times worse than the strap" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 144). However, as labor became less central to the inmate experience at Parchman due to mechanization and agricultural development, control and punishment shifted from productivity-based discipline, like whipping, to security-based incapacitation.

Prior to its opening, there was much speculation amongst inmates about what the unit would mean for life at Parchman. Perhaps to settle tensions, Wiggins later began to support the construction of the unit, claiming it would "prove a balance wheel that will greatly improve conditions at the penitentiary" (Hills, 1953, p. 7) and that once the incorrigibles were removed from the general population, the rest of the prison population would fare better. The unit was more consistent with surveillance-based punishment and incapacitation, indicating a shift in the prison's penal philosophy.

The MSU was in part used as a form of punishment, but also housed the state's new gas chamber, which replaced an oak electric chair. The first execution using the gas chamber was in

1955. The *Inside World* reported on the execution, including the headline "First man to die in the state's new painless (?) gas-chamber" (Durham, 1955, p. 3). News articles covering the execution and modern knowledge on this execution method suggest the gas chamber was not painless. One journalist reported the death as "terribly and lengthily painful" (Hills, p. 5), as the individual repeatedly convulsed and his head bounced back hard against an iron exhaust pipe behind the chair he was sitting in (Hills, 1955, p. 1). The execution changed the spirit of the penitentiary, as men in the MSU reportedly broke into sobs as the inmate was taken from his cell and brought to the chamber (Hills, 1955, p. 1). One inmate said the execution "killed the soul of the farm," leading to less animated and lively chants in the fields and a more somber attitude amongst inmates (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 147). This notion was predicted by the Mississippi Governor, who believed the gas chamber, which he referred to as the "death chamber," would be greatly "demoralizing" to the inmates housed there (Associated Press, 1954, p. 18).

Wiggins' superintendency ended in July of 1956. His immediate successor was Bill Harpole, who was superintendent until 1960. One of his first orders of business was establishing an official conjugal visitation program in 1957. He ordered the construction of one-room buildings intended for conjugal visits during Family Day on Sundays, and they were available to all married couples of all races (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 158). This contrasted with the informal conjugal visits of earlier years, which had a racialized focus and did not require marital relationships. Like Wiggins, Harpole was concerned with good press surrounding MSP and emphasized religious activities such as mass baptisms, to contradict the looming national narrative that the facility was notoriously bad. His efforts, however, were mostly in vain as he was quickly succeeded by someone who called out the facility's poor management.

When Fred Jones became superintendent in 1960, he announced the penitentiary was not maintained as well as the public had been led to believe. He said during Harpole's years the production of crops was abysmal, the dairy and meat-processing plant had been improperly managed, and the hospital operated without trained or experienced personnel (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 166). Despite the media reporting minimal use of corporal punishment during the 1950s, Jones told journalists he found "too much whipping" and that the strap had been used more frequently than the public realized, specifically as punishment for two sit down strikes in August of 1959 (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 167). He also reported that housing units were more than 50 years old with inadequate heating, toilet, and bathing facilities. The new superintendent was not the only one to point out poor conditions at MSP in the early 1960s. The former assistant director of the Federal Penal System visited Parchman in 1961 and criticized "virtually every facet of the penitentiary's operations" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 168). Those incarcerated also complained of mistreatment, overwork, unnutritious food, merciless whippings from staff, and hair being plucked from their faces as a means of torture (Banks Taylor, p. 190).

Jones echoed Wiggins' sentiment that white men had always been the most unmanageable inmates. Due to the Great Depression and the Baby Boom, the number of white inmates at Parchman increased. Literate inmates as well as white inmates were less willing to conform to the "labor-intensive regimen" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 178). Concurrently, black inmates were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and became less manageable. Individuals both inside and outside of Parchman grew uncomfortable with the plantation and slavery undertones that dictated the structure of the institution. Despite improvements throughout the Wiggins era, the administration struggled to balance agriculture with industrial development. A glut in the cotton market also impacted the facility's ability to turn a profit. Parchman could not

continue to operate as a plantation system employing mostly black inmates in the face of growing Civil Rights movements (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 161). The Southern Regional Council published a report in 1968 on prisons in Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, stating penitentiaries in these states relied on “archaic and brutal instruments” to maintain discipline and exact labor (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 191). Between the expansion of the white inmate population and Civil Rights activism, racial control and plantation style labor were becoming increasingly unstable.

Despite growing unrest from the public and Civil Rights leaders calling for rehabilitation, Jones admitted nothing resembling rehabilitation existed at Parchman (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 180). The purpose of the MSU in the 1960s was reportedly to house and “break down those who challenged [MSP’s] racist customs and segregation laws" (Oshinsky, 1996, p. 233). This tactic was notably applied to the Freedom Riders, who were arrested and sent to Parchman in 1961. The MSU was cleared out specifically for the Riders, who were put two in each cell. This was against state law as the Riders were convicted of misdemeanors but were being confined in the MSU (Chicago Defender, 1961). The cells were barred at the front and opened onto a cement corridor that was brightly lit at all hours. They were given prison trunks with no snaps or buttons and three scanty meals a day (Martinson, 1967, p. 134). One Rider reported losing 15 pounds in 45 days (Clark Sr, 1994, p. 23). They were given no toothbrushes or hygiene materials and were forced to tear pieces off their shorts or shirts for sanitary purposes (Clark Sr, 1994, p. 23). Many individuals passed out due to poor air circulation and intense heat. They were permitted to leave the cells only twice a week to shower and were given at most two 10-minute periods a week to exercise (Martinson, 1967, p. 134). In other ways, however, life for the Riders at MSU paralleled that of all inmates at Parchman. Riders noted the ambiguous nature of rules that governed life

within the unit, as staff made no effort to outline official rules and regulations (Martinson, 1967, p. 139). Rules were often unofficially communicated through a set of graded punishments and varied based on different sergeants' work styles. Other inconsistently enforced punishments for the Riders included removal of bedding, being sprayed with fire hoses, and fans being blown on full blast and then shut off for days, making it very hot (Chicago Daily Defender, 1961).

The arrest and treatment of the Freedom Riders at Parchman drew national attention, condemning the facility for its inhumane conditions and forms of punishment. MSP, however, continued to use similar methods of punishment for other activist groups. For instance, the treatment of Charles Evers and more than 250 Natchez local civil rights activists in 1965 was reportedly worse than that of the Freedom Riders. Similar treatment continued into 1966 for those arrested for protesting or demonstrating for Civil Rights. A woman who was also arrested in 1966 reported up to six people being confined to each cell, with only one toilet and no privacy from other arrestees or guards. Along with no sanitation or hygiene products, there was no tissue for those menstruating and no ability to wash their clothes (R. Washington, pp. 16, 17). Prior to this, and in the general population, women were housed separately from men at the Women's Camp.

Litigation in future eras stemmed from these events, including the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, which filed a civil damage suit in federal court concerning the mistreatment of the Natchez demonstrators. *Anderson v. Nosser, 1971*, which addressed the demonstrators' treatment at MSP and held that the institution violated the 8th Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment. The Court stated the demonstrators were treated so horrendously that state officials should remember they "deal with human beings, not dumb driven cattle" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 193).

A further change towards the end of the era was the implementation of security checks for visitors in August 1965 (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 188), another move showing MSP's growing commitment towards a more punitive lifestyle. The vast, free-moving nature of the facility started to disappear. The decades-old trusty system continued to weaken. Due to a lack of reliable, respected, and eligible inmates for the trusty position, sergeants were forced to appoint "conspicuous and notorious criminals" into this role (Banks Taylor, p. 189). The facility could not turn to the employment of civilian guards as it was an undesirable job due to low pay and terrible work conditions, and those who were employed tended to be corrupt or inefficient.

By 1968, Parchman was struggling to sustain itself as a racialized plantation due to the growing Civil Rights movement and a destabilized agricultural sector. The institution began to rely more heavily on isolation and deprivation as forms of punishment to maintain control of those incarcerated, indicating a shift away from the labor-based structure of the earlier years and a new rise of punishment rooted in incapacitation rather than productivity.

War on Drugs 1970-2000

The War on Drugs era at Parchman was significantly defined by the landmark court case *Gates v. Collier (1972)*, filed in February of 1971. The Civil Rights movement and negative press impacted the facility, leading to Judge William Keady's official decision in October of 1972, which was affirmed by the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1974. One particular instance that gained national attention was the death of Danny Bennet in 1970. Preliminary reports stated heatstroke as his cause of death, as he had collapsed in the cotton rows on a 100-degree day, but intense bruising on the body led to further investigation. The public took great interest in the case because he was young, otherwise healthy, and serving only a short sentence. It was revealed he had been beaten with an ax handle and rubber hose by trusties, and tossed in a bus to die (Banks

Taylor, 1999, p. 192). Despite the erosion of the trusty system in the 1960s, the system was still around in 1971. There was no formal training system, and many trusties were serving time for violent crimes. While offense type alone did not render an individual inadequate for the position, 71 percent of those psychologically tested were found to have personality disorders. Thirty-five percent of trusties were not tested at all, calling into question the reliability and safety of the trusty system as a mechanism of prison control. From February 1969 to February 1972, 30 inmates were shot, an additional 29 were shot at but not hit, and 52 were physically beaten by trusties (Lipman, 1974, p. 697).

In 1971, a former correctional officer in Massachusetts who was employed as a driver at Parchman to transport inmates from their camps to the fields for work commented on the "political neglect" of MSP (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 194). He noted run-down, rat infested buildings, rotted wooden steps, and mice inside living quarters. A report from January 1972 cited an inadequate sewage system, improper waste disposal, and unreliable fire protection (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 195). *Gates* formally documented and publicized these conditions, drawing on empirical findings. The Court emphasized the purpose of Parchman had always been to grow cotton, among other crops, and operate as a farm, rather than a corrective or rehabilitative institution. The case described inadequate housing, insufficient numbers of civilian guards, conflicts among inmates, and inadequate medical staff and treatment. Housing units were deemed "unfit for human habitation under any modern concept of decency" (*Gates v. Collier,* 1972). An unsigned letter from the September 1972 issue of the *Inside World* reported the Front Camp had over 100 men with only one wash basin per 35 people. It was "so crowded [they could] hardly find space to walk" and had to "squeeze by half a dozen people to get anywhere" (Inside World, 1972, p. 26). The findings of fact from the case wrote "the policy and practice at

Parchman has been and is to maintain a system of prison facilities segregated by race, and by which the black inmates are subjected to disparate and unequal treatment" (*Gates v. Collier*, 1972). About two times the number of black inmates were required to live in the same amount of dorm space as white inmates and were subjected to greater punishment or more severe discipline than white inmates for similar infractions.

The types of punishment practices used in the MSU were also condemned by the Court. The two solitary cells in the unit were reserved for "psychological punishment for inmates who [were] obstreperous, obstinate, or violated penitentiary discipline" (*Gates v. Collier*, 1972). When punishment began, inmates were placed in the "dark hole," a six by six cell with no lights, sink, commode, window, or furnishing. Inmates were left naked, without adequate food or any hygiene products, and kept in the hole for 48 to 72 hours, during which the cell was not cleaned, and the inmate was not permitted to wash themselves. Common forms of punishment in other parts of the MSU were administering milk of magnesia, which acted as a laxative; stripping inmates of their clothes; turning the fan on inmates while naked and wet; depriving inmates of mattresses, hygienic materials and adequate food; handcuffing inmates to the fence and to cells for long periods of time; shooting at and around inmates to keep them standing or lying in the MSU yard; and using a cattle prod to keep inmates standing or moving.

The Court went on to include relief to be granted without delay, requiring discipline procedures that comport with due process, prohibiting severe corporal punishment that offends modern concepts of human dignity, racially integrating the facility, eliminating racially discriminatory practices at the prison, and requiring conditions in MSU cells to be agreeable to state law without imposition of cruel and unusual punishment. The Court also recognized other needed areas of change, specifically the physical facilities, that would take "substantial funds and

reasonable time to implement," but steps would be taken for these changes to be fully carried out.

After Judge Keady's decision, inmates were generally positive about future change. In the summer of 1973, multiple reports from the *Inside World* included information from Camp writers that their facilities were being upgraded, including new bathrooms (Inside World, 1973). Their excitement, however, was short-lived. It was later revealed that during the same summer, inmates were beaten by prison guards without any legal justification, and that there was new and substantial evidence of cruel and unusual punishment not available during the original case (NYT, 1973). In 1975, forty inmates in the MSU signed a petition asking prison authorities to improve conditions in their unit. The report listed 21 specific complaints including harassment by guards, lack of church services, insufficient exercise, cold meals, and shortage of reading material. In response, prison officials tightened security and increased harassment (Chicago Defender, 1975). Notably, many of the issues raised in the petition had already been addressed in *Gates* and ordered by the court to be addressed. Judge Keady had not done anything to force the administration to follow his order, resulting in the persistence of inadequate conditions.

In the decades following *Gates*, one significant change was the dismantling of the trusty system and barrack-style cages. This change occurred during the 1980s and 1990s in which cellblocks were constructed, and MSP conformed to the national model of criminal corrections (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 197). In 1981, Unit 29 was opened, intended to relieve overcrowding. There were 12 two-tier housing units with six units on each side, divided by a large complex with kitchens, a cafeteria, offices, and a gymnasium (Camire, 1981, p. 1). Two of the housing units had single-man cells, with a capacity of 88 prisoners each. The other 10 units held 128 inmates in a dormitory arrangement, leading to a total capacity of 1,456 beds. Inmates received

far fewer privileges in this unit and had to earn their privileges through a "performance ladder system" (Camire, 1981, p. 1). This system, however, suffered from inconsistency from one unit to the next. The March 1981 issue of the *Inside World* wrote, each unit had its own "unwritten rules," complicating the job of prison officers and policy enforcement (p. 9).

The emergence of Unit 29, along with continued use of Unit 27, the original MSU unit, which the prison warden said was "designated for punitive isolation in connection with the disciplinary process" (Lucas, 1981, p. 7), revealed MSP's full commitment to incapacitation and punishment. Unit 27 continued to be exceptionally inhumane. In February of 1981, 75 percent of inmates in the unit went on a food strike to protest bad conditions and denial of personal property (Inside World, 1981, p. 18). In 1990, another maximum security unit, Unit 32, added more than 15 times the preexisting maximum security bed space at MSP. Considered a "useful tool" by the prison superintendent, the unit was intended for inmates deemed escape risks or threats to guards and other inmates (Walton, 1990, p. 1). Each cell had a bed and toilet, so inmates considered to be of greatest risk could spend 23 hours a day in their cells. In 1991, death-row inmates housed in the unit went on a hunger strike to protest inhumane living conditions, and said conditions were more restrictive than their previous unit, which was under construction at the time. Their sensible requests included asking for daily showers, daily opportunity to see a nurse, and more frequent attorney conferences (Walton, 1991, p. 13). The commissioner of the Corrections Department dismissed their claims, stating it was simply an attempt to get media attention, and asserted that conditions in the unit were above national standards.

In May 1992, a Jackson, MS lawyer said over the past five years, they received several hundred brutality complaints, averaging 28 per year, emerging from MSP (Pettigrew Craft, 1992, p. 17). The executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in Mississippi said

in her 11 months in the position, she had received 26 complaints of physical brutality, 8 of mental cruelty, 3 of excessive force, and 2 of assault at MSP, mostly from the medium and maximum security units (Pettigrew Craft, 1992, p. 17).

The *Gates* decision intended to improve medical care, but there were still significant barriers to reliable medical care in the 1990s. To deter inmates from faking illness, inmates were required to pay $3 for non-emergency medical visits (Pettigrew Kraft, 1996, p. 13). From February to November of 1996, Mississippi collected over $30,000 from the collection of these fees, though the state claimed this was not the intention of the fees, but rather to ensure non-ill inmates were working and not faking their ailment. Complicating the issue of charging for medical visits was that inmates had little to no money. According to the wife of an inmate serving a life sentence, workers in the fields, who now farmed fruits and vegetables rather than cotton, received no wage (Pettigrew Kraft, 1996, p. 13). A spokesman for the Department of Corrections said the wage scale started at 15 cents per hour and capped at 25 cents for those who have worked more than two years.

Gates made some positive changes such as fully integrating the institution and dismantling the trusty system, which were essential to the facility's plantation style labor, leading to its elimination. However, the end of the War on Drugs era begged questions about whether the standard of living for inmates was really any better than it was before formal legal reform. A legislative colleague of Judge Keady said to "not assume that things are necessarily better at Parchman now than they were in Wiggins's last years" (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 199), citing evidence that in the mid 1950s, MSP better supported traditional goals of corrective justice and general welfare of inmates than the facility did in the late 1990s. Despite earlier national sentiments supporting means of rehabilitation, the public began to falter due to this philosophy

"failing," citing rates of increased recidivism (Hopper, 1981, p. 10). These changes in public sentiment led to a significant drop in educational and religious programs at MSP. There was also a growing gang subculture within the prison, with a 1995 article reporting inmates were "running" the facility and controlling "much of the state's drug trafficking from behind bars" (Harrison, 1995). Connecting to Alexander's observation on the War on Drugs, the state's inmate population was over 70 percent black by the late 1990s (Banks Taylor, 1999, p. 201), prompting further questions about the premise of prison and punishment at MSP by the turn of the century. While *Gates* dismantled the overtly racialized plantation labor system, it also facilitated the transition toward a more traditional penal regime centered on isolation, surveillance, and incapacitation rather than economic productivity.

Contemporary Era 2000-Present

The Contemporary Era is similar to the War on Drugs period, as it is characterized by positive changes, typically brought on by legal and/or public pressure, and a subsequent backsliding towards inhumane conditions. Starting in the late 1990s and extending into the 2000s was the overt discrimination and mistreatment of prisoners who were HIV positive. Not unlike the racial segregation of the earlier eras, HIV positive inmates were separated from the rest of the prison, barred from education and vocational opportunities, and lived in dirty, unkempt housing units (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 6). Eighty percent of these individuals were black, and most were imprisoned for nonviolent, typically drug-related, crimes. They were denied medical care, including a drug that had begun to change HIV from a fatal disease to a treatable chronic illness. A doctor associated with the ACLU reviewed prison medical charts and stated inmates were "deliberately denied the standards of care promulgated by [the Community Health Center] and [National Institutes of Health], and it threatens the survival of these men." He went on to

describe care as “grossly inappropriate, resulting in unnecessary pain and suffering, and will be responsible for unnecessary deaths” (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 7).

In response, the ACLU filed an emergency motion to intervene on behalf of HIV positive prisoners in February 1999. In July of that year, a judge asserted the medical care MDOC provided was constitutionally inadequate and entered an injunction to require the state to provide appropriate HIV treatment. However, similar to Judge Keady with *Gates*, the judge declined to order independent monitoring of the injunction, which meant that, for practical purposes, the injunction would not be enforced (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 8). In response, MDOC moved the prisoners to “a feces-smeared, vermin-infested unit,” and staff were “retaliating against those who had played leading roles in the litigation” (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 8). By 2001, however, policy changes were implemented when the MDOC Commissioner adopted recommendations made by a task force that ended segregation and implemented a mandatory educational course on HIV for staff administrators and inmates (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 10). In September, HIV positive inmates were able to join an integrated literacy class and were warmly welcomed by staff and other inmates.

Despite this victory, inhumane conditions prevailed in other parts of the prison. In January 2002, death row inmates engaged in another hunger strike protesting the conditions of their confinement. Among the issues cited were profound isolation, denial of exercise, pervasive filth, malfunctioning plumbing, temperatures of over 130 degrees in summer months, mosquito-infested cells, and leaking rainwater and flooded toilets that led to inmates’ beds and personal items getting wet. They were not provided with any hygiene or cleaning products, and said the lighting in their cells was so dim they were unable to read, write, groom, or clean their cells. The lead plaintiff described an instance when there was no water on death row for a week, causing

sewage to back up, and inmates received only a small amount of water to drink three times a day (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 11). A trial was held in February 2003, and in May, a judge entered an injunction granting most of the relief asked for.

Those not on death row, did not fare much better. They were locked in their cells for 23 to 24 hours a day and treated with excessive force, beatings, and assaults while shackled. Despite the fact that MSU was meant to incarcerate the most “incorrigible," many of the individuals in the unit did not have that kind of criminal or institutional history. Many were in the unit because they had requested protective custody, had special medical needs, or were severely mentally ill (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 12). Long periods of isolation and physical assault in the unit were associated with increased mental health issues for those confined in the unit. In November 2005, a settlement was reached that incorporated all relief held in the death row case and added provisions on due process related to excessive force, classification for being assigned to the MSU, and stated through “good behavior [inmates assigned to Unit 32 and not sentenced to death could] earn their way to less restrictive housing” (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 13).

Despite an outburst of gang violence in 2007 that resulted in inmates not being permitted to leave their cells for any reason, the MDOC Commissioner continued with the classification task force, leading to the release of several hundred carefully selected men from the MSU. More work assignments and recreation areas were created and the prison reduced the number of lockdown areas. As a result, violence decreased, and incidents using force dropped by 70 percent (Winter and Hanlon, 2008, p. 14). This supported a shift in ideology that “difficult” inmates should not be locked away as tightly as possible, as this causes psychological harm and makes inmates even more dangerous when they emerge from isolation (Goode, 2012). Though the early 2000s brought some positive changes to conditions, they required great legal effort and

addressed issues that should have been resolved with the *Gates* decision 30 years prior. A massive victory, however, was the closure of MSU in 2010 as part of a settlement after the ACLU sued MDOC, challenging the unit's inhumane conditions and lack of medical and mental health care (Zhu, 2020).

A notable change in this era was the dismantling of the infamous conjugal visits. While this may seem positive due to the program's initial racist motivations, the elimination of conjugal visits at MSP was not warmly received by all. The closure was especially ill-received since the prison ended more extensive family visits in 2013 (Severson, 2014). Conjugal visits contradicted the broader, contemporary punitive system at MSP. They provided inmates an hour of privacy with their spouses which allowed them to maintain bonds with the outside world and take reprieve from constant surveillance. Those who had long participated in conjugal visits were surprised and upset by the end of the program, stating they found it an essential part of their married relationships. According to officials, reasons for the termination of visits included concerns about pregnancy, cost, and HIV transmission. Women who attend the visits said they were not about sex, but rather about privacy in an environment where all other interactions with their spouses are monitored. The ending of conjugal visits relates to larger implications of increased surveillance and lack of care for those incarcerated. Severing a way for inmates to connect with and relate to the outside world makes reentry more difficult and promotes isolation and incapacitation rather than rehabilitation.

In 2014, the prison started a program, the first of its kind at Parchman, in which inmates spent 18 weeks learning the basics of poetry, fiction, and memoir writing by studying works of a wide range of writers. The inmates then submitted their own memoirs which were published in the book *In Our Own Words: Writings From Parchman Prison*. Participants praised the course,

stating it was “the highpoint of [their] week” (Shaddix, 2014, p. 103) and the course “[brought] a little light to a very dark place” (Bostick, 2014, p. 110). The course ran again in 2016 with inmates expressing similar sentiments. One inmate said the class gave him an outlet to “release some of the tension and stress of everyday life here at Parchman” (Hampton, 2016, p. 195). Another said writing his feelings had allowed him to relieve a lot of his depression and stress (Snow, 2016, p. 196).

Despite the positive impact of this program, conditions took a turn for the worse in the late 2010s and during COVID-19. Inspections done by state health officials in June 2019, revealed hundreds of environmental and sanitation deficiencies similar to those reported in the early 2000s, indicating a lack of maintenance and long-term resolution of poor conditions. From November 2015 to May 2016, 18 inmates died and another six prisoners died in the first 16 days of July 2019. Families of victims said no provisions were made for visitation or phone calls, and medical condition updates were not provided prior to their death. The deaths were attributed to long-term malnourishment, lack of adequate health care services, and exposure to conditions that take a toll on the body (Clarke and Reutter, 2019). Inmates in the Contemporary Era emphasize the monotonous structure of prison life, saying though routine can be helpful, it also has the ability to “hinder one’s mental state of mind [and] make one institutionalized, if [they are] not careful” (Potts, 2016, p. 77).

There was also an uptick in inmate on inmate violence, which some inmates attributed to overcrowding and lack of personal autonomy. In an attempt to quell this violence, authorities moved an undisclosed number of inmates back to the MSU, which had been closed for nearly 10 years (Zhu, 2020). MSP had seemingly done nothing to fix the issues leading to the unit's original closure, as there was no running water or electricity, and cell doors could not be secured.

The efforts to limit violence evidently did not succeed, as two inmates were beaten to death by other inmates in January 2020 (Rojas, 2020). In a separate incident, another inmate housed in Unit 29 was found dead from apparent suicide. The lockdown was also problematic as it prevented inmates from making purchases through the prison canteen, which many of them relied on to supplement the meager food portions MSP provided (Segura, 2020).

Inmates throughout the prison used smuggled cell phones to make calls and share the deteriorating conditions with the public. They reported mold and rats everywhere, unhealed injuries, vermin forcing them to hang leftover food from the ceiling, broken toilets, holes in the wall, dangling wire, and rodents caught in sticky traps (Rojas, 2020). The prison was severely understaffed, in part because of the tough-on-crime measures during the War on Drugs era that increased the prison's population. The smuggled cell phones allowed inmates to report that programs such as choir, radio station, print shop, and visitation had been taken away, causing the prison experience to feel even more dehumanizing and without rehabilitative components (Segura, 2020).

In response, democratic state lawmakers went to the prison to see the conditions and improvements began "almost right away" (Beveridge, 2022). More COs and security guards were hired, and the prison's food system was improved. In January of 2020, lawyers sued corrections officials on behalf of more than 100 Parchman inmates, alleging the conditions amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. A Jackson attorney pointed out that while there had been physical improvements, the facility did not have the proper infrastructure to keep it in good condition, which has been a persistent issue throughout the institution's history (Beveridge, 2022). In the following months, COVID-19 further deteriorated conditions, exacerbated by the facility's poor sanitation system and overcrowding. To limit the spread of the virus, MDOC

prohibited transfers, disallowed visitors—except lawyers—and provided masks and hand sanitizer to inmates and staff (Zhu, 2020). The active lawsuit however alleged the pandemic protocols were not being followed and though officials stated Mississippi had one of the lowest infection rates amongst prison populations in the country, only 20 percent of state inmates had been tested and more than 40 percent of those tested, were positive for COVID-19 (Griesbach & Turcotte, 2021). In April 2022, the Justice Department declared conditions and practices at MSP violated the 8th and 14th amendments by failing to provide adequate mental health treatment, to take sufficient suicide prevention measures, and subjecting people to prolonged isolation in solitary confinement in "egregious conditions" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). In 2023, the 2020 lawsuit was dismissed, citing substantial improvement to conditions including new stainless steel showers, toilets, sinks, upgraded heating and air conditions, ventilation and plumbing systems, an increase in recreational activities, replacment of broken tiles, and mold removal (Ortiz, 2023). The lawyers of the case, however, acknowledge the facility's long history of lawsuits leading to improvements and then backsliding conditions.

The Contemporary Era represents the most complete manifestation of Alexander and Husak's theories in which punishment and incapacitation are normalized, and the struggles of those incarcerated are largely ignored by the general public. Though these qualities of the Contemporary Era are seen in other periods, mass incarceration and disproportionate punishment, which were building throughout the latter half of the 20th century, became fully embedded into the current penal structure. Many of the individuals incarcerated at MSP in this era are serving sentences they received as a result of the War on Drugs, and are overwhelmingly people of color, revealing how mass incarceration produces a predictable, racialized outcome based on established structures of punishment and social control.

As in earlier eras, the Contemporary Era reveals that while reforms may alter the structure of punishment, they rarely meaningfully change the conditions those incarcerated at MSP live in.

Discussion

The current research highlights the instability of prison reforms and the challenges of lasting change in penal institutions. While shifts in ideology, such as MSP's move from profit-driven to incapacitation, may alter punishment forms, these shifts do not necessarily improve living conditions and their humanness or reduce severity of punishment.

Notable sociological theories from Alexander, Husak, and Foucault all correctly explain some aspect of change at MSP, but are incomplete on their own. It is critical to view this literature, along with the lived experiences of those at Parchman, in conjunction with one another, to fully understand the facility's evolution. Alexander's theory properly identifies who is targeted by mass incarceration and explains how racialized social control persists even when the form of control changes. MSP was built upon a racist ideology that mirrored pre-emancipation labor structures that continued until *Gates*. The decrease in labor demands due to mechanization cannot be attributed to an institutional commitment to abandon racial social control and treat inmates with greater humanity, but rather as a productive, profit-driven decision. Changes at MSP were less about moral corrections to systems of inequality and mistreatment, but more about resolving practical issues. This is akin to Foucault's perspective, that shifts away from excessive punishment were not concerned with the humanity of inmates, but for the economic interests of those in power.

Amid these practical changes, black inmates still faced discrimination at MSP and continued to be incarcerated at rates higher than their white counterparts for drug crimes and other nonviolent offenses during the War on Drugs and Contemporary Eras. Mississippi has some of the harshest drug laws in the nation and utilizes habitual laws that lead to unjustifiably long sentences for individuals with prior charges. Habitual laws take two forms. One requires

any person with two prior felony convictions to be sentenced to the maximum term possible for the current offense. The second requires anyone with two prior felony convictions, at least one of which is defined as a violent crime, to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole for their third felony (FWD, 2019). This produces exceptionally long sentences, even for crimes that do not warrant such penalties.

In alignment with Alexander's theory, Mississippi's habitual laws and drug laws disproportionately impact black citizens, leading to their overrepresentation in the prison system and exposure to inhumane conditions at MSP. Black men make up approximately 13 percent of Mississippi's population but account for 75 percent of those facing a 20-plus-year sentence due to a habitual law (FWD, 2019). In 2006, the black population of Mississippi was about 37 percent, yet 57 percent of arrests for drug crimes were black individuals (HRW, 2009). Due to the War on Drugs era, the prison population in Mississippi increased by more than 400 percent between 1980 and 2013 (Khalid et al., 2023). Alexander's theory explicitly covers the "who" of mass incarceration and a drastic increase in the prison population due to drug laws, as seen in MSP. A notable divergence from Alexander's timeline is that data findings suggest a lag effect between policy implementation and lived prison conditions. Lags between policy implementation and impact on incarceration can be attributed to three primary reasons: the lag between a person committing a crime and getting apprehended, pre-sentencing delays between arrest, conviction, and sentencing, and the fact that many prison sentences are served over many years and thus their impact is seen over this entire period of time, not just at the point the crime is committed or the individual is first incarcerated (Listokin, 2007, pp. 6-7). At MSP, the latter two reasons are the most pertinent. Pretrial detainees are not held at MSP. In Mississippi, 45 percent of those in jail are being held pretrial (Vera Institute, 2026), delaying the impact of

criminal policies leading to these individuals' incarceration and the impact of their future sentence. Much of what Alexander predicted is more evident in the Contemporary Era as opposed to the War on Drugs, as many individuals were still serving their multi-decade-long sentences handed out in the ‘80s and ‘90s in the 2000s.

Husak’s theory explains why ideological shifts at MSP represent an expansion of punishment that extends beyond moral and justifiable means. Early in the prison’s history, punishments such as minor whippings or revoking visiting privileges could be framed by administrators as essential to maintaining labor discipline. However, in more recent years, contemporary punishments like extended time in the MSU and brutal physical beatings have no valid justification. Punishment at MSP has suffered from the same overcriminalization seen on a broader, legislative scale that penalizes minor crimes. At Parchman, individuals may be punished excessively for minor infractions, like talking back to guards. The shift from limited use of the MSU to its routine use for minor infractions, reveals a change in the prison’s philosophy to an institution of extreme punishment and incapacitation. Where punishment once functioned as a means to enforce labor discipline, it now operates as an end in itself, meaning punishment at the facility has surpassed moral, reasonable justification. This pattern can be recognized elsewhere, like in zero-tolerance policies to enforce school discipline and digital workplace monitoring where tactics initially intended to be for only extreme circumstances later become more frequent or the default. For the latter, monitoring employees was initially used in specific instances like suspicion of theft, but now has expanded to be a normative practice in which minor deviations are punished (Public Citizen, 2024). Surveillance may initially have served a productive role, but is entering unjustifiable and unbeneficial territory, similar to the use of the MSU at Parchman.

Elements of Foucault's framework appear in the evolution of conditions at Parchman as shifts in the administration of punishment across different time periods at MSP reveal the institution's penal purpose at that given time, as well as increased surveillance in later years. Part of Foucault's theory explains the increase in surveillance at MSP. When considering the physical changes at Parchman through Alexander and Husak's work—an institution that disproportionately targets and punishes black Mississippians—it is clear the shift from open barrack-style cages to more individual lockdown cells worked to decrease inmates' mobility and privacy. In this regard, mass incarceration manifests in MSP through the justification of prison design that supports punitive punishment through maximizing isolation and surveillance. MSP demonstrates that increased surveillance does not replace physical punishment, but instead coexists with corporal control.

MSP deviates from Foucault's framework in a few critical ways. MSP maintained racialized control and plantation-style labor well into the 20th century, a practice that had been largely eliminated elsewhere. Punishment remained about the body, not the "soul" (Foucault, 1975), at MSP for far longer than Foucault suggests. Further, his framework does not consider the racialized organization of labor and control at Parchman. In some ways, Parchman's evolution counters Foucault as punishment became more punitive and physical in later years as the labor regime weakened. Additionally, unlike the Dutch prisons cited by Foucault, at MSP, labor was always about generating a profit and did not hold a rehabilitative purpose. Foucault's framework makes sense when discussing increased surveillance of those incarcerated at Parchman via the development of individual cells in the latter half of the 20th century. Direct examples of this are cited in first-hand accounts of Freedom Riders who spent time in the Maximum Security Unit in 1961, but his theory does not map onto conditions at MSP as directly

as Alexander's and Husak's. The manifestation of Foucault's theory cannot be seen as plainly as the other two sociologists, but is important to note as it is one of the most recognizable penal frameworks of the 20th century. MSP's departure from Foucault emphasizes its uniqueness and deservedness of scholarly attention.

When considered together, these frameworks explain different facets of conditions and punishment at MSP. Alexander identifies who is targeted and recurring structures of racial control, Husak explains the expansion and excess of punishment, and Foucault helps account for shifts in how control is maintained. Though critical to understanding change, these theories are not sufficient to fully explain why change occurred at the facility. It is important to consider factors specific to Parchman that impacted penal conditions, like individual superintendents and their goals for the institution. Superintendency notably led to deviations in the predicted timeline compared to when the change truly took place, as multiple superintendents served during the same time period, and some superintendents spanned multiple predicted periodizations. These micro-level factors shape conditions, but operate within the broader penal context defined by macro-level forces, such as state and national policies. Further research into MSP could include exploring the impact of other micro-level factors specific to the facility, such as religion. Religion was used to appease the public and promote good press for the institution. Inmates welcomed religious opportunities in the fields and elsewhere, so much so that the prison's chaplain said the facility was too large for him to accommodate all the inmates who he described as willing and "in some cases very anxious to hear the Gospel" (Jones, 1921, p. 25). Existing research examining the connection between religion and carceral control in a U.S. state women's prison revealed that religion offered redemption narratives to inmates (Ellis, 2020, p. 758), a practice also seen at Parchman. In the ethnographic study, inmates were also reprimanded by

others for violating religious norms, through direct confrontation or informing prison staff (Ellis, 2020, pp. 763-764). These practices simultaneously enforced prison rules and acted as a form of informal surveillance for the women (Ellis, 2020, p. 766). Based on this research and existing data from this project, it would be a rich area of study to examine how religion simultaneously functioned as a source of solace for inmates and as a mechanism of institutional control and public approval at Parchman.

The development of prison labor could also be a further area of study. Inmates at MSP still work in the fields at Parchman, producing fruits and vegetables rather than cotton. Agricultural prison labor is common in the United States from apple picking in Maine to goat farming in Colorado and given the disproportionate representation of people of color in the prison system, it is worth studying given it has already been denoted as "modern day slavery" (Jou, 2025).

The results of this paper demonstrate how macro-level penal and sociological theories examining mass incarceration, racial control, and punishment manifest in the prison conditions inside a specific penal institution, MSP. While other factors outside of these theories, such as prison leadership, administration, and economic conditions, impacted daily life at Parchman, broad sociological theory related to crime and punishment was still a driving force in reform efforts and persisting unconstitutional conditions. By tracking these changes over the institution's history, this project moves away from broad analytical work to show how macro-level penal theories result in real prison structures and practices that impact the lives of the thousands of people incarcerated at MSP. This thesis places popular works on crime and punishment in conversation by demonstrating shifts in the purpose of incarceration at a certain

facility do not necessarily lead to more humane conditions or create real change for those who must endure incarceration.

Rather than producing lasting change, reforms often result in cycles of improvement followed by regression. Legal or public pressure may prompt institutions to improve inhumane conditions like excessive punishment, unsanitary living quarters, or racialized treatment. Still, lasting change is undermined by weak enforcement, financial limits, legal issues, low commitment, and the hidden nature of prisons. At MSP, poor infrastructure is another important factor. Infrastructure impacts the daily routines and structures at penal institutions (Hackett, 2025), and when the infrastructure does not promote safety, cleanliness, or comfort, staff and inmates alike are focused on immediate survival rather than long-term change. Poor infrastructure also diverts human and financial resources away from sustaining improved conditions towards more immediate safety and security concerns (Hackett, 2025).

These factors allow facilities to return to inhumane, sometimes unconstitutional, practices. The regression may not be to previous practices, but, as seen at MSP, shifts in ideology often do not improve lived experiences for incarcerated people. Alexander's (2010) analysis supports this, showing that periods of change are often followed by new forms of racial control that comply with new rules but maintain inequality. Due to public and legal pressures, not an internal desire to improve the facility, changes at Parchman may have been performative to adhere to new legal standards. This sort of minimal effort could also be the reason for backsliding conditions. This pattern is not unique to Parchman. There were more than 24,000 Prisoner Civil Rights filings in federal court in 2024 (Schlanger, 2022, p. 3). Rather than indicating many isolated incidents, this large figure highlights a high level of persistence or reemergence of unconstitutional conditions on a national scale. Legal reform has been around for

decades, and this recent statistic implies that penal reform across the country has not produced stable or lasting change. Future research should explore obstacles to legal enforcement and ways to make legal reform more effective.

Further, conditions that appear unique to Parchman are present in other penal institutions, such as modern versions of trusty programs that are common in county jails. These systems have vivid similarities to the disbanded Parchman program, providing the most senior trusties with better living conditions, like sleeping in their own cellblock in unlocked cells and occasionally getting to work outside the jail (Howey et al., 2025). Many trusties, former and current, also reported feeling pressure from prison officials to deny violence in the jail to the public. Some who did speak out later faced physical retaliation. This modern-day version mirrors the culture of fear and violence bolstered by the historical system at MSP. Issues at Parchman, like racialized treatment and excessive punishment, are persistent problems throughout the American penal system as a whole that need to be addressed. Research should be conducted on how to identify penal structures that better prioritize humane conditions, respect between staff and inmates, and rehabilitative outcomes across the US, potentially drawing on international models of open prisons and shorter, less punitive sentences. Existing work to draw inspiration from include the Missouri Prison Transformation Project (MPTP), a five-year long trial that seeks to make changes at four Missouri prisons to improve conditions for staff and inmates based on concepts of normalization, humanistic psychology, and dynamic security (MPTP, 2026). The project draws from Western European penal models and has already transformed a housing unit at a Missouri Correctional facility to resemble a common area seen at college dormitories, providing inmates a more comfortable environment to promote improved mental health and morale (Wilkins, 2025). MPTP also importantly focuses on increasing professional rapport between

inmates and staff by encouraging empathetic communication and humanistic language (Wilkins, 2025).

Limitations

The primary limitations of this research stem from the nature of historical archival research. The dataset was limited to accessible sources, which may have been incomplete or biased. While precautions were taken to ensure an unbiased and robust data set, it is still possible data cited in this paper may reflect biases, omissions, or selective reporting inherent in the original sources. Furthermore, time constraints, an inability to access certain archival materials, and conducting research outside the state of Mississippi may have also contributed to the dataset not being completely comprehensive. The majority of data was also collected through the digitization of archival material, and thus, physical archives that may have contained important information were unintentionally excluded. Related to lack of data, this project fails to devote proper attention to women incarcerated at MSP. The facility is, and always has been, predominantly male, but a Women's Camp did exist and was written about in various issues of the *Inside World*. As of 2023, women made up less than 8 percent of Mississippi's custody population (MDOC, 2023, p. 63) and thus were not a primary focus of this paper. There are three women-prisons in Mississippi that would be better suited to analyze how prison conditions in the state have changed for women. Additionally, the War on Drugs impacted all people of color, but this paper did not focus on the experience of Hispanic or Latino individuals incarcerated at MSP. This is because they made up a small portion of the state's penal population, at around one percent in 2023 (MDOC, 2023, p. 63).

This project spans over 100 years of history and thus cannot reasonably cover every detail or change in conditions at the facility. This project prioritized changes that pertained to,

departed from, or supported Alexander and Husak's theories, which served as the guiding framework for research and data collection. Alternative methodology or a mixed method approach involving quantitative data, such as budget reports, could have yielded additional insights into the facility's ability to enact and maintain change. Electronic coding platforms may also be better suited for coding such a high volume of data. These limitations reflect broader challenges in historical research and research on penal institutions, where access to complete and unbiased records is often restricted and unavailable.

Conclusion

Through a case study of the Mississippi State Penitentiary, this project examined how changes in macro-level penal and criminal theories impact day-to-day conditions at the institution. MSP began as a plantation based on racialized social control, drawing from pre-emancipation practices and structures. The facility was primarily concerned with turning a profit dependent on inmate labor, meaning those in power had to ensure the general well-being and cooperativeness of the primarily black inmate population, but only for self-serving purposes. For this reason, punishment and reprimand were not physically incapacitating and prioritized an inmate's continued ability to work.

As agriculture became more mechanized and MSP no longer needed to rely as much on prison labor, the facility's purpose shifted toward incapacitation. The facility remained racially segregated until *Gates v. Collier 1972* which dismantled the plantation style labor system and aimed to address decades of unconstitutional conditions like pervasive filth and inadequate health care. However, due to poor infrastructure and weak enforcement, many of these conditions persisted. More traditional penal structures with a focus on surveillance and isolation were constructed, and punishment shifted from a means of maintaining labor discipline to having

minimal or no justification. Minor infractions were overly punished via extended time in the Maximum Security Unit or even physical beatings. Inmate-on-inmate violence and gang culture also became prevalent further into the 21st century.

Despite multiple lawsuits and reform efforts after *Gates*, MSP continues to exhibit inhumane conditions and treatment, revealing the challenges and limitations of legal reform. It is critical to research and devote resources to addressing these shortcomings to produce stable, long-lasting change at penal institutions like MSP. Concrete steps include ensuring implementation of reform policies or shifting how reform is conducted, such as exploring alternative carceral structures and penal designs. MSP is an institution that has long embodied American racial and penal ideology. Tracking conditions at the institution from a self-sufficient plantation to an institution of extreme incapacitation and isolation is consistent with national changes in racial projects and forms of racialized social control. Despite MSP exhibiting different penal frameworks over its history, at the core of the institution remains the disproportionately arrested and punished Black, typically male, Mississippian. Changes in macro-level theory have done little to truly impact how people at MSP have been treated over time. MSP is representative of a broader issue facing the country regarding mass incarceration, who is most impacted, and a general disregard for these individuals. This paper importantly serves to undo a prominent issue — the invisible inequality that those incarcerated face while behind bars. The lives of those at MSP, both historical and present, deserve attention, and this holistic evolution of conditions at MSP aims to provide a basis for future work to achieve long-lasting penal reform and humanness while incarcerated.

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