

What can be done today to make Dr. King's dream of freedom and justice a reality in our community?

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In Mrs. Carlson's eighth grade U.S. History class, I recall her discussing the Thirteenth Amendment and how it had liberated millions of slaves. Yet, she left out one little clause that had a large impact on African-Americans. It read: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." In turn, African-Americans were arrested for minor crimes such as, loitering or jaywalking, and returned to their previous slave-owners to continue their backbreaking labor. If laws like this still exist within our judicial system, how can we remain free?

Voting is an important way to achieve freedom and justice. Despite popular belief, presidential elections do not affect people's daily lives. When it comes to laws and sanctions, it's the local and state government's decision. Electing mayors, governors, and state representatives that reflect a person's beliefs that will be the best fit for the people is imperative to ensure that safety for all is maintained. If voting for a local representative that has blatantly been discriminatory to a certain race, gender, or group, chances are that person is not the best for the people.

Policing is another important pathway to equilibrium. With police brutality now becoming a personal fear and an epidemic, it's difficult to trust law enforcement. Luckily, there are two ways to place assurance back into the police force: community policing and police anti-bias training. Police anti-bias training is a course that helps law enforcement remove any bias.

The second way of putting trust into the law is to community policing. No matter the economic or social status of that area, having a person constantly stay in area will not only help the community restore its trust in police but put trust from the police back into the community as well. Officer B. G. Samples of Arlington P.D. is a great example. He would come into Gunn Junior High where I would see him interact with many students, especially the ones that constantly got in trouble. He would encourage them to do better. In fact, if you showed him your report card and earned A's and B's, he would reward you with the candy of your choice. This motivated the students to strive for good grades.

Studies show that schools that have more security like metal detectors and weekly drug searches don't decrease crime; in fact, they tend to increase crime. The reason behind that is the thinking, "You treat me like a criminal, then I'll act like one". This only feeds into the school-to-prison pipeline. Unfortunately, this usually happens in schools whose makeup is majority minorities. Black students are about four times as likely to be suspended as white students and almost twice as likely to be expelled was the conclusion from a 2014-15 study. This needs to change; we need to find a better way to discipline kids that misbehave. Instead of pulling students out of school, making them fall behind in classes, we need to work with them. Having them go to a counselor or giving them an older student, is a great way to have the student cope with their feeling and allowing them to express themselves in a healthy way. This tactic should reduce the school-to-prison pipeline. If the student goes through this program and doesn't change, a juvenile detention center should be a good option. The center should be a place where they rehabilitate the student, not become a prerequisite or a preparatory place for jail. According to Campaign for Youth Justice, "community-based programs, including diversion programs, drug treatment, evening reporting centers, treatment clinics and family programs, have been

shown to be less costly than detention or incarceration and to help youth stay out of trouble and to not re-offend.” The program also said “research shows that young people who are kept in the juvenile justice system are less likely to reoffend than young people who are transferred into the adult system.” According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “youth who are transferred from the juvenile court system to the adult criminal system are approximately 34% more likely than youth retained in the juvenile court system to be re-arrested for violent or other crime.” Kids do not deserve to be treated like criminals even if they are arrested for a crime.

Law reform is essential as well. As was stated before, the 13th Amendment allows prison labor to be the new form of slavery. Prisoners are often worked long hours for little to no pay. In the state of Texas, prisoners earn a whopping zero dollars an hour for their labor. We could have the argument that, “They’re criminals; it’s what they deserve.” But is that really true? Former felons in the United States suffer longer than their sentence. They can’t vote for a certain period of time, they have to mark that they’re a felon on job applications, allowing employers to discriminate against them. They’ve already paid with time so there’s no need to continue their punishment. We need to fix a plethora of laws but we can start by reforming laws put in place by the Clinton administration: mandatory minimums and three-strikes. Mandatory minimums remove the power from the local judicial system. The purpose of municipal courts is to judge the case by its circumstances but by forcing these sentences, more people are in jail for a longer time. The power need to be given back to the court. Three-strikes rule only puts people back on jail. If selling drugs is all a person knows, is it realistic to think they’d quit? If it keeps a roof over their head, clothes on their back, and food on their table, why stop at the risk of being arrested. “They should know better; it’s wrong”, is a common claim but it’s human nature to want to continue something isn’t good for them if there is an outcome that is profitable to them.

Instead, while they are incarcerated, they should learn a trade so they do not go back to doing what landed them in prison in the first place. Three strikes place people in prisons three times, and in Texas the third time is for life. If the well being for prisoners isn't concerning then the money being put into it is. The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition found that, "48.5% are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses,²⁴ costing taxpayers almost \$4 million per day." Billions of dollars are being funneled into keeping people in cages when it is cheaper to have them on probation, especially if they are nonviolent offenders. Money, time, and effort is spent on a failing system.

So much needs to be done to fix an ailing system but step by step, hand in hand, we can accomplish a lot. By voting, representatives can work in the community to help the people. The people will trust who they have put in office, such as a police chiefs, mayors, and governors, to do their job honestly and correctly. These community leaders will help students and other young adults to aspire to greatness. If they happen to fall along the way, they won't be trapped in a system that is build for them to fail. Just one small leap of faith can travel a far way. And when fighting gets to hard, because it will, remember this isn't just for us; it is for our community and posterity.