Moynihan stayed on at the Labor Department during Lyndon B. Johnson’s administration, but became increasingly disillusioned with Johnson’s War on Poverty. He believed that the initiative should be run through an established societal institution: the patriarchal family. Fathers should be supported by public policy, in the form of jobs funded by the government. Moynihan believed that unemployment, specifically male unemployment, was the biggest impediment to the social mobility of the poor. He was, it might be said, a conservative radical who disdained service programs such as Head Start and traditional welfare programs such as Aid to Families With Dependent Children, and instead imagined a broad national program that subsidized families through jobs programs for men and a guaranteed minimum income for every family.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-’80s, America’s incarceration rate doubled, from about 150 people per 100,000 to about 300 per 100,000. From the mid-’80s to the mid-’90s, it doubled again. By 2007, it had reached a historic high of 767 people per 100,000, before registering a modest decline to 707 people per 100,000 in 2012. In absolute terms, America’s prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from some 300,000 people to 2.2 million. The United States now accounts for less than 5 percent of the world’s inhabitants—and about 25 percent of its incarcerated inhabitants. In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcerated—10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, compared with only 13 percent of their white peers.

Our carceral state banishes American citizens to a gray wasteland far beyond the promises and protections the government grants its other citizens. Banishment continues long after one’s actual time behind bars has ended, making housing and employment hard to secure. And banishment was not simply a well-intended response to rising crime. It was the method by which we chose to address the problems that preoccupied Moynihan, problems resulting from “three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment.” At a cost of $80 billion a year, American correctional facilities are a social-service program—providing health care, meals, and shelter for a whole class of people.

Through the middle of the 20th century, America’s imprisonment rate hovered at about 110 people per 100,000. Presently, America’s incarceration rate (which accounts for people in prisons and jails) is roughly 12 times the rate in Sweden, eight times the rate in Italy, seven times the rate in Canada, five times the rate in Australia, and four times the rate in Poland. America’s closest to-scale competitor is Russia—and with an autocratic Vladimir Putin locking up about 450 people per 100,000, compared with our 700 or so, it isn’t much of a competition. China has about four times America’s population, but American jails and prisons hold half a million more people. “In short,” an authoritative report issued last year by the National Research Council concluded, “the current U.S. rate of incarceration is unprecedented by both historical and comparative standards.”

… After studying California’s tough “Three Strikes and You’re Out” law—which mandated at least a 25-year sentence for a third “strikeable offense,” such as murder or robbery—researchers at UC Berkeley and the University of Sydney, in Australia, determined in 2001 that the law had reduced the rate of felony crime by no more than 2 percent. Bruce Western, a sociologist at Harvard and one of the leading academic experts on American...
incarceration, looked at the growth in state prisons in recent years and concluded that a 66 percent increase in the state prison population between 1993 and 2001 had reduced the rate of serious crime by a modest 2 to 5 percent—at a cost to taxpayers of $53 billion....

It is estimated that between 30 and 50 percent of all parolees in Los Angeles and San Francisco are homeless. In that context—employment prospects diminished, cut off from one’s children, nowhere to live—one can readily see the difficulty of eluding the ever-present grasp of incarceration, even once an individual is physically out of prison. Many do not elude its grasp. In 1984, 70 percent of all parolees successfully completed their term without arrest and were granted full freedom. In 1996, only 44 percent did. As of 2013, 33 percent do....

In America, the men and women who find themselves lost in the Gray Wastes are not picked at random. A series of risk factors—mental illness, illiteracy, drug addiction, poverty—increases one’s chances of ending up in the ranks of the incarcerated. “Roughly half of today’s prison inmates are functionally illiterate,” Robert Perkinson, an associate professor of American studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, has noted. “Four out of five criminal defendants qualify as indigent before the courts.” Sixty-eight percent of jail inmates were struggling with substance dependence or abuse in 2002. One can imagine a separate world where the state would see these maladies through the lens of government education or public-health programs. Instead it has decided to see them through the lens of criminal justice....

In 1993, Texas rejected a bid to infuse its schools with $750 million—but approved $1 billion to build more prisons. By the end of her term, Richards had presided over “one of the biggest public works projects in Texas history,” according to Robert Perkinson’s Texas Tough: The Rise of America’s Prison Empire. In New York, another liberal governor, Mario Cuomo, found himself facing an exploding prison population. After voters rejected funding for more prisons, Cuomo pulled the money from the Urban Development Corporation, an agency that was supposed to build public housing for the poor. It did—in prison. Under the avowedly liberal Cuomo, New York added more prison beds than under all his predecessors combined...

This was penal welfarism at its finest. Deindustrialization had presented an employment problem for America’s poor and working class of all races. Prison presented a solution: jobs for whites, and warehousing for blacks. Mass incarceration “widened the income gap between white and black Americans,” writes Heather Ann Thompson, a historian at the University of Michigan, “because the infrastructure of the carceral state was located disproportionately in all-white rural communities.”...

Incarceration pushes you out of the job market. Incarceration disqualifies you from feeding your family with food stamps. Incarceration allows for housing discrimination based on a criminal-background check. Incarceration increases your risk of homelessness. Incarceration increases your chances of being incarcerated again. “The prison boom helps us understand how racial inequality in America was sustained, despite great optimism for the social progress of African Americans,” Bruce Western, the Harvard sociologist, writes. “The prison boom is not the main cause of inequality between blacks and whites in America, but it did foreclose upward mobility and deflate hopes for racial equality.”