

## **States of Incarceration**

### **Overview**

The [Humanities Action Lab](#) (HAL) is a collaboration of 40 universities, including 4-year universities, liberal arts colleges, HBCUs, community colleges, and prison education programs, led by Rutgers University-Newark, working with issue organizations and public spaces to:

- Foster new public dialogue on contested, deadlocked social issues, through public humanities projects that explore the diverse local histories and current realities of shared global concerns;
- Open space for experimentation and innovation in how design and public humanities can help confront urgent social problems;
- Combine and connect the diverse local perspectives of communities around the world, to create widely applicable and flexible pedagogical models.

HAL partners collaborate to create major public projects that explore the history, memory, and current realities of a pressing social issue. Each project includes an exhibit, digital platform, oral histories, face-to-face community dialogues, and interactive media. Students and community partners in each participating locality contribute their local histories and perspectives to the international project, which then travels to each community that created it, opening a space to generate and exchange unique locally-grounded approaches to common global questions.

The first such project, [States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories](#) focused on the past, present, and future of incarceration, exploring the explosion of prisons and incarcerated people in the US – including immigration detention centers - and its global dimensions. The project includes a traveling exhibit created by students and others directly impacted by incarceration from 20 different communities around the country (and counting); a digital platform ([www.statesofincarceration.org](http://www.statesofincarceration.org)); innovative and interactive programs held in each local community the exhibit visits; resources for teaching, facilitation, and dialogue. The exhibit opened at The New School in New York City in April 2016 and is now [traveling to cities around the country](#).

**Why States of Incarceration?** The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, and by far. According to The Sentencing Project, there are currently “2.2 million people in the nation’s prisons and jails--a 500% increase over the last forty years.” America’s incarceration rate is more than 50% higher than Russia (in second place) and more than four times higher than China’s. These statistics are deeply divided by race. “Today, people of color make up 37% of the U.S. population,” the report continues, “but 67% of the prison population.”<sup>1</sup> This happened fast: in 1972, there were only 300,000 people behind bars in the US; today, that number has skyrocketed seven times. And it’s unique in US history: the country now has the most incarcerated people per capita and in absolute terms than ever before. Today’s statistics not only describe a transformation of our prison system, but how its recent, rapid, and racialized growth has shaped society on a wider scale:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>

labor and economic systems; racial power structures; landscapes and communities; and democratic practice. What happened? How is it rooted in much longer histories? And how can exploring the path to this point help us change course in the future?

**Why not leave it to the experts? Local discovery, national dialogue:** HAL projects are student- and community-driven, involving an ongoing dialogue among local student teams, their community partners (people outside the university directly impacted by incarceration in diverse ways), their faculty coordinators, and their counterparts across the country. HAL university partners offer courses, through which students collaborate with community partners to curate a history of a local site of incarceration as one piece of the national project.

Becoming a part of the HAL community has had a lasting impact on our university partners, including:

- **Innovative and transformative pedagogies:** More than half of university professors have recently recognized the importance of public humanities and use it in their classrooms. And more universities are intentionally incorporating it into their curriculum. HAL faculty have been at the forefront of these efforts at their universities. Participation in States of Incarceration has resulted in standing courses, lecture series, and new, academic programs.
- **Inter-institutional and community collaborations:** States of Incarceration has activated new partnerships between and within universities, and universities and their communities, that extend long after the exhibit has come and gone.
- **Measurable impact:** HAL meticulously evaluates its strategic goals and the impact of each project on students, faculty, and communities using both qualitative and quantitative data. This information and analysis has been used to support applications for external and internal funding and tenure/promotion, in addition to helping faculty document their students' learning and engagement with the project's experimental and experiential ways of teaching and learning.

**What is the impact of States of Incarceration on communities?** As described above, each local "chapter" is created through a collaboration among students and others directly impacted by incarceration in a variety of ways. In addition, men and women directly impacted by incarceration have been involved at every stage, including the national working group that framed the traveling exhibition's guiding questions and designed potential public interaction mechanisms that allowing affected communities to create and share stories in an ongoing way as the exhibit grows and travels.

On the local level, hosting the exhibit presents a great opportunity for communities to examine local histories in greater detail in the interest of thinking through the ways they can collaborate to create change in the places where they live. The exhibition tackles everything from race to gender to juvenile justice to life sentences. Over the last three years, States of Incarceration has hosted over 100 public programs in twenty cities across the country. Here are just a few ways that our partners have activated the traveling exhibit:

- **Structured dialogue/public forums** are designed to engage multiple and varied stakeholders in dialogue around a particular topic related to mass incarceration. For example, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Ohio hosted open forums where community members were able to interact with and ask questions of representatives from their local corrections' departments.
- **Community mobilizing** events serve as a great way to share information about local campaigns or policy issues. The "Shape the Debate" feature on the States of Incarceration

website is a built-in tool that allows facilitators to poll community members and collect data. For example, in Louisiana, local partners used the “Shape the Debate” feature as a means of demonstrating to state legislators the overwhelming community support for “banning the box” on college applications in the state.

- **Films screenings/performances/storytelling** utilize the arts as a vehicle for community conversations about mass incarceration. Partners have hosted everything from poetry readings to plays to story circles in the interest of centering the voices of those who are directly impacted in a way that creates a safe space for dialogue.
- **Community education** events can take the form of teach-ins or workshops. These allow participants to learn tangible skills and information related to criminal justice reform. In Massachusetts, for example, our partners hosted a series of free “know your rights” workshops. In Indiana, our collaborators offered mental health first aid certification classes, which present an alternative to calling police.

## **Become an SOI partner: Add Your Community’s Story**

*States of Incarceration* is designed to grow and change as new communities add their histories and contemporary experiences of mass incarceration. Here’s how your university can participate:

### **Partner obligations**

- Teach a course on the history of incarceration nationally/globally as well as in your local community, using resources provided by HAL
- Lead students to collaborate with others directly impacted by incarceration outside the college/university to curate a new “chapter” of SOI about a history of incarceration in your state/community, using SOI design templates and workplans, for inclusion in physical and digital SOI exhibit
- Install and host the exhibit at a local venue
- Host public dialogues around exhibit
- Pay HAL digital and physical exhibit design/fabrication fee of:
  - \$6000 for exhibit panel to be integrated into [national traveling exhibit](#), plus new area on web platform with unlimited digital material (see examples [here](#))
  - \$750 shipping for the exhibition
- Assume or facilitate (through collaboration with local venue or organization) costs of local hosting, including:
  - Support for community partnership: cost varies depending on nature of collaboration but is typically around \$1000-2000 for the community partners’ time and any other expenses such as travel costs, food, etc.
  - Packing, unpacking, exhibit installation: labor costs vary by institution
  - Public programming: cost varies depending on scale and scope of programming

### **HAL Resources and Obligations**

- Provide teaching resources on both subject and methodology, including readings and other media on incarceration histories, and guidelines and models for community collaboration/co-curation and dialogue facilitation
- Administer week-by-week curation work plan, providing guidelines for how to work with your team to produce a “chapter” within a 15-week semester
- Provide design guidelines detailing number of images, amount of text, and options for media

and formats for both physical and digital exhibits

- Design and produce digital and physical exhibit (physical design and production can also be done locally if local partner prefers)
- Ship and insure the exhibit
- Assist partners in designing public programs and provide facilitation resources
- Provide marketing and communications support for local events
- Curate digital platform for student reflections on States of Incarceration blog
- Host national convenings with other partners with opportunities for students, faculty, and community partners to exchange work and experiences
- Provide InDesign files and material specifications and instructions for production of optional additional local exhibits

## **Timeline**

### **Months 1-3**

- Identify and schedule course and local community curator partner organization
- Work with local community partners to identify broad local theme/topic and map out collaboration agreement (describing how students and community partners will work together to curate “chapter”, what compensation will be offered, if any, under what terms, etc.)

### **Months 4-6**

- Conduct preliminary research on local topic; gather sources
- Create syllabus based on customized curation plan

### **Months 7-9**

- Teach course and facilitate student/community collaboration
- By end of course: finalize choices/editing of images, text, digital media for “chapter”; send to HAL or local designer
- Identify venue for hosting exhibit

### **Months 10-12**

- HAL or local designer fabricates physical exhibit panel
- HAL integrates digital media into [www.statesofincarceration.org](http://www.statesofincarceration.org)

### **Months 13-15**

- Exhibit chapter integrated into traveling exhibit
- Complete local exhibit, if choosing to create one

### **Months 16-?**

- Host exhibit
- Host public programming