Harvard Data Science Review • Issue 3.3, Summer 2021

Two Regimes of Prison Data Collection

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Published on: Jul 30, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/99608f92.72825001>

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Column Editors’ Note: *From risk assessment scores to facial recognition, data-driven tools have become central to policing and punishment over the last century, and they are also urgent sites of struggle and contestation. Presumptions about criminality—and the data collected in the name of tracking criminal behavior—prove to be deeply intertwined with other kinds of data sets, from census and municipal records to that of insurance and mortgage companies. In this column, political scientist and historian Kaneesha Johnson traces the changing form and content of prison data and questions how and why different communities and institutions collect the data they do. In particular, she compares the data gathered about crime and incarceration by the U.S. government with data gathered by incarcerated people and their communities in part to show that what we measure, collect, and count is always a reflection of the world we are trying to create.*

Keywords: prison data, community data

The first records of state organized data collections of prisons and incarcerated people in the United States began with the 1850 census and remains one of the most widely cited sources of adult prison data. The first iteration gathered a few basic points of information; number of people incarcerated, geography, race, age, nativity, and sex. Although seemingly straightforward, the questions, and the people who crafted them, established a statistical lock-in of how to understand the prison system and those held within it.

The *content* of data that is gathered—what is being asked and recorded—and the initial intentions driving data gathering often dictate the parameters of our understanding (Nobles, 2000). For instance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Survey of Prison Inmates gathers data pertaining to the status of a sentence: awaiting trial, awaiting sentencing, awaiting revocation hearing, or serving sentence. This gives us information for understanding where people are in the system and identifying those who are being held for pretrial detention, and for how long. Whereas a survey conducted by incarcerated people at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, who have a more personal understanding of the sentencing process, in addition to counting sentence lengths also gathers data on the perception and quality of legal representation, thus moving beyond a story of who is where and giving us the necessary details of why people are held up in the system, reasons often beyond an individual’s control.

Contrasting the history and content of national state-sourced prison data with data collected by those most acutely impacted by the prison invites a new perspective of the role of the former. State prison data is primarily concerned with counting and painting a picture of who occupies a system; what they did, what they look like, and what are some select individual behaviors. It rests on an assumption that everything is best known from afar—especially by those who receive training from Western universities, whose job it is to produce ‘valid’ knowledge (Mignolo, 2011), whereas community data collection grapples with the experience of living within the prison, the conditions that are faced, institutional failures, and the ripple effect of prisons on the wider

community. This later form of collection relies on an expertise found not within the ivory tower, but in those proximal to the harm and who believe that experience itself is valuable knowledge.

State Collected Prison Data

The leading national state-sourced corrections data collection has historically been the U. S. Census Bureau, the National Prisoner Statistics (NPS), and the BJS, all of which continue to be relied upon as some of the main authorities for national state-sourced data.¹ These data serve to both count the prison population and as a foundation for national policy (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020). Since the census' 1850 inception, despite some year-to-year variations on the specific questions included in the decennial census collection, the general categories of the questions have remained unambiguously similar to the initial years.

There are two somewhat contradictory points on the importance of data infrastructure establishment. First, it is important to have some kind of stable and over-time measure of a system, hence, reproducing questions is a necessary practice to understand longitudinal change. Second, data collection has important epistemological value—what is asked and recorded in the beginning becomes increasingly important over time, not because of measurement or comparison purposes, but because of the ways in which it shapes our understanding of the system. In reference to prison data, the data has power to limit our perception of who serves time in prisons and the reasons why they are there.

Tables 1–3 provide an overview of the type of information collected by the three state prison data collection bodies. Each table provides information on three broad categories: prison and sentence related, demographics, and other (mostly socioeconomic information)

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The most striking takeaway from Table 1 is that the questions asked in the 2010 census are identical to the questions asked in the 1850 census: number incarcerated, location of prison, type of prison, sex, race, and age. Second, although there is a level of statistical inertia, there is also expansion at specific points. Beginning in the 1880s, the census intensified its data collection of incarcerated individuals, collecting information pertaining to their occupation, formal schooling, health, and citizenship. The 1850 census had made imprisonment something to do with locality and race. Between 1890 and 1980, the census made connections between incarceration and individual factors: health, income, literacy, occupation, and so on.

In 1926, 76 years after the census began to gather prison data, the NPS joined the practice. Despite being moved to various departments over the duration of its existence, the content of the data has remained fairly constant, and mirrors the information we observe in the census (see Table 2).

Table 2. Questions related to prisons on the national prisoner statistics 1926–2018.

Prison and sentence related	
Number incarcerated and prison capacities (capacity added 1978)	Parole violations
Geography	Type of prison; private, local, other state (added 1999)
Length of sentence	Number died while incarcerated/reason for exit
Demographics	
Sex	Race and ethnicity
Age categories (age 17 or younger added 1998)	Citizenship (added 1998)
Other	
Health - HIV/AIDS testing and status (added 1999)	

The BJS, which began in 1979, is the most comprehensive national state-sourced data resource and comprises multiple surveys conducted both yearly and periodically.² While each survey alters slightly in scope, the main categories of data closely resemble both the census and the NPS.³ The most notable exception is the Survey of Prisons Inmates (Table 4, column 5), which to date has only been conducted in 2016 and it is unknown whether the collection will become a regular fixture in future data collection efforts.

Table 3. Bureau of Justice Statistics “inmate” question categories.

Annual Survey of Jails	National Inmate Survey	Report of Inmate Under Sentence of Death	Survey of Inmates in Local Jails	Survey of Prison Inmates
Prison and sentence related				
Year	Year	Year	Year	Year
Number incarcerated and capacity		Number incarcerated	Number incarcerated	Number incarcerated
Geography	Geography	Geography	Geography	Geography

	Type of prison	Type of prison	Type of prison	Type of prison
	Length of sentence		Length of sentence	Length of sentence
	Prior admission	Prior prison admission	Prior prison admission	Prior prison admission and criminal history
Status of sentence		Status of sentence and method of execution		Status of sentence
Type of offense				Type of offense
		Date of arrest and sentence		Date of arrest and sentence
		Reason for removal		
			Sentence fees	Sentence fees
				Information on victim
Demographics				
Sex	Sex	Sex	Sex	Sex
Race/color/ethnicity	Race/color/ethnicity	Race/color/ethnicity	Race/color/ethnicity	Race/color/ethnicity
Age category	Age	Age	Age	Age
	Sexual orientation			
				Citizenry
				Nativity
Other				
	Victim of sexual assault			
		Marital status	Marital status and children	Marital status and children and contact with them

		Schooling	Schooling and employment	Schooling, employment, and income (including work in prison)
			Health	Health
			Drug and alcohol use (including parent information)	Drug and alcohol use

The information collected by each agency adheres to similar categories. All collect general prison and sentencing information: year, number incarcerated, location of prison, type of prison, sentence length, and reason for exit. Demographic information remains consistent; sex, race, age. Socioeconomic information includes health, years of formal schooling, employment and income prior to incarceration, drug and alcohol use, and marital status.

What *exactly* is the problem with relying on standards that were established in data collections of the late 19th century? For one thing, these data collections and their reproduction of 19th-century questions do not address the evolution in our understanding of the causes and consequences of the prison system, most notably the shifting from personal behaviors and traits to more structural factors—including the changing political landscape (Owens & Smith, 2012), reactions to civil rights gains (Weaver, 2007), the public’s willingness to ascribe to tough-on-crime policies (Enns, 2014), and the social and economic interests in maintaining and expanding the prison industrial complex (Carceral Tech Resistance Network 2020; CR10 Publications Collective 2008; Parenti, 2000).

The widening scope of prison data collection also emerged as White supremacy was mutating under a new system. No longer permitted to delegate Black people to a bottom-class citizenry through the institution of slavery, more innovative techniques had to be developed to explain why a delegation must be made. Those first iterations of census prison data collection coincided with a revival of racial science around the globe (Riegel, 1933; Shaler, 1890), which eventually found its way to the practice of crime and prison data collection (DuBois, 1897; Floyd, 2006; Hoffman, 1896). As highlighted by Khalil Muhammad, Francis A. Walker, the superintendent of the 1870 census and lead of the 1880 census, played an important role in elevating Frederick Hoffman’s *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, one of the first book-length accounts of Black criminality in the United States, which relied heavily on the Eleventh Census of the United States in 1890 data to come to conclusions of Aryan superiority (Muhammad, 2010).

Walter F. Willcox, also a central figure in the development of the census, in 1899 wrote of the “criminal tendencies” of the African American, “from all the evidence obtainable it seems clear that Southern agriculture

is become increasingly diversified, and is demanding and receiving a constantly increasing amount of industry, energy, and intelligence,—characteristics which the whites more generally possess or more readily develop” (Willcox, 1899, p. 11). He continues to describe the “lower class African American” as “styled potentially criminal” (p. 14), and that the only way for White people to govern Black people is not through personal loyalty, as he believed existed during slavery, but through an increasing amount of force and punishment.

The continual fabrication of data as an ‘objective’ measure of criminality among Black Americans ultimately gave legitimacy to systematic punishment, because ‘they are the ones who commit the crimes,’ a sentiment that has persisted with such fierce intensity that it remains exceedingly difficult to detach from. It also mutes the fact that criminality is a constructed phenomenon, rather than an immutable character trait, inducing a moral panic to legitimize the expansion of the carceral state and the punishment of certain groups (Gilmore, 1999; Hall, 1978).

Community Sourced Prison Data

When seeking answers using data, we are confined to what the data allows us to ask, and what we ask can often be restricted to the biases of the person, or institution, who decided what is important to ask from the outset. What questions should we be asking to gain a better understanding of the world through data collection? Where should we look for guidance in formulating those questions? Community-sourced data collections are likely our best bet. People who have lived within or with the prison system add meaning to otherwise arbitrary distinctions and question assumptions made by those who have not; should we think of crime as a cause or an effect? What are the physical conditions of the prisons? How has prison impacted your mental and physical health? What constitutes a long prison sentence?

In 1976, in an attempt to fill the knowledge gap, the editors of the *Angolite*, a newspaper founded in 1942 and produced by incarcerated people in the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP), also known as Angola prison, conducted a prison-wide study to better understand the state of the “longtermers,” which they use to describe those who had been confined for at least 10 years in a single stretch. Their mission:

“Why do they keep them locked up so long, when they let others out?” Is a question often wondered about by many of us. Four months ago THE ANGOLITE decided to try to find an answer to that question. And we tried. Unfortunately, nobody had information as to how many “old-timers” are confined, who they are, to any other data pertinent to that group of prisoners. We were faced with the choice of either securing the data ourselves or doing like everyone else – forget it. We decided to do it, see what we could dredge up. (The Angolite Editors, 1976)

The study took 2 months to complete and included a comprehensive survey of the majority of the longtermers population of the LSP. While the study has some components that reflect the state-sourced data collection, including basic demographic and sentencing information, there are a number of questions that unveil some

critical components of the prison commonly overlooked by national data collections. Figure 1 shows the section of the study that looks at the assistance received from longtermers.

TABLE 6 LONGTERMERS/AMOUNT OF ASSISTANCE OR LACK OF IT
BASED UPON RANDOM SELECTION OF 88 CONFINED OVER 10 YEARS
IN LOUISIANA STATE PENITENTIARY, PERIOD ENDING 12/31/76

	BLACK	%	WHITE	%	TOTAL	TOTAL%
FORMER FRIENDS:						
Have Forgotten Them	58	79	13	87	71	81
Have Not Forgotten Them	15	21	2	13	17	19
	73	100%	15	100%	88	100%
FAMILY:						
Trying To Get Them Out	50	68	9	67	59	67
Doing Nothing To Help	23	32	6	33	29	33
	73	100%	15	100%	88	100%
EXTENT & SOURCE OF ASSISTANCE:						
Getting Most Assistance From:						
--Relatives	42	57	6	40	48	55
--Wife/Girlfriend	6	8	5	33	11	13
--New Friends	14	19			14	16
--No One	11	15	4	27	15	17
	73	99%	15	100%	88	101%
FREQUENCY OF VISITS FROM FRIENDS & RELATIVES:						
Never Received A Visit	27	37	7	46	34	38
Received 1 Visit	6	8	3	20	9	10
" 2 "	4	6	1	7	5	6
" 3 "	4	6	1	7	5	6
" 6 or more	32	43	3	20	35	40
	73	100%	15	100%	88	100%

Figure 1. The Angolite "longtermers" study, amount of assistance or lack of it, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale.

The longtermers survey asks 88 randomly selected men confined for more than 10 years whether their former friends have forgotten them (81% yes), whether their families are actively trying to get them out (61% yes), and where their main source of assistance is derived from: relatives (55%), partner (13%), new friends (17%), or no one (17%). These numbers demonstrate far more than a counting game of who is incarcerated. It shows both the devastating effect that incarceration has on friendships—81% of longtermers believed that their former friends had forgotten them, and 38% percent of them had never received a visit from a friend or relative—as well as the staggering amount of time and resources families spend trying to get their loved ones out of the prison—67% believed that their families were trying to get them out after at least 10 years of imprisonment. The study also reveals shocking numbers surrounding the legal representation of longtermers.

Only 26% believed that their lawyer tried to help them and 93% did not have the original attorney that handled their case.

The *Angolite* longtermers study is just one example of how data collection can look entirely different when taking an alternate position to the state. The National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons (NCSCUP) was founded in 1994 by people living inside and outside of prison walls to “engage in collecting data, education, fostering public awareness, and acting to put an end to human rights abuses that occur daily in control units” (NCSCUP, 1995a). The campaign gathered a huge amount of information by reaching out directly to people incarcerated in control units—defined as units that “disable prisoners through spiritual, psychological, and/or physical breakdown” (NCSCUP, 1995a)—and documented the conditions they were subjected to. Figure 2 shows a copy of a questionnaire included in their 1995 *National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons How to Packet* (NCSCUP, 1995b).

NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO STOP CONTROL UNIT PRISONS (NCSCUP) MONITORING PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE			
Name (optional) _____	Register Number (optional) _____	Today's Date _____	
Prison and unit name and address _____			
Age _____	Race _____	Male/Female _____	Arrival Date _____
(1) PLACEMENT IN CONTROL UNIT: (a) Were you sent to control unit from court? _____ Y _____ N (b) Were you sent to control unit from another state? _____ Y _____ N (c) Were you sent to control unit from another prison? _____ Y _____ N If so what was your level there? [] Max. [] Control Unit [] Comm. Corr. [] Camp [] Min. [] Med. [] Close (d) Was it a state prison or federal prison? _____ State _____ Federal (e) Reason why the DOC or prison staff placed you in control unit: [] Administrative [] Disciplinary (f) Reason(s) why you think you were placed in control unit. (optional) _____ _____ (g) Have you ever been in a control unit before? _____ Y _____ N If yes when, for how long, and why? _____ _____			
(2) CLASSIFICATION HEARING AND CLASSIFICATION REVIEWS: (a) Did you have a classification hearing before being sent to control unit? _____ Y _____ N (b) Were you sent notice of this hearing? _____ Y _____ N (c) Were you present at this hearing? _____ Y _____ N (d) What evidence was used by the prison staff to send you to control unit? [] prison staff reports or testimony [] prisoner testimony [] confidential information [] physical evidence [] other _____ (e) Were you allowed to present evidence? _____ Y _____ N (f) Were you allowed to challenge evidence against you? _____ Y _____ N (g) What prison staff was present at the hearing? _____ (h) Has your classification been reviewed since you've been in the control unit? _____ Y _____ N (1) How often is it reviewed? _____ (2) Can you be present at the review? _____ Y _____ N (3) Date of your last classification review: _____ (4) Did they tell you what you need to do in order to leave the control unit? _____ Y _____ N (5) What do you have to do? _____ (i) What reasons were given for keeping you at the control unit? _____ _____ (j) Do you know when you will leave the control unit? _____ Y _____ N (k) Have you ever appealed being sent to the control unit? _____ Y _____ N (1) How did you appeal? _____ _____			
(3) PRISON CONDITIONS (a) Cell: (1) How big is your cell? _____ (2) Does the bed have restraints or bracelets attached to it? _____ Y _____ N (3) Do you control the light in your cell? _____ Y _____ N (4) If not, when are the lights on? _____ (5) What personal property do they allow in your cell? _____ (6) Can you see outside from your cell? _____ Y _____ N (7) What kind of doors are on your cell? [] barred [] solid steel [] honey combed steel [] plexiglass [] combination (b) Can you smoke in the prison? _____ Y _____ N (c) Do you have a cellmate? _____ Y _____ N (d) How many hours a day are you in your cell? _____ (e) Do you eat in your cell? _____ Y _____ N (f) Do you eat with others? _____ Y _____ N (g) Do you shower in your cell? _____ Y _____ N (h) How many times a week do you have yard? (1) Is yard outside, inside or both? _____ (2) Do you have access to direct sunlight when exercising? _____ Y _____ N (3) Describe the area you exercise in and equipment if any. _____ _____ (4) Do you have yard with others? _____ Y _____ N (5) How much time do you have in the yard? _____ (6) What happens if the weather is bad? _____ (7) If you chose not to go to yard, why? _____ (i) Are you allowed to talk to other prisoners from your cell? _____ Y _____ N (j) Are there a different levels with different "privileges" in the control unit? _____ Y _____ N If so, please explain: (1) If there is a step program, where are you in it? _____ (k) Have you ever been forcibly removed from your cell? _____ Y _____ N (1) When? _____ (2) Why? _____ (3) How many prison guards were involved? _____ (4) What type of weapons or protection did they have? [] batons [] shields [] tear gas/pepper spray [] stun guns [] other _____ (5) Was the forced cell extraction video taped? _____ Y _____ N (6) What were you written up for? _____ (7) Were you found guilty? _____ Y _____ N (8) Describe any injuries: _____ _____ (l) Have you ever been physically restrained? _____ Y _____ N (1) What kind of restraints were used? _____ (2) How long were you restrained? _____ (3) Why were you restrained? _____ (4) What were you written up for? _____ (5) Were you found guilty? _____ Y _____ N (6) Were you beaten while restrained? _____ Y _____ N (7) Describe any injuries: _____ _____ (m) Other than what's listed have you ever been assaulted by a guard since you've been in the control unit? Y _____ N Describe: _____ (n) Have you ever been assaulted by another prisoner while in control unit? _____ Y _____ N If yes by: Cell mate _____ Other _____			

<p>(4) PRIVILEGES AND SERVICES</p> <p>(a) Are educational classes available in the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) What kind? ☐ GED ☐ College course correspondence ☐ Other _____</p> <p>(2) Is there a teacher available to you at the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(3) Are classes available only over the TV? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(b) Is job training available at the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) What kind? _____</p> <p>(c) Can control unit prisoners have a job? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) If yes, do you have a job? ☐ Y ☐ N What kind? _____ (2) What are the rules for getting a job? _____</p> <p>(3) What's the pay per day or month? _____</p> <p>(d) Are religious services available at the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) For what religions? _____ (2) Can prisoners attend religious services together? ☐ Y ☐ N (3) Are religious services available only on TV? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(e) Did you have a mental health evaluation before placement in the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (f) Have you had a mental health evaluation while in the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (g) Have you had mental health treatment in the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) What kind of treatment? _____ (2) Is treatment/therapy offered on TV? ☐ Y ☐ N (3) When was the last time you saw someone from mental health? _____ (4) Are you getting all the mental health services you need? ☐ Y ☐ N If not, explain _____</p> <p>(5) Are you taking any medication for a mental health condition? ☐ Y ☐ N (6) For what? _____ (7) How long have you been taking this medication? _____ (8) Are you voluntarily taking this medication? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(h) Are you getting the medical services you need? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) If not, briefly explain _____</p> <p>(2) Are there fees for the medical services? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(i) How often do you have access to the law library? _____ (1) Are you allowed to make copies? ☐ Y ☐ N (2) Do you have access to a legal assistant? ☐ Y ☐ N (3) Do you have communication with Jail House Lawyers? ☐ Y ☐ N (4) Other comments: _____</p> <p>(j) Are you allowed visitors? ☐ Y ☐ N (1) Are the social visits contact or non-contact? _____ (2) Are the attorney visits contact or non-contact? _____ (3) Are you allowed privacy during attorney/legal visits? ☐ Y ☐ N (4) Do your visitors have problems with staff or getting the visits? ☐ Y ☐ N If yes, please explain _____ (5) How often are you allowed visitors? _____ (6) How long are the visits? ☐ 1 hour ☐ 1-2 hours ☐ 2-4 hours ☐ 4 hours or more ☐ other _____ (7) Are visitors limited to people that you knew prior to your incarceration? ☐ Y ☐ N (8) Are children allowed to visit you? ☐ Y ☐ N (9) How many visiting days are there in the week? _____</p> <p>(k) How often are you allowed to use the telephone? _____ (1) Are you allowed to make collect calls? ☐ Y ☐ N</p> <p>(l) How much money a month can you spend at the canteen? _____</p>	<p>(5) Do you know of any legal cases concerning conditions or other issues against the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (a) If yes, what is the case name, number and jurisdiction? _____</p> <p>(6) Have you noticed any psychological changes since you have been in the control unit? ☐ Y ☐ N (a) Do you have problems with your ability to concentrate or focus? If so, please describe _____ (b) Do you have trouble reading? If so, please explain _____ (c) Are you jumpy? Please describe _____ (d) Are you sensitive to noise? Please describe _____ (e) Are you irritable? Please explain _____ (f) Do you have trouble remembering things? Please describe _____ (g) Do you have thoughts you can't turn off? Please describe _____ (h) Do you see things on the wall? Please explain _____ (i) Do you see things that aren't really there? Explain _____ (j) Do you have restlessness? Describe _____ (k) Are you easily agitated? Describe _____ (l) Do you have feelings of fear or paranoia? Please explain _____ (m) Do you have feelings of anger or thoughts of violence? Describe _____</p> <p>(7) Do you have any other major complaints or information that you think we should be aware of regarding the control unit? _____</p> <p>(8) Please list the name, address and phone number of anyone (family member, friend, attorney) you think may be interested in monitoring the control unit, so we can contact them. _____</p> <p>Thank you for your time.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PLEASE RETURN QUESTIONNAIRE TO:</p>
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Figure 2. Questionnaire from National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons How to Packet, 1995, Freedom Archives.

Similar to the *Angolite* longtermers survey, the NCSCUP gathered basic demographic information and information in four broad categories: placement in control units, classification hearings and classification reviews, prison conditions, and privileges and services. In each section, respondents were asked to provide information on topics that, for those looking from a distance, (1) could be assumed to be the case, such as asking if the person has access to legal assistance, or (2) would have not considered asking: “Can you see outside from your cell?,” “Do you have access to direct sunlight?,” “Do you have thoughts you can’t turn off?” The NCSCUP goes beyond individual traits of the respondent and questions the way the system functions: “Were you allowed to present evidence [in your classification hearing]?,” “Were you able to challenge evidence against you [in your classification hearing]?”; thus recognizing that the system itself, rather than character traits or individual actions, often dictates outcomes.

Beyond a comprehensive understanding, data collected by the NCSCUP were used in a larger campaign to “monitor conditions in control prison units across the country, and seek to resist, and eventually abolish, all control unit prisons” (Ikuta, 1995). The NCSCUP, aided by the 1995 survey, had a number of early wins, including the release of four political prisoners being held in control units.

The juxtaposition of the two regimes of prison data collection reveal that community data gathering not only results in a more complete understanding of the prison system, it allows for more meaningful interventions in

response to harms created by the system. Prison data collection may have been born from Enlightenment-era projects of state-based data collection and racial science, but we are no longer bound by those limitations in understanding. What might the future of prison data consumption look like? It involves those of us who have relied too extensively on state data to interrogate who established the data infrastructure and why they were motivated to do so. It requires us to be diligent in seeking out the geneses of data so that we do not unknowingly accept and reproduce potentially misguided conclusions. By relying uncritically on state-sourced data that originated with an agenda of proving racial inferiority, we risk embedding the assumptions behind those claims in future research.

This is not to say that the conclusions we come to, by using state data, are *always* going to reproduce biases. It is also not to say that the questions asked in state prison data collections are inherently bad; indeed, movements have been successful in repurposing them to help give evidence of deeply unequal outcomes and to change carceral policies. But our reliance on state data has precluded much of our ability to see the whole picture. What might our research, policies, and understanding of the world look like if we move from a belief that the trajectory of a person's life after prison is not determined by the years of formal education they have received, but whether they lived for years in a system that did not give them access to direct sunlight?

Disclosure Statement

Kaneesha R. Johnson has no financial or non-financial disclosures to share for this article.

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Footnotes

1. Due to the localized nature of the prison system in the United States, there are numerous data collections occurring at the state and local levels, which often differ dramatically in content. [↵](#)
2. Current active surveys for the adult incarcerated population are the Annual Survey of Jails, Census of Jail Inmates, National Inmate Survey (as funding permits), National Prisoner Statistics Programs (moved under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Justice Statistics from 1979), Report of Inmate Under Sentence of Death, Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, and Survey of Prison Inmates. [↵](#)
3. An exception is the *National Survey of Youth in Custody*, which gathers extensive data in accordance with the *Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003* as specified in the act. [↵](#)