

FIRST DEGREE

Director's Statement

After making a recent documentary about capital punishment, I wanted to address another criminal justice controversy—mass incarceration. America has 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prisoners. Since launching the war on drugs in the 1970s, there has been a 700% increase in our prison population. The land of the free is now the world's biggest jailer with almost seven million Americans in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole.

If our prisons were effectively rehabilitating inmates and making our communities safer, it might be possible to justify the 80 billion dollars a year we spend on mass incarceration, but our prisons do an abysmal job of preparing inmates for productive lives once they return to their communities. Over three quarters of released inmates are re-arrested within five years, and over half return to prison.

The expression “sent up the river” was coined by convicts who were sent up the Hudson River to do their time at the infamous Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. I heard rumors that this notorious maximum security prison had an unusual college program that was successfully preventing Sing Sing inmates from being sent back up the river after their release. I set out to investigate Sing Sing's secret to curbing recidivism and met some unforgettable inmates along the way.

FIRST DEGREE is primarily an intimate portrait of three Sing Sing inmates who discover the transformative power of higher education. Jermaine Archer, serving 22 years for murder, says, “It costs \$60,000 dollars, approximately, to house a person in prison for one year. And I think it costs \$54,000 to go to Harvard for a year... if I do my time, and you let me go home because I did the 20 years that the state sentenced me to, there's a good chance it becomes a recycling bin. Whereas it shows that if you give me an education, instead of that drug dealer, I can be that accountant. Instead of that pimp, I can be a lawyer. I mean there are so many different options for me now, and I understand that with this education.” Sean Pica, a former inmate now serving as the college program's Director, says, “Less than one percent of our graduates that have been through the program and are now home have returned to prison—phenomenal statistics that save this country and this community about eight million dollars a year. So, for a program that is privately funded, saving New York State taxpayers eight million dollars a year, I'm not sure I see the downside to that.”

Nationwide, every dollar we spend on prison education programs saves five dollars on re-incarceration costs. But, Congress withdrew prison education funding in 1994, and the number of prison college programs dropped from 350 to about a dozen. My hope is that FIRST DEGREE can make a wary public realize that prison education saves money as well as lives.