

"Guilty Until Proven Innocent";  
A Manifesto of a rehabilitated, long TERM Offender  
By Antonio Balderas: Voice of the poor and incarcerated.

My name is antonio Balderas. I am currently incarcerated at Stateville Correctional center in Joliet, Illinois. I have been locked away both mentally and physically for 31 years, I've been wrongfully convicted of a captial-murder and sentenced to life without parole. In March of 1988, I was twenty-six years old and a three time felon. The circumstances surrounding my arrest and coerced false confession wasn't as dramatic and well-known as some of the recent John Burge type violations and abuses. Yet the results were similar in that I was psychologically and even physically made to confess to crimes I did not commit or have knowledge about.

I was handcuffed to a ring on a wall in a windowless room at area 6th Police Precinct for six hours at a time and then I would be rehandcuffed with my hands behind my back so tightly that my circulation was cut-off. So much so that I reached the point of losing full consciousness.

I was threatened with the death penalty and was called all kinds of words: n-words, scum bag, you name it. I was told to go along with an incriminating verison of the crime that was vividly described by the arresting officer. I felt alone and isolated. My request to remainsilent and to have a lawyer present were ignored by my captors.

I knew I was a three time convicted felon long before I was threatened with the death penalty.

On March 4th 1988, I was psychologically and physically tortured and coerced to go along with a prepared verison of events and circumstances that the arresting suggested had occurred. Everybody around me was white-and angry! In this "Crook-County just-Us-System", if you are a minority and poor don't expect any Justice or fundamental fairness!

Futhermore, the criminal justice system in Illinois is racially discriminatory. (Numerous works such as Nicole Gonzalez Van Cleave's Crook County Racism and Injustice in America's largest Criminal Court can provide a more thorough narrative than this brief viewpoint of mine.) Nevertheless, I find it more than necessary to contribute to the narrative that helps to expose this cycle of massive incarceration and inequality that's driven by the flawed criminal justice apparatus. This helps to only fuel a cycle a poverty and racial dicrimination, handed out in the disguise of Justice.

In crook-county courts, the only legal representation for the poor is ~~██████████~~ a state public defender who is guided by a sponsored plea-bargain system orchestrated by a state prosecutor and/or state public defender who is overwhelmed with a montage of pending court cases.



The plea-bargain system is the cruel foundation that helps to drive the racial balance to an inherently flawed demise. This system is blind to it's own faults and has failed to protect and serve those who gave it the power to do so.

Illinois court system are disproportionately discriminatory towards the poor and minorities who take on roles as slaves of the Judicial system. Today, I am rehabilitated. But it's not due to the "sincere" efforts of the Illinois Department of Corrections. It is due to the innate power of redemption that is imbued in all of us, no matter our race, creed or color. In a civilized society, every time a person (male, female, adult or juvenile) is convicted of a crime and sentenced to a period of incarceration, they're supposed to be evaluated based on Article 4 one Section Eleven (XI of the US Constitution). The flawed Just-Us system is over populated with minorities and poor people, It is based upon mass incarceration of the poor to fuel and support the new "Jim Crow Prison Industrial Complex".

Despite this racially based Judicial Criminal-Holocaust carried out against them, defendants who have been rightfully or wrongfully convicted have managed to survive with the help of family and friends. They have helped themselves to be released from wrongful convictions handed out by a flawed system under the disguise of legislation aimed at getting "tough on crimes" that actually target the poor and minorities. This plague on the poor and incarcerated men and women continues to force people to rehabilitate themselves.

Thanks to the help of ~~and~~ family and friends and support groups and organizations like Prison Neighborhood arts project which comes into the prison system and helps inmates to educate themselves by learning and sharing in a controlled environment. Over the last twenty eight years of incarceration, I have enrolled into many such programs to help increase my knowledge of the arts and other studies.

I've witnessed positive change in men who society has given no chance for rehab or redemption. In contrast, I have also observed that despite it's many flawed operational procedures that are systematically hinged together by racist techniques and quotas, nothing has changed in the Crook-County Just-us system.

In fact, despite of Gray-Lord judges taking bribes to fix cases as well as the Burge torture victims who were made to confess (like I was). I have witnessed the abolition of the Death Penalty yet this racially discriminatory system still flourishes with no accountability or integrity. The mass of poor and incarcerated has increased by thousands totally overcrowded prisons and masking them unsafe and unmanageable because of the lack of basic human resources and care. The mass number of poor and incarcerated-minorities who are ensnared in this vicious web of systemic racism that is adjudicated by Judges in Crook-County (as well as other counties.) These Judges are not concerned with how and when these convicted individuals might be returned back into society or if they have been rehabilitated with basic job skills in order to find work upon release so that they can provide



for themselves(or their families) and can become productive citizens once and for all.

Relatedly, it is <sup>said</sup> ~~sad~~ that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, I submit that it takes a whole entire community to help rehabilitate and restore a citizen back to useful citizenship. Nevertheless this process must proceed after a suspect or defendant has received a Fair and Just proceeding during the entire criminal process held against him no matter of race, creed, color, or his or her financial status. The surviving family members of both victims and defendants suffer also when a crime is committed and a loved one is harmed or when someone is taken out of the household, in a civilized society Society itself is judged according to how it treats its weakest and most vulnerable. Such a measuring stick should shape how the judicial system treats the poor and minorities in their very midst.

To date, there have ~~been~~ some victories for many wrongfully convicted, but the system itself is still broken and flawed. New meaningful reforms and safeguards are needed to assure that fundamental fairness is given out and not merely spoken about in passing or behind closed political doors. As part of a civilized human race and society, we must all play a role in restoring our most vulnerable to full useful citizenship. And in so doing, we as a society will have acted in a civilized manner towards those who will take their rightful place back into society thereby making our society stronger in the process.

The cycle of racial Injustice and inequality is real. and it will get even worse unless society and or the public-at-large recognizes all the present and past injustices put upon people of color and/or minorities and the poor. Although recognizing the problem is only the tip of the iceberg, we as a society must start recognizing how to use the tool of restorative justice and reform to help rehabilitate a system that has become criminal in itself. Moreover, real reforms begin by changing laws through legislation and acted on behalf of those who have been unfairly adjudicated by a racist and bias system simply because there a certain color or poor. A person should never be perceived as guilty or innocent based upon race Creed or nationality or financial status, which sadly seems to be the overwhelming perception of judges and police who lie to incriminate innocent defendants who are later proven to be not guilty. Today, in 2019, millions of tax dollars have been rightly paid cut by a failed system of justice that should have initially been used towards real reforms that might help restore integrity and accountability into a broken system. The time is now and the need is reform!

"I remain! Antonio Balderas, voice of the Poor and Incarcerated!"

"Guilty until I am proven Innocent\$?"

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