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A LOOK BE Urban Studies

The United States is home to 5 percent of the world's population, but it holds 25 percent of the world's prisoners. The country's current trend towards mass incarceration is especially apparent in the state of Wisconsin. An April 2018 article in [Wisconsin Lawyer](#), published by the State Bar of Wisconsin, notes that the state has among the highest rates of racial disparity when it comes to incarceration, and the state's prison system costs taxpayers more than \$1.2 billion last year.

But just how did these current circumstances come about?

That's the question driving urban studies graduate student Kayla Kuo's research. She presented her work, "Mass Incarceration in the Land of the Free: A Look at Wisconsin Prisons and Criminal Injustice System," at UWM's annual [Urban Studies Student Research Forum](#) in May. Her work explores how historic legislative actions and public attitudes shaped our current prison system.

The main culprit driving mass incarceration dates back to the 1970s, Kuo said.

"Nationally, including in Wisconsin, we saw more tough-on-crime policies as a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement. This goes hand-in-hand with the War on Drugs," she said. "(Public perception) began to shift to think, we have to protect the citizens (i.e., white, middle-class people), rather than these 'criminals' (nonwhite and/or poor citizens)."

Beginning around 1976, Wisconsin began to enact tougher legal penalties, including for drug-related offenses. The public responded favorably; Kuo noted that, "If you were running as a governor or an elected official, you had to appear tough on crime. It wasn't just talk; we saw a lot of that rhetoric going into actual practice."

That included in 1998 when then-state representative Scott Walker, who later sat as Wisconsin's governor from 2010-2018, introduced Wisconsin's Truth In Sentencing Act. The legislation, signed into law by then-governor Tommy Thompson, essentially abolished parole so that incarcerated people would serve the entirety of a prison sentence handed down by a judge.

BEHIND THE BARS

student tracks state's history of mass incarceration

“Legislators also introduced longer penalties and sentences. We see a lot more people in prisons for longer periods of time without any early release programs. We also see more people coming into prisons,” Kuo said. “Wisconsin has always (relied) on the solution of building more prisons to deal with overcrowding, and the state uses rehabilitation as the justification for the prison regime. But from what we’ve seen since the 1970s, we know that it doesn’t reduce crime, nor does it come close to ‘rehabilitating’ people since prisons can result in violent trauma for those incarcerated.”

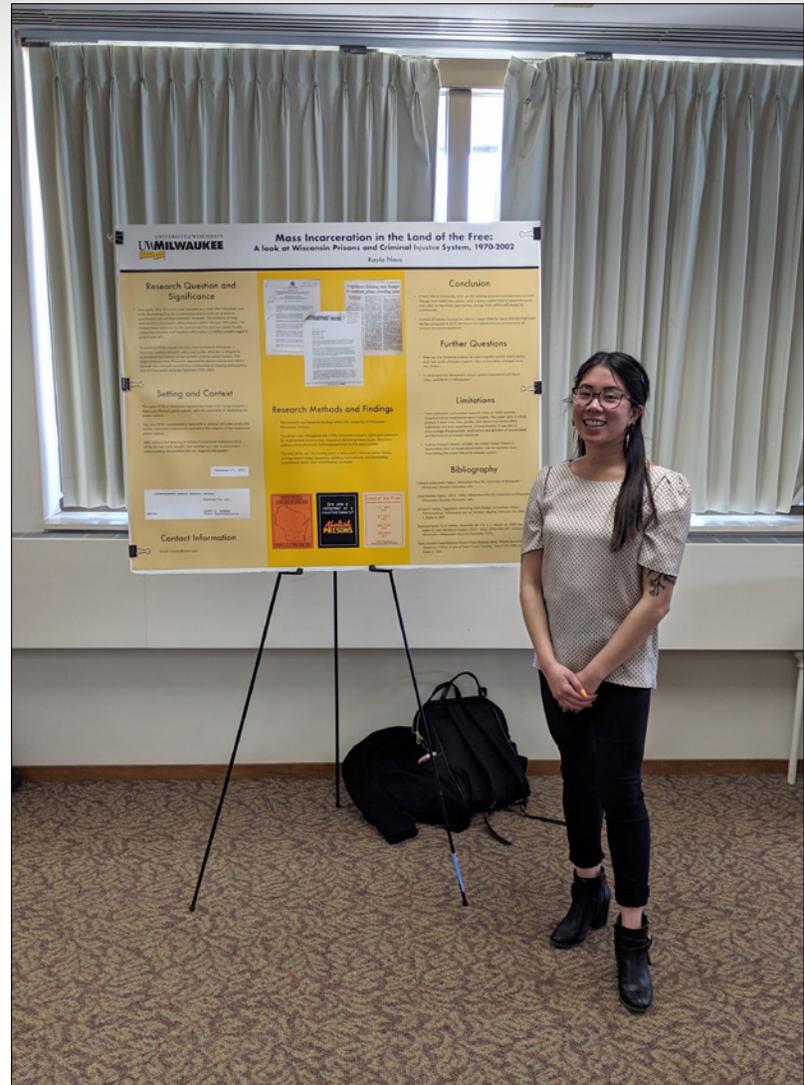
Today, Wisconsin operates 37 prisons, and Gov. Tony Evers’ proposed budget includes increased funding for the penal system.

These tough-on-crime laws have had a huge social and economic impact, and black men in Wisconsin have been hit the hardest. Despite evidence that white and black people commit crimes at the same rates, Wisconsin sees black people incarcerated at 11.5 times the rate as white people. For comparison, said Kuo, the national average is 5.6.

“It’s very clear that we can’t talk about prisons without talking about racial justice,” she added. “We can see the ways that race, socioeconomic status, and geographical location all are a significant factor in who ... is going to be sent to prison, or will have more encounters with the police.”

Kuo became interested in studying mass incarceration and prison reform movements when she volunteered with LGBT Books to Prisoners, a Madison-based organization that provides reading and educational materials to LGBT people who have been incarcerated. The more she learned about Wisconsin’s prison system, the more she wanted to research it so others could be aware of the size and scope of mass incarceration.

“The fact that we don’t talk about it is a reason why this topic should be studied. It not only allows for dialogue, but it can become a seed for education and learning,” she said.



Kayla Kuo stands in front of her poster at the annual Urban Studies Student Research Forum in May. Her research focused on the history and effects of mass incarceration in Wisconsin. Photo courtesy of Kayla Kuo.

Kuo plans to continue her research on mass incarceration. Her Master’s thesis will focus on prison abolition and why it should be considered a family-centered issue.

By Sarah Vickery, College of Letters & Science