Layperson Summary

The purpose of a criminal justice system is to prevent crime, as well as to punish those who commit crimes. Imprisonment is a penalty with the aim of not only correcting unlawful behavior, but also discouraging others from committing the same crimes. The United States has the largest prison population in the world, and houses approximately half of the world’s prisoners. Almost as alarming as the sheer number of individuals in United States prisons, is the racial differences among those in prison. Racial and ethnic minorities make the majority of those imprisoned in the U.S. The imprisonment rate of African American males is the highest of any racial group. Drug laws and law enforcement has contributed greatly to the increased incarceration rate over the past several decades. In 1980, 41,000 Americans were incarcerated for drug offenses; by 2013, the number rose to 489,000. Individuals convicted of drug offenses are held in prison longer periods because of sentencing laws.

My thesis aims to provide the history behind why the United States currently has the more individuals in prison than any other country in the world. I will specifically look at the War on Drugs of the 1980s launched by President Ronald Reagan and its effect on the current imprisonment statistics. I am interested in the development of drug laws under the Reagan Administration, and how law enforcement as a whole changed during this period. Looking at the reasons why these policies specifically targeted racial and ethnic minorities is particularly interesting to me. I hope to provide insight into the political, economic, and social factors that led to this phenomenon and challenge certain misconceptions about the issue.
Another aspect of my research question looks at the effect of the media on making drugs seem like a large problem and creating fear of crime. I will argue that the perceived threat and fear of violent crime among suburban white voters, helped to support and justify the government changes to law enforcement and drug legislation. I will investigate the language used by media outlets as well as government officials, and how they affected public perception of crime in America. I also want to compare black and white responses to the War on Drugs.

Mass incarceration is an issue that is not only relevant, but one that is not necessarily common knowledge. I believe that my research will provide insight into a problem that has been affecting our country for decades.