

Numbers Don't Lie... Or Do They?

Sergio Hyland

BEFORE YOU READ: Scan the title, the headings, the vocabulary words, and the pull quote. What do you think this article is about?

Can You Argue with Numbers?

I like challenges; I'm a natural competitor. I love arguing, debating, and questioning. For all of those reasons, I HATE numbers! Numbers are

I don't have to be a negative statistic. Neither do you.

the only thing in the world that you can't argue with.

Think about it: in any language, in any culture, $1 + 1$ always equals 2. I hate it! I'm

used to listening to a person take a stance on an issue, so I can jump right in and challenge it. Sometimes I win; sometimes I lose. But at least I could put up a fight. With math, I was thinking, there is no fight. But then I started considering the math of my life. This is the math that supposedly tells my life story:

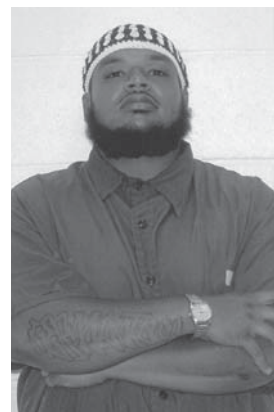
- In 1997, when I was 16 years old, the U.S. Bureau of Justice published a report that said that African American men had a 28.5% chance of going to prison in their lifetime.¹
- Three out of every 200 Philadelphians are incarcerated. African Americans account for about 11% of Pennsylvania's population, but nearly 50% of Pennsylvania's prison population.²



Recidivism (n)
the tendency for someone who has committed a crime to commit another crime

Recidivate (v)
to return to a previous behavior

- Incarceration rates for people of color are seven times higher than they are for our white counterparts.³



- Between 1996 and 2003, only 107,000 people accounted for the nearly 241,000 arrests. Why? Because the same people keep getting rearrested.⁴
- About 71% of African Americans recidivate.
- When African Americans are released from prison, they can expect to make about 11% less than whites with the same amount of education and vocational training. Furthermore, about 25% of people leaving prison are homeless.⁵

Turning the Numbers Around for Me

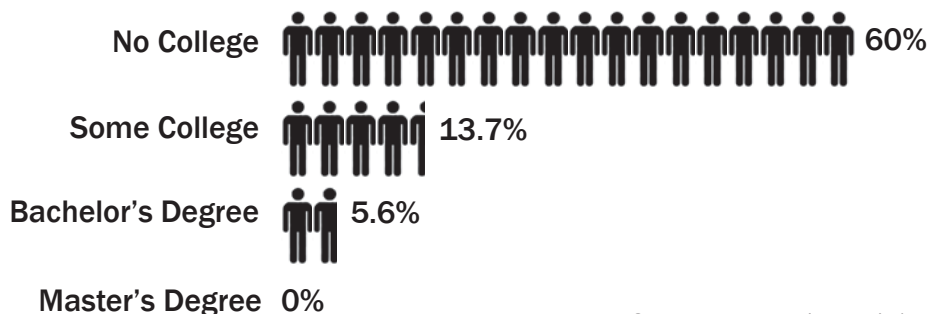
That's a whole lot of math to digest right there, and as the old adage goes: numbers don't lie.

That may be true. But those numbers do not have to be my destiny. The way I see it, there are two things that need to happen: First, I have to make some life adjustments. For example, did you know that if I get a college degree while I'm incarcerated, the recidivism rate for someone like me drops from 71% to less than 10%? What if I worked hard and focused on securing housing before I was released, instead of waiting to find it when I got out? That would eliminate me from the 25% of those who are homeless when they're released.

The Power of Us

Second, we need to notice that there is power in numbers—our numbers! There are a lot of us

Recidivism Rate and Prisoner Access to College



Source: <www.wesleyan.edu/cpe/About/whycip.html>

Study the chart above. According to the chart, what is the relationship between getting access to college in prison and the recidivism rate? In math, we talk about positive and negative correlation. Two variables are positively correlated when one goes up as the other goes up. They are negatively correlated when one goes down as the other goes up. Is the recidivism rate positively or negatively correlated with college access?

whose stories are told by these negative statistics, but what if we joined together in large numbers? We could create a force that will reverse these statistical trends. For example, we can vote for policies that bring more education into prisons and that help prisoners find housing and jobs when they are released. We could address the roots of the incarceration crisis, too.

You see, statistics are about more than just numbers. There are people behind those statistics, and, as people, we can challenge the math. My point is: don't let the numbers tell you what you CAN'T do. I don't have to be a negative statistic. Neither do you. It can be difficult; it can be discouraging; but it can be done. All you have to do is remember that WE make the numbers; the numbers don't make us!

Sergio Hyland is currently incarcerated at SCI Chester, in Pennsylvania, where he is working on earning an Associate's Degree in General Studies.

Sources: 1. <bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/Llgsfp.pdf>; 2. Rosenstock, "Home for Good," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 6-21-16; 3. Mika'il Deveaux, "The Trauma of the Incarceration Experience." *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, 2004; 4. Urban Institute Report: "Instituting Lasting Reforms for Prisoner Reentry in Philadelphia," 2006; 5. Ibid.



The U.S. has 4% of the world's population but 25% of the world's incarcerated population. Share what you see in the image above. What is the illustrator trying to say? Look up other statistics about incarceration in the U.S. How does the author, Sergio Hyland, say we can challenge the statistics? What do you think? Study this topic further by reading the "Prisons" issue of *The Change Agent*.