Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration

Eastern State Penitentiary
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania //
Opened May 6, 2016; closing date undetermined

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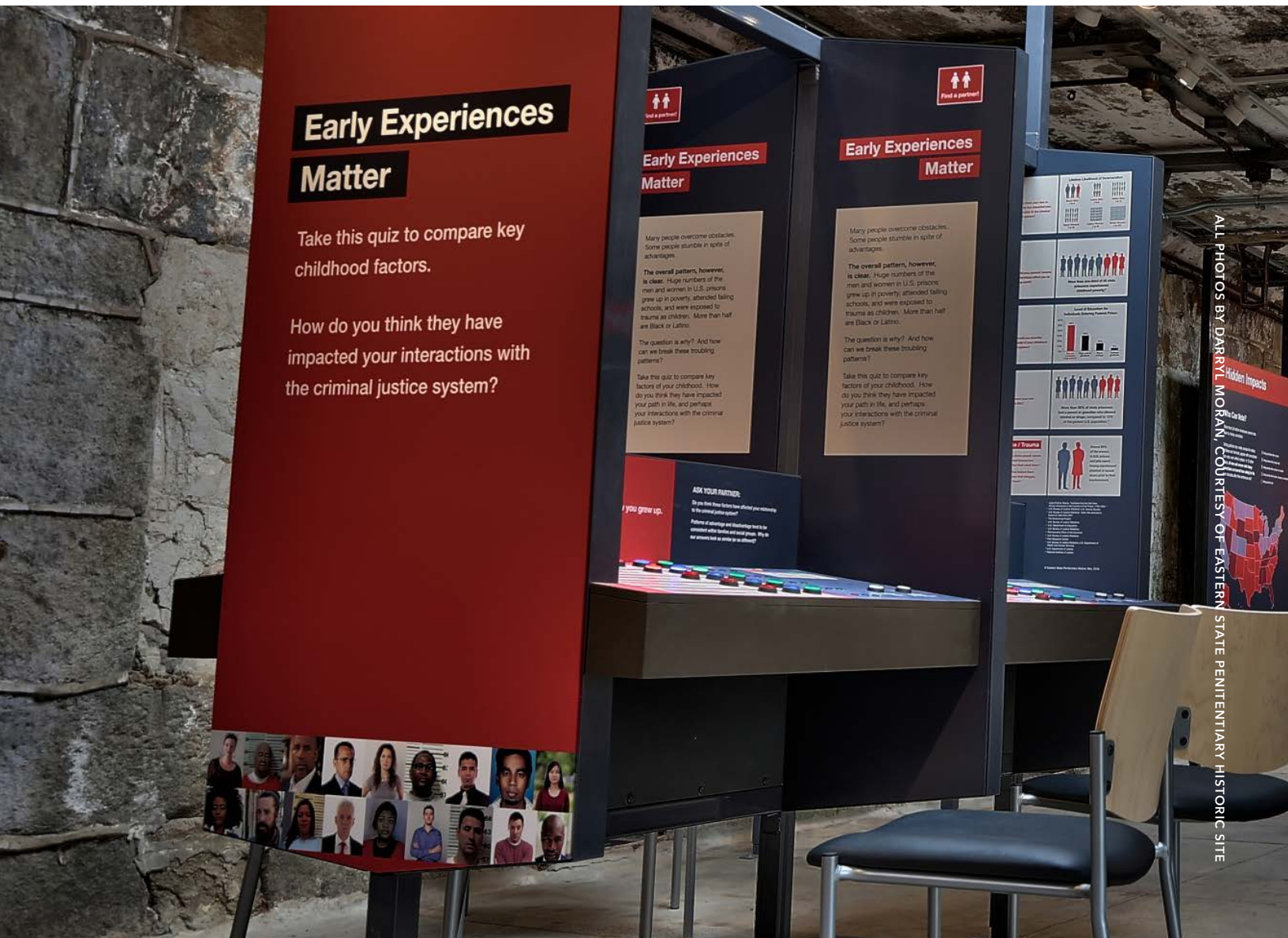
A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.



ALL PHOTOS BY DARRYL MORAN, COURTESY OF EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY HISTORIC SITE

Where does the *Prisons Today* exhibition (fig. 1) begin? On one hand, this is a simple question – it is located in a section of Cellblock 4 at the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On the other, it is complex. Does it really start with *The Big Graph*, the larger-than-life, sculptural visualization of the astronomical growth in the number of people incarcerated in the United States since 1970, which sits in the prison's former baseball diamond? Perhaps the starting point is stop 10 on the audio tour, when actor Steve Buscemi explains in his narration that Eastern State, the first true penitentiary in the world, was old and hard to manage by the 1930s, and was closed in the early 1970s as newer, more modern facilities were needed. Or does it actually begin in the 19th century, with the building of Eastern State's surveillance hub, the center of this massive, star-shaped complex set in the middle of Philadelphia? That hub, also called a panopticon, was the key to a theory developed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. Since the prisoners couldn't be sure if the guard was watching them at any specific moment, they had to manage their behavior as if they were being watched constantly. His vision changed how we envision punishment.

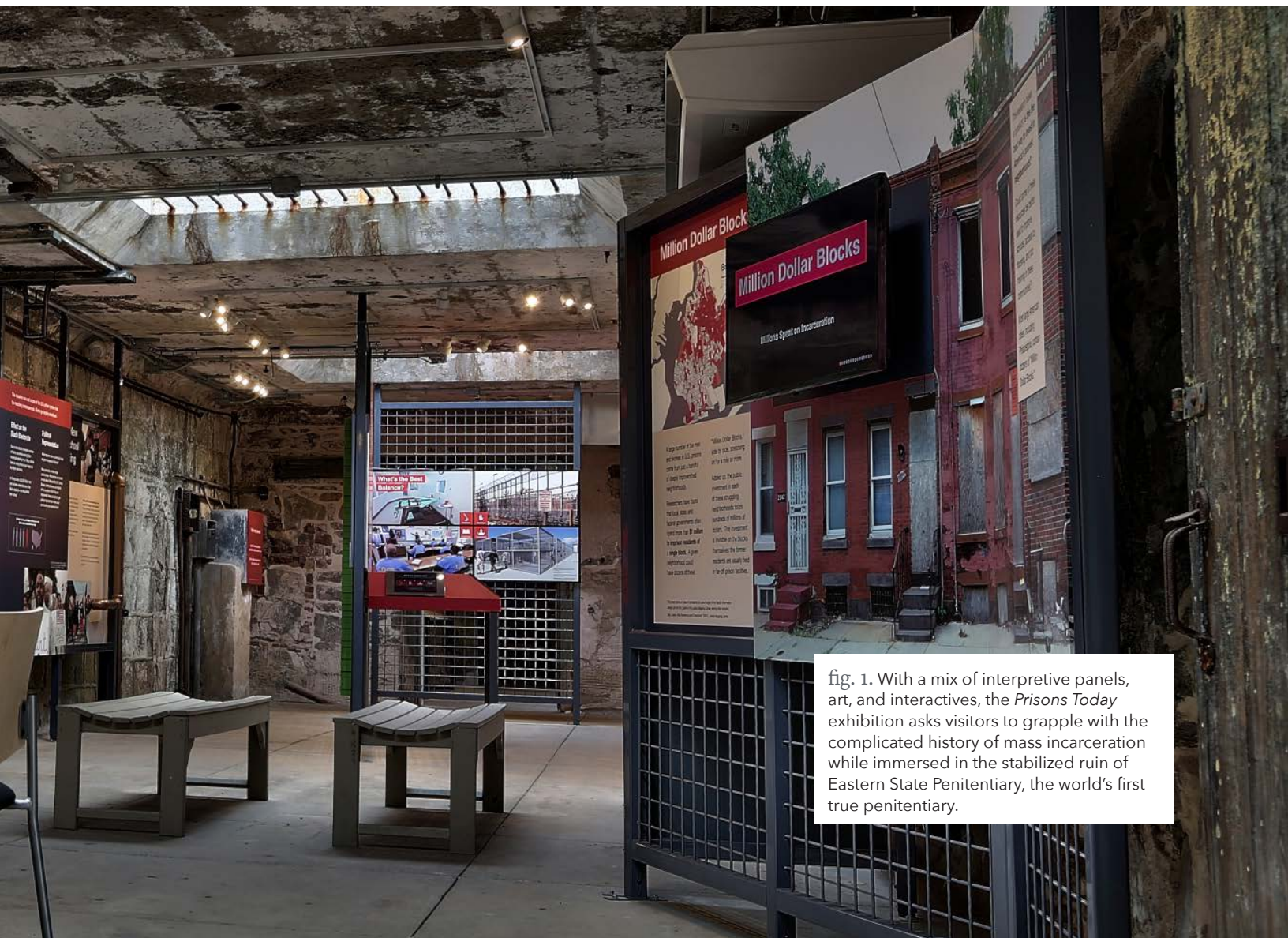


fig. 1. With a mix of interpretive panels, art, and interactives, the *Prisons Today* exhibition asks visitors to grapple with the complicated history of mass incarceration while immersed in the stabilized ruin of Eastern State Penitentiary, the world's first true penitentiary.

fig. 2.
Greeting visitors just outside the exhibition, this graph visually responds to a common misperception: that incarceration rates rose since the 1970s because of an increase in violent crime.

The answer, of course, is that it is all of these, depending on your perspective. And it is this thematic flexibility that makes *Prisons Today* such a successful exhibition, with potential resonances for a wide variety of visitors.

As a public historian and educator who has worked on exhibitions professionally and with students, I often grapple with how to address complicated topics. An approach that focuses on individuals and their stories humanizes difficult or abstract concepts, but does so at the risk of offering sentiment rather than context. The flip side is equally problematic. Panels of charts, tables, and well-sourced historical detail quickly exhaust even the most interested visitor. And there are probably few issues today more complicated or consequential than mass incarceration.

I went to see *Prisons Today* with this question in mind.[1] How would the exhibition balance individual stories and structural conditions? What I found is that the curators used varying techniques to manage these perspectives. By focusing on change over time as the key dynamic, the exhibition forces visitors to ask why rates of incarceration changed so much in the United States since 1970, in contrast to the rest of the world. Because it is comparative, this question asks visitors to think about relationships between politics, the law, racial hierarchies, and economics. By incorporating interactives and art installations, however, the curators insert individual stories, including our own, into the exhibition. This complicates the simplistic and divisive "us vs. them" narrative of much law-and-order rhetoric. Instead, the exhibition implicates the visitor in the criminal justice system.

While it's possible that a visitor could go directly to the *Prisons Today* exhibition, it's hard to imagine that most would speed walk through the massive, stabilized prison ruin to get there. Unlike a more typical museum, where specific exhibitions draw people more than the building itself, Eastern State Penitentiary is a fascinating, evocative place. Poked into the thick, stone walls are small cells, a few with a narrow bed and a toilet. Chips of stone and paint lay in piles in the corners. Wandering through these halls, listening to Buscemi's voice on the audio tour, is surreal and compelling. Stories of individual prisoners, from the nameless to the

1 For a virtual tour of the exhibition, go to: https://interactives.ap.org/2016/prisons-today.

famous (like gangster Al Capone), tell what life was like for those that lived, sometimes for decades, in this place, which was in use from 1829 to 1971.

Doing Time

For most historic sites, interpretation focuses on a specific period of time within the site's operational history. A historic house museum might, for example, interpret the era when a famous person lived there. A historic site using first-person interpretation might choose one year around which its activities would revolve. But Eastern State has not only decided to interpret its entire history, but also to extend interpretation beyond the actual shuttering of the site as a prison. In this way, this site has decided that its focus is not on the building, but on criminal justice, punishment, and incarceration. This radical revisioning of the scope of the museum is something more historic sites should consider. By focusing on these issues rather than one moment in time, the number of mission-related stories that can be told is open-ended.

Stepping outside of Cellblock 4 and onto the former baseball diamond, the towering sculpture called *The Big Graph* draws visitors. Through a clever use of all of its sides to tell different aspects of the story of the rise of mass incarceration, the massive graph sets a context for *Prisons Today* (*The Big Graph* is its own exhibition). By showing the growth in the number of people being imprisoned in the U.S. compared with other nations and broken down by race, it becomes clear that something historically significant happened in the 1970s, after Eastern State closed.

From there, visitors can wander through a red door to enter *Prisons Today*. Two graphs that visually echo *The Big Graph* add new information and context (fig. 2). One shows the number of people imprisoned in 1970 in comparison to the violent-crime rate; the other shows the same data for 2015 – which is essentially the same. Text then poses the logical question: why are so many Americans in prison if violent crime has stayed static?

A media presentation (fig. 3) helps to situate the response – the passage of drug laws, greater use of prisons as punishment rather than fines, and longer sentences through mandatory sentencing guidelines – both politically and historically. It plays out over three video screens. The center screen shows clips of politicians of every political ilk promoting harsher sentences, the building of more prisons, and other law-and-order ideas.

fig. 3.
Clips of politicians from throughout the political spectrum dominate this space. Paired with information on the growth in mass incarceration, we see how bipartisan support for law-and-order policies led to the United States' current status as the world leader in incarceration.

The screen on the left displays the year that the clips are from, while the one on the right shows the number of people who are incarcerated at that time. The implication is clear – bipartisan policies created this system.

As the presentation draws closer to the present, we see a sudden shift. Politicians, including some of the same ones we just saw promoting more prisons, argue that mass incarceration was a mistake and that criminal justice reform must be at the top of the political agenda. Why the early support for incarceration and the later flip-flop? That question is not easily answered through this display of primary source evidence, unfortunately. Astute viewers can piece it together through the rest of the exhibition, but others may leave without it.

Accomplices

The next exhibition room asks visitors a question: have you ever broken the law (fig. 4)? If you answer yes, you are supposed to proceed in one direction. If no, the other. Since I have broken the law (illegal drug use and shoplifting), I turned left. There I was asked whether I got caught (no) and whether my actions made me a criminal. Text panels explain that prisons are meant to work as deterrents, to incapacitate criminals, to punish them or to rehabilitate them – or, more likely, some combination of all of the above. Oddly, there's no clear linkage back to the history of Eastern State here, even though it was designed initially as a place of penitence, where prisoners could reflect on their evil ways and change them.

An interactive station asks visitors to rank deterrence, incapacitation, punishment, and rehabilitation as the goals of prison and see what others say. Perhaps the most powerful element is an interactive titled "The Criminal US," which gives visitors the opportunity to anonymously confess to a crime they've committed. Selected confessions are displayed on a board alongside confessions from people in prison. A button shows which confessions are from visitors and which are from prisoners. Until that's pressed, there's no way to tell the difference (see fig. 5, p. 98). The message is clear – plenty of people break the law but aren't in prison. Why not?

Across from the confession wall, text panels discuss racial disparities in punishment, although they do not make as clear a case for the racism that underlies our criminal justice system as they might. But by discussing the zero tolerance policies of the 1990s that brought African American kids into the school-to-prison pipeline, the disenfranchisement of black people due to laws around voting rights and felony convictions, and the increased political representation of rural, majority white areas that house prisons, the panels suggest the interlocking mechanisms by which race functions. A later section on "million dollar blocks" (city blocks where local, state, and the federal governments are spending more than one million dollars to incarcerate residents), and how early life experiences shape future likelihood of imprisonment, underlines the racialization and geography of the prison economy.

Stories, Structures, and Systems

These themes come together fully in the documentary film installation *6 Voices* by Gabriela Bulisova. Six people who are affected by mass incarceration speak, their images and stories shown on one of three screens in the middle of the exhibition. The speakers range from a young girl named Kiya Anderson, whose father is in prison and whose mother is unable to care for her, to Phill, who is serving life without parole, and who leads discussion sessions with incarcerated men to help them analyze their actions and the harm they have caused. The stories are short, simply told, and incredibly powerful.

Jesse, an artist from Philadelphia, ends the video. He served five years in prison, determined to use that time to develop his skills as an artist. He philosophizes, echoing (unwittingly or not) sociologist Erving Goffman's work on total institutions and cultural theorist Michel Foucault's on the origins of the prison when he says,

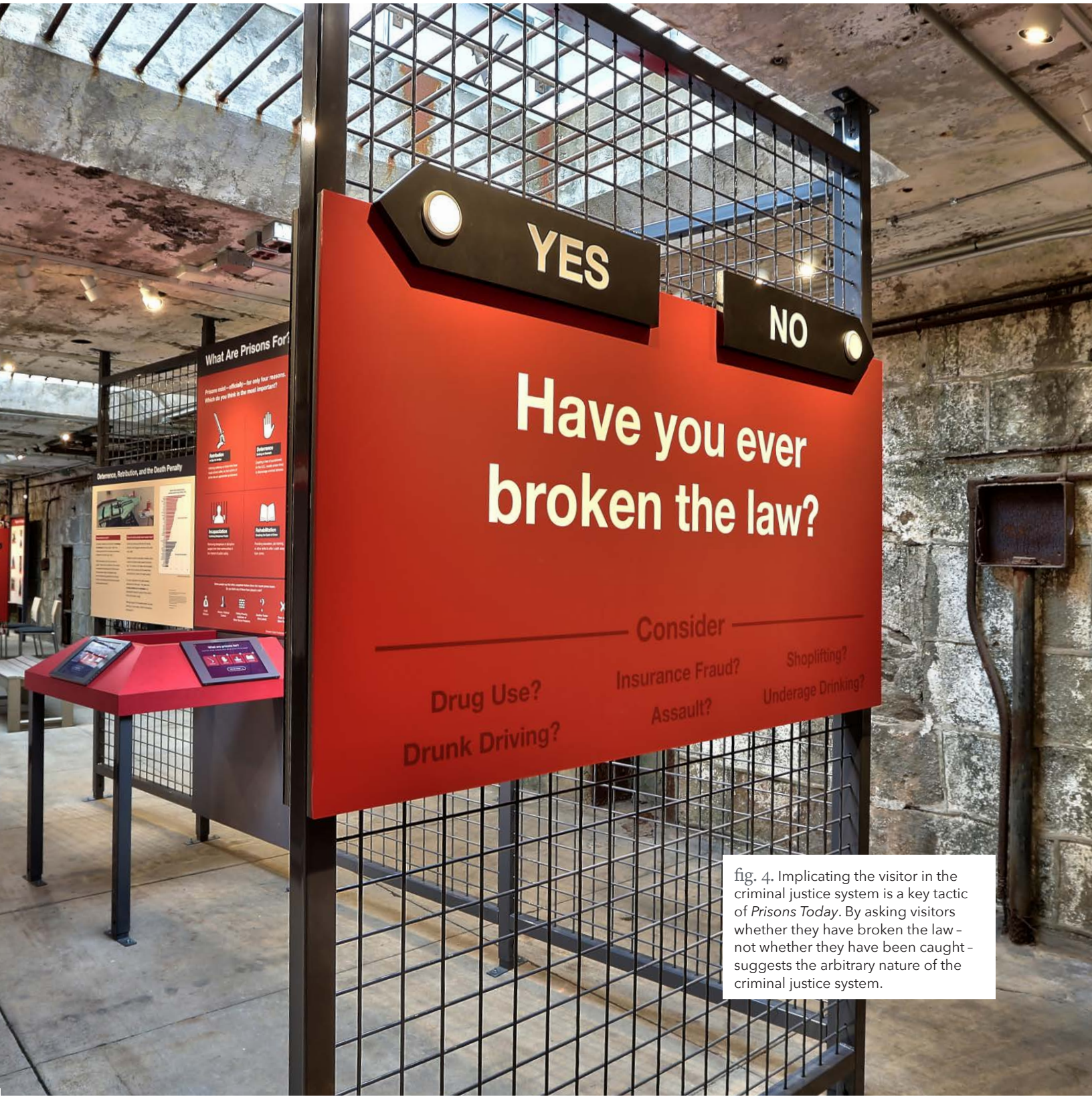


fig. 4. Implicating the visitor in the criminal justice system is a key tactic of *Prisons Today*. By asking visitors whether they have broken the law – not whether they have been caught – suggests the arbitrary nature of the criminal justice system.

> Prison is…a microcosm of society. Everyone's performing within the same confined theater.... You get to experience things and see structures and systems…as they really are.... The prison system is Western society's most powerful technique of control. We use it to not only control individuals…but entire communities and classes of individuals.

The stories are moving – tears came to my eyes when Kiya talked about loving her absent mother. But by being placed within an exhibition that raises questions about what prisons are doing in and to our society, they help to bridge the structure and agency divide. Individuals may commit crimes, but when our racist society decides who is a criminal and who gets punished, there are larger systemic, historic forces at work. When one speaker's section of the video ends, the screen goes dark for a moment. I could see myself, a ghostly reflection in the screen, alongside other visitors. We are all implicated in this system, no matter who we are or where we're from.

All the Pieces Matter

In many ways, *Prisons Today* is doing everything one could hope for in a single exhibition. It's tackling a complicated, contentious topic in a historical setting. It is striving to touch people as individuals, while also confronting them with the larger systemic issues, particularly around race, that explain how we got to where we are today. And it's using a number of techniques to encourage exploration and learning, including letting visitors send a postcard to their future self, and using a daily newspaper reading to connect the issues in the exhibition with what's happening right now. I would have liked more attention paid to immigration detention, which grew under President Obama and will likely grow under President Trump, but a huge amount of information is already packed into this exhibition. With no closing date for *Prisons Today*, it is well worth making a visit as a curious history lover, a concerned citizen, or a museum professional. ▮

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fig. 5.
This visitor pushes a button that indicates which of the displayed confessions were written by people in prison or visitors to the exhibition. There is little difference in the kinds of crimes committed by the two groups.