The Center for Justice Research: Criminal Justice Reform in Tennessee

The Political Economy Research Institute and Middle Tennessee State University welcomed the director of the Center for Justice Research and professor of justice administration in the Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs Howard Henderson, PhD, back to his alma mater on October 31st. Dr. Henderson received his B.S. in Criminal Justice Administration from Middle Tennessee State University, his Masters of Criminal Justice from Tennessee State University, and his PhD in Criminal Justice from Sam Houston State University. Henderson presented for the Distinguished Lecture Series, speaking on “Criminal Justice Reform in Tennessee: Addressing Inequities within the Justice System.”

Dr. Henderson’s accomplishments as a former practitioner and within his academic career allow him the opportunity to focus on data-driven approaches to criminal justice reform through research. As crime continues to decrease and there is increasing public support for reform, Henderson identified the evidence-based approach taken by the Center for Justice Research. “Criminal justice reform requires strategic, data-supported partnerships, with policy makers, key decision makers, advocacy groups, and members of the community. Henderson discussed the need to align the right groups in this unprecedented period of bipartisan support for mass decarceration.

The work of the Center for Justice Research is devoted towards data-driven approaches to policy change for an equitable criminal justice system. Dr. Henderson stressed the importance of, “moving individuals out of the state prison system and back into local communities, where they are more likely to have a support network”. Throughout the lecture, Henderson explained the need to “collaborate and approach the issues with mutual appreciation for the protection of public safety through justice reform.”
In spite of the obvious limitations, data is the steppingstone of reform. The Center for Justice Research produces interdisciplinary research utilizing praxised approaches to justice-oriented barriers for members of fragile communities, while simultaneously providing research development opportunities for faculty and graduate students interested in research careers. Dr. Henderson went on to empower the attendees to understand the important role they play in criminal justice reform. As action-oriented participants, the research training is essential to understanding what needs changing and why. Henderson emphasized, “Research is needed in order to implement effective policy change, but more importantly, everyone must be at the table”.

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