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UCLA is building a digital archive of mass incarceration with a new \$3.6M grant

Devin Coldewey @techcrunch / 6:02 AM PST • January 28, 2021



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UCLA researchers have been awarded a \$3.65 million grant to collect, contextualize, and digitally preserve a huge archive of materials relating to policing and mass incarceration. It should help historians and anthropologists, but more fundamentally it will thoroughly document a period that many would rather forget.

The “Archiving the Age of Mass incarceration” effort is being led by Kelly Lytle Hernandez, director of the university’s Bunche Center for African American Studies and creator of *Million Dollar Hoods*, another project documenting the human costs of incarceration in Los Angeles. The grant is provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

“We may be at a turning point in American history — may be building something new,” Lytle Hernandez told me, citing a tumultuous but potentially transformative 2020. “If that’s the case we want to make sure we are preserving the record of what happened. What we want to do is retain the records, the memory, the experiences of people affected by mass incarceration, and where possible the records of the state, which would otherwise be destroyed.”



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Many of our students are graduating soon. One of our students will be attending Harvard for his PhD, others will be in law schools and completing fellowships, all of them will be making a difference. We don't just map incarceration, we build leaders. |LIFE. LOVE. LABOR
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The core of this collection will be a cache of documents released to Lytle Hernandez by the LAPD as part of [this 2019 settlement](#) (shortly after she won a MacArthur fellowship) regarding public disclosures and communication. She described it as around 177 boxes of paper records from the 1980s to the early 2000s detailing the “war on drugs,” policing immigrants, and many other topics, with more to be provided later under an agreement with the department.

The idea would be to “counterbalance” these official documents, as she put it, with documentation and testimony from the other side of the equation.

“People who are disproportionately incarcerated or arrested — we often lose our records because we get evicted; because where we stored our records, we can’t make the payments and they’re seized; they’re seized when we’re arrested, etc.,” she explained. “If we need to undo generations of harm, we need to know, where did that harm happen? Who did it happen to? I see this archival project as part of that dismantlement effort.”

Over the next few years Lytle Hernandez will lead the effort to assemble the archive, which will involve such traditional work as scanning and indexing paper documents, but also visiting communities and collecting “carceral ephemera” such as receipts for bail bonds (which may be the only surviving record of a person’s brush with the justice system) and personal stories and media.

Getting records from police and state agencies is a difficult and sometimes legally or politically fraught process. It’s important to get as much information as possible, from as many sources as possible, as quickly as possible, she said. Other major turning points in the history of racial justice have been inadequately documented, for reasons both negligent and deliberate.

“What if the nation had sent out squads of oral historians and students to capture and preserve the record? Imagine what we could know about enslavement and its toll on all of us, what it meant to the making of this country, if we had talked to the people who had experienced it —what kind of archive that would have left us, to grapple with and to help us move away from its legacies,” said Lytle Hernandez. “But we’ve been able to forget the power and legacy of slavery because we didn’t do a good enough job. Same with native removal, internment, immigration.”

Now there is an opportunity — around the country, she was careful to point out, not just in LA — to do just that with the era of mass incarceration. Not only that but they can bring modern techniques to bear in ways that weren’t possible during, say, the Civil Rights movement.

Her experience with Million Dollar Hood has shown her that there is serious interest in turning the tables among communities that have historically been disenfranchised or targeted by racist and classist policies propped up by bogus data.

“When we have a meeting we have black and brown students crammed into the room and out into the hall to learn data analysis and data science,” she said.


“Part of the project is opening up that door. When you bring the people into the room who are the most impacted, they see that data differently — they see different stories.”

The archive will be completely public, though the exact scope of what documents will be included and how they will be sorted, described, and so on is still being worked out. Regardless of the exact details, the archive should prove invaluable to students, researchers, and a curious public over the coming decades as the changes Lytle Hernandez hopes for begin to get underway.

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