As the nation’s largest jail, Chicago’s Cook County facility spans eight city blocks and houses 9,000 inmates. It also has another distinction: by default, it’s the largest mental-health facility in the United States.

To Dr. Anne Parsons, this is not surprising. Her research shows that as state governments shuttered decades-old, often-barbaric mental asylums starting in the 1950s, society was left with an unintended consequence: the mass incarceration of people with psychiatric disorders. And, in jails and prisons, these individuals rarely get the help they need.

“It’s deeply saddening, but I am optimistic that if we keep bringing this to the public’s attention, perhaps we can break the cycle,” says Parsons, an assistant professor of history.

Her recently finished manuscript, “Asylum to Prison: Deinstitutionalization and the Rise of Mass Incarceration,” delves into this transition and offers guidance on needed reforms. The book, to be published in 2018 as part of the UNC Press series “Justice, Power, and Politics,” is intended for history scholars as well as for professionals who work for prison and mental-health reforms.

Parsons also plans to curate a traveling exhibition on this work for more than 100 libraries, universities, museums, and community centers nationwide. The exhibition, sponsored by the National Library of Medicine and funded by the National Institutes of Health, will likely open in 2019.

“My goal is to share this research with a broader audience and start conversations across the country,” she says.

Parsons’ book opens with the story of the Philadelphia State Hospital at Byberry, which held up to 6,000 people in the mid-20th
Last fall, Parsons and graduate students in the museum studies program brought the national “States of Incarceration” exhibition to the International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro. UNCG and 20 other universities contributed to the traveling exhibit, which explores the roots of mass incarceration.

One of the “States of Incarceration” exhibit guides and community participants was Sherrill Roland, a UNCG MFA student.

In 2013, Roland served nearly a year in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. Today, he has been fully exonerated.

He feels compelled to share his experience in a deeply personal and sometimes shocking way. He wears a bright orange, prison-style jumpsuit around campus.

“The point is to throw people off and to get a reaction,” says Roland, 32. “People pose questions instantly.”

With the support of Assistant Professor of Art Sheryl Oring, Roland conceived of “The Jumpsuit Project” as a performance-art piece to start conversations. His goals are to shed light on what it’s like to serve time, to tackle the stigma of incarceration, and to promote support for those in prison and their families and friends.

“Incarceration was the worst thing I’d ever experienced,” Roland says. “Before it, I was really naïve. I think we can all be caught up in our bubbles, and if something doesn’t affect us personally, we won’t know the inner workings.”

He hopes his project will change that. “Maybe being able to share my story can help people understand what it’s really like.”

By Dawn Martin  •  Major photography by Martin W. Kane, Jumpsuit Project photography by Todd Turner  •  Learn more at https://his.uncg.edu