SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK

The Scourge of America's Imprisonment Boom

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The ranks of imprisoned Americans are starting to decline. But as SSN scholars spell out, our country must still grapple with the ill effects – for families, communities, and democracy – from over four decades of incarceration skyrocketing at rates beyond the incidence of crime.

GET TOUGH POLICIES AND MASS INCARCERATION

America is now among the world's leaders in imprisoning its own citizens. Since the 1970s, the United States has responded to crime – and over-responded – by imprisoning mounting millions, often to serve very long sentences. African Americans and Latinos have been disproportionately affected, and their families and communities have paid the highest price – although many Americans of all backgrounds feel the effects, including poorer whites in economically declining suburban and rural areas.

Scholars debate the forces behind the get-tough laws that led to the prison boom. A variety of disparate causes came together from the 1970s, including white racial fears and conservative political campaigns, as Vesla Mae Weaver of Yale University has argued in her research on "frontlash" politics after the Civil Rights revolution (see her 2007 article in the journal *Studies in American Political Development*). Racial prejudice played a worrisome role in fuelling public support for tough criminal penalties, as Steven Barkan of the University of Maine spells out.

But white prejudice and racial political appeals were not the only causal forces. In addition, black middle class responses to drug addiction and crime sprees in urban communities were centrally involved, as Michael Javen Fortner of Rutgers University-Camden documents in his newly published research on black politics and the origins of the prison boom. Politicians of all races and persuasions responded to urban disorder by enacting "get-tough" laws, which then spread across many states and unleashed unforeseen consequences.

POVERTY AND MARGINALIZATION – ESPECIALLY FOR LESS EDUCATED BLACK MEN

Bruce Western of Harvard University and Becky Pettit of the University of Washington provide a compelling overview of the disadvantageous results of America's prison boom. American inmates spend an average of 28 months in state or federal prisons. Nine out of ten of them are men, and African American men, especially those with less than high school educations, go to prison as a "regularly expected" part of life.

Persistent poverty contributes to the crimes that land so many Americans, especially young black men, in prison. But prison, in turn, sets a long-term "poverty trap" for inmates and their families, as SSN scholars Pettit, Western, and Christopher Wildeman of Yale all show in research recently discussed at length in the *New York Times*. Instability and ill health plague the imprisoned and their relatives, and former prisoners have trouble finding stable jobs with good wages and prospects.

HOW FAMILIES AND MINORITY COMMUNITIES HAVE SUFFERED

The sad consequences of incarceration are visited not only on those convicted of crimes and sent away, but also on the partners, children, and communities they leave behind. The children of imprisoned parents are the "unintended casualties of the prison boom," as Wildeman shows in detailed research. Black children very frequently have a father in prison, and children of imprisoned parents are disproportionately likely to be convicted of crimes in the future, perpetuating the sad cycle through generations. Working with research colleagues, Raymond Swisher of Bowling Green State University has tracked over time the many kinds of family disruptions and poor outcomes for children and youth that occur when so many fathers go to prison.

Indeed, Americans may not even fully see the social harms spurred by mass imprisonment, because official statistics often make imprisoned men "invisible." Social progress for African Americans looks better than it really is, explains Becky Pettit, because U.S. social indicators are skewed by the failure to count prisoners.

THE HARM TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Breakthrough scholarship has recently pushed exploration of the consequences of mass incarceration beyond social effects to the study of implications for democratic citizenship and American politics.

Virtually all U.S. states currently deny voting rights to prisoners, which means that African American electoral clout is reduced as large numbers of black men disappear from the electorate. But "felon disenfranchisement" goes much further than that, as Bruce Western's book *Punishment and Inequality in America* documents, because in recent times the states have also competed to deny voting rights to all or many ex-prisoners, even those who have completed sentences and parole terms. This further reduces the ranks of low-income and minority voters, enough to swing the results of many elections from one party to another, as shown by careful calculations in *Locked Out: Felon Disenfranchisement and American Democracy* by Christopher Uggen, Jeff Manza, and Melissa Thompson. SSN member Christopher Uggen of the University of Minnesota further shows that the denial of voting rights goes well beyond what most Americans want. A majority would like to see full voting rights restored to former felons who have completed their sentences; and adjusting U.S. laws accordingly would restore voting rights to four million out of the 5.6 million currently disenfranchised.

Election fairness is not the only issue. Mass imprisonment disproportionately hitting minority communities burdens the United States with a distrustful civic underclass, explains Vesla Weaver in research that explores the many ways in which encounters with punitive and authoritarian practices in all parts of the criminal justice system breed distrust and withdrawal from community affairs and democratic politics. Racial comity also

suffers. Locking up so many people, she shows, transforms the relationships of millions of people to America's political system.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Each of the SSN briefs and other scholarly writings mentioned in this spotlight includes suggestions for new directions in public policy. Using community supervision and service as alternatives to imprisoning minor offenders, and making changes in drug laws to mitigate inequities are possible steps that could be taken to reserve imprisonment for the most serious offenders. Other obvious steps included additional support for the families of prisoners and for ex-inmates trying to get a foothold in the labor market. "Roadblocks to rehabilitation" must be removed or lowered, as detailed in the research of SSN scholar David Kirk of the University of Texas at Austin, which was prominently featured in a recent *New York Times* column by Tina Rosenberg.

In the final analysis, too, we must find better ways to prevent and reduce crime, especially serious drug addiction and violent offenses, because many Americans, including minorities, suffer from the lawbreaking that gets so many perpetrators sent to prison in the first place. Long prison sentences disproportionately affecting minority men may not be the answer, but neither is releasing violent felons who may prey on others.

Yet at times, people leaving prison were wrongfully convicted and should never have been incarcerated in the first place. Michael Leo Owens of Emory University looks closely at the challenge of ensuring just compensation for wrongfully convicted people. Just as ex-prisoners who rightly paid their dues to society need support to forge constructive lives, even more do men and women who were mistakenly imprisoned need and deserve extra help to make up for time lost at work and in their families and communities.