



The Disadvantages of America's Prison Boom

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On a typical day in the year 2008, America's prison and jail cells held an astonishingly large number of inmates – 762 out of every 100,000 adults. Back in 1980, the nation's "incarceration rate" was 221 prisoners for every 100,000; and that had climbed from the rate of 100 out of 100,000 that held roughly steady from the 1920s through the mid-1970s. Over the last several decades, in short, imprisonment in America has exploded more than seven-fold.

What difference does it make? Society certainly gets some immediate protection from imprisoned lawbreakers who could harm others. But putting so many people behind bars may also make our country less safe. Going to prison undercuts life chances for many who are already severely disadvantaged, particularly less-educated African American men. Their families and children also suffer – threatening cumulative social harm and high costs long into the future.

Who Goes to Prison?

Each inmate spends an average of 28 months in state or federal prison, and disparities of gender, race, and education tell us which kinds of Americans are locked up:

- Nine out of ten U.S. prisoners are men. The female rate of imprisonment is rising, but women are still a small fraction of all inmates.
- Young men with less than a high school education make up a rising share of all prisoners. One in eight white male high school dropouts was in prison as of 2008, up fourfold from 1980. Even more astonishing, fully 37% of African American men without diplomas were behind bars in 2008, up from one in ten in 1980. (To put this in perspective, consider that less than one percent of all U.S. adults were imprisoned in 2008.)
- *Prison has become a regularly expected life experience for African American men who have dropped out of high school.* More than two-thirds born since the 1970s have spent time in state or federal prisons (leaving aside those who just spent spells in local jails).

An Insidiously Hidden Inequality

The massive imprisonment of the least educated black men has created a new kind of severe inequality – much of it invisible. Because prisoners mostly come from impoverished African American neighborhoods and are usually sent to far-away state and federal institutions, they are out of sight and mind for most citizens.

Even official statistics are skewed. For example, each month the U.S. Census Bureau surveys households to find out how many adults are employed compared to the entire population. But prisoners are not there, so their absence from the labor force goes uncounted. Once prison and jail inmates are included in the population count – and among the jobless – we see that by 2008 only a quarter of U.S. black men without high school diplomas had jobs. Indeed, such men were more likely to be locked up than employed.

The Harmful Effects Cumulate and Live On

Serving time in prison or jail diminishes opportunities, not just for the prisoners themselves but also for their families and children.

Family life for all economically disadvantaged Americans has become much more fragile in recent decades – and prison makes things worse. Over half of all prisoners have children under the age of 18. The remaining parent, usually the mother, is left to juggle childrearing, family crises, and prison visits. Separation or divorce often follows.

After a prisoner is released, he is less equipped to provide for his family. Research using data that track people over time shows that serving time in prison is associated with a 40 percent reduction in earnings, reduced hourly wages, and more unemployment. Without jobs, former inmates often commit new offenses and go back to prison.

New research shows that the children of prisoners, particularly the boys, are at greater risk of developmental delays and behavioral problems. They are more likely to end up committing crimes and going to prison themselves.

Can America Find a Better Way?

Research on crime and punishment suggests that the United States cannot make further gains in public safety simply by locking up more wrongdoers in far-away places. Some offenders might better be kept under supervision in their communities, holding jobs and maintaining family ties. In addition, much more can be done to provide jobs and constructive life opportunities for ex-inmates. Their children – and society as a whole – will benefit.

Read more in Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, “Incarceration and Social Inequality.” *Dædalus* 139, no. 3 (2010): 8-19.