

# Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities

## African American Prisoners

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities

Chapter Title: "African American Prisoners"

Pub. Date: 2005

Access Date: January 16, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761927310

Online ISBN: 9781412952514

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952514.n8>

Print pages: 19-22

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952514.n8>

African Americans are incarcerated in the nation's jails and prisons in disproportionate numbers. At present, black inmates account for more than half of those in U.S. penal facilities even though they make up only 13% of the nation's total free population. The causes and effects of the rate at which the black community is confined constitute some of the most urgent problems facing U.S. society today.

## Rates of Imprisonment

According to the most recent figures, there are approximately 912 male state and federal prison inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents, and 61 female [p. 19 ↓] inmates per 100,000. If these figures are then broken down by race, there are 3,437 African American men per 100,000 and 191 African American women per 100,000 locked up as compared to 450 white male and 35 white female inmates for every 100,000 residents. These figures mean that African American men are being incarcerated at a rate approximately eight times that of white men, and black women are confined at approximately five times that of white women. Though more men than women are in prison, African American women have been incarcerated at a greater rate than African American men during the previous two decades.

Further differentiations based on race and ethnicity can be made when age is also considered. For example, across the country an estimated 10% of all African American men ages 25 to 29 are in prison. In some jurisdictions, this figure is as high as 50%. Overall, an African American male has a 29% chance of spending time in prison at some point in his life, as compared to a white male, who has a 4% chance, and a Latino male, who has a 16% chance.

## History

Prior to the abolition of slavery in the United States, African Americans were rarely incarcerated in penitentiaries. Instead, punishment was administered to them on the slave plantations where they were imprisoned and controlled by their owners. When slavery was abolished, Jim Crow laws and the convict leasing system led to a rapid

growth in the number of African Americans behind bars. Particularly in southern states where the majority of the black population was located, many African Americans were forcibly returned to work for former slave-owners as plantation owners leased offenders to pick cotton and perform other tasks.

As early as the 1890s, the convict lease system came under scrutiny because of accounts of brutal treatment of the inmate workers. Yet it was not until the 1930s that all states finally abolished this system—and made their governments the sole overseers of convict labor. Indeed, even in those states that officially did away with leasing, other structures grew to replace it that continued many of its racist traditions. For example, in many states, chain gangs—where convicts labor outdoors while chained to each other—partially replaced the leasing system. African Americans were once again over-represented among the members of the chain gangs. This method of punishment existed in many states until the 1960s. It was reinstated first in Alabama in 1995, quickly followed by Florida and Arizona. Despite public outcry from and litigation by groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, this practice now exists in many other states as well.

In the 1970s, racial disparities among U.S. prisoners began to increase. Though prison admissions for all convicted felons grew rapidly in this decade, the number of African American persons being sentenced to prison grew fastest of all. Indeed, since the beginning of national-level data collection on prison populations in 1926, the incarceration rate of African Americans has seen an overall steady increase, while during this same period the incarceration rate of white prisoners declined.

## Causes and Effects of the Overrepresentation of African American Prisoners

Criminologists have identified several causes of the overrepresentation of African Americans in the U.S. prison system, including: the rate at which blacks commit crime, criminal justice policies such as policing and sentencing, socioeconomic factors, and

racial bias. Weitzer and Tuch (2002), for example, found that race was a key factor in police decisions to stop and interrogate suspects. Others have found that, compared to any other group, young, black men are more likely to be denied bail and sentenced to the harshest prison terms.

One of the most common explanations for the dramatic increase in the imprisonment of African Americans is found in the so-called war on drugs. Many observers believe that the combination of law enforcement focus on combating drug sales and use and the relatively insignificant number of treatment resources available to individuals with lower incomes has led to the rise in the African American prison population. Likewise, current drug laws that [p. 20 ↓ ] punish crack cocaine use much more harshly than powder cocaine have been shown to be particularly detrimental to minority communities, where crack cocaine is more readily available. Not only has the increase in drug-related prison sentences been greater among blacks than whites, but so too has been the rate of incarceration for drug offenses for African Americans.

There are numerous collateral consequences of incarcerating high numbers of African Americans. Some of the most troubling effects include the economic, emotional, and social impact on the children of prisoners; the lack of support for the partners of inmates; the inability of ex-felons to secure gainful employment; and in some states, their loss of the right to vote. Though children are adversely affected by the incarceration of their parents, no matter what their race or ethnicity, when large sections of the community are being confined at the rate that is occurring across black communities in the United States, the impact on black children is even greater. Entire generations of young people are currently growing up without the presence of male role models or fathers.

## Women

Between 1986 and 1991, there was an 828% increase in the number of black women incarcerated for drug offenses in state prisons. This was the greatest increase of any demographic group in the United States. In most state and federal prisons, the percentage of black women in the incarcerated female population now equals or exceeds the percentage of black males in the incarcerated male population. Drug

offenses constitute the primary offense for which black women are incarcerated, even though most women's role in the illicit drug markets is fairly minor and is most often related to their involvement with a male and is a result of their drug dependency.

Although most inmates are the parents of at least two children under the age of 18 years at the time of their imprisonment, women are, more often than men, the primary caretaker of their children prior to incarceration. Due to the overrepresentation of black women in the female prison population, the increase and large number of imprisoned black women exacerbates the impact on black children of having a parent who is incarcerated.

Research suggests that the presence of black women in the prison systems must be investigated separately from that of black males. Although they experience similar situations due to race, the intersection of race and gender provides for very different experiences in the criminal justice system.

## Coping

All prisoners, including African American prisoners, seek out various support systems to cope with their incarceration. Many African American male prisoners choose religion, including converting to Islam, particularly, the Nation of Islam, during their incarceration as a way to deal with incarceration. In some prison systems with large African American populations, such as New York State, Islam is the most common religion behind bars.

Another form of coping in prison is through the formation of comparable alliances in which people group together for security. Research demonstrates that such alliances are typically formulated along racial lines and that this custom is more prevalent among male prisoners than female prisoners. Such alliances may take the form of prison gangs, which are typically divided by race. Two of the most common gangs in which young black men participate are the Bloods and the Crips. Gangs are far less common in women's prisons. Prisoners also form non-gang-related groups, such as religious organizations or sports teams.

## Conclusion

Despite the decrease in crime in recent years, it is anticipated that if the current sentencing policies remain in effect, particularly for drug-related offenses, the number of African Americans sent to prison will continue to increase and the racial disparities within the prison population will continue to increase. Fortunately, this state of affairs is beginning to gain more attention from academicians, policymakers, and the general public. With [p. 21 ↓ ] this new interest, it is anticipated that measures, such as youth delinquency prevention efforts, can and will be implemented to alleviate the overrepresentation of African Americans in U.S. prisons and, accordingly, assuage the negative outcomes brought about by this epidemic.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952514.n8>

See Also

- [Asian American Prisoners](#)
- [Bloods](#)
- [Chain Gangs](#)
- [Convict Lease System](#)
- [Crips](#)
- [Gangs](#)
- [Hispanic/Latino\(a\) Prisoners](#)
- [Immigrants/Undocumented Aliens](#)
- [Nation of Islam](#)
- [Native American Prisoners](#)
- [Plantation Prisons](#)
- [Racism](#)
- [Religion in Prison](#)
- [Resistance](#)
- [Slavery](#)
- [War on Drugs](#)
- [Women's Prisons](#)

### Further Reading

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The Encyclopedia contains biographies, articles describing important legal statutes, and detailed and authoritative descriptions of the major prisons in the United States. Comparative data and examples are employed to analyze the American system within an international context. The Encyclopedia's 400 entries are written by recognized authorities. The appendix contains a comprehensive listing of every federal prison in the U.S., complete with facility details and service information. by SAGE Publications. in Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities. Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities; doi:10.4135/9781412952514.n1.Â Published: 24 November 2014. by SAGE Publications. in Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities. Encyclopedia of Prisons & Correctional Facilities; doi:10.4135/9781412952514.n10. Prisons -- United States -- Encyclopedias, Correctional institutions -- United States -- Encyclopedias. Publisher. Thousand Oaks, Calif.