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The injustices behind America’s incarceration boom

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Injustices Behind America’s Incarceration boom

By Jay Widlack, Faculty Adviser: Christoph Schiessl

Imprisonment Statistics

Despite making up around 12% of the US population black people account for 28% of all arrests and compose around 40% of the prison population. White men compose about 32% of the population, but only make up 6% of the prison population. In the United States, for every one white man locked away seven black males are locked away. The disproportionality of these numbers are so large it is impossible to argue that they are coincidental.

Are Crime Rates to Blame?

The imprisonment rate has not correlated with the number of violent crimes committed since 1978. The prison boom is largely due to the War on Drugs and a racially charged legislature.

Does Imprisonment Reduce Crime?

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Racial Biases in Court

Courtrooms are made up of predominantly white judges and juries that hold the racial biases all Americans are subject to. Researchers conducted a study examining the correlation between Afrocentric features and sentencing. Researchers controlled for criminal history and race before asking undergraduates to rate the "the degree to which each face had features that are typical of African Americans." The researchers found that individuals that “looked black” received longer sentences than other prisoners.

High Reentry Rates

In many states, federal cases incur “restitution” fines that are often thousands of dollars. Courts may also have various “general court fees” or state-imposed courtroom fees that cost hundreds of dollars. Most felons are not able to find work to pay off these debts. A felony conviction in most state bars ex-convicts from public sector jobs. A felony also severely reduces the chance an individual will be hired.

Economic Barriers to Reintegration

In some states, economic barriers to reintegration may keep the steady stream of prisoners flowing. Researchers found that individuals that “looked black” received longer sentences than other prisoners.

A Lack of Rehabilitation

People with drug convictions face a lifetime bar on food stamps, cannot receive federal grants for college, and are often excluded from public housing. Prisoners that have access to educational programs have a recidivism rate of barely 10% while those who don’t have access to these programs have a recidivism rate ranging from 40% to 70%. Despite the positive impact that these programs hold, between the years 1979 to 1995, the number of prisoners in these programs fell nearly 20%. Paradoxically, the number of state prisoners more than tripled during that period.

Modern Day Sharecropping

Prisons in America are meant to fund businesses and provide cheap labor. Convicts are given a medium wage of 0.20 cents per hour if they are state inmates and 0.31 cents per hour if they are federal inmates; they are not allowed to unionize. These wages barely begin to cover in-prison expenses (like phone calls), yet released prisoners are expected to pay an assortment of debts.

Works Cited