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A Conversation on Race (Part 2): 'Incarceration of Black Lives in America'

Leila Nasr

The following article is the second in a three-week series on the LSE Human Rights Blog entitled 'A Conversation on Race'.

*By Jacqueline Stein**

To a foreigner, American incarceration rates must be haunting. Figures today report American prison rates toping world charts, with [over two million people in prison](#), far above incarceration rates in China, Russia, Brazil and India. However, looking closer into domestic incarceration statistics, the numbers quickly indicate another trend. According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010, [black men in America on average were six times more likely](#) to go to jail, state or federal prison than white men. In a country where values like *freedom* and *equality* are exported abroad through mass media and wars, in the land of the free, Americans are not so equal after all.

With *Netflix* dramas and documentaries such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Making a Murderer*, which have started thoughtful discourses on the failings of the criminal justice and prison systems in the United States, it is also important to consider America's role in sustaining (and increasing) racial and class inequalities, especially on the subject of incarceration. With prison massively altering one's life course—possibly [affecting their job prospects, mental health, relationships and voting rights](#)—this situation cannot be taken lightly. So, why is African American incarceration so disproportionately high? In the following sections, I will briefly discuss the war on drugs, education and states' behaviors contributing to racial inequality in the United States.

Stigma and Poor Neighborhoods

In the 1970s, a new social problem emerged: [America's drug problem](#) and the increasing deaths related to this phenomenon. American politicians responded by launching a nationwide war in attempt to halt crime and eradicate drug trade. The consequences of this proposal, however, turned out to be much more complicated than simply the drug dealer going to jail.

Simultaneously, while new policies began a war on drugs, low-skilled job opportunities also decreased in the country; consequently, with limited economic choices, more poor black men living in disadvantaged neighborhoods turned to drug dealing. Becky Pettit and Bruce Western, two professors researching incarceration and social inequalities in America, summarized, "[If poor black men were attracted to illegal drug trade in response to the collapse of low-skill labor markets, the drug war raised the risks that they would be caught, convicted and incarcerated. As Sampson and Lauritsen observed, trends in drug control policy ensured that 'by the 1990s, race, class, and drugs became intertwined.'](#)"

With this trend, African Americans, living especially in poor neighborhoods, became re-stigmatized. [Police targeted these neighborhoods](#) though undercover assignments and street sweeps, leading more black men serving time in prison. Instead of helping these citizens gain education and job opportunities, thereby opening new experiences and equalities across the country, new anti-crime and anti-drug campaigns put these men behind bars, affecting not only themselves, but also generations ahead. In America's fight towards reducing crimes and preventing drugs-related deaths, new crimination policies led to increased racial inequalities throughout the country.

Education and Incarceration Trends

In the last 10 years, Pettit and Western researched incarceration in America and determined several important trends. According to the scholars, "[For black men in their mid-thirties at the end of the 1990s, prison records were nearly twice as common as bachelor's degrees.](#)" As tuition rates climb higher each year, access to higher education becomes more difficult, thus increasing inequalities and preventing many from attending university, as the burden of debt becomes heavier. Instead of making public education more affordable, American society keeps building higher barriers for people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Moreover, Pettit and Western note that incarceration has increasingly become [a common life path for many non-college black men](#). As average incarceration rates for black men have risen over the past few decades, too many African American men are spending years in prison, instead of starting new jobs and spending time with their loved ones. Instead of creating opportunities to eliminate class and race inequalities, American society has failed those living in poor minority neighborhoods.

States and Incarceration Data

In February 2015, *The Washington Post* wrote an article on John Legend's insightful observation about incarceration. While at the Oscars, the popular singer/songwriter/actor expressed, "[We know that the Voting Rights Act that they fought for 50 years](#)

[ago is being compromised right now in this country today. We know that right now, the struggle for freedom and justice is real. We live in the most incarcerated country in the world. There are more black men under correctional control today than were under slavery in 1850.](#)" The blogger from *The Washington Post*, Jeff Geo, had a colleague, [Max Ehrenfreund](#) fact check this information and he found Mr. Legend's conclusions were true. However, Ehrenfreund clarified that correctional control did not mean only behind bars, but also incorporated black men on parole or probation. Moreover, Ehrenfreund noted that today in the United States the population of African Americans is 10 times larger than in 1850.

The blog also included data about racial disparity in different states across the country. It revealed that Iowa and Minnesota were amongst the worst states with the largest black-white disparities. These states, which are [overwhelmingly white](#), hold the highest divides between black-white incarceration rates.

In the land of the free and the home to the *American dream*, race and class inequality, especially relating to the subject of incarceration, persists. The American incarceration system is broken; with [black men being incarcerated on average six times higher than white men](#), reform is much needed. In today's society, America's wars on drugs and crime have stigmatized African Americans and poor neighborhoods. Incarceration is now a common-life path for non-university black men. It is time for America to stop putting African Americans' concerns behind bars and begin to change this trend.

**Jacqueline Stein is a MSc Human Rights candidate at the LSE. She can be reached at j.r.stein@lse.ac.uk.*

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