

New Jump in Rate Of Incarceration For Black Males

By Louis Freedberg
Chronicle Washington Bureau

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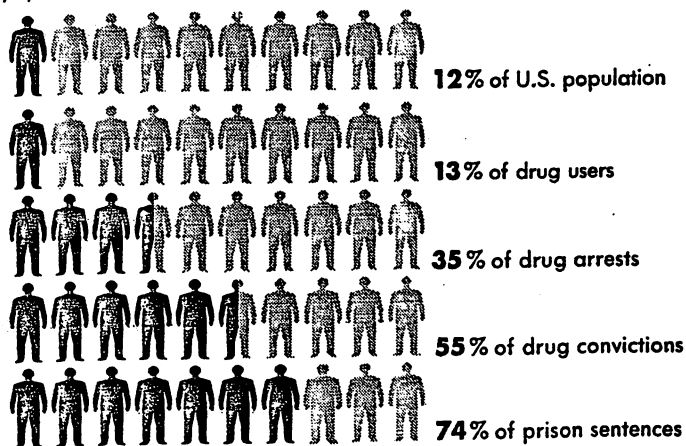
One out of three black men in their 20s are in jail, on probation or on parole — a figure that has jumped by more than one-third over the past five years, according to a new study made public yesterday.

The study by the Sentencing Project, a research group in the District of Columbia that advocates drug treatment and alternatives to prison, also concludes that blacks are convicted and jailed at far higher rates than their proportion of the population or even

BLACKS: Page A13 Col. 1

BLACKS, DRUGS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

African Americans constitute a much larger percentage of those arrested, convicted and serving prison time for drug offenses than of the population at large:



Source: The Sentencing Project

BLACKS: Incarceration Rate

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their proportion of those arrested.

The report's release comes just two days after the acquittal of O. J. Simpson raised concerns primarily among white Americans that he received lenient treatment because he faced a largely black jury. Although the report dealt only with defendants in their 20s, it suggests that his experience was anything but typical for black defendants.

In 1989, just over 600,000 black men in the 20-to-29 age group were involved with the criminal justice system, according to the report. By 1994, that number rose to 827,000.

Yesterday, in calling for racial calm after Simpson's acquittal, Jesse Jackson called on the nation to "declare a national emergency" to respond to the deteriorating conditions among largely poor African Americans described in the report.

Jackson said these grim figures help explain the vastly different views among whites and blacks of the Simpson trial's outcome.

"Whites believe the justice system is half full, while blacks experience it as half empty, and sinking," Jackson said. "If this were basically white youth in this dilemma or sentenced at this level, we would assume something is wrong with the system, not something wrong with the children."

Other African American leaders said the report undercut any inference that Simpson's treatment was analogous to that of the majority of black Americans in the criminal justice system. Especially when it comes to drug offenses, they said, most African Americans get tougher sentences than the average offender, they said, not more lenient ones.

The report argued that most of the increase in incarceration and parole rates is not because of a jump in crime, but because of the "war on drugs," which began in the 1980s and which has disproportionately affected blacks.

It said that African Americans constitute 13 percent of drug users but represent 35 percent of arrests for drug possession, 55 percent of convictions and 74 percent of prison sentences.

"I don't think that O. J. Simpson should become a symbol of 'getting off,' because basically

O. J.'s world was not the black community's at all," said the Rev. Amos Brown Jr. of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco.

Compounding the problem, Brown said, are controversial federal laws that require judges to sentence dealers of crack cocaine more harshly than those who sell the drug in its powdered form.

"A black who has five grams of crack cocaine is given five to 10 years automatically, but someone who has enough money and influence who has powdered cocaine is given a suspended sentence, or a slap on the hand," Brown said. "You have whites in that situation and they go free."

The U.S. Sentencing Commission recently proposed changing federal sentencing guidelines so that defendants convicted of crack cocaine and powder cocaine offenses would be treated equally but both the full Senate and the House Judiciary Committee voted to reject the proposed changes.

The report estimated that the cost of supervising the 827,440 young African American males in jail, on probation or on parole is about \$6 billion a year. It said the greatest increase in the rate of criminal justice supervision has been among African American women. That figure rose 78 percent from 1989 to 1994, also a result of the crackdown on drug use in recent years.

A Justice Department spokesman, John Russell, said the department "has no quarrel" with the report's numbers. But he took issue with the suggestion that blacks are more likely to be prosecuted under federal drug laws than whites accused of the same offense.

The numbers, said Russell, probably "reflect the social and economic factors that have a disproportionate effect on the African American community."

Marc Mauer, a co-author of the report, agreed that the reason blacks were disproportionately convicted and jailed is not necessarily racism but rather differences in economic backgrounds between many blacks and whites.

He said that sweeping changes in U.S. drug policies would be needed to reverse the skyrocketing incarceration rates he documented.

Blacks surpass 50% of U.S. prison inmates

Experts fear trend could continue

By Joe Hallinan
NEWHOUSE NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — For the first time since the government began keeping track more than 60 years ago, black inmates account for more than half of all prisoners in the United States.

According to unpublished figures obtained from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, blacks accounted for 50.6 percent of all inmates in state and federal prisons at the end of 1993, a record high.

By comparison, African Americans make up 12.4 percent of the population, according to the most recent census figures.

The number highlights an ominous trend and is likely to become a key statistic in the increasingly touchy debate over crime and race in this country.

"The implications are horrendous," said Jerome Miller, founder of the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, a nonprofit group in Alexandria, Va.

If the current trend continues, he said, the United States could reach a point soon after the turn of the century where the majority of all black men have at one time or another been behind bars.

"I think it's going to get much worse," he said. "I am not at all optimistic."

In California, where blacks makeup 7 percent of the population, more than 30 percent of the prison population is African American, according to the state Department of Corrections.

But more disturbing, one in every three young African American men in California is in prison, jail or youth institutions, or on probation or parole, according to a 1990 study.

The national figures on black incarceration, which aren't due to be released for another six months, were compiled through the National Prisoner Statistics program.

According to the final count for 1993, there were 946,946 inmates behind bars as of Dec. 31. (That is the last year for which complete data is available.)

Of these, 479,290, or 50.6, were identified as black. This number includes 22,720 of the 44,888 inmates whose race was not known but who were counted as black based on the ratio of known blacks in the prison population.

The 1993 figure caps a trend that has been in progress since the federal government began recording annual prison statistics in 1926.

In that year, blacks accounted for 21 percent of all inmates admitted to prison. Over each

successive decade, the percentage of blacks admitted to prison has continued to rise.

The new wave of federal and state get-tough laws is likely to result in even more black men behind bars.

"Longer sentences, less plea bargaining and tougher parole standards mean substantially increased incarceration rates for black perpetrators," said Glenn Loury, a black economist at Boston University.

Some contend the get-tough provisions themselves are racially motivated.

"We wouldn't be talking this way if the Average Joe thought we were talking about young white men," said Miller.

But others, including North Western University law professor Paul Robinson, point out that most victims of black criminals are other blacks, and it is they who would most benefit from tough law enforcement.

However, Robinson said, It would be a mistake for lawmakers or anyone else to look at the crime problem and conclude the answer lies solely in crimes committed by blacks.

"The black crime gap could disappear tomorrow," Robinson wrote in a recent article on the subject, "and America would have a crime crisis beyond anything imagined in the 1950s."