

The Growth of **INCARCERATION** in the United States

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NOVEMBER 2014

ISSUE BRIEF

Consequences for Communities

After decades of stability, U.S. federal and state prison populations escalated steadily between 1973 and 2009, growing from about 200,000 people to 1.5 million. The increase was driven more by changes in policy—measures that imprisoned people for a wider range of offenses and imposed longer sentences—than by changes in crime rates. Has this greater reliance on incarceration yielded significant benefits for the nation, or is a change in course needed?



To answer that question, a committee of the National Research Council examined the best available evidence on the effects of high rates of incarceration. The committee found no clear evidence that greater reliance on imprisonment achieved its intended goal of substantially reducing crime. Moreover, the rise in incarceration may have had a wide range of unwanted consequences for society, communities, families, and individuals. The committee's report, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, urges policymakers to reduce the nation's reliance on incarceration and seek crime-control strategies that are more effective, with better public safety benefits and fewer unwanted consequences.

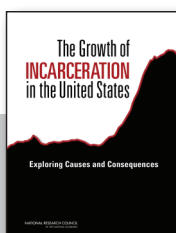
High Incarceration Rates Disproportionately Affect Already Disadvantaged Communities

Incarceration in the United States is almost entirely concentrated in the nation's most disadvantaged communities. Prison admission and return have become commonplace in inner-city African American and Hispanic communities that already suffer from problems of poverty, poor health and education, family instability, and violence. As the incarceration rate climbed, many residents, mostly poor and with little schooling, experienced the cycle of arrest, imprisonment, community supervision, and re-incarceration. The effects may flow through families and social networks and undermine confidence in local law enforcement. In short, incarceration has become a new facet of community life in the nation's poor and minority neighborhoods.

The concentration of incarceration rates in disadvantaged neighborhoods is illustrated in the map of New York City (pictured on reverse side). About half of the people sent to prison from the city in 2009 came from 15 of the city's 65 community districts. These communities have twice the poverty rate as the rest of the city, and more than 90 percent of their residents are from minority populations, compared with less than 60 percent in the remaining areas.

Policymakers should Reduce Use of Incarceration and Improve Social Supports

Given that high rates of incarceration have not clearly yielded substantial crime-control benefits and may have had high financial, social, and human costs, policymakers should revise current criminal justice policies to significantly reduce the rate of incarceration in the United States and to improve prison conditions in ways



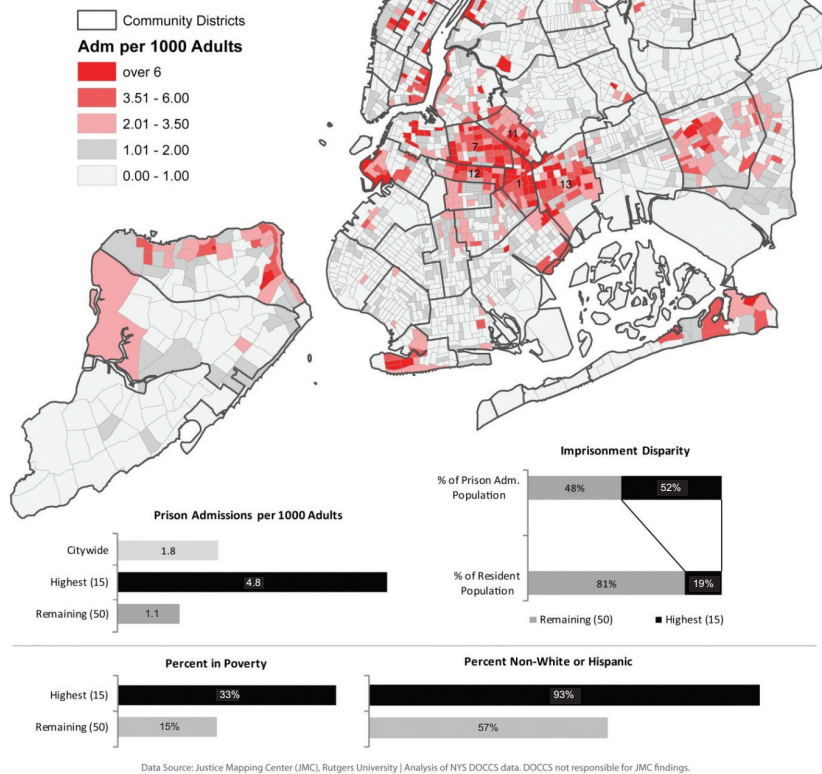
THE GROWTH OF INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES
Exploring Causes and Consequences

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NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL
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New York City (2009)
 People Admitted to Prison per 1000 Adults
 By Census Tract of Residence
 With Community District Borders

About half (52%) of the people sent to prison from New York City in 2009 came from 15 of the City's 65 Community Districts (CD's). The 15 CD's constitute the highest prison admission rate CD's in the City and are labeled in the map according to rank from 1 to 15. These 15 CD's are collectively labeled "Highest (15)" and compared to the City's remaining 50 CD's, labeled "Remaining (50)," in the charts below.



that will prepare prisoners to make a successful transition back into the community. To promote these goals, jurisdictions would need to review a range of programs, such as community-based alternatives to incarceration, probation and parole, and crime prevention initiatives.

However, reducing the use of incarceration will not, by itself, relieve the underlying problems of economic insecurity, low education, and poor health that are associated with incarceration in the nation's poorest communities. Solutions to these problems are outside the criminal justice system, and they will include policies that address school dropout rates, drug addiction, mental illness, and neighborhood poverty – all of which are intimately connected to incarceration. If large numbers of intensely disadvantaged men and women remain in, or return to, poor communities without meaningful assistance, programs, and support, already stressed and fragile families and neighborhoods could be destabilized. Sustainably reducing incarceration may in part depend on whether sufficient community services and programs are available.

Principles to Guide Policy

In a democratic society, policymakers need to consider not only empirical evidence but also principles and values as they determine policies for punishment. The following four principles have

helped shape criminal justice in the United States and Europe for hundreds of years. Policymakers should consider these principles as they weigh sentencing and prison policies:

- **Proportionality:** Is the severity of sentences appropriate to the seriousness of the crime?
- **Parsimony:** Is the punishment the minimum necessary to achieve its intended purpose?
- **Citizenship:** Do the conditions and consequences of punishment allow the individual to retain his or her fundamental status as a member of society, rather than violating that status?
- **Social justice:** Do prison policies promote and not undermine the nation's aspirations to be fair in terms of the rights, resources, and opportunities people have?

These principles should complement the objectives of holding offenders accountable and combating crime. Together, they help define a balanced role for the use of incarceration in U.S. society.

This issue brief is one in a series prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the report *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice and the MacArthur Foundation. Any findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the study committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors.