

GENERATIONS LOCKED DOWN: THE IMPACTS OF PRISON ON A COMMUNITY

Fact Sheet



U.S. rates of imprisonment rates have reached unprecedented levels compared with any other time in U.S. history or in comparison with other Western countries. One out of every 80 people between the ages of 16 and 70 is in jail or prison. For Black men, the situation is even more grim, with a one in three chance of doing time in their lifetime.

The high rates of incarceration are the result of several converging factors over the last two decades. The Reaganomics era saw the dismantling of the social safety net and its replacement with a criminal dragnet targeting poor communities. De-industrialization and the resulting unemployment, coupled with the introduction of crack cocaine into communities, also took its toll. The “end of welfare as we know it” under Clinton put further stresses on the social fabric. In the early and mid-1990s, crime control policies became increasingly harsh, giving us three strikes, truth-in-sentencing laws, and zero-tolerance policing.

The impacts go beyond the prison walls—more than 90 percent of those going into prison will be released. Los Angeles County has the highest number of releases in the country. The vast majority of those released come home to areas like South L.A. with little to no re-entry services in place.

Did You Know?

- Los Angeles County has the largest number of releases from prison in the country, with 37,080 releases in 2001, followed at a distant second by Cook County, IL (17,480), and San Bernardino, CA (10,183).
- South L.A., in turn, has the largest number of releases in the L.A. area. One of four parolees in the greater L.A. region is in the South L.A. Service Planning Area (SPA), even though the area holds only 10 percent of the population.
- In California in 2000, returns to prison for technical violations of parole accounted for 57 percent of total admissions, up from 11 percent in 1980. Not surprisingly, the state has the highest recidivism rate in the nation with 70% of paroled felons reoffending within 18 months.
- California has the largest number of female prisoners in the U.S., with nearly 12,000 incarcerated during 1999. Approximately 80% of U.S. female inmates are mothers with, on average, two dependent children, two-thirds of whom are under 10 years of age.
- California is choosing cellblocks over classrooms, with total state spending on corrections rising at 15 times the rate it did for total state spending on higher education.