



2008's Ten Worst Places to Be Black

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Corporate media, which conceal much about the state of things beyond our borders, work hard to obscure the facts of life for Americans too, including the state of black America. In this year of symbolic firsts and "never before" Black Agenda Report offers a useful index of how life is lived for hundreds of thousands of families in our communities.

America's prison system, the world's largest, houses some 2.2 million people. Almost half its prisoners come from the one-eighth of this country, which is black. African-American communities have been hard hit by the social, political and economic repercussions of the growth of America's prison state. Its presence and its reach into black life is a useful index of the quality of life in black America itself.

In this year of symbolic optimism, when a black man is a leading contender in the presidential race, as well as a leading recipient of contributions from Wall Street, big insurance and military contractors, the need to measure and describe life as it is actually lived by millions of African-Americans has never been greater. As we said in the introduction to [2005's Ten Worst Places to Be Black](#).

The pervasive corporate media bubble, which grossly distorts the views most Americans have of the world beyond their shores, and of life in America's black one-eighth, operates to fool African-Americans, too. While a fortunate few of us are doing very well indeed, and many more are hanging on as best we can, the conditions of life for a substantial chunk of black America are not substantially improving, and appear to be getting much worse. This is a truth which can't be found anywhere in the corporate media, but it is nevertheless one with which we must familiarize ourselves in preparation for the upcoming national black dialog. It is high time to begin constructing useful indices with which to measure the quality of life, not just for a fortunate few, but for the broad masses of our people in America's black one-eighth.

Painting an accurate picture is not difficult. Useful measures of family income and cohesiveness, of home ownership, life expectancy, education levels, of unemployment and underemployment abound. But among all the relevant data on the state of black America today, one factor stands out: the growth of America's public policy of racially selective policing, prosecution and mass imprisonment of its black citizens over the past 30 years. The operation of the crime-control industry has left a distinctive, multidimensional and devastating mark on the lives of millions of black families, and on the economic and social fabric of the communities in which they live.

Although our black presidential candidate would have us believe that African-Americans are, as he has said many times, "90 percent of the way" to freedom, justice and true equality, the facts seem to say otherwise. As recently as 1964, a majority of all U.S. prisoners were white men. But since 1988, the year Vice President George H.W. Bush rode to the White House, stoking white fears with an ad campaign featuring convicted black killer and rapist Willie Horton, the black one-eighth of America's population has furnished the majority of new admissions to its prisons and jails.

The fact is that while U.S. prison populations have grown seven times since 1970, crime rates have increased only slightly over that time. According to Berkeley scholar Dr. Loic Wacquant, the increase in America's prison population over that time has been achieved simply by locking up five times as many people per one thousand reported crimes as we did in 1980.

The ripple effects on black communities and families have been enormous and devastating. Millions of the black poor are permanently stigmatized, excluded from much of the job market and opportunities for training and education, and are sent home to the same resource-poor, deindustrialized communities in which they lived before prison, where there are no services for them and no societal will to educate or train them. America's enormous prison system, along with its punitive and exclusionary attitude toward the class of people from which prisoners originate, is freezing the black poor in place for generations to come. As we said in 2005,

"... if you want to know where black families fare the worst, where the lowest wages and life expectancy are, where to find the highest unemployment and the greatest number of single-parent households among African-Americans, you don't need an online survey. You certainly don't count the black businesses or the black elected officials. You count the black prisoners and the former prisoners, and the ruined communities they come from and are discharged into."

That's what we did. Despite our requests, we were unable to get breakdowns of federal prisoners by state of origin before our publication deadline, so our data excludes the nearly 200,000 prisoners under federal lock and key. When the Federal Bureau of Prisons makes this data available, we will share it with our readers. So here, based on incarceration data supplied by states and found on the website of The Sentencing Project, are the ten worst states in the United States to be black.

10 WORST STATES TO BE BLACK			
STATE	BLACK PRISONERS AS % OF TOTAL BLACK POPULATION	RATIO OF BLACK TO WHITE IN PRISONS AND JAILS	BLACK % OF STATE POPULATION
Wisconsin	4.5%	10.64	6%
Iowa	4.2%	13.59	2%

Excluded from this list are South Dakota, Vermont, Utah, Montana, Idaho, and North Dakota, where African-Americans make up 1 percent or less of the

population, but which do have extremely high rates of black incarceration.

Texas and California, the nation's two most populous states each account for more than a tenth of the nation's 2.2 million prisoners. Kansas and Kentucky, which did not make the 2005 "ten worst" list, have replaced Delaware and Nevada.

Dishonorable mentions: racial disparities in incarceration

Most U.S. prisoners are nonviolent drug offenders. Although federal statistics show the rates of illegal drug use for whites, blacks and Latinos to be within a single percentage point of each other, African-Americans are an absolute majority of the people serving time for drug offenses. The stark and inescapable fact of double-digit disparity between black and white incarceration rates is hard to miss and harder to explain, except in terms of a consistently applied if rarely acknowledged policy of racially selective policing, sentencing and imprisonment.

STATE	BLACK TO WHITE IMPRISONMENT RATIO	BLACK % OF STATE POPULATION
Iowa	19.02	2%
Vermont	13.59	1%
New Jersey	12.49	14%
Connecticut	12.38	10%
North Dakota	12	1%
Wisconsin	10.72	6%
South Dakota	10.64	1%
Rhode Island	10.02	6%
New York	9.62	17%
New Hampshire	9.35	1%
Pennsylvania	9.22	11%
Utah	9.15	1%
Minnesota	9.15	4%

The states with the 15 highest disparity rates between black and white incarceration show some interesting characteristics. First, none of them are in the South. Secondly, blacks make up a negligible percentage, 6 percent or less in ten of these high disparity states. Thirdly, the other five high-disparity states either contain or are adjacent to three of the five largest concentrations of African-American population in the United States, namely the metro areas

of New York, Chicago and Philadelphia.

What about the South?

About half of all African-Americans live in the South, and that number is increasing. Generally, Southern states have higher percentages of black population, but lower disparity rates between black and white population than elsewhere. No Southern state locks up nine or ten times as many African-Americans as whites. In the table below, we can see that the Texas pattern is a typical southern one, with a pretty average disparity rate.

STATE	BLACK % OF STATE POPULATION	BLACK IMPRISONMENT AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL BLACK POPULATION	BLACK-WHITE IMPRISONMENT DISPARITY
Mississippi	37%	1.74%	3.46
Louisiana	32%	2.45%	4.69
Georgia	30%	2.06%	3.32
Maryland	29%	1.58%	5.48
South Carolina	29%	1.86%	4.47
Alabama	26%	1.91%	3.54
North Carolina	22%	1.72%	5.40
Delaware	21%	2.51%	6.36
Virginia	20%	2.33%	5.89
Tennessee	17%	2.0%	4.12
Florida	16%	2.61%	4.45
Arkansas	16%	1.84%	3.86
Texas	12%	3.12%	4.74

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Evidently, the highest relative percentages of African-Americans, if not the highest absolute numbers of black incarcerated, are to be found in and near large concentrations of Northern blacks, or in states where African-Americans make up a relatively small percentage of the population.

Are things getting any better? Is there any good news?

There is good news, but not in the numbers. According to Prisons and Jails at Mid-Year 2006, in the 12 months ending on June 30, 2006, prison populations increased in 43 state jurisdictions and declined or remained the same in eight. Overall, the number of America's prisoners is increasing at a rate not seen since 1999-2000.

The good news is that the issue of racially selective mass incarceration has actually begun to be acknowledged by members of the nation's political elite. One day last October, a bipartisan hearing on the topic was conducted. Every candidate for office in black constituencies for some time has been accustomed to "drive-by" rhetorical mentions of the fact that we are a disproportionate share of the nation's incarcerated.

Even Democratic presidential candidates have made cursory nods to the edges of the issue. Obama is promising to spend millions more on re-entry programs, and Hillary Clinton has denounced felony disenfranchisement.

Those are the limits of the good news. Money on re-entry programs is a good thing, and felony disenfranchisement is indeed a very bad thing. But both leave unexplored and untouched the foundational reasons for the explosive growth of America's prison state, a topic explored by Loic Wacquant elsewhere in this issue. An Oregon state senator introduced a bill calling for racial disparity impact statements to accompany further sentencing law; the senator plans to reintroduce it in the coming session.

Longstanding public policies like racially selective mass incarceration, which profoundly affects the quality of black life will not change without the birth of a broad social movement in our African-American communities to demand it. Cautious politicians dependent on campaign contributors and the favor of corporate media won't give us this, any more than LBJ would have given us the 1965 Civil Rights bill without a loud, disrespectful and civilly disobedient mass movement in the streets to embarrass him and prod him on. It will take a movement on that scale to challenge the policies of racially selective mass incarceration.

Is it in us? Only time will tell.

Bruce Dixon is editor of The Black Commentator.

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