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Decline in Blacks in State Prisons for Drugs

By SOLOMON MOORE

The number of African-American drug offenders in state prisons has declined for the first time since law enforcement agencies started the war on drugs 25 years ago, even as convictions of white drug offenders have increased, according to a new study released Tuesday.

The study, by the Sentencing Project, a nonprofit policy research group in Washington, found that the number of blacks in state prisons for drug crimes dropped 21.6 percent from 1999 to 2005, the last year for which data are available. The number of white drug offenders in state prisons grew by 42.6 percent in the same period.

The total number of drug offenders in state prisons increased to 253,300 in 2005 from 251,200 in 1999, according to [the report](#).

"I'm encouraged that there are fewer African-Americans in prison for drug offenses," said Marc Mauer, the executive director of the Sentencing Project and the report's author. "But the overall number of blacks in prison is still high, and we've replaced some of those black drug offenders with white drug offenders. The racial disparity has lessened, but the overall effect of the drug war has not."

Experts in criminal justice suggested several reasons for the decline in imprisoned black drug offenders, including a reduction in racial profiling, a drop in open-air drug sales and a cooling of the crack cocaine trade that devastated urban communities throughout the 1980s and '90s.

The study, which was based on an analysis of data from the [F.B.I.](#) and other federal agencies, noted a sharp contrast between state and federal prisons, where there was an overall expansion of inmates — black, white and Latino — serving time for drug-related offenses.

Blacks continued to make up the largest segment — 44 percent — of all prisoners serving time for drug offenses, although they were only 12 percent of the total population, while whites, who were 75 percent of the national population, made up 27 percent of all imprisoned drug offenders. The incarceration rate for Latino drug offenders in state prisons was substantially unchanged, 20.2 percent in 2005, down from 20.7 percent in 1999.

David Kopel, an associate policy analyst for the [Cato Institute](#), attributed the decline in black inmates serving time for drug offenses to the decline in crack cocaine, which was the drug of choice for many black addicts.

"We're probably just seeing a shift in drug use and consumption patterns of crack cocaine, and so there is

less production as well," Mr. Kopel said.

Joseph McNamara, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at [Stanford University](#), suggested that the decline resulted from so many blacks' having already been imprisoned over the last two decades.

"With mandatory-minimum sentencing laws, the nation had already locked up so many African-Americans that whole communities were decimated," said Mr. McNamara, a former police chief in San Jose, Calif.

Diversion programs like [drug courts](#), which often assign offenders to rehabilitation programs instead of jail or prison, may have also lowered the number of black drug offenders, Mr. Mauer said.

Stiffer enforcement of laws against the production and use of [methamphetamines](#), which is generally associated with white drug users, could account for the increase in imprisoned white drug offenders, said Beau Kilmer, a fellow at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, Calif.

In California, the number of felony arrests for methamphetamine production increased by about 70 percent over the last decade, Mr. Kilmer said.

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