Collateral Damage: How Mass Incarceration Increases Poverty and Crime in North Carolina’s Poorest African American Communities

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Imagine the following: One in five of the men you knew had a prison record. Members of your race were six times more likely to be incarcerated than those of the majority race. Those incarcerated had a much harder time working, marrying, and parenting their children. Their children were in turn more likely to commit crime and more likely to be incarcerated as a result. These imaginings describe reality in our poorest African American communities.

Collateral damage is a phrase used to refer to the civilian casualties that inadvertently result from military operations. North Carolina’s poorest African American communities have become collateral damage in a misguided, all out war against crime. Incarceration is a necessary response to serious crime, and the poor suffer from crime more than anyone else. So many young men are being incarcerated for such long periods of time in these communities that the cure has become worse than the disease, however. During the Vietnam War a reporter claimed that an officer told him that the army had to destroy a Vietnamese town in order to save it from the enemy. In a similar fashion, mass incarceration has increased both poverty and crime within our state’s poorest African American communities; we are hurting the people we are supposed to be protecting.

Mass incarceration refers to arrest, charging, and sentencing practices that result in the widespread incarceration of minor offenders for significant periods of time. The logic of the last twenty years has been that minor offenders (including, most notably, non-violent drug offenders) might become serious offenders, and should therefore be incarcerated for the safety of the public. We punish offenders not just for what they have done, but for what they might do. Therefore, thieves are sentenced as if they might be burglars, burglars as if they might be robbers, and so on. Drug offenders are treated worst of all. Anyone who sells drugs is presumed to be a remorseless urban predator, and a series of nonviolent drug offenses can easily land an offender in state prison in North Carolina. Mass incarceration is to punishment what amputation is to surgery.

Crime, of course, is not colorblind and occurs most frequently among poor communities. Since poverty is also not colorblind, mass incarceration has resulted in disproportionately high rates of incarceration in African American communities. Currently 57 percent of the state prison population is African American, despite the fact that African Americans constitute only 21.5 percent of the state’s population. The ratio of African Americans to whites in North Carolina jails is 5.4 to 1. The ratio is even more lopsided in our largest urban counties. In 2000, for example, the ratio was 12.9 to one in Wake County, and 11.3 to one in Mecklenburg County, despite the fact that the African American populations in those counties made up only 27 percent and 19.7 percent of the overall county populations, respectively. In that same year twenty-one percent of African Americans in Mecklenburg County and fourteen percent of African Americans in Wake County lived in urban neighborhoods that researchers defined as distressed, a definition that requires an unemployment and poverty rate that is at least 150 percent greater than the state average.

National research has shown that such mass incarceration literally disintegrates many African American communities. It disrupts family ties, increases poverty and ultimately increases crime as well by making it more likely that the children of those incarcerated will follow in the incarcerated parent’s footsteps. Mass incarceration has changed prison into something that seems almost normal in impoverished African American neighborhoods. Poor communities have always known more crime and more punishment than others, but before the 1980s prison was reserved for “extremely violent offenders, hardcore drug addicts, and career criminals.” The “tough on crime” policies of the eighties and nineties changed that. Young African American men who committed crimes that would have earned them only probation or relatively short county jail sen-
tences found themselves joining hard-core criminals in state prison.

These policies weighed most heavily on those who had the poorest economic prospects. “Among black men born in the late 1960s who received no more than a high school education, 30 percent had served time in prison by their mid-thirties; 60 percent of high school dropouts had prison records.”

One study estimated that on an average day in 1999 almost 8 percent of African American men aged thirty to thirty-four who were high school dropouts were in prison or jail.

Mass incarceration weakens poor communities economically. “Incarceration significantly reduces the wages, employment, and annual earnings of former inmates, even through their economic opportunities are extremely poor to begin with.”

One study showed that the existence of a criminal record reduced an African American job applicant’s chance of being called back for an interview by 60 percent. The stigma of a criminal record compounds racial discrimination as well. The same study showed that a white applicant with a criminal record had as good a chance of being called back for a further interview as a black applicant without one. Furthermore, the effect of this lost income reverberates throughout the community as local businesses suffer from decreased spending and cut back on hiring in the community as a result.

Mass incarceration also weakens African American families. “By 2000, over a million black children — 9 percent of those under eighteen — had a father in prison or jail.”

Many of these men were playing a role in their children’s lives although mass incarceration seems to have changed that over time. In the mid-1980s, roughly half of African American fathers admitted into the state prison system were living with their children — approximately the same percentage as white prisoners; by the mid-1990s, the number had dropped to 40 percent for African American fathers.

Other research has shown that “most of those incarcerated were breadwinners at the time of their arrest, contributing significantly to their family’s legitimate income.”

Recently a number of studies have documented some of the effects of mass incarceration on North Carolina communities. Mass incarceration hits children in North Carolina communities especially hard.

One study of data from each of North Carolina’s 100 counties showed that mass incarceration significantly increased child poverty, especially in counties with a high proportion of non-White residents.

A study of eleven rural North Carolina counties revealed that minimal involvement with the criminal justice system increased the risk of family instability and economic strain even after controlling for risk factors such as lack of education, substance abuse or mental illness.

Almost three-fourths of the African-American children in this study had a parent or parental figure who had been arrested or charged despite the fact that African Americans constituted less than four percent of the county’s population.

Mass incarceration also directly affects the health of those living in North Carolina’s poorest communities. One North Carolina study showed that rates of sexually transmitted infections and teenage pregnancies consistently increased as incarceration rates moved higher.

Not surprisingly, poor, minority youth are over-represented in North Carolina’s juvenile justice system. Two separate North Carolina studies have shown that minority youth are more likely to have been arrested, detained and committed to a training school than white youth.

A 1998 study showed that five times as many minority juveniles were transferred to criminal court in North Carolina as compared to the rest of the population.

Crime requires punishment, but mass incarceration ultimately punishes the community that the criminal law is supposed to protect. When that community is an impoverished one still weighed down by a legacy of racial discrimination, the decision to over punish “just to be on the safe side” is not only a bad idea, but an immoral one as well.


8. Id. at 3.

9. Id. at 6-7.


12. Id. at 91.


14. Western, supra note 8, at 5.

15. Western et al., supra note 5, at 10.

16. DeFina, supra note 6, at 379.

17. Id. at 390.


19. Id. at 687.


