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MAGAZINE

Who's Gonna Take the Weight? Assessing the Cost of Mass Incarceration in America

By Adolphus G. Belk Jr.

America is the undisputed global leader in incarceration. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were nearly 2.2 million persons in America's prisons and jails as of 2005—60 percent of whom were black or Latino. If all persons under adult correctional supervision are included, the number of individuals under the surveillance of American criminal justice systems increases to over 7 million. What is more incredible is that, according to the International Center for Prison Studies, the U.S. alone—with just 4.6 percent of the world's total

— Continued on page 18

Let's "Tear Down the Walls" to Better Health Care

By Congressman Edolphus Towns

There are moments in history when those in leadership need to take the right course of action. That was never more true than it is today in terms of our nation's health and its health care system. Let me be clear: those of us with employer-paid health insurance most likely have access to one of the world's best systems of care. However, those without health insurance or those not eligible for coverage under Medicare or Medicaid often have no means of accessing preventive care and may seek care too late to make a difference in their lives and those of their families.

— Continued on page 9

IN THIS ISSUE...

- 1 **Who's Gonna Take the Weight?**
Assessing the Cost of Mass Incarceration in America
- 1 **Let's "Tear Down the Walls" to Better Health Care**
- 2 **From the President's Desk**
- 3 **Making Education a Presidential Campaign Issue**
- 5 **Lessons from Early Childhood
and Elementary Education Practice**
- 7 **Do Issues Really Matter in the Presidential Campaign?**
An Interview with Dr. David A. Bositis
- 10 **Economic Security:**
A Priority for African Americans
- 12 **Bridging Our Racial Divide:**
What the Next President Can Do
- 20 **Joint Center Updates**

IN TRENDLETTER...

- 14 **Health Report**
Medicaid: Improving Care, Not Cutting It
- 16 **Economic Report**
**A Difficult Balancing Act: Funding Program Priorities
in a Time of Budget Deficits**

WHO'S GONNA TAKE THE WEIGHT?

ASSESSING THE COST OF MASS INCARCERATION IN AMERICA

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population—accounted for 24 percent of the world's prisoners in 2006.

The explosion in the U.S. prison population reflects the shifting politics of crime and punishment, which left an indelible mark on the formulation and implementation of public policy. During the 1960s, federal and state lawmakers began to argue that the nation's crime problem could only be solved by hardening criminal justice policy. By the 1970s, new policies emphasized deterrence, incapacitation, punishment, and victims' rights rather than rehabilitation, treatment, and re-entry. This new paradigm was fueled by the campaigns of issue-seeking politicians of both parties and commentaries from the scholarly community. The 1980s and 1990s saw the dawn of the "get tough" movement, which sparked president-led wars on crime and drugs. This movement also targeted juvenile offenders, particularly those in central cities who were young, black, or Latino. Federal—and even state—policies grew more punitive, resulting in the incarceration of nonviolent drug offenders for lengthy prison sentences (e.g., via the "100-to-1" powder cocaine/crack cocaine ratio), the diversion of juveniles to adult criminal justice systems, and measures such as "Three Strikes and You're Out" and mandatory minimum sentencing—all of which contributed to an overflowing prison system.

While crime rates have fluctuated over the years, recently increasing after a notable decline during the 1990s, one thing has re-

mained consistent: incarceration rates have continued to rise. This imprisonment binge has had particularly dire consequences for persons often labeled as the "underclass," a term almost exclusively used to describe poor, urban blacks and Latinos.

The Costs of Incarceration

Inmates, their families, their communities, and American society at large shoulder the economic, political, and social costs of imprisonment. For example, while most inmates eventually return to society, ex-offenders often have lower levels of educational attainment and poorer job skills than the general population, which inhibits their ability to find work and avoid future criminality. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, inmates enter correctional institutions with much lower levels of educational attainment than the general population. About 41 percent of prison and jail inmates had not completed high school or earned a G.E.D. as of 1997, compared to just 18.4 percent of all Americans. Among persons in state prisons specifically, 53 percent of Latinos, 44 percent of blacks, and 27 percent of whites had not finished high school or earned a G.E.D. Not surprisingly, nearly 52 percent of state prisoners and 57 percent of jail inmates reported enrolling in educational programs after they were admitted. However, as University of Missouri-Kansas City economist L. Randall Wray remarked: "With the near abandonment of attempts to rehabilitate or educate prisoners, it is

unlikely that most prisoners leave prison better prepared for employment."

Even if they are successful, a prison record adds another obstacle to securing a decent job. Upon release, ex-offenders also struggle with difficulties accessing the types of services they need to ensure successful reintegration into society. All of these challenges in finding gainful employment contribute to high recidivism rates, perpetuating a cycle of incarceration, release, and re-incarceration.

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The economic costs of mass incarceration also extend to the taxpayer. In 2001, the average cost of incarcerating one inmate for one year was just over \$24,000. Data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that corrections spending increased by 423 percent from 1982 to 2003; the combined spending of the federal, state, and local governments was \$39.2 billion in 2003. Unlike their counterparts in Washington, however, state lawmakers must pass balanced budgets. This reality has resulted in trade-offs to balance the ballooning expenditures on incarceration. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that, from 1977 to 2003, total state and local spending on corrections increased at a far greater rate (1,173 percent) than spending on education (505 percent), hospitals and health care (572 percent), interest on debt (577 percent), and public welfare (766 percent). Thus, while state governments spend more on things such as education and public welfare, the rising cost of incarceration means that some funds will not be put to more productive uses.

Incarceration policies have significant political implications as well. Losing the right to vote is among the most obvious political costs associated with

imprisonment. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia ban inmates from voting. Thirty-five states bar felons from voting while they are on parole and 30 of these jurisdictions also rule out felony probationers. As a result of disenfranchisement laws, 5.3 million Americans have either temporarily or permanently lost the right to vote. Roughly 1.4 million of these persons are black men, a group that is disenfranchised at a rate seven times greater than the general population.

Some of the political costs of imprisonment, however, are more subtle. For instance, Census Bureau tabulations redirect federal financial aid and voting power from the cities in which offenders were arrested to the locations where they are incarcerated. While new prison construction has occurred near some metropolitan areas, a great number of the nation's newest facilities have been constructed in rural areas. Thus, inmates from New York City, for example, are counted as "residents" in far away places such as Franklin County. Because the Census Bureau calculates a community's per capita income by including the salaries of inmates (some of whom make as little as \$0.25 per hour), many prison towns are now eligible for federal assistance programs. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, the federal government distributes nearly \$140 billion in formula-based grants to state and local governments. Likewise, because legislative districts are drawn based on decennial population counts, political power in some states has flowed away from cities populated largely by blacks, Latinos, and Democrats and toward rural areas that are mostly white and Republican. While urban communities surely gain a modicum of security with the incarceration of each felon, they also lose standing when millions of federal dollars and political power leave for small town America.

Finally, there are the social costs of mass incarceration, which have shaken American families. America's inmates are more than statistics—they are sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, from 1991 to 1999, the number of children under the age of 18 with a parent in state or federal prison increased from 936,500 to almost 1.5 million. Black and Latino children (7 percent and 2.6 percent, respectively) were more likely than white

children (0.8 percent) to have a parent behind bars. Forty-nine percent of parents in state prisons were black, 28.9 percent were white, and 18.9 percent were Latino. Moreover, although men continue to comprise the vast majority of the prison population, the number of women in prison has increased at roughly double the rate for men since 1980. In 2005, black women, with an incarceration rate of 156 per 100,000 persons, were more than twice as likely as Latina women and three times as likely as white women to be in prison. About 70 percent of the women in prison—many of whom were imprisoned for drug violations—have children under the age of eighteen.

The next president must do something that his or her predecessors have mostly failed to do—move beyond overblown rhetoric and chart a policy course grounded in evidence-based practices.

These numbers are especially alarming because children living in single-parent households are more likely to live in poverty than those in two-parent households. Poverty, combined with high levels of joblessness in cities, can lead to other neighborhood problems such as crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking. Children who engage in these behaviors will ultimately come into contact with the juvenile or adult justice systems. Thus, family stability and community cohesion are severely threatened with so many black and Latino men and women behind bars.

Recommendations

While crime and incarceration have long been state and local government concerns, national leadership is needed. While some members of Congress, like U.S. Representative John Conyers (D-MI), are working to reverse these trends, the next president of the United States—as the national agenda-setter—can help determine where we go from here. Just as presidents

have supported the imprisonment binge, the next president must do something that his or her predecessors have mostly failed to do—move beyond overblown rhetoric and chart a policy course grounded in evidence-based practices. The last two decades have demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt that the "get tough" approach has significant limitations. Now, the nation must get "smart on crime." In fact, public opinion data demonstrate that Americans want their political leaders to be smart on crime. According to Gallup, in 2003, 69 percent of those polled agreed that lawmakers should work to lower the crime rate by attacking social and economic problems that lead to crime.

It is time for government to reassume its obligation to rehabilitate offenders and reintegrate them into society once they are released. The next president should address the change in course on crime policy that is needed to break free of the cycle of incarceration, release, and re-incarceration, which is imposing such tremendous costs. The following recommendations may serve as a starting point for change in this critical policy area:

1. Abolish the "100-to-1" powder cocaine/crack cocaine ratio established by the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988.
2. Divert nonviolent drug addicts and offenders from the prison system.
3. Divert juvenile offenders from detention facilities and offer family therapy and parent training directed at delinquents or pre-delinquents and their families.
4. Reinvest in rehabilitation and re-entry programs that treat persons with substance abuse problems, promote job readiness skills for ex-offenders, and offer assistance with the transition from prison to the community.
5. Offer incentives to businesses to employ ex-offenders.
6. Restore voting rights to ex-offenders once they are released from prison. □

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