

The New York Times
August 28, 2002

Study Finds Big Increase in Black Men as Inmates Since 1980

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

The number of black men in jail or prison has grown fivefold in the past 20 years, to the point where more black men are behind bars than are enrolled in colleges or universities, according to a study released yesterday.

The increase in the black male prison population coincides with the prison construction boom that began 1980. At that time, three times more black men were enrolled in institutions of higher learning than behind bars, the study said.

The report was prepared by the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington-based research and advocacy group that supports alternatives to incarceration.

The study found that in 2000 there were 791,600 black men in jail or prison and 603,032 enrolled in colleges or universities. By contrast, the study said that in 1980 there were 143,000 black men in jail or prison but 463,700 enrolled in colleges or universities.

Some criminal justice experts said it was misleading to compare the two categories because the number in jail and prison includes all adult black men 17 years or older, while the number in institutions of higher learning is confined to a narrower student-age population in their late teens and early twenties.

But Todd Clear, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, said the study's findings were still significant and "tell us there has been a public policy far overemphasizing investment in criminal justice instead of in education for this population."

"It tells you that the life chances of a black male going to prison is greater today than the chances of a black male going to college, and it wasn't always this way," Professor Clear said.

The study did not directly address why the number of black men in jail and prison climbed so quickly. Some experts suggested as one explanation a rise in the number of black men serving time for drug offenses. But Justice Department figures show that from 1990 to 2000, 50 percent of the growth in inmate populations at state prisons was for violent crimes, and that only 20 percent was for drug crimes.

During the prison-building boom of the last two decades, the number of Americans of all races in jail or prison quadrupled, to 2.1 million in 2000 from 502,000 in 1980, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. In that same period, the number of Americans of all races attending colleges

and universities rose to 14.8 million from 12.1 million, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, an increase of 22 percent.

Hilary O. Shelton, the director of the Washington chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said, "It is indeed a sad statement about our nation that it appears to be easier for governments to invest precious public dollars into the incarceration of African-American men than it is for them to invest in higher education."

Vincent Schiraldi, the president of the Justice Policy Institute, noted the report found that the number of black men in jail or prison grew three times as fast from 1980 to 2000 as the rise in the number of black men in colleges and universities.