

Prison boom rockets despite 'crime' drop

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by MC12

New u.s. government statistics show that incarceration continues to skyrocket despite declining official crime rates. The Amerikan prison system is part of imperialism's ever-growing system of oppression and social control. MIM recognizes all imprisonment under imperialism as political; it is the oppressed that are locked up after being railroaded within the settler nation's bourgeois INjustice system. Imperialism and its allies commit the most horrendous crimes; these crimes go unpunished because it is the bourgeoisie that creates the laws and controls the courts.

Bourgeois accounting of crime does not include multi-national corporations murdering peasants to build golf courses or banana plantations. Bourgeois accounting of crime does not include devastating malnutrition, preventable disease, and environmental contamination resulting from imperialist wars. Bourgeois accounting of crime is extremely suspect because crime itself is politically defined according to what class and national interests are represented within the government.

It's no surprise that Amerika excludes imperialist crimes from the official crime rates. But typically, white nation pigs and bureaucrats have used official crime rates to justify the proliferation of pig departments and prisons. Recent reports prove what MIM has said repeatedly: increased imprisonment and repression is primarily a result of Amerika's attempts to maintain control, not of increased official crime rates.

Despite the continued decline in official crime rates, the U.s. prison population grew 4.8% in 1998. The government estimates that 1,825,400 people were in jail or prison at the end of 1998, up from 1,744,001 the previous year. The total rate of imprisonment rose to 672 per 100,000 residents, up from 461 as recently as 1990.(1)

There were fewer officially-defined crimes committed in 1998 than there were the year before, but the prison numbers kept going up. Authors of the u.s. report attribute this to several factors. First, even though "crime" is down, there was a 4% increase in people sent to prison and jail. There was also a 39% increase in the number of people on parole returned to prison. The rate of release continued to fall (from

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37% per year in 1990 to 31% in 1997), and the average time spent in prison before release continued to go up (from 22 months in 1990 to 27 months in 1997). Finally, expected time served by those now entering prisons has increased to 43 months, from 38 months in 1990.

Changes in the INjustice system's policies have made it so that the prison population will continue to grow even if crime rates fall. People are still going in faster than they are coming out. Amerika will imprison more people for lesser crimes and will keep them in prison longer. The prison system has its own momentum, and it is only partly related to "crime" itself. The INjustice system serves political economic purposes — national oppression, population control, the exploitation of labor, jobs for the labor aristocracy and contracts for corporate Amerika. A down-turn in the crime rate cannot stand in the way of these important goals.

The annual rate of increase in the prison population was lower in 1998 than the 6.7% average annual increase in the 1990s. However, with state prisons 13% above their highest capacity, and federal prison 27% above capacity, there is still plenty of demand for new prisons and more money for the prison industrial complex.(2)

The new statistics offer fresh evidence of national oppression in the INjustice system. In 1998, the states

with the highest imprisonment rates were those with the relatively largest pockets of oppressed nation members: Louisiana (736 sentenced prisoners per 100,000 residents), followed by Texas (724), Oklahoma (622), Mississippi (574), and South Carolina (550). The states with the lowest imprisonment rates were the whitest: Minnesota (117), Maine (125), and North Dakota (128). In addition, Puerto Rico, with a rate of 330, had a 15% increase in sentenced prisoners last year.

The latest year for which imprisonment of oppressed nation members was calculated is 1997. Imprisonment of Black nation members has been rising faster than imprisonment of whites throughout the 1990s. Black male imprisonment is up 61% in the 1990s, compared to 54% for white male imprisonment. The prison population has dropped from 50.1% white to 47.9% white during the 1990s. (Remember that Blacks are 12% of the population.) The Latino male prison population rose 62% during that time. [We get this information from Amerika's accounting of "Hispanic" imprisonment rates. Among other settler chauvinist problems with this type of accounting, Amerika tallies many Latinos as "white." Figuring that up to one-third of "whites" in prisns are probably Latino or members of indigenous nations is reasonable.]

Figure 1. 1997 imprisonment rates of sentenced prisoners per 100,000 adults

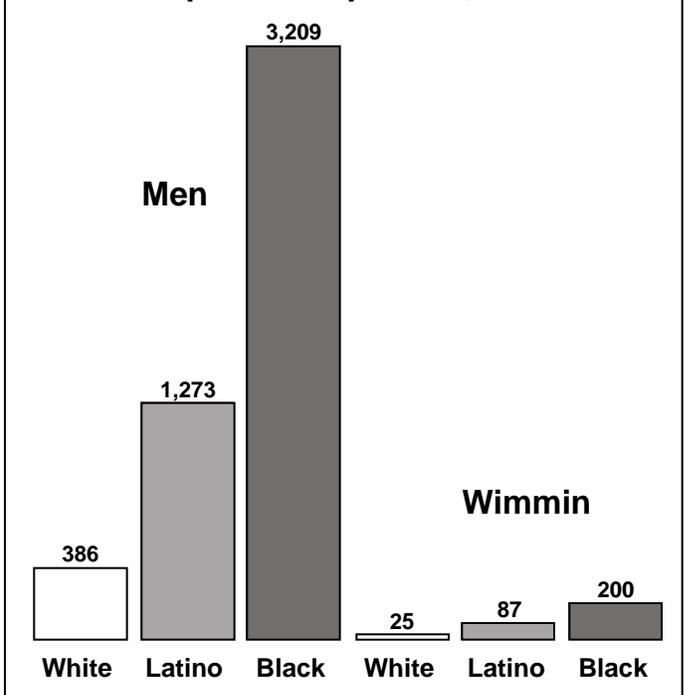


Figure 2. 1997 imprisonment rates of sentenced men per 100,000, by age.

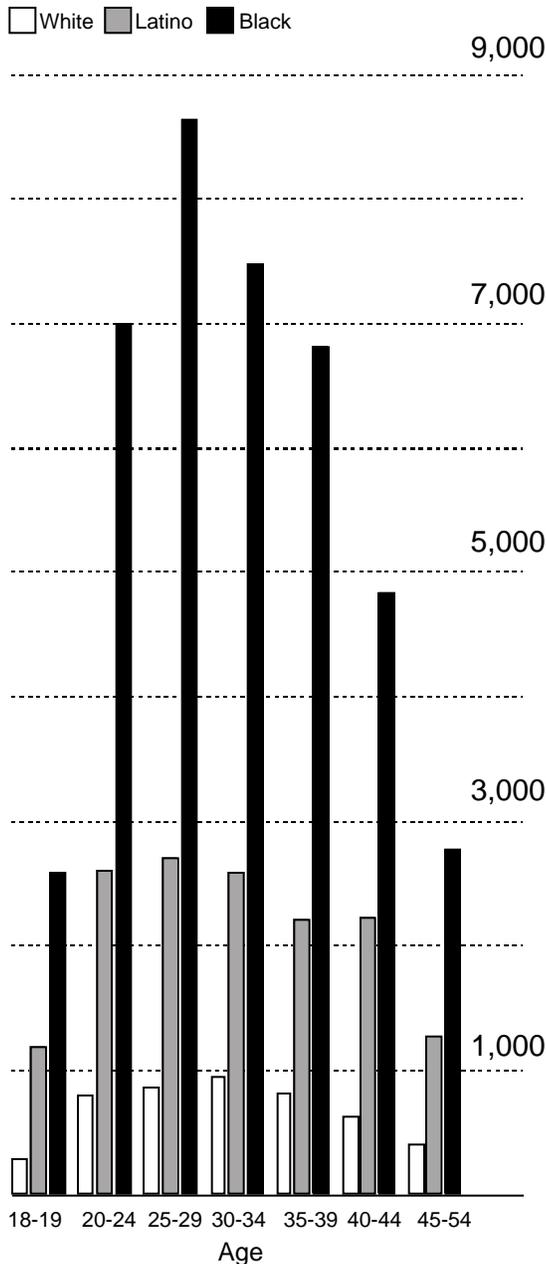


Figure 1 shows 1997 imprisonment rates by gender and nationality.

Most striking were the imprisonment rates by age as well as sex and nationality (Figure 2). Among 25-29 year-old Black men, the imprisonment rate was 8,630. This is ten times the rate for white men of the same age group. The incarceration rate of Latinos in the same age group was 2,703 per 100,000. In percentage terms, 8.6% of Black men between 25 and 29 years old were in prison in 1997 (and sentenced to a year or more).

The concentration of prisoners in the prime ages of the 20s and 30s has calculat-

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ed, devastating economic, social and political effects on the Black nation. Families, neighborhoods and communities have major leaders and contributors ripped from their hearts and brutally imprisoned for years at a time. When and if they are released, the terms of their imprisonment are designed to prevent their success in mainstream pursuits. For whites, men in their 20s and 30s are getting the education and job experience that they will use to translate into positions of power, wealth and savings, and building their families. MIM does not diminish the importance of Black wimmin when we say that the loss of all these Black men, and the damage done to the survivors, takes a horrific toll on the Black nation as a whole.

The imprisonment rate for wimmin has been rising faster than it has been for men in the 1990s. However, the rate for wimmin remains much lower than the rate for men. As MIM has previously discussed, the imperialist patriarchy is much more likely to use the "mental health" system to control wimmin, while men are

more likely to be thrown into the prison system. So, the rate of increase for wimmin in the 1990s has been 8.5% per year on average, compared to 6.6% for men — but the overall rate for men is still 16-times higher, and there are less than 100,000 wimmin in prison.

The prison system is indeed booming out of control. It's vital for the people to understand the machinations of this system if they are to develop their opposition to it. The imprisonment of millions of people in this country is not the result of "crime," or the attempts of the imperialists to make this country safer — except for themselves and their lackeys. But in building their machine of oppression, they are also laying the groundwork for a resistance movement, for the development of anti-imperialist and revolutionary consciousness on the part of prisoners, former prisoners, and their supporters on the outside. The oppressiveness of the prison system is a symbol to all that care to see it, a symbol of the wanton inhumanity and hypocrisy of the imperialist system and its supporters. We need to develop the consciousness that the prison system inadvertently promotes, to undermine and eventually overthrow that system from within as well as from without.

Notes:

1. Allen J. Beck and Christopher J. Mumola, "Prisoners in 1998," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, August 1999, NCJ 175687.
2. The practice of transferring prisoners into other states has grown in the last few years, but it is still only 1% of prisoners who are jailed in states other than their own. Leading the way in terms of percent of prisoners shipped to other states or federal prisons are Washington D.C., Hawaii, and Arkansas, which all have more than 20% of their prisoners in other states or the federal system (D.C. is in the process of transferring all prisoners into federal prisons). The government also reports that Michigan has 1,317 prisoners in other states, and Massachusetts has 173.

Maoist Internationalist Movement

MIM Notes
P.O. Box 29670
Los Angeles, CA 90029-0670

eMail: <mim@mim.org>
WWW: <http://www.etext.org/Politics/MIM>