



Why Place Matters for Understanding — and Reversing — America’s Mass Incarceration Epidemic

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As the U.S. prison population quadrupled from the 1970s through the 1990s, a small number of poor communities bore the disproportionate brunt of this mass incarceration epidemic. Scholarly research and public discourse have primarily examined the dire consequences for affected poor neighborhoods in large metropolitan cities. Although case studies of inner-city “hot spots” of incarceration help illustrate the extent to which people’s contact with criminal justice is disproportionately distributed, these studies have created a misleading image of incarceration as a hyper response to a cluster of urban social problems, including violence, street homelessness, substance abuse, untreated mental illness, and concentrated poverty. But such linking of incarceration to urban neighborhoods does not match the reality of the prison boom’s heavy footprint in many communities far beyond urban cores.

Some 97% of U.S. cities have a population of fewer than 50,000 residents, but until very recently, most of these smaller cities have been absent from research and policy debates about criminal punishment. What is more, even as large U.S. cities are experiencing *declines* in prison admissions, nonmetropolitan areas have driven recent *growths* of U.S. imprisonments. Since the mid-nineties, imprisonment rates have been intensifying and mass incarceration has become ingrained in small cities, suburbs, and rural areas as well as inner-city neighborhoods. Unless scholars and policymakers broaden their understanding of mass incarceration to include both urban and suburban disadvantage, many crucial questions about prospects for reducing incarceration and ameliorating its effects on communities will remain unanswered.

Small Cities Face High Rates of Incarceration

In my research, I have examined and confirmed a number of expected – and unexpected -- relationships between Massachusetts prison admissions and the incidence of crime, concentrated disadvantage, minority racial composition, and residential instability.

- Prison admissions are most numerous in municipalities with high rates of violent crime and drug arrests.
- But the high rates of punishment in poor, minority neighborhoods are not simply a result of higher crime levels in those neighborhoods. After controlling for crime and drug arrests, I find that communities with concentrated disadvantage and more racial minorities – particularly non-Hispanic blacks – have higher rates of prison admission.
- Prison admission rates are highly concentrated outside of urban centers. Some 15% of Massachusetts census tracts account for more than half of the state’s prison admissions, and small urban satellite cities like Fall River and Worcester and suburbs like Holyoke have the highest rates in my study’s sample of places.

A number of factors could explain why the concentration of prison admission rates in small cities and suburbs so far exceeds what prior models might predict. Although some larger cities like Boston have partially recovered from deindustrialization, smaller working-class cities across the region continue to experience economic decline. In the process, they continue to experience high rates of population turnover, low rates of educational attainment, and worsening effects from the opioid epidemic. In large part, these dynamics proceed because smaller communities are geographically isolated and demographically distinct from major cities. They are also deprived of resources and suffer from less attention from researchers and policymakers.

A wide array of economically struggling smaller cities with varying demographics have experienced increasing imprisonment rates. Many of these communities have majority non-Hispanic white populations. This highlights the reality that the prison boom impacts places far from the poor minority neighborhoods typically associated with this phenomenon.

Scholars, Reporters, and State Governments Need to Focus on Small Cities

Researchers, advocacy groups, and policymakers should support more research into the shifting geography of social deprivation and mass imprisonment. Processes that require further exploration include regional deindustrialization, the suburbanization of poverty, and rapid gentrification in large metropolitan cities. Also crucial to understand are the growing rural drug epidemic amid a scarcity of treatment services, as well as the suburban migrations by minority and immigrant groups that attract considerable police attention.

To analyze various kinds of social disadvantage and efforts to control crime and disorder *without attention to geographic variation* runs the risk of mistakenly relegating inequalities, social disorders, and the ills of mass incarceration only to large cities. The relationship between place and punishment must be examined in many more locales well beyond metropolitan cities. More comprehensive analyses may well untangle the similar and different shifts in demography, economic life, and correctional policies that have led to high rates of incarceration for people in small cities and suburbs as well as larger places.

In particular, greater attention should be paid to policing and prosecutorial practices in the growing number of nonmetropolitan communities that exhibit higher rates of imprisonment and harsher sentencing patterns than their urban counterparts. Imprisonment appears to closely follow the contours of poverty, minority racial concentration, and other forms of disadvantage in declining cities and towns. These areas have become regional hot spots of social and health problems, and authorities in many of them may have responded with punitive policy measures. Across the country, analysts are learning that reducing incarceration is a financially and humanly expensive response to social disorder. Efforts to address this problem should bolster local access to physical and mental health care and social services to expand local economic opportunities. Without good jobs and adequate health, educational, and social-service facilities, people facing new threats from unemployment, crime, and drug addiction are going to suffer and commit infractions that can land them in prison – no matter where those people live. Before and after they are imprisoned, their needs must be addressed to avoid the downward spiral mass incarceration brings to many communities.

Read more in Jessica Simes, “Place and Punishment: The Spatial Context of Incarceration” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 513-533.