



How Mass Imprisonment Burdens the United States with a Distrustful Civic Underclass

Vesla M. Weaver, Johns Hopkins University

In many urban areas across the United States, the police, the courts, and the probation offices are the agencies of government most familiar to residents. A recent study of New York City, for example, showed that three-quarters of 18 to 19 year-old black men will be stopped by the police each year. On any given day, eleven percent of young black men are in jail or prison, and one third are serving probation or living under some other type of correctional supervision. Prison spells and police encounters have increased at a breakneck pace. For 35 consecutive years prior to 2000, the numbers of Americans imprisoned steadily increased. Imprisonment went up when crime grew – and also went up when crime declined.

So what? Setting aside debates about the causes of this remarkable prison boom, we need to probe the many effects on American life. Democratic citizenship is one of the most crucial areas to investigate. Especially for the blacks and Latinos who are most affected, does spending time in prison affect people's attitudes toward government and democratic values – and alter their likelihood of voting or engaging in other important forms of citizen participation? My colleague and I tackled these questions, and our findings document worrisome trends and suggest new ways of thinking about the issues at stake.

Encounters with Authoritarian Institutions Heighten Citizen Distrust

No one thinks prisons are a nice place to be, but they have become increasingly punitive and authoritarian. Over recent decades, U.S. prisons have adopted tighter limits on free speech and possibilities for prisoners to form groups. Prison unions and newspapers once flourished, but are now discouraged or prohibited; and the Prison Litigation Reform Act has placed new limits on inmates' access to the courts. On the outside, prosecutors and police have gained new immunities from prosecution, and it has become harder for citizens to express grievances. Overall, the criminal justice system has become more authoritarian during the same era that millions more U.S. citizens, especially minorities, spend much of their lives dealing with the system.

Our research reveals that adversarial, involuntary contacts with criminal justice institutions alter what people believe about government and their own standing as citizens. From encounters with police, prosecutors, courts, and prisons, people learn it is best to remain quiet, make no demands, and be generally wary and distrustful of anyone in authority – exactly the opposite of the lessons we want citizens to learn in a healthy democracy.

Impacts on Citizen Trust, Participation, and Racial Outlooks

From detailed analyses of large, nationally representative surveys, supplemented with in-person interviews, my colleagues and I found sizeable effects on citizen attitudes and behavior from experiences with prisons and adversarial criminal justice institutions.

- Holding all else constant, people imprisoned for more than a year trust government nearly 40 percent less than those without any contacts with the criminal justice system.
- When asked how much government leaders "care about people like me," fully three-quarters of people who had experienced punitive contact with the criminal justice system said "very little," compared with just 36 percent of otherwise similar people with no criminal justice contact.

- Citizens with prison experience are much less likely to be registered to vote or to report having voted in the past presidential election. Even minor encounters with the police are associated with reduced likelihoods turning out in an election. And the effects are sizeable: encounters with criminal justice agents and institutions discourage citizen participation just as much as traditional predictors of lower participation such as poverty.
- What scholars call “racial pessimism” is also heightened by criminal justice encounters. Compared to other socioeconomically similar blacks, African Americans who have had experiences with police or prisons perceive more racism, feel less equal, and are more likely to point to “the system” as responsible for black disadvantages.

Correlations are not the same as causation, of course. To fully explore the causal processes at work, we used the most sophisticated available statistical tests – and also went beyond the numbers to talk directly with people about their experiences. From the interviews, we learned that people who had experienced prison or other forms of punishing encounters in the criminal justice system were more distrustful and withdrawn from active citizen engagement than peers facing similar economic disadvantages. People who had bitter experiences of arrest and incarceration learned never to contact public officials. As a middle-aged black man in Charlottesville put it, “I feel like they’re not interested in what I have to say. I feel like if I contact a senator or governor, they’ll probably want to put me in jail and leave me as a troublemaker. I’m serious. That’s how I actually feel: ‘I better stay below the radar....’”

The Reforms America Needs

In a nation that aspires to political inclusion and responsive government, our results should elicit concern. The mass incarceration epidemic not only hurts the children, partners, and neighbors of the imprisoned. Locking up so many people also *transforms citizens’ relationship to the polity*. Intentionally or not, get-tough-on-crime activities have deepened the divide between Americans whose voice is heard and those whose views are silenced. That the ill effects fall especially on blacks and other traditionally disenfranchised minorities should give all of us special pause.

What should we do? Finding alternatives to imprisonment, especially for minor or victimless violations, gains new urgency given our findings. The more the United States can do to ensure public safety while keeping minor violators engaged in normal life routines, the better. In addition, our country needs to make prisons less authoritarian, allowing a modicum of rights even in necessarily regimented settings. And we should also ensure that former inmates regain their citizen rights quickly once their sentences are completed. All of these steps can be taken without undermining public safety – and all of them are important to help revitalize the democracy in which all Americans have a strong stake.

Read more in Vesla M. Weaver and Amy Lerman, “*Political Consequences of the Carceral State.*” *American Political Science Review* 104 (November 2010): 817-833.