

# The Color and Geography of Prison Growth in Illinois

By Dr. Paul Street

Vice President of Research & Planning and

Dennis Kass, Research Specialist

Chicago Urban League

**M**ore than 30 years after the heroic victories of the civil rights movement, the stigma of race remains the seemingly unmeltable condition of the black social and economic situation. Consider, for example, a recent front-page *New York Times* piece titled "Rural Towns Turn to Prisons to Re-ignite Their Economies." According to this article, rural towns in America are relying like never before on prison construction to produce jobs and economic development formerly provided by farms, factories, coal mines and oil. Reporting that 25 new prisons went up in rural America each year during the 1990s, up from 16 per year in the 1980s and just four per year in the 1970s. The article quotes a satisfied Oklahoma city manager whose town just got a new maximum-security prison. "There's no more recession-proof form of economic development," this official says, than incarceration because "nothing's going to stop crime."

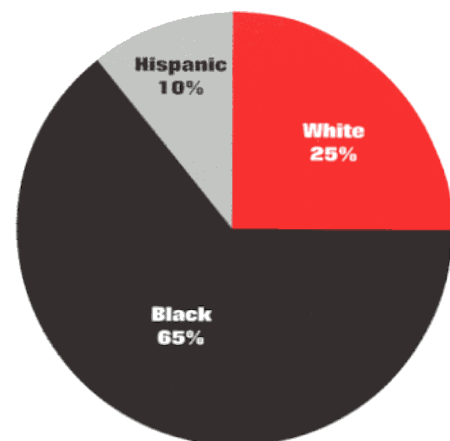
Three crucial things are missing from this high-profile story. The first is an appropriate sense of horror at the spectacle of a society in which communities see the nightmare of mass incarceration as their economic dream. The second thing missing concerns the matter of race. Nowhere could the nation's leading newspaper bring itself to mention either the disproportionately white composition of the keepers or the disproportionately Black composition of the kept. Blacks are 12.3 percent of the U.S. population, but they comprise fully half of the remarkable two million Americans now behind bars.

The racial disparities are especially high in Illinois, which resisted the nation's slight downward trend in the number of prisoners during the last year. In Illinois, the prison population has grown by more than 266 percent since 1980. That growth, which has led Illinois to construct

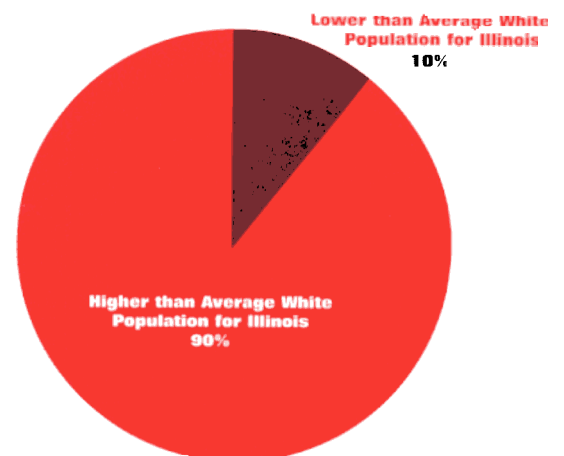
20 adult correctional centers, all located downstate and since 1980, has been fueled especially by black admissions from the Chicago metropolitan area. The Chicago area is point of origin for 70 percent of the state's prisoners and 83 percent of the state's African Americans. Nearly two thirds (65 percent) of the state's 45,629 prisoners are African American. Forty-four percent of the state's prisoners are African Americans from Cook County.

The third thing missing from the *Times* article is any sense of what racially disparate mass incarceration means for the color and geography of community and economic development. According to distinguished criminologist Todd Clear, the prison boom fed by the rising "market" of black offenders is a remarkable economic multiplier for communities that are often far removed from urban minority populations. As he explains in candid terms that suggest disturbing analogies with enslavement

Race of Adult Prison Population, Illinois, 2001



Racial Composition of Illinois Counties Hosting New Adult Correctional Centers, 1980-2001



(Continued on next page)

# The Color and Geography of Prison

(Continued from previous page)

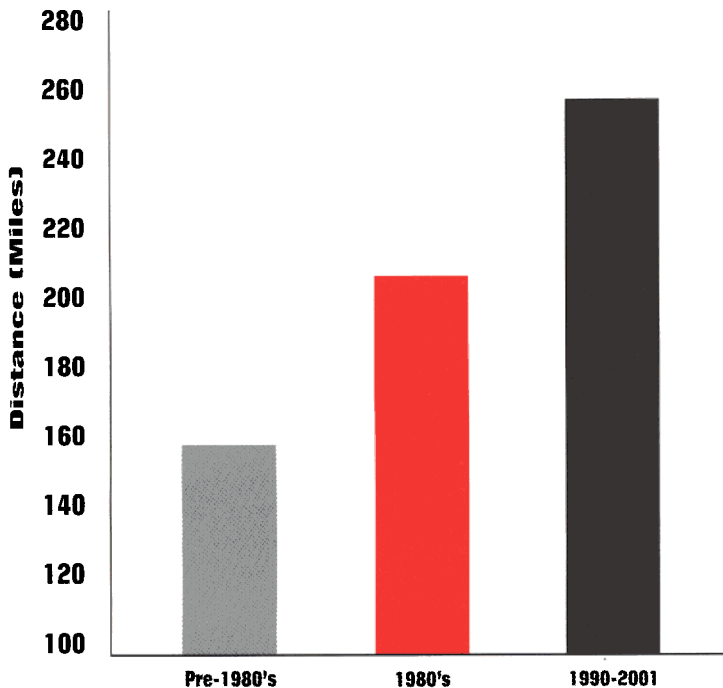
*"Each prisoner represents an economic asset that has been removed from [their own] community*

*and placed elsewhere. As an economic being, the person would spend money at or near his or her area of residence – typically, an inner city.*

*Imprisonment displaces that economic activity: Instead of buying snacks in a local deli, the prisoner makes those purchases in a prison commissary. The removal may represent a loss of economic value to the home community, but it is a boon to the*

*prison [dare we say "host"?) community. Each prisoner represents as much as \$25,000 in income [annually] for the community in which the prison is located, not to mention the value of constructing the prison facility in the first place. This can be a massive transfer of value: a young male worth a few thousand dollars of support to children and local purchases is transformed into a \$25,000 financial asset to a rural prison community. The economy of the rural community is artificially amplified, the local city economy artificially deflated."*


Distance of Illinois Adult Correctional Centers from Chicago



Beyond the jobs and related economic development they provide to white downstate areas, inner-city prisoners also draw considerable federal dollars and voting clout away from major cities, with especially negative consequences for an inner city black neighborhood. Generally quite poor, prisoners deflate downstate communities, income profiles downward, making prison towns eligible for poverty-directed public dollars. The prisoners naturally do not benefit from the rural roads, schools and bridges built with federal funds and the enhanced political influence exercised in downstate areas. To complete the advantageous deal for downstate communities, prisoners put relatively minimal strain on local infrastructure beyond occasional trips to the court and the use of prison shower and toilet facilities. It is not surprising, then, that prison-hosting rural districts have become part of a prison-industrial lobby that presses for harsher sentences and tougher laws.

By applying Todd Clear's estimate of the average annual value of one prisoner to a town hosting an incarceration facility, we conservatively (without factoring in diverted public funds) estimate that African American prisoners from just Cook County create more than half a billion dollars worth of economic development for downstate communities. What is the color of those communities? Eighteen of the 20 adult correctional facilities constructed over the last two decades in Illinois are located in counties that are disproportionately white for the state. Just four of the state's 20 new (post-1980) prison towns have above-average black municipal populations for the state but in three of those it appears that this is only because they get to report prisoners as part of their population. Visitors to such very visibly white downstate towns as Ina, Illinois, (home of the Big Muddy Correctional Center) would be surprised to learn from the Census Bureau that that community is 42 percent African American and 90 percent male. The explanation, of course, is mass incarceration.

(Continued on next page)



Contrary to the Department of Corrections' declared mission of "assisting in" prisoners' post-release "reintegration to the community," Illinois prisons are being built over time at increasing distance from prisoners' point of origin. The state's very disproportionately black and Chicago-based inmates are being further and further removed from family, community networks and support services vital to the successful reintegration of ex-offenders in the Chicago area. Consistent with the notion that prison construction has become a job-creation strategy for areas hit by de-industrialization and farm failure. Moreover, five of the six adult correctional centers constructed in the 1990s are located in the southern third of the state, where the average ratio of unskilled job seekers to available unskilled jobs (as estimated by the Midwest Job Gap Project) was highest for Illinois in that decade.

The full story of mass incarceration's role in transferring wealth out of the urban black community is incomplete without factoring in the negative impact of having a prison record on an ex-offender's future earnings and employment. Black inner-city residents are already deeply challenged in the job market by low skills, poor schools, weakened family structures, racial discrimination in hiring and promotion, and geographic isolation from the leading sectors of job growth. When prison records are thrown into that mixture, the job and earnings consequences are deadly. This latter topic—the labor market consequences of racially disparate mass incarceration—is currently receiving research attention from the Chicago Urban League, with help from the Woods Fund of Chicago.