

# **Mass Incarceration as Reverse Reparations**

**Paul Street  
Director of Research and Vice President for Research and Planning  
Chicago Urban League**

**Special Address at Annual Meetings of  
North Lawndale Employment Network  
September 12, 2001  
Sinai Community Institute  
Chicago, Illinois**

Good morning. Thank you Brenda Palms Barber for the invitation to this gathering, which like everything feels strange in light of yesterday's tragic events. Thank you Deborah Harrington and the Woods Fund of Chicago for funding us on the topic of mass incarceration and its labor market and community development consequences. Thanks also to Congressman Danny Davis and his office for putting this issue on the front of the political agenda.

It is the moral responsibility of intellectuals to tell the truth about things that matter to people who care and have the power to do something about those things. I hope that I am discovering and telling the truth to the best of my abilities. I am certain that the problem I am discussing --- racial disparities in mass incarceration --- today is one of the leading social issues of our time. I know that the people I am addressing care and have the power to do something about the problem.

I've got a file at home that keeps getting bigger. The title of this file is *Deleting and/or Downplaying Race*. In this file I put newspaper articles and speeches and studies that talk about subjects that have a clear racial dimension but in which the authors and/or the editors leave out any explicit mention of race.

The leading piece in this file right now is a front page *New York Times* article that appeared about five weeks ago. Its title is "Rural Towns Turn to Prisons To Re-ignite Their Economies." According to this piece, many rural towns in America are relying like never before on prison construction for jobs and economic development. They used to rely on agriculture, on

manufacturing, on coal mining, and on oil. Now they rely on prisons. The article reports that 250 new prisons went up in rural America during the 1990s. It quotes a city official whose Oklahoma town just got a shiny new maximum-security lockdown. “There’s no more recession-proof form of economic development,” this official said, than incarceration because “nothing’s going to stop crime.

I’ve got another article with the exact same theme from the *Chicago Tribune* last February. It’s about downstate Illinois and its title is “Towns Put Dreams in Prisons.” “Towns Put Dreams in Prisons.” It quotes another happy prison town official, this one from Hoopston, Illinois, who says, “You don’t like to think about incarceration. but this is an opportunity for us. We’ve been plagued by plant closings.”

Good articles. Well researched. Well written. But three key things are missing in each of these articles. The first thing missing is any sense of horror at a society in which local officials see prisons as their best chance for economic growth. Are we really going to make the nightmare of incarceration into the small town American Dream?

The second thing missing has to do with skin color. Nowhere could the *Tribune* or the *Times* bring themselves to mention either the predominantly white composition of the keepers or the predominantly Black composition of the kept in prison towns. *Blacks are 12.3 percent of US population, but they comprise fully half of the roughly 2 million Americans currently behind bars.* On any given day, 30 percent of African-America males ages 20 to 29 are either in jail or prison or on probation or parole. A young Black man age 16 in 1996 faces a 29 percent chance of spending time in prison during his life. The corresponding statistic for white 16 year-olds is 4 percent. In mid-year 1999, percent of Black US males in their 20s and early 30s were in prison. And incredible 33 percent of Black male high school dropouts were in prison or in jail on an average day in the late 1990s.

To get a feel for what these numbers mean and how differently we treat black and white kids in our state, let me tell you that in the Fall of 1999 Illinois had 115,746 more persons

enrolled in its 4-year public universities than in its prisons. When it came to Blacks, however, it had roughly 10,000 more prisoners. For every African-American enrolled in those universities, two- and- a-half Blacks are in prison or on parole in Illinois. This is nationwide. In New York, more Blacks entered prison just for drug offenses than graduated from the state's massive university system with undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degrees combined in the 1990s.

The third thing missing from the *Times* and *Tribune* articles and this absence flows directly from the prior omissions is a full sense of what mass incarceration means in more immediate terms for the color of economic and community development. According to distinguished criminologist Todd Clear, writing in 1996, the prison boom fed by the rising "market" of Black offenders is in fact a remarkable economic multiplier for communities that are often far removed from urban minority concentrations. "Each prisoner," he found "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," says, amounts to "*a massive transfer of value* [emphasis added]."

Plug that into Illinois where there's roughly 45,000 prisoners.  $45,000 \times \$25,000 = \$1$  billion, one hundred and twenty five million dollars a year for mostly white prison towns. Of those 45,000 prisoners, roughly two-third are African-American. Take the roughly 30,000 Black prisoners, then its ballpark three-quarters of a billion, mainly from Chicago to "downstate."

I said "mostly white prison towns." Yesterday, I asked my research specialist to run the race (2000 Redistricting Census data) numbers on the 20 Illinois towns that got new adult prisons during the last twenty years. Fifteen of those 20 towns are recorded by the census bureau as disproportionately white and five as disproportionately black for the state of the Illinois. Of the five, as far as we can tell, three have above-average black populations for the state only because they report prisoners as part of their population. So really 18 or 90 percent of those towns are disproportionately white for the state.

The full story of mass incarceration's role in transferring wealth out of the black community is incomplete without factoring in both the lost potential wages and savings and purchases and investments of people behind bars. Then there's 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.

Researchers cite unemployment rates as high as 50 percent for people with felony records. One study, based in California during the early 1990s found that just 21 percent of that state's parolees were working full time. Karen Needels found that less than 40 percent of 1176 men released from Georgia's prison system in 1976 had any officially recorded earnings in each year from 1983 to 1991. For those with earnings, average annual wages were exceedingly low: white former inmates averaged \$7,880 per year and Blacks made just \$4,762. In the most widely cited study in the growing literature on the labor market consequences of racially disparate criminal justice policies, distinguished Harvard economist Richard Freeman found that prison records reduced the amount of time employed after release by 30 percent. Princeton sociologist Bruce Western has found that the negative labor market effects of youth incarceration can last for more than a decade and that adult incarceration reduces paid employment by 5 to 10 weeks annually. "Even when paroled inmates are able to find jobs," the *New York Times* reported last Fall, "they earn only half as much as people of the same social and economic background who have not been incarcerated."

The obstacles to ex-offender employment include the simple refusal of many employers to even consider hiring an "ex-con." Employers routinely check for criminal backgrounds in numerous sectors, including banking, security, financial services, law, education, and health care. But for many jobs, employer attitudes are irrelevant: state codes places steep barriers to the hiring

of ex-offenders in numerous governmental and other occupations. At the same time, Western notes, “the increasingly violent and overcrowded state of prisons and jails is likely to produce certain attitudes, mannerisms, and behavioral practices that ‘on the inside’ function to enhance survival but are not compatible with success in the conventional job market.” The alternately aggressive and sullen posture that prevails behind bars is deadly in a job market where entry-level occupations increasingly demand “soft” skills related to selling and customer service.

In this and other ways, the inmate may be removed, at least temporarily, from prison but prison lives on within the ex-offender, limiting his “freedom” on the “outside.” It doesn’t help that correctional departments have in the last two decades cut back significantly on education, training, and counseling services for inmates, reflecting a shift from rehabilitation to pure punishment as the dominant American penal paradigm. No wonder, then, that US recidivism rates hover around 60 percent for ex-offenders.

Historical folklore romanticizes the large number of British and European convicts and ex-convicts who peopled and prospered in colonial North America and Australia. But, leaving aside the question of how many of those ex-offenders thrived, much less survived, the transplanted white convicts of earlier eras landed anew in largely agricultural societies not yet based on waged and salaried labor and concentrated private monopoly in the means of production and distribution. It is entirely more difficult for black ex-offenders to “re-enter” a “modern” capitalist society in which the preponderant majority of working-age persons must find someone -- real or “fictional” (a corporation) --- willing to “take the risk” (make the investment) of hiring them. A more telling and accurate historical analogy in their case --- and the racial consistency rightly suggests considerable historical *continuities of race and class* --- is found in the economic and labor market circumstances faced by America’s suddenly “free” former slaves, all Black and woefully short on capital, skills, and education in a competitive society that still despised and coerced them, after the Civil War. It’s an analogy worth reflecting on in a time when America’s expanding prison, probation, and parole populations are recruited especially from what leading

slavery reparations advocate Randall Robinson calls “the millions of African-Americans bottom-mired in urban hells by the savage time-release social debilitations of American slavery.”

There is a widespread false belief among whites today that African-Americans now enjoy equal and color-blind opportunity in the United States. According to Barbara Diggs-Brown and Leonard Steinhorn in an excellent book published last year under the title *By the Color of Their Skin*, white Americans are telling blacks that, quote “We got the message, we made the corrections” and now “you’re on your own.... Get on with it.” Corrections, indeed. The US in the age of racially disparate mass corrections is giving a darkly colored twist to the Christian notion that we are “our brother’s keeper.”

A final dark irony also merits consideration in a time when black leaders face public criticism for raising the issue of reparations to compensate African-Americans for the crime, legacy, and stolen wealth of chattel slavery. It is that a criminal justice system bearing unmistakable traces of that legacy is conducting something that seems very much like reverse economic reparations from black to white America. For this and other reasons, mass incarceration and ex-offender reintegration have become major subjects for both civil rights and community development activists in the new millennium.

## SELECTED SOURCES

Stanley Aronowitz, "Race: the Continental Divide," *The Nation* (March 12, 2001)

Testimony of Congressman Danny K. Davis, Expungement Legislation, Springfield, Illinois, February 23, 2001, in author's possession.

Illinois Department of Corrections, 1999 Departmental Data at [www.idoc.state.il.us/news/1999\\_data.pdf](http://www.idoc.state.il.us/news/1999_data.pdf)

Illinois Board of Higher Education, IBHE Data Book at [www.ibhe.state.il.us/](http://www.ibhe.state.il.us/)

Interview with Joan Archie, Director, Employment, Counseling, and Training Department, Chicago Urban League, March 1, 2001.

Interview with Chris Moore, Director, Male Improvement Program, Chicago Urban League, March 1, 2001.

Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: Norton, 2000)

Alfred Blumstein and Allen J. Beck, "Population Growth in U.S. Prison, 1980-1996," pp. 17-62 in Tonry and Petersilia, eds., *Prisons*, vol. 26 of *Crime and Justice: a Review of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

Maria Buck, *Getting Back to Work: Employment Programs for Ex-Offenders* (Philadelphia, Public/Private Ventures, Fall 2000)

Fox Butterfield, "Often, Parole Is One Stop On the Way Back to Prison," *The New York Times*, 29 November, 2000, A1

Jan M. Chaiken, "Crunching Numbers: Crime and Incarceration at the End of the Millennium," *National Institute of Justice Journal* (January 2000): 10-17.

Todd Clear, "Backfire: When Incarceration Increases Crime," in *The Unintended Consequences of Incarceration* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, January, 1996)

Ellis Cose, "The Prison Paradox," *Newsweek*, (November 13, 2000): 40-46

Eugene V. Debs, *Walls & Bars: Prisons & Prison Life in the "Land of the Free"*, Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2000)

Eric Foner, *Reconstruction America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988)

Richard B. Freeman, "Crime And The Employment Of Disadvantaged Youths," working Paper no. 3875, National Bureau of Economic Research.

Jefferey Fagan and Richard B. Freeman, "Crime and Work," in *Crime & Justice: A Review of Research*, Volume 25, edited by Michael Toney, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000): 225-290

Robert Gangi, Vincent Shiraldi & Jason Ziedanberg, "New York State of Mind? Higher Education vs. Prison Funding in the Empire State, 1988-1998" (NY: Justice Policy Institute and Correctional Association of New York, (December, 1998).

Michael Tonry and John Petersilia, "American Prisons at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century," pp. 1-16 in Tonry and Petersilia, eds., *Prisons*, vol. 26 of *Crime and Justice: a Review of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), ed. by Michael Tonry and Joan Petersilia, *Prisons*, Volume 26 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999)

United States Census Bureau, "Table 1: Population By Race and Hispanic Origin for the United States, 2000" [[www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)].

Bruce Western, Katerine Beckett, "How Unregulated Is the U.S. Labor Market? The Penal System as a Labor Market Institution," *American Journal of Sociology*, 104 (January 1999): 1030-60.

Bruce Western and Becky Pettit, "Incarceration And Racial Inequality In Men's Employment," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 54(October, 2000): 3-16

Bruce Western, Jeffrey R. Kling and David F. Weiman, "The Labor Market Consequences of Incarceration," *Crime & Delinquency*, 47 (July 2001): 410-427.

William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996)