

Hispanic Prisoners in the United States

Hispanics in Prisons and Jails

- There are 283,000 Hispanics¹ in federal and state prisons and local jails, making up slightly over 15% of the inmate population.²
- Nearly 1 in 3 (32%) persons held in federal prisons is Hispanic.³
- As of 2001, 4% of Hispanic males in their twenties and early thirties were in prison or jail - as compared to 1.8% of white males.⁴
- Hispanics are the fastest growing group being imprisoned, increasing from 10.9% of all State and Federal inmates in 1985 to 15.6% in 2001.⁵
- From 1985 to 1995, the number of Hispanics in federal and state prisons rose by 219%, with an average annual increase of 12.3%.⁶
- There is a fair amount of inconsistency in measuring Hispanic jail and prison populations, as they are frequently counted in conflicting or contradictory methods; e.g. Hispanics measured racially as black or white and not as a distinct group. It is commonly suspected that the actual number of Hispanics incarcerated is higher than what is accounted for by reporting agencies.

Likelihood of Incarceration

- Hispanic men are almost four times as likely to go to prison at some point in their lives as non-Hispanic white males, but less likely than African American males.⁷
- In some regions Hispanic male arrestees are the least likely to have their cases dismissed, followed by black males, Anglo males, and females of all ethnic groups.⁸

Comparing Hispanic with White and Black Incarceration

- Nationally, in state prisons and local jails, Hispanics are incarcerated at nearly twice the rate of whites, while in some states the rate is much higher, e.g. seven times higher in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, and six times higher in Massachusetts and North Dakota.⁹
- In New York, where the state's adult minority population is less than 31.7%, nine out of ten new prisoners are from an ethnic or racial minority. In 1997, the state-wide population of Maryland, Illinois, North Carolina, Louisiana and South Carolina was two-thirds or more white, but for each, prison growth since 1985 was 80% non-white.¹⁰

Drugs

- Despite equal rates of drug use proportionate to their populations, Hispanics are twice as likely as whites, and equally as likely as blacks, to be admitted to state prison for a drug offense.¹¹

- Of all federal prisoners, Hispanics are half as likely as whites to have ever received treatment for substance abuse and also less likely than blacks (H19%, B25.7%, W39.5%). The numbers are also disproportionate for state prisoners (H33.8%, B36.6%, W51.8%).¹²

Ethnicity and the Criminal Justice System

- Hispanic defendants in the federal court system are about one-third as likely as non-Hispanic defendants to be released before trial (22.7% vs. 63.1%).¹³
- Despite a public perception that Hispanic immigrant communities are riddled with crime, studies show the involvement of Hispanic immigrants in crime is less than that of U.S. citizens.¹⁴
- Hispanic federal inmates have a lower education level than both whites and blacks.¹⁵

Hispanic Women Prisoners

- In state prisons and jails Hispanic females are incarcerated at almost twice the rate of white females (117 persons to 63 persons per 100,000 population).¹⁶
- Hispanic women are three times as likely to go to prison in their lifetime as compared to white women (1.5% vs. 0.5%).¹⁷
- In the U.S. general population, 9.7% of women are Hispanic. In the U.S. prison population, 15% of women state prisoners and 32% of women Federal prisoners are Hispanic.¹⁸
- Between 1990 and 1996, the number of Hispanic female prisoners rose 71%.¹⁹
- In New York, Hispanic women are 14% of the state's prison population but constitute 44% of women sentenced to prison for drug offenses.²⁰

Hispanics in the U.S.

- A study from the National Survey of America's Families found far reaching racial and ethnic disparities in the U.S.:
 1. Hispanics are significantly more likely to be low-income (61% of Hispanics, 49% of blacks and 26% of whites).
 2. Hispanics are less likely to receive child support (40% for Hispanics, 48% for blacks and 58% for whites).
 3. Hispanics are most likely to report being in fair or poor health (33% for Hispanics, 23% for blacks and 20% for whites).
 4. Hispanics are more likely to have uninsured children (29% of Hispanic children, 19% of white children and 16% of black children).
 5. Hispanics experience rates of housing hardship that are twice as high as that for whites.
 6. Across all income groups, Hispanic non-elderly experience food problems at a rate nearly twice that of white non-elderly.²¹

Endnotes

- ¹ The term “Hispanics” refers to persons who may be of any race.
- ² Beck, A.J., Karberg, J.C. & Harrison, P.M. “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2001,” April 2002. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ³ Federal Bureau of Prisons Population Count; June 2003
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Harrison, P.M. & Beck, A.J. “Prisoners in 2001,” July 2002. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁶ Mumola, C.J. & Beck, A.J. “Prisoners in 1996,” June 1997. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁷ Bonczar, T.P. & Beck, A.J. “Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison,” March 1997. Table 9. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ⁸ Spohn, C., Gruhl, J., & Welch, S. “The Impact of the Ethnicity and Gender of Defendants on the Decision to Reject or Dismiss Felony Charges.” *Criminology*, February 1987, 25(1): 175-191.
- ⁹ Beck, Karberg & Harrison, op. cit..
- ¹⁰ Holman, B. “Masking the Divide: How Officially Reported Prison Statistics Distort the Racial and Ethnic Realities of Prison Growth,” Washington, DC: National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, 2001.
- ¹¹ Ditton, P.M. & Wilson, D.J. “Truth in Sentencing in State Prisons,” January 1999. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹² Mumola, C.J. “Substance Abuse and Treatment, State and Federal Prisoners, 1997,” January 1999. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹³ Compendium of Federal Justice Statistics, 1999, Washington, D.C.: US Department of Justice, May 2000
- ¹⁴ Hagan, J. & Palloni, A. “Sociological Criminology and the Mythology of Hispanic Immigration and Crime.” *Social Problems*, November 1999, 46(4): 617-32.
- ¹⁵ Jackson, K. (1997). “Differences in the Background and Criminal Justice Characteristics of Young Black, White, and Hispanic Male Federal Prison Inmates.” *Journal of Black Studies*, 27, (4), 494-509.
- ¹⁶ Beck, A.J. & Karberg, J.C. “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2000,” March 2001. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹⁷ Bonczar & Beck, op. cit.
- ¹⁸ Greenfeld, L.A. & Snell, T.L. “Women Offenders,” December 1999. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ¹⁹ Gilliard, D.K. & Beck, A.J. “Prisoners in 1997,” August 1998. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- ²⁰ Mauer, M., Potler, C. & Wolf, R. “Gender and Justice: Women, Drugs, and Sentencing Policy,” 1999.
- ²¹ Racial and Ethnic Disparities: Key Findings from the National Survey of America's Families, 1997.