

# The crime of black imprisonment

By Steven Whitman

Dostoevsky once wrote that if you want to know about a society, you should look into its prisons. When we look into prisons in the United States, we see the reflection of a profoundly unjust society.

Imprisonment rates are measured as the number of inmates per 100,000 people in the population. In 1925, when the United States began keeping these statistics, the imprisonment rate was 79 (per 100,000). This rate stayed more or less constant until 1972, when it started to rise dramatically. By mid-1986, more than a half-million people were in state and federal prisons. This number corresponds to an imprisonment rate of 219—about twice as high as it had ever been before 1972.

But this overall imprisonment rate obscures an important difference. In 1983 (the last year for which racial data are available), the imprisonment rate was 713 for black people compared to 114 for white people. This means that a black person is six times more likely to go to prison than a white person. In Illinois, he is 10 times more likely to go to prison.

It is also instructive to contrast international imprisonment rates. Using the latest available comparative data (from 1980), we find that white people in the U.S. go to prison at a rate similar to that for most Western Europeans. Incredibly, though, blacks in the United States go to prison more often than blacks in South Africa. In fact, the United States' black imprisonment rate is the highest in the world.

This reality is devastating for blacks. A 1979 government survey revealed that about one out of every five black men would go to prison in his lifetime. The imprisonment rates have spiraled since then, and the proportion is now closer to one out of every four. The total number of black men in the United States who have been in prison is about 3 million, roughly the population of Chicago.

People who have studied the reasons for these spiraling imprisonment rates have made startling observations. William Nagel, a well-known criminologist, analyzed many factors in each state to determine which were related to rapidly increasing imprisonment rates. He found no relationship between the crime rate (or violent crime rate) and the imprisonment rate, and no relationship between the crime rate (or the violent crime rate) and the proportion of black people in a state. However, Nagel discovered a very strong relationship between the imprisonment rate and the proportion of black people. In other words, people go to prison in increasing numbers because they are black, not because of a rise in the crime rate. Two British criminologists, Steven Box and Chris Hale, found similar results and concluded that people are sent to prison during times of economic stability, not because of an increase in crime but because they are perceived as a threat by

those who hold power in society.

It is no coincidence that the rise in black imprisonment accompanies the rise of the Klan and the Nazis, attacks on black people in Howard Beach, Queens; in Forsyth County, Ga.; and in Marquette Park, Uptown and other areas of Chicago. It is not surprising that these events coincide with the term of a President who is endorsed by the Klan, who has undermined civil rights advances and decimated social programs. It is no coincidence that all of this occurs while the proportions of black doctors, lawyers and professors remain tiny; while the black infant mortality

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rate, which already in some communities is at levels associated with the Third World, remains twice the white rate; while the black maternal mortality rate is three times the white rate; and while black poverty intensifies.

None of this could happen without the implicit, and far too often complicit, agreement of white people. We are caught up in a law-and-order ideology generated not by reality but by hysteria. Imprisoning more black people will not stop the decay of our social system. In fact, the opposite is true. Until whites confront racism, and stop using blacks as the scapegoats for our failing social system, the situation will only get worse. As Nagel writes, "The causes of crime in this country are deeply rooted in its culture and its economic social injustices. The massive use of incarceration has not contributed and will not contribute significantly to the abatement of crime or to the correction of flaws in the social fabric."

If prisons are indeed a window to society, what does this look at the prison system tell us? Most important, we are confronted with the undeniable reality that this society, built on a foundation of slavery and racism, is staying its course. The system of white supremacy has not been diminished but is in fact intensifying. Being human means refusing to accept such a system and thus blacks can be counted on to continue to resist and try to pursue freedom.

This presents white people with a choice: We can join forces with those in Howard Beach, Forsyth County and Marquette Park; or we can bury our heads in the sand, pretend that none of this is happening and announce that we aren't prejudiced; or we fight for a just society. We have to make this choice. But in making it, we must understand that the fight for equality and freedom for black people is actually the fight for the humanity of all people. The only real question is whether we will pursue a humane society or a racist one.

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