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A look behind the bars

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A LOOK BEHIND THE BARS

Examining the State of South Carolina's Prison Population

Prepared by Ashley Hanna-Williams

Summary

This report examines the State of South Carolina's prison population in light of the growing socioeconomic imbalances that infringe upon the state's historically disenfranchised and under-served communities. This information was presented publicly at the 2022 South Carolina Re-Entry Conference, April 8, 2022. All rights reserved.

It is often said that money does not buy happiness, but research shows otherwise.* Poverty and the attendant desperation some feel about an inability to "make ends meet" may lead to crimes of desperation. While it is true that there are crimes committed due to innate characteristics, such as greed and jealousy, crimes committed due to poverty reveal the inequity of the social safety net, not necessarily character flaws. This Brief examines some social forces that lead to crimes of desperation, their repercussions, and their impact on correctional populations in South Carolina.

Today, South Carolina has a population of more than five million people, with nearly one-third identifying as an ethnic or racial minority. However, more than half of the state's incarcerated population is non-White. According to the South Carolina Department of Corrections' Southern Legislative Conference Adult Corrections Systems 2017 report, South Carolina has the seventh highest incarceration rate in the South, with 397.84 state inmates per 100,000 citizens.** This underscores other studies that have connected minority overrepresentation in prison to socioeconomic hardship, poverty, and lower educational attainment.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, Whites make up about a half of the state's general population but represent one-third of the state's prison population. Thus, minorities exceed Whites in the prison system roughly by a two-to-one ratio. According to the 2016-2020 Poverty and Snap/Food Stamp Participation figures from the United States Census Bureau, African Americans are more likely than any other race or ethnicity to be poor and use government-subsidized programs in South Carolina. Also,

33.3%

Minority share of the state's total population

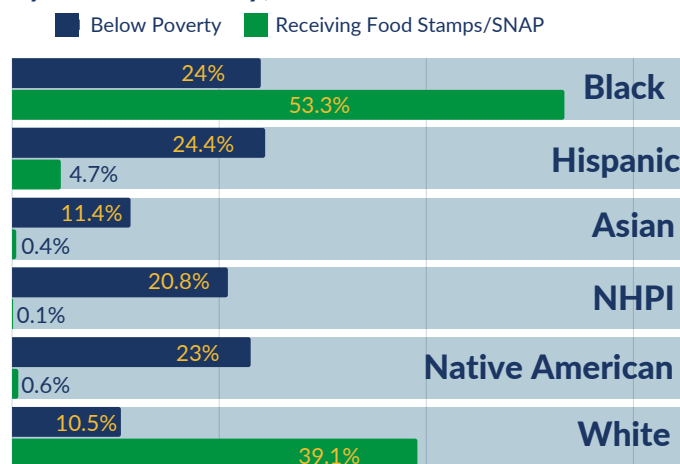
2020 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File

64.6%

Minority share of the state's prison population

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: Table - B26103

Poverty and SNAP/Food Stamp Participation by Race/Ethnicity, 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

the U.S. Census Bureau has found that prisoners have lower levels of educational attainment, are more likely to drop out of high school, are more likely to have a GED as their highest level of attainment and are less likely to be enrolled in a degree-granting program than the general population. It is thought that more focus and accountability should be given to ensuring that all offenders in judicial custody have access to educational activities that may help them improve their range of employable skills and educational attainment levels while incarcerated.

South Carolina Department of Corrections Southern Legislative Conference (Adult Corrections Systems 2017 report)

*"If Money Doesn't Make You Happy Then You Probably Aren't Spending It Right", Elizabeth W. Dunn, Daniel T. Gilbert and Timothy D. Wilson

**"Incarceration and Poverty in the United States", Tara O'Neill Hayes, Margaret Barnhorst

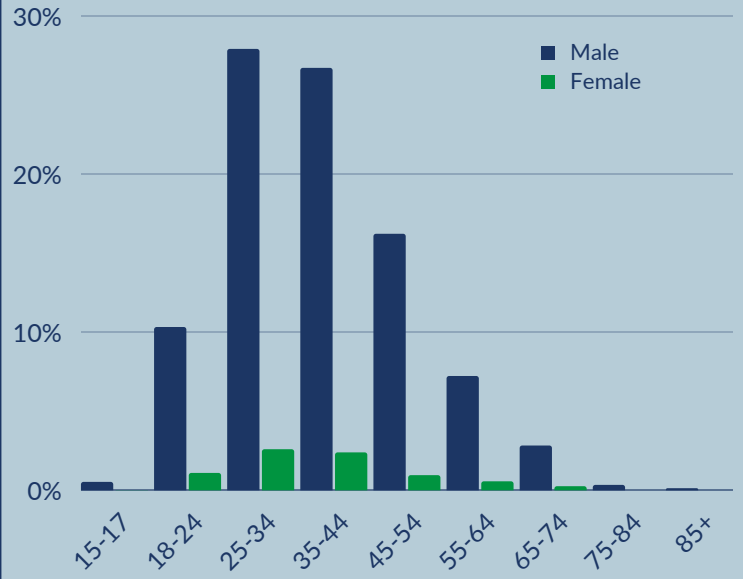
All inquiries concerning research methodology should be addressed to CMA's Director of Research, Dr. Robert Fenton (rfenton@cma.sc.gov).



While there is no statistical difference in high school graduation rates between White men and women, minority women graduate at a higher rate than their male counterparts, according to the US Census Bureau's 5-year estimates. The gender makeup of the state's prison population is closely tied to this difference. According to the 2016-2020 Adult Correctional Facilities Group Quarters Population survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau, African American men account for the vast majority of the state's incarcerated population.

African American men are more likely than males of other races and ethnicities to serve longer terms, according to a report published by the South Carolina Department of Corrections titled "Distribution of time spent by SCDC Inmates released in FY 2021." Furthermore, African American men and women were 2.5 times more likely to receive harsher sentences than White men and women. Men of color served for an average of 4 years and 2 months, whereas White males served for an average of 2 years and 7 months. Sentencing inequalities were similar for White and African American women.

Distribution of SC's Incarcerated Population by Age Cohort and Gender, 2020

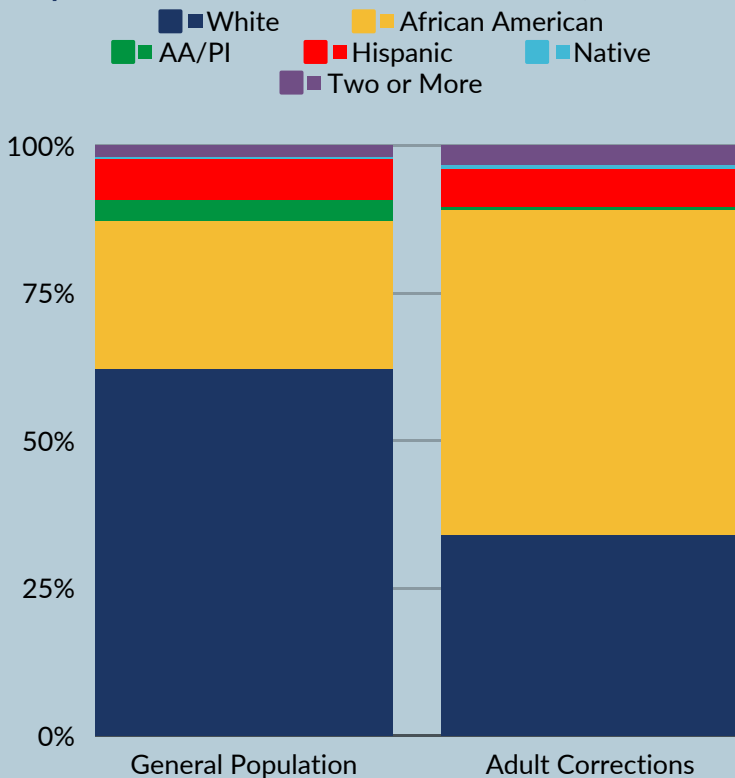


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates : Table I.D. - B26101

While mass incarceration and systematic racism have not generated a uneven effects across many communities, the United States' harsh sentencing policies have been assessed as largely ineffectual and costly. South Carolina has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the country due to the state's anti-recidivism effort. However, the long-term effectiveness of decreased recidivism rates must be thoroughly researched and questioned in the absence of a comprehensive plan for addressing community-level stressors such as poverty, unemployment, and disparate levels of educational attainment.

Recidivism is measured by a person's rearrests, reconviction, or return to the prison system during a three-year period following their release. According to recent studies conducted by the South Carolina Department of Corrections, South Carolina has seen its lowest recidivism rate in nearly a decade in 2021 at 22%. This is one area where society and the government are currently working together to assist and care for the incarcerated by providing education, providing suitable employment opportunities, and enforcing labor regulations. These interventions go a long way toward addressing the problem of poverty-generated criminality.

Racial Composition of South Carolina's General Population and Adult Correctional Facilities, 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016-2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates : Table I.D.-B26103