



# Mass Incarceration

Executive Summary

New Jim Crow, Class War, or Both?

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People's Policy Project

**Cover**

Bosse, Abraham. *Visiting the Prisoners (Visiter les prisonniers)*. ca. 1629–1666. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1926. Public domain. Accessed via web on 7 January 2017. [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/390811](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/390811)

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**About**

**People’s Policy Project** is a think tank founded in 2017. The primary mission of 3P is to publish ideas and analysis that assist in the development of an economic system that serves the many, not the few.

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**Colophon**

Titles are set in Harriet Display and Bodoni URW.  
Body is set in Harriet Text. Data values are set in Franklin Gothic.

Design by Jon White.

**1**

# Introduction

**M**ass incarceration is a reality for a historically unprecedented number of Americans: the United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world's population, but more than 20 percent of the world's prisoners.<sup>1</sup> And this does not affect all groups equally. In 2010, white people were incarcerated at a rate of 450 per 100,000 while black people were incarcerated at a rate of 2,306 per 100,000.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, black people are five times as likely as white people to be in jail or prison.

There are two common explanations for this racial disparity in left-of-center thought. The first holds that mass incarceration primarily exists to manage black people as black people, a racist system that developed following the end of formal Jim Crow laws and the successes of the civil rights movement. Michelle Alexander offers this view in her widely acclaimed book *The New Jim Crow*.<sup>3</sup> The second explanation is that mass incarceration primarily exists as a capitalist system to manage the poor, one that emerged from the rollback of the liberal social welfare state and other neoliberal reforms. This perspective is presented by Cedric Johnson in his essay "The Panthers Can't Save us Now."<sup>4</sup>

Both of these perspectives recognize the racial disparity among prisoners, but one holds that black people are disproportionately incarcerated primarily because they are black, while the other holds that it is primarily because they are poor.

This paper finds support for the class-based explanation. To evaluate the roles of race and class in incarceration, it examines four different outcomes:

1. Whether or not men aged 24-32 years have ever been to jail or prison;
2. Whether or not men are jailed after being arrested;
3. Whether or not men have spent more than a month in jail or prison; and
4. Whether or not men have spent more than a year in jail or prison.

While class has a large and statistically significant effect on the first three outcomes, race—once one controls for class—does not. Race does, however, have a significant impact on whether or not a man has spent more than a year in prison or jail.

**2**

# Findings

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), this paper analyzes racial and class disparities in incarceration. Each survey participant is assigned a race based on self-identification and assigned a class based on their household income during adolescence, their current household income, their education, their current assets, and whether they own a home or not. From there, logistic regressions were run for the four incarceration outcomes tracked by the Add Health dataset.

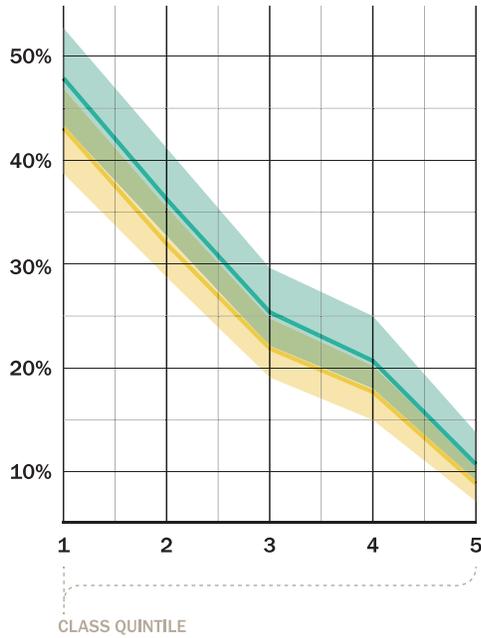
The findings are summarized in the four-graph panel in **Figure 1**, which shows the probabilities for various incarceration outcomes based on class status for white and black men. The shaded area around each line represents the confidence interval that corresponds with statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**FIGURE 1 ON NEXT PAGE →**

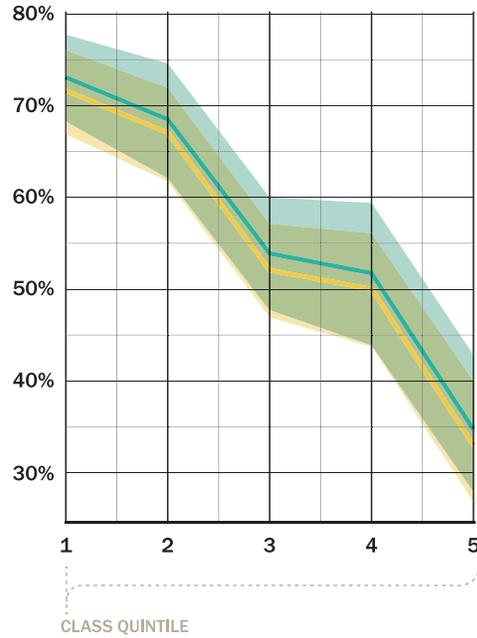
FIGURE 1

● BLACK ● WHITE

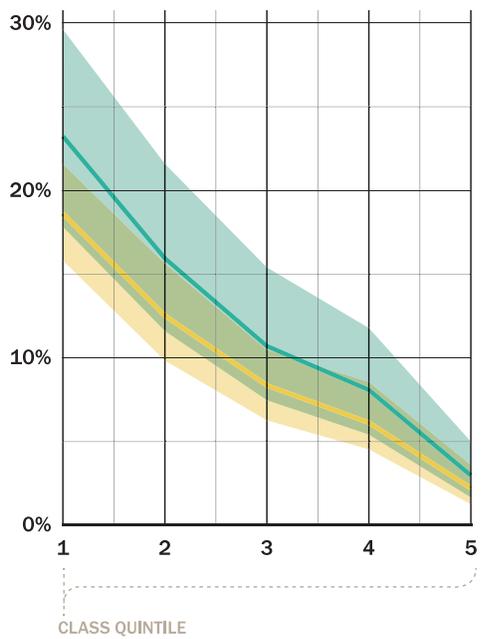
*Probability of ever having been jailed*



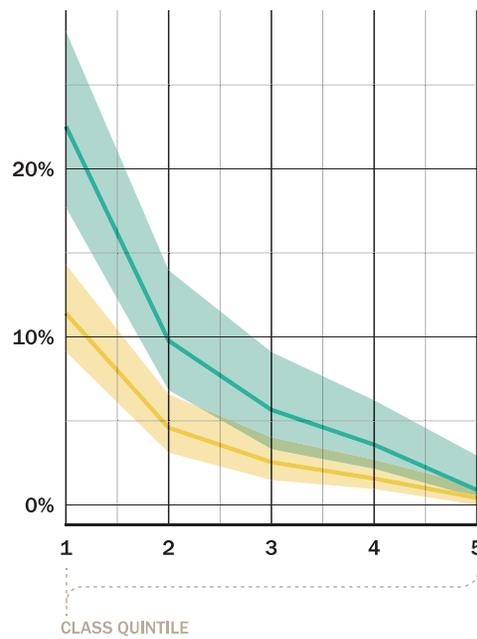
*Probability of being jailed after arrest*



*Probability of being jailed more than a month*



*Probability of being jailed more than a year*



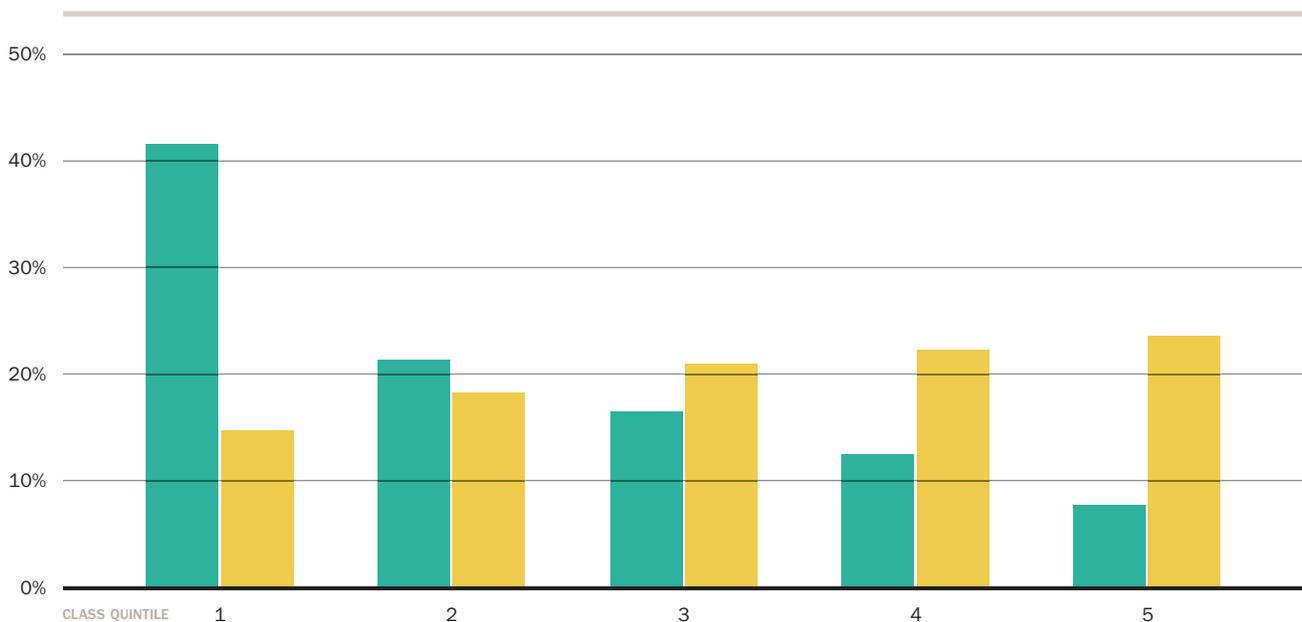
For all four incarceration outcomes, being lower class rather than middle or upper class makes a massive difference. Being black rather than white makes a modest difference that is statistically insignificant for all outcomes except one: the probability of being in jail or prison for more than a year. And even in that case, whites in the lowest class group are more likely to be incarcerated than blacks in the second-to-lowest class group.

Thus, the primary reason why there is such a big overall gap in black and white incarceration rates appears to be differences in the class composition of each racial group. **Figure 2** shows how the black and white men used in our analysis are distributed across the class spectrum. Forty-two percent of black men were in the lowest class group versus just 15 percent of white men; and twenty-four percent of white men were in the highest class group, versus just 8 percent of black men.

**FIGURE 2**

*Percent of Black and White Men in Each Class Quintile*

● BLACK ● WHITE



To see how much class explains the overall racial disparity for each incarceration outcome, I constructed a counterfactual scenario which eliminates the class differences among white and black men. We can examine this by changing the bars in **Figure 2** so that 20 percent of black and white men were in each of the five class groups, all else being equal.

**Figure 3** shows the difference this makes: the overall black-white gap falls anywhere from 53.7 to 84.8 percent depending on the incarceration outcome being tested.

**FIGURE 3**

	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Proportion accounted for by class disparities</i>
<b>EVER JAILED</b>				
Sampled	35.4%	22.8%	12.6pp	72.2%
Counterfactual	28.2%	24.7%	3.5pp	
<b>JAILED AFTER ARREST</b>				
Sampled	63.2%	52.7%	10.5pp	84.8%
Counterfactual	56.3%	54.7%	1.6pp	
<b>JAILED FOR MORE THAN A MONTH</b>				
Sampled	16.1%	8.7%	7.4pp	64.9%
Counterfactual	12.1%	9.5%	2.6pp	
<b>JAILED FOR MORE THAN A YEAR</b>				
Sampled	13.0%	3.5%	9.5pp	53.7%
Counterfactual	8.5%	4.1%	4.4pp	

# Conclusion

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Overall, this study supports the view of Cedric Johnson and others that mass incarceration in the United States is primarily a system of locking up lower class men—one which ends up disproportionately imprisoning black men, since they are far more likely to be lower class than white men. Racial disparities remain among certain incarceration outcomes, which are consistent with findings of other studies on this topic, but it is nevertheless class that is the predominant factor.

Understanding this reality is important for policymakers interested in rolling back the American carceral state. While racial discrimination and bias are clearly present in various aspects of the criminal justice system, eliminating that bias will not effectively reduce the racial disparities of mass incarceration. This is because these disparities are primarily driven by our racialized class system. Therefore, the most effective criminal justice reform may be an egalitarian economic program aimed at flattening the material differences between the classes.

# References

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- 1** Walmsley, R. (2016). World Prison Population List, eleventh edition. Institute for Criminal Policy Research. [http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world\\_prison\\_population\\_list\\_11th\\_edition\\_o.pdf](http://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_11th_edition_o.pdf)
- 2** Sakala, L. (2014). Breaking Down Mass Incarceration in the 2010 Census: State-by-State Incarceration Rates by Race/Ethnicity. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/rates.html>
- 3** Alexander, M. (2012). The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. New York: The New York Press. <http://newjimcrow.com/>
- 4** Johnson, C. (2017). The Panthers Can't Save Us Now. The Catalyst, 1(1). <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no1/panthers-cant-save-us-cedric-johnson>