

“Incarceration vs. Education:  
Reproducing Racism and Poverty in American”

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Along the Color Line, March, 2008

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Since 2004, former Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards campaigned across the U.S. with a simple message: that there are essentially “two Americas,” separated by a chasm of inequality, defined largely by race and class. It was a truthful message that the vast majority of Americans didn’t want to acknowledge, or even hear. Yet the larger meaning of Edwards’ message may be more significant to the future of U.S. politics, than even the historic presidential campaign of Barack Obama.

Americans are reinforced to believe that individuals are largely in control of their own destiny. Hard work, sacrifice, and personal effort, we are told, determine what happens to us. But increasingly, the fundamental institutions of American society function unfairly, restricting access and opportunity for millions of people. The greatest example of this is the present-day criminal justice system.

Let us start with the basic facts. As of 2008, one out of every one hundred American adults is living behind bars. According to a December 2007 study of the American Civil Liberties Union, "Race and Ethnicity in America," in the past thirty years there has been a 500 percent increase in the number of Americans behind bars, amounting to 2.2 million people, which represent 25 percent of the world's prison population. This prison population is disproportionately black and brown. As of 2006, the U.S. penal population was 46 percent white, 41 percent African American, and 19 percent Latino. In practical terms, by 2001, about one out of every six African-American males had experienced jail or imprisonment. Based on current trends, over one out of three black men will experience imprisonment during their lives.

There is overwhelming evidence that the overrepresentation of blacks in prisons is largely due to discrimination in every phase of the criminal justice system. According to the 2007 ACLU study, for example, African Americans comprised 11 percent of Texas' population, but 40 percent of the state's prisoners. Blacks in Texas are incarcerated at roughly five times the rate of whites. Despite the

fact that blacks statistically represent fewer than 10 percent of drug abusers, in Texas 50 percent of all prisoners incarcerated in state prisons and two-thirds of all those in jails for “drug delivery offenses” are African Americans.

A similar pattern is found within the juvenile justice system. According to the 2007 ACLU study, African-American youth amount to 15 percent of all American juveniles. However, they represent 26 percent of all juveniles who are arrested by the police nationwide. They are 58 percent of all youth who are sentenced to serve time in state prisons. In California, Latino youth are two times more likely than whites to be sentenced to prison; for African-American youth in California, it is six times the incarceration rate.

What are the practical political consequences of the mass incarceration of black Americans? In New York State, for example, the prison populations play a significant role in how some state legislative districts are drawn up. In New York’s 45<sup>th</sup> senatorial district, located in the extreme northern corner of upstate New York, there are thirteen state prisons, with 14,000 prisoners, all of whom are counted as residents. Prisoners in New York are disenfranchised

– they cannot vote – yet their numbers help to create a Republican state senatorial district. These “prison districts” now exist all over the United States.

The most obscene dimension of the national compulsion to incarcerate has been the deliberate criminalization of young black people, with the construction of a “school-to-prison pipeline.”

Under the cover of “zero tolerance” for all forms of “disobedience,” too many school administrators are aggressively and unfairly removing black youth from schools. Statistically, African-American youths are two to three times more likely than whites to be suspended, and far more likely to be corporally punished or expelled. According to the ACLU’s study, “nationally, African American students comprise 17 percent of the student population, but account for 36 percent of school suspensions and 31 percent of expulsions. In New Jersey, for instance, black students are nearly 60 times more likely to be expelled than their white counterparts. In Iowa, blacks make up just 5 percent of the statewide public school enrollment, but account for 22 percent of suspensions.” Too many black children are taught at an early age that their only future resides in a prison or jail.

Meanwhile, state after state is reducing its investments in education, while expanding its expenditures in correctional facilities. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (March 14, 2008), between 1987 and 2007, states spent an average of a 21 percent increase on higher education, but expanded their corrections budgets by an average of 127 percent. Today, for the first time in recent history, there are now five states that spend more state money on prisons than on public colleges – Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Oregon, and Vermont. The ugly tradeoff not to educate but to incarcerate continues.

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