Report affirms damage done by high incarceration rates

By Alice Green  June 27, 2022

Some 30 years ago, a group of incarcerated Black and brown men at New York’s Green Haven Correctional Facility, including several who had been at Attica during the 1971 deadly prison uprising, formed a criminal justice think tank. Led by longterm prisoners Eddie Ellis and Larry White, they surveyed the facility’s imprisoned population to record where each had come from.

They discovered what they had earlier theorized: Most of the nearly 2,000 men surveyed came from just seven of New York City’s poorest neighborhoods. The others had resided in similar neighborhoods in the upstate urban communities of Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo.

While some legislators embraced the findings, most ignored them and their implications, resulting in almost nothing being done to address this inherent systemic problem. That neglect resulted in the state’s prison population swelling to 72,000 mostly Black and brown men by 1997, a level of mass incarceration that led to devastating results for them, their families, and their communities.

Recently, the Prison Policy Initiative (PPI), a criminal justice public policy think tank that produces reports to show the scale and magnitude of incarceration in the United States, issued a report, “Where People Come From: The Geography of Mass Incarceration in New York.” With more resources, they were able to pick up where the Green Haven group left off now that New York has abandoned “prison gerrymandering,” which had allowed the state to count incarcerated people as residents of the county in which they were imprisoned. Thanks to a redistricting reform, they must now be counted in the legislative district where they lived — in other words, their home address.

This change allowed PPI to collect more detailed and accurate data than the imprisoned researchers before them.

In this new report, we learn much more about exactly where incarcerated people come from, the impact of their absence on their families and communities, and what needs to be done to address incarceration rates shown to be directly connected to poverty, employment, education, health, and public safety.

PPI’s study found that incarceration is no longer a problem unique to big cities. One of their most disturbing findings is that Albany and Schenectady counties lead upstate New York in incarceration rates. While the statewide rate is 190 persons per 100,000, Albany and Schenectady have rates of 340 and 484, respectively. Furthermore, Albany has an outrageous incarceration rate of 917, twice that of Queens. In some neighborhood areas
across the state, the rates are even higher. This should be of great concern to our Capital Region communities.

Not surprisingly, high disproportionate incarceration rates were found to be concentrated in small Black and brown geographic neighborhoods that are “systemically under-resourced, over-policed, and disproportionately affected by mass incarceration.”

PPI recounts the startling impact of this situation by using its own data and a litany of recent research reports.

The analyses of these studies reveal the significant damage of high incarceration rates against affected individuals, their families, and their community. Individuals living in these affected neighborhoods suffer major depressive and anxiety disorders and higher instances of other medical conditions including asthma, poor health profiles, teenage pregnancies, drug-related deaths, environmental pollutions and lead poisoning in children. They also experience higher unemployment, lower household income, fewer high school diplomas, lower access to healthy foods, higher mortality rates, and lower voter turnout in municipal elections. And, most disturbing, the children of incarcerated parents are more likely to experience incarceration themselves.

The question that must be asked now is: Will our state and city leaders make the same mistake they did 30 years ago and ignore the stark evidence connecting mass incarceration to the destruction of lives and the diminishing of our public safety?

PPI has provided the needed data and research to use for change. Hence there is only one answer to the question, if we are truly committed to effectively addressing the crime and violence that so many profess to find abhorrent.

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