

Half of Prisoners are Black

Outside, African-Americans form 11.5% of population

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WASHINGTON – New census figures show what critics of the criminal justice system have long maintained: Ohio's jails and prisons have a disproportionate number of black inmates compared with the state's population.

About 11.5 percent of Ohio's population is black, according to 2000 Census figures. But more than half of Ohio's prisoners, 50.1 percent, are black.

Black people are similarly represented on the state's death row at Mansfield Correctional Institution. Of 199 death row inmates, 50.2 percent are black and 46.2 percent white.

Some conservatives question whether this shows the criminal justice system is discriminatory, saying those who break the law should be punished. Others say minorities are targeted for arrest.

"Unfortunately, Ohio mirrors national trends," said Marc Mauer, assistant director of the criminal justice policy group Sentencing Project and author of *Race to Incarcerate*.

Actually, Ohio fares only slightly worse than national figures, he said.

Black people make up about 13 percent of the nation's overall population and 46 percent of the prison population, Mr. Mauer said.

"All through the criminal justice system, every step of the way, you find the disproportion growing," said Jana Schroeder, director of the Ohio Criminal Justice Program of the American Friends Service Committee. The committee is an advocacy group for prisoners and their families.

In Cincinnati, a disparity in races emerges early in the court process. Figures from the city's Department of Pre-trial Services show that of the nearly 40,000 people arrested and set to stand trial last year, almost 64 percent were black.

Census 2000 figures show the city with a population that's 42.9 percent black, 53 percent white.

"I don't have an explanation for it," said Mike Allen, Hamilton County's prosecutor. "The one thing I do know, contrary to what some would say, **African-Americans, Hispanics and minorities are not targeted by law enforcement for prosecution. We just take our defendants as they come.** Prosecutors generally don't engage in social-work activities."

Census 2000 counted 68,873 inmates in Ohio in federal prisons and detention centers, halfway houses, local jails and police lockups, and military and other facilities.

Mr. Mauer attributed the racial disparity to a combination of crime rates and criminal justice policies.

Black people are disproportionately arrested for violent offenses, which are more likely to lead to prison terms, he said.

The national push to target drug offenses also puts more minorities in jail, he said. Four of every five people in jail for drug offenses are black or Hispanic, he said.

"All the best research we have right now is that while drug use and abuse cuts across class and race lines, drug enforcement is disproportionately focused in urban areas and inner cities."

Nationally, one of every eight black men ages 20 to 34 is in jail or prison, he said.

"Even if you believe they all belong in prison, what does it do to family formation, people in prison, the next generation of children growing up?" Mr. Mauer asked.

But Todd Gaziano, director of Heritage Foundation's Center for Legal and Judicial Studies, said comparing the racial and ethnic backgrounds of inmates to those of the overall population proves nothing.

Who's to say how many of a certain group should be in prison, he asked.

"They ought to be ashamed of drawing those kinds of race-baiting comparisons," Mr. Gaziano said. **"Why don't they care more about the law-abiding citizens who are ravaged by crime?"**