

Incarceration is not an equal opportunity punishment.

On December 31, 2003 there were 2,085,331 people in U.S. prisons and jails. That's a rise of 2.6% during the 12 previous months. Federal prisons are growing almost 5 times faster than state prison populations.

As of December 31, 2003, the U.S. incarceration rate was 714 per 100,000 residents. But when you break down the statistics you see that incarceration is not an equal opportunity punishment.

Select U.S. incarceration rates:

Whites: 376 per 100,000

Latinos: 997 per 100,000

Blacks: 2,526 per 100,000

Gender is an important "filter" on the who goes to prison:

All Females: 119 per 100,000

All Males: 1,331 per 100,000

White males: 681 per 100,000

Latino males: 1,778 per 100,000

Black males: 4,834 per 100,000

Break it down by age and race, and you can see what is going on even clearer:

For Black males ages 25-29: 12,809 per 100,000. (That's 12.8% of Black men in their late 20s!)

Or you can make some international comparisons:

South Africa under apartheid was internationally condemned as a racist society.

South Africa under apartheid (1993), Black males: 851 per 100,000

U.S. under George Bush (2003), Black males: 4,834 per 100,000

What does it mean that the leader of the "free world" locks up its Black males at a rate 5.7 times higher than the most openly racist country in the world?

Statistics as of December 31, 2003 from Bureau of Justice Statistics Prisoners in 2003, Table 1 on page 2. Statistics as of June 30, 2003 from Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2003, Tables 1, 14 and 15; Calculation for rates by race uses Table 13 and Census Bureau population estimates for 2003. South Africa figures from Marc Mauer, Americans Behind Bars: The International Use of Incarceration. All references to Blacks and Whites are for what the Bureau of Justice Statistics and U.S. Census refer to as "non-Hispanic Blacks" and "non-Hispanic Whites".