

Differences in the Background and Criminal Justice
Characteristics of Young Black, White and Hispanic
Male Federal Prison Inmates

Kevin L. Jackson

Office of Research and Evaluation

Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, D.C.

**Published in the Journal of Black Studies
(March 1997)**

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not represent the policies of the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the U.S. Department of Justice.

Differences in the Background and Criminal Justice
Characteristics of Young Black, White and Hispanic
Male Federal Prison Inmates

Research reviews reveal two dominant explanations of race as a factor in disparate imprisonment rates and treatment in the criminal justice system: (1) disparate imprisonment rates are the result of race 'making a difference'; and (2) blacks (people of color) commit not only more crime but also more serious crimes than other groups. In most instances, the hypothesis that race is a significant factor in the existing disproportionate imprisonment rates was either suggested or undeniably supported (Blalock, 1967; Chambliss, 1964; Christianson, 1981; Davis, 1980; Duster, 1987; Huizinga & Elliot, 1987; Jacobs & Britt, 1979; Joe, 1987; McIntyre, 1993; Quinney, 1980; Welsing, 1991;).

However, researchers have argued (Blumstein, 1982; Langan, 1985; Petersilia & Turner, 1988) that the racial disparity in the prison population is due to the seriousness of crimes committed and offender's prior criminal history, thereby eliminating race as a causal factor and further suggesting that a relationship exists between crime and incarceration rates. But studies that have examined crime and incarceration rates found no significant relationship between a state's crime rate and the percentage of nonwhites in the population, or between its crime rate and incarceration rate (Garofalo, 1979; Nagel, 1977). Instead, these

studies found a very strong positive correlation between the racial composition and incarceration rates of states that was too strong to be accounted for by indirect relationships, like the types of crimes committed.

By simply considering the sums, race can easily be identified as a contributor to the imprisonment rates of black-Americans and particularly young black-Americans. Blacks currently make up 12% of the population of the United States but 36% of the federal prison population. The number of black federal prison inmates between 18 and 25 years old increased from 1,496 in July 1988 to 6,820 in July 1994 (355%); hispanics from 1,584 to 2,881 (82%); and whites from 1,588 to 2,656 (67%) (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 1994). While each group experienced a considerable increase in the number of young federal prisoners, the increase for blacks was comparably much higher. Clearly, differences do exist. But in what regard are these offenders different?

This article will provide profiles (descriptive information) of black, white and hispanic male inmates aged 18 to 25 years old housed in the federal correctional system through a reanalysis of the information secured from five areas, as reported in the 1991 Survey of Inmates of Federal Correctional Facilities (SIFCF). The areas were examined and grouped into two major categories:

(1)background and (2) criminal justice characteristics.

Socioeconomic/personal, and drug and alcohol use areas were used to

determine the background characteristics category. Probation and incarceration history, current sentence and offense, and prison infraction and work assignment areas were used to determine the criminal justice characteristics category.

Prior profiles of inmates focussed primarily on black and white male offenders housed in state facilities. Black and white inmates were found to be significantly different in terms of personal characteristics, drug use, and probation and incarceration history (French, 1977; Goetting & Howsen, 1983). Other studies found, regardless of race, inmates have much in common in terms of personality, intellect, behavior and adjustment to prison, i.e., prison rule infractions (Oldroyd & Howell, 1977; White, 1980).

Information about hispanics was scant. The few studies that did compare black, white and hispanic offenders to ascertain which group received harsher sentences than the other(s) found that when hispanics and blacks were the majority of the total population of an area, they experienced similar mistreatment in the criminal justice system with regard to convictions and sentencing (Holmes & Daudistel, 1984; Welch, Gruhl & Spoon, 1984).

Methods

The subjects of this study were three groups of sentenced federal prison inmates, aged 18 to 25 years old: 274 non-hispanic black males; 114 non-hispanic white males; 175 hispanic males. All of these individuals had been randomly selected by statistical

sampling from a list of all sentenced inmates in Federal facilities to be voluntarily interviewed for the 1991 SIFCF.

The Bureau of Census, through agreement with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), collected and processed the survey data used for the original study. The Bureau of Census also furnished guidelines, including statistical methods, for selecting a stratified random sample of inmates. The BOP, via the methods provided by the Bureau of Census, systematically selected sentenced inmates from each sample prison with expected release dates that were not earlier than the sampling day.

Many items were clustered to make the analyses more efficient. The offense type for which the inmates received the longest sentence was grouped into either a violent (murder, armed robbery, aggravated assault, and weapons offenses) or nonviolent (drug trafficking, and possession/use) category. Work assignments/duties were designated as either skilled or unskilled. Janitorial duties, grounds or maintenance, food preparation, and laundry comprise the unskilled category. UNICOR jobs (prison industries system), repair/construction, and other services (library, stockroom, store, office help, recreation, barber or beauty shop) comprise the skilled category.

The two statistical techniques used for data analysis were chi-square and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The chi-square test was used to analyze nominal and some ordinal level data. Group

means were used in one-way ANOVA procedures, where data were at least interval, to compare the effects of selected variables on the population groups.

Results

Various items for each inmate group were chosen from the five areas that were used to provide the profiles for this study. Based on their level of measurement, F and Chi-Square values were produced from the statistical analyses for these items. Narrative, describing the statistically significant results, is provided, followed by profiles for each inmate group in the two major categories for this study--Background and Criminal Justice Characteristics.

Background Characteristics

The three inmate groups differed on several items in the area of background (personal/socioeconomic) characteristics. Over half of the hispanics (58.29%) and whites (66.67%) had full-time employment before being incarcerated, while just over one-third of the blacks (37.59%) were employed on a full-time basis. Only 12.00% of the hispanics reported that at least some of their annual income came from illegal sources, compared to 25.55% for blacks and 28.07% for whites. Another important difference among the inmates involves with whom they lived when growing up. The majority of the white (50.88%) and hispanic (56.57%) inmates had lived with both parents. But the majority of the black inmates had lived with just

one parent, their mother (48.91%): $P^2(2, n=274 \text{ blacks}; 114 \text{ whites}; 175 \text{ hispanics})=17.23, p<.01$.

While the white group reported having used drugs (heroin, ice, speed, crack, coke, lsd and marijuana) and alcohol much more extensively than the black and hispanic groups, the median annual incomes among the groups also differed. The median annual income of the black inmates (\$6,750) was half that of whites (\$13,500). The median annual income for the hispanic group (\$8,750) was lower than the white group but still higher than that of the black group. Further, the analysis of variance indicated a significant racial effect: $F(2, 470)=9.57, p<.001$.

The years of formal schooling (education levels) among the inmates also yielded significant differences. The education levels of black and white inmates were generally the same (means of 11.45 and 11.46, respectively), while the mean education level for the hispanic group was much lower (9.98).

Criminal Justice Characteristics

In the area of probation and incarceration history, several differences were found. The white inmate group ranked first with regard to probation experience (42.98%); the black group ranked second (31.02%); the hispanic group ranked third (20.00%). Additionally, significant differences were found regarding firearms owned by inmates. The percentage of whites (63.16%) indicating that they owned firearms prior to incarceration was twice as high

as the corresponding figure for blacks (31.75%) and three times as high as that for hispanics (20.00%): $P^2(2, n=274 \text{ blacks; } 114 \text{ whites; } 175 \text{ hispanics})=58.66, p<.01$. Only 12% of the hispanics reported previous incarcerations as juveniles or adults for crimes other than minor offenses, compared to blacks (28.83%) and whites (21.05%).

Although the hispanic group had noticeably fewer guilty violations and minor offenses (i.e., convictions, sentences and time served for drunkenness, vagrancy, disorderly conduct, or loitering), majority of the white and black inmate groups also reported that they were not found guilty of breaking prison rules (blacks, 58.76%; white, 65.79%; hispanic, 78.29%), and had not been convicted, sentenced or served time for minors (blacks, 84.67%; white, 74.56%; hispanics, 90.86%). These findings were expected due to the age and first time offender status of the subjects.

The white group reported a mean of 3.14 for the number of times they were arrested as juveniles or adults. The corresponding figure for blacks was 2.56 and 1.61 for hispanics. The analysis of variance indicated a significant racial effect: $F(2,550)=5.02, p<.01$. White inmates also reported more frequent ownership of firearms. The mean number of firearms owned by white inmates (8.00) was more than twice the mean for black (3.54) and hispanic (3.81) inmates.

Profile of Background Characteristics

for Black, White and Hispanic Male Federal Prison Inmates

BLACK inmates are more likely to have:

(1) lived with their mother when growing up; (2) supported others; (3) children and siblings; (4) never been married; (5) completed high school; (6) low incomes; (7) at least some of their annual income come from illegal sources; and (8) not been employed full-time.

WHITE inmates are more likely to have:

(1) been employed full-time; (2) high incomes; (3) completed high school; (4) never been married; (5) lived with both parents when growing up; (6) at least some of their annual income come from illegal sources; and (7) been users of drugs and alcohol.

HISPANIC inmates are more likely to have:

(1) been employed full-time; (2) been married; (3) lived with both parents when growing up; (4) not completed high school; (5) low incomes; (6) children and siblings; and (7) supported others.

Profile of Criminal Justice Characteristics

for Black, White and Hispanic Male Federal Prison Inmates

BLACK inmates are more likely to have:

(1) been incarcerated for a nonviolent crime; (2) been found guilty of breaking prison rules; (3) unskilled work assignments; and (4) been previously incarcerated.

WHITE inmates are more likely to have:

(1) been arrested several times; (2) more probation experience; (3) owned more firearms; (4) been incarcerated for a violent crime; (5) skilled work assignments; and (6) been found guilty of breaking prison rules.

HISPANIC inmates are more likely to have:

(1) been incarcerated for a nonviolent crime; (2) not been previously incarcerated; (3) unskilled work assignments; and (4) not been found guilty of breaking prison rules.

Discussion

The prominent differences among these groups were found in the area of background (personal/socioeconomic) characteristics. The lower incomes, less frequent full-time employment and more frequent reports of illegal sources of income for the black group was consistent with recent studies on socioeconomic status and contact with the criminal justice system (Duster, 1987; Joe, 1987; Simons & Gray, 1989). These studies concluded that economic inequalities (e.g., lack of employment opportunities, lower incomes and less wealth) cause this group (black youth) to view crime and the underground economy as a means of economic survival.

The most potent areas of difference between blacks and hispanics were found in the personal characteristics, and probation and incarceration histories of the inmates. Specifically, blacks and hispanics were different with respect to education levels, previous incarcerations, marital status, and guilty violations.

These findings suggest that race may not be the only factor determining the effects on these groups, particularly the hispanic group.

Considering these findings in regard to previous studies, Wilson (1987) suggested that changes in the population age structure and migration flow of hispanics could possibly cause increasing rates of social problems for this group (e.g., joblessness, crime, out-of-wedlock births, teenage pregnancy, family dissolution and welfare dependency). Wilson's perspective suggests that as the population for this group grows (and eventually becomes the largest U.S. minority group), hispanics are likely to encounter similar experiences as blacks.

Accordingly, the results of the present study clearly show similarities between these minority groups. Blacks and hispanics were depended upon by others, had more siblings, had lower incomes and had more of their own children, than did whites. These similar personal characteristics between black and hispanic inmates accentuate the economic stress under which both groups have subsisted.

However, the generally disadvantaged economic conditions of blacks cannot be explained via education, for the black group was as 'educated' as the white group. The lower education levels reported by the hispanic group corroborates findings in another

much earlier study which found hispanics to have completed fewer years of school than black and white inmates (Oldroyd & Howell, 1977).

The present study also found the white group was arrested more often than the black and hispanic groups, which, in turn, suggests that the white group was involved more often in some type of criminal behavior. Further, the white group (37.72%) committed more violent offenses (murder, armed robbery, aggravated assault, and weapons offense) than black (12.41%) and hispanic (11.43%) inmates; nonviolent crimes (drug trafficking and possession/use) were committed predominantly by the black (74.82%) and hispanic (78.86%) groups. Moreover, while imprisonment was more often the punishment for the black group for prior offenses (as adults or juveniles), probation was more often the punishment for the white group.

Reasons for the differences in offense types and punishments for offenses among the inmates probably can be traced to the collective opinion of the general public, and ultimately to federal drug sentencing policies. If the general public views blacks--and hispanics--as being more frequently involved in drug (or criminal) activity, then the law that addresses this issue will target these activities, as well as blacks and hispanics, according to Durkheimian theories. These theories hypothesize that laws target unacceptable behaviors and those who participate in the behaviors,

based on the general public's perceptions. Thus, laws are guided by the collective opinion of the general public (Besnard, 1983).

Prior research findings and the findings of the present study suggest that the views of the general public, which guide the law, are biased toward blacks--and hispanics. Studies have found race to be a major issue in mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses, contributing to more blacks and hispanics being convicted of drug crimes and to longer sentences for these groups (McDonald & Carlson, 1993; Schwarzer, 1992). Other research has shown that a black person in the United States was found to be four times as likely as a white person to be arrested on drug charges (Meddis, 1993).

Drug and alcohol use findings in the present study were in accordance with prior research in this area but clearly do not fit the general public's perceptions. Whites were found to use drugs and alcohol at a greater rate than blacks and hispanics (Wallace & Bachman, 1991). While drug use among high school students was found to be on the rise, black students reported the lowest rates of use for virtually all drugs, licit or illicit, in a study by the University of Michigan with the National Institute on Drug Abuse (Bosarge, 1994).

The most obvious similarity between the black and hispanic inmate groups are their large samples, i.e., disproportionate imprisonment rates in relation to their proportions in the general

population. The differential involvement hypothesis states that the disproportionate imprisonment rates stem from differential rates of delinquency involvement. This hypothesis is not supported by the findings in this study. However, the white inmate group, whose imprisonment rate is not at all disproportionate, committed the majority of the serious 'violent' crimes in the study presented here. In addition, studies that found support for the differential hypothesis (Blumstein, 1982; Langan, 1985) noted that the less serious the crime (e.g., drugs and burglary), the greater is the amount of disproportionality that must be explained on grounds other than arrests, like race.

No significant differences were found for the maximum sentence lengths among the inmate groups. The sentencing items in the SIFCF were divided into two mutually exclusive categories: inmates who committed only one offense and inmates who committed more than one offense. To complement the offense data for this study, only the longest sentence received was analyzed for inmates who committed more than one offense.

Conclusions

For 18 out of the 37 analyses conducted (49%), significant differences among black, white, and hispanic prisoners become evident. This set of findings suggests that these prisoners differ from one another in terms of background (personal/socioeconomic) characteristics, probation and incarceration history, offense types

and firearm ownership. Significantly fewer hispanics were previously incarcerated, most blacks grew up in a one-parent household, and whites committed majority of the violent crimes.

For 14 of the 37 analyses conducted (38%), significant differences between nonwhite (black and hispanic) and white inmates become evident. This suggests that black and hispanic inmates are similar in terms of background characteristics (e.g., income levels, and number of children and siblings), drug and alcohol use, offense type, crime characteristics, and work assignments. There were also several areas in which blacks and hispanics differed-- education levels, marital status, and probation and incarceration histories.

The differences found among the inmates suggest that other secondary causes are possibly operating: socioeconomic, language barriers, the socialization process, child rearing practices, and family structure and values. But no matter how it is discerned, race, or more specifically racial perceptions of the general public and discrimination in the criminal justice system, is a major factor in the different outcomes found among the inmate groups in such areas as offense type, employment status, probation experience, arrest history, and drug and alcohol use. Also, the idea that differential incarceration rates stem directly from differential rates of delinquency involvement was rejected by this research effort. To obtain a more in-depth analysis of the key

factors contributing to the differences and similarities among the groups, especially the effects of race, future research should include more rigorous statistical tests. Use of different age groups (e.g., 26 to 33 years old, 34 to 41 years old) could help to determine if, as they age, the black inmates become more violent, and the white inmates become less violent. This study found the white group to be more violent than the black group. Also, similar studies on female federal prison inmates is essential, as the number of female offenders continues to rise.

It is important to note that the over representation of black and hispanic males in the federal prison system may be the result of discrimination at various stages in the judicial process. Ultimately, research is necessary in order to discover policies and programs that will effectively reduce incarceration rates, particularly for blacks, and to understand all of the contributing factors that may be operating, as well as their comparative importance. This problem should rise to the top of our national agenda when the public realizes that the constantly expanding number of incarcerated youth is a distinct sign of present social dysfunctions and probable future social turmoil.

REFERENCES

- Besnard, P. (1983). The Sociological Domain: The Durkheimians and the Founding of Sociology. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Blalock, H. (1967). Toward a Theory of Minority Group Relations. New York: Capricorn Books.
- Blumstein, A. (1982). On the Racial Disproportionality of United States' Prison Populations. The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 73, 1259-1281.
- Bosarge, B. (Ed.). Teen Drug Use Increasing. (1994, February 7). Crime Control Digest, p. 3.
- Bridges, G., Crutchfield, R. & Simpson, E. (1987). Crime, Social Structure and Criminal Punishment: White and Nonwhite Rates of Imprisonment. Social Problems, 34, 345-357.
- Chambliss, W. J. (1964). A Sociological Analysis of the Law of Vagrancy. Social Problems, 12, 67-77.
- Christianson, S. (1981). Our Black Prisons. Crime and Delinquency, 27, 364-375.
- Colney, D. J. (1994). Adding Color to a Black and White Picture: Using Qualitative Data to Explain Racial Disproportionality in the Juvenile Justice System. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 31, 135-148.
- Crutchfield, R. D., Bridges, G. S. & Pitchford, S. R. (1994). Analytical and Aggregation Biases in Analyses of

- Imprisonment: Reconciling Discrepancies in studies of Racial Disparity. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 31, 166-182.
- Davis, D. B. (1980). The Crime of Reform [Review of Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America]. New York Review of Books, 27, p. 14.
- Duster, T. (1987). Crime, Youth Unemployment, and the Black Urban Underclass. Crime and Delinquency, 33, 300-316.
- Fagan, J., Slaughter, E. & Hartstone, E. (1987). Blind Justice? The Impact of the Juvenile Justice Process. Crime & Delinquency, 33, 224-258.
- Federal Bureau of Prisons (1994). Key Indicators/Strategic Support System [Automated Management Information System]. Washington, D.C.: Central Office, Office of Research and Evaluation (Producer/Distributor).
- Federal Bureau of Prisons & Bureau of the Census. (1991). The Survey of Inmates of Federal Correctional Facilities Study [Survey Data File]. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Prisons, Office of Research and Evaluation (Producer/Distributor).
- Fox, W. (1992). Social Statistics Using Microcase. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers.
- French, W. (1977). As Assessment of the Black Female Prisoner

- in the South. Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 3, 483-488.
- Garofalo, J. (1979, March). Social Structure and Rates of Imprisonment: A Research Note. A paper presented at the annual meeting of Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Cincinnati, OH.
- Goetting, A. & Howsen, R. (1983). Blacks in Prison. Criminal Justice Review, 8, 21-31.
- Holmes, M. D., & Daudistel, H. C. (1984). Ethnicity and Justice in the Southwest: The Sentencing of Anglo, Black, and Mexican Origin Defendants. Social Science Quarterly, 64, 265-277.
- Huizinga, D. & Elliot, D. S. (1987). Juvenile Offenders: Prevalence, Offender Incidence, and Arrest Rates by Race. Crime and Delinquency, 33, 206-223.
- Jacobs, D. & Britt, D. (1979). Inequality and Police Use of Deadly Force: an empirical assessment of a conflict hypothesis. Social Problems, 26, 403-412.
- Joe, T. (1987). Economic Inequality: the Picture in Black and White. Crime and Delinquency, 33, 287-299.
- Krisberg, B., Schwartz, I., Fishman, G., Eisikovits, Z., Guttman, E., & Joe, K. (1987). The Incarceration of Minority Youth. Crime and Delinquency, 33, 173-205.
- Langan, P. (1985). Racism on Trial: New Evidence to Explain

- the Racial Composition of Prisons in the United States. The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 76, 666-683.
- Leedy, P. D. (1993). Practical Research, Planning and Design (5th ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Liska, A. E., Lawrence, J. J. & Sanchirico, A. (1982). Fear of Crime as a Social Fact. Social Forces, 60, 760-768.
- McDonald, D. & Carlson, K. (1993). Sentencing in the Federal Courts: Does Race Matter?: The Transition to Sentencing Guidelines, 1986-1990. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- McGarrell, E. F. (1993). Trends in Racial Disproportionality in Juvenile Court Processing: 1985-1989. Crime and Delinquency, 39, 29-48.
- McIntyre, C. C. L. (1993). Criminalizing A Race: Free Blacks During Slavery. New York: Kayode.
- Meddis, S. V. (1993, July 23-25). Is the Drug War Racist? USA Today, pp. 1A-2A.
- Nagel, W. G. (1977). On Behalf of a Moratorium on Prison Construction. Crime and Delinquency, 23, 154-172.
- Oldroyd, R. J., & Howell, R. J. (1977). Personality, Intellectual, and Behavioral Differences Between Black, Chicano, and White Prison Inmates in the Utah State Prison. Psychology Reports, 41, 187-191.

- Petersilia, J., & Turner, S. (1988). Minorities in Prison, Discrimination or Disparity? Corrections Today, June 1988, 92-94.
- Quinney, R. (1980). Class, State & Crime (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.
- Schwarzer, W. W. (1992). Sentencing Guidelines and Mandatory Minimums: Mixing Apples and Oranges. Southern California Law Review, 66, 405-411.
- Simons, R. L. & Gray, P. (1989). Perceived Blocked Opportunity as an Explanation of Delinquency Among Lower-Class Black Males: A Research Note. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 26, 90-101.
- Wallace, J. M. & Bachman, J. G. (1991). Explaining Racial/Ethnic Differences in Adolescent Drug Use: The Impact of Background and Lifestyle. Social Problems, 38, 333-354.
- Welch, S., Gruhl, J. & Spohn, C. (1984). Dismissal, Conviction, and Incarceration of Hispanic Defendants: A Comparison with Anglos and Blacks. Social Science Quarterly, 65, 257-264.
- Welsing, F. C. (1991). The Isis Papers, The Keys to the Colors. Chicago: Third World Press.
- White, R. B. (1980). Prediction of Adjustment to Prisons in a Federal Correctional Population. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 36, 1031-1034.

Wilson, W. J. (1987). The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.