

Presentation by Steven Whitman to the November 1, 1986

Conference to End the Marion Lockdown as part of the workshop
on the Changing Nature of the U.S. Prison System

As we have written in much of our literature, the CEML believes that Dostoevsky was correct when he said that if you want to understand a society, you should look into its prisons. I have spent some time using various books, journals, government documents, and phone calls to the U.N. to gather information about imprisonment in the United States. What I would like to do today is share some of this data with you and also, when appropriate, discuss some of the political insights that accrue as a result of analyzing the data.

This first slide will set a context for the rest of the discussion. As you can see, at mid-year 1986 there were about a half-million people in prisons in the U.S. and a quarter-million people in jails. When I talk about imprisonment for the rest of this presentation, I will be speaking only about those people in prison - not those in jail, nor those on probation, parole, or any of those other criminal justice categories. The U.S. is

adding about 1000 prisoners per week or about 52,000 per year to its system. To put this number in perspective we can note that no state has as many as 50,000 prisoners. All of the data that I will use for the rest of this talk will be about state and federal prisoners combined but as you can see, federal prisoners are only a small part of this total - about 7%.

Nonetheless, this is an important 7%. Most relevantly, Marion and Lexington are both federal prisons. Finally, women constitute about 5% of all prisoners.

This next slide shows U.S. imprisonment rates per 100,000 people, starting in 1930 and extending until 1986. These rates are given per 100,000 population. Thus, the rate for 1930 tells us that for every 100,000 people living in the U.S. that year, 104 of them were in prison. As you can see, the rates vacillated for about 40 years and then really started zooming up in 1970. Now, in 1986 they are almost double any rate that occurred before 1970. And you can see, the proportion of prisoners that are Black has also doubled - from, 23% in 1930 to 46% in 1982; and the proportion that are "Spanish Speaking" was 9% in 1982 - and increasing rapidly. (Categories such as "Spanish Speaking," "Hispanic," etc. are used as they appear in the documents that I employed to develop a particular slide. There are, of course, many very important difficulties with these

categories and thus related tables must be interpreted with this in mind.)

This slide shows graphically what the last slide showed numerically. It's the same data - just presented differently. As you can see, the rates stayed more or less steady until about 1970 when they began to zoom out of sight. And note that the graph only goes up to 1983 - when the rates were much lower than they are now. If the graph went up to 1986, the line would be off the piece of paper.

This next slide shows U.S. imprisonment rates by race. As you can see, in 1983, the rate for Black people was 713, the rate for Hispanic people was 232, and the rate for white people was 114 - more than 6 times less than the rate for Black people.

This next slide shows the imprisonment proportions by race for Illinois. Black people constitute 60% and Hispanic people 7% of the prison population. Recall the national figures of 46% and 9%. Also recall that Black people constitute only about 12% of the Illinois population. Data not shown here demonstrate that a Black person in Illinois is ten times more likely to go to prison than a white person.

This next slide is the one that I find most interesting. It contains imprisonment rates for Western Europe, the U.S. and South Africa. As you can see, the European rates group around about 50, with a low of 17 in the Netherlands and a high of 94 in Finland. Now, look at the U.S. The rate for white people is like those of other Europeans while the rate for Black people is much higher - almost 25 times higher than those for Italy and the Netherlands! Perhaps most staggering, the rate for Black people in the U.S. in 1980 was almost twice as high as the rate for Black people in South Africa in that year. There is a very important political lesson to be drawn from this slide. Much of the organized left says that Black people in the U.S. are part of some multinational working class - but perhaps somewhat more oppressed than white people. But this slide refutes that notion. You see what the imprisonment rates are for Europeans (including those living in the U.S.); they are somewhere between 19 and 94 . These are rates for workers and poor people, since these are the only people who get sent to prison. What, then, is the rate of 567? I maintain that this is the rate of people oppressed far more than workers - this is the imprisonment rate of something like an oppressed colony or an imprisoned nation. No single set of numbers can ever totally prove this assertion, but this slide comes close to proving it to my satisfaction.

Now, what does all of this data mean for the lives of Black people?

This slide shows that the probability that a Black man will go to prison in his lifetimes was 18.7% in 1979. That's almost 20% or one out of five. But this is before the rates rose so much higher. By now it must be one out of every four Black men. Now, think about what this must mean. One out of every four Black men will go to prison in his lifetime (and remember, this does not include jail, probation, parole, etc.). It's not only that these men are gone but that their families and friends must fill the gaps they leave in the community, and that they must be supported while they are in prison with toothpaste, soap, some clothing, books, etc. In addition, when they are visited, the costs will be huge since most of the prisons in this country are far away from most urban areas. Most important, it means that the entire community will be devastated. This figure helps us understand why some think that it is reasonable to call what is happening to Black people in this country by the name of "genocide."

This next slide presents the same basic data in other forms. First, it notes that on any given day, like today, about 2 1/2% of all Black men will be in prison. And that there are today about 3,000,000 Black men who have been prisoners in this country. If you want to know how much 3,000,000

is, I'll tell you. It is the size of Nicaragua; and Nicaragua is not nearly the smallest country. That should give some sense of both the monstrous white supremacy of this country and also the incredible potential for resistance that the Black nation is capable of providing.

Now that we see who is in prison, the next step is to ask "Why?" And there are a couple of fascinating studies that answer this question empirically. A few years ago, Box and Hale, two British criminologists, studied this question. They noted that the existing liberal explanation for high imprisonment rates was unemployment. That is, people noticed that when unemployment went up, so did imprisonment rates. But Box and Hale decided to examine this more closely. After a detailed data analysis, Box and Hale found that imprisonment rates are indeed highly correlated with unemployment rates. But they also found that imprisonment rates are not correlated with crime rates and that unemployment rates are not correlated with crime rates.

This puts a dent in the argument which suggests that unemployment causes poverty, that poverty causes crime, and that crime causes imprisonment. Box and Hale state: "In times of rising unemployment, the judiciary send more people to prisons than can be accounted for by any

concurrent rise in crime or any increase in the court's workload." What is it then that sends people to prison? Box and Hale suggest: "This increased use of imprisonment [during times of increasing unemployment] is not a direct response to any rise in crime, but is an ideologically motivated response to the perceived threat of crime posed by the swelling population of economically marginalized persons." Saying this all another way, when times get bad for the ruling class, they freak out, institute a campaign of law and order, and throw lots of people in prison in a process that has nothing to do with any increase in crime.

The next study was implemented by William Nagel, one of the most famous criminologists in the U.S. Nagel examined many factors in each state to determine which were correlated with high imprisonment rates.

He found:

1. No correlation between the crime rate and the imprisonment rate;
2. No correlation between the violent crime rate and the imprisonment rate;
3. No correlation between the crime rate and the racial composition;
4. No correlation between the violent crime rate and the racial composition;
5. A very high correlation between the racial composition and the

imprisonment rate.

Putting all of this in simpler words: "If you're Black, you're going to prison." And note how precisely Nagel's study coincides with the one by Box and Hale.

Finally, look at this graph. It shows in a picture what Box and Hale and Nagel proved statistically. Note how the crime rate goes one way and the imprisonment rate goes on its own merry way and how the two are not at all correlated. If any picture is worth 1000 words, this is it.

By way of conclusion, I offer the following observations. First, prisons are being filled at a rate faster than ever before in the history of the United States and this has nothing to do with crime. This increase is associated with more and more people of color going to prison - at a rate that is the highest in the world. When these two observations are put together, I think that it tells us that prisons are some kind of control mechanism for people of color - some attempt to contain them both physically and politically.

According to Dostoevsky, this tells us something about our society. I

think that what it tells us is that the ruling class thinks that people of color are those who threaten this system most. I think they are correct. I think that they are correct because this is a system built on white supremacy and a system that will fall with the destruction of white supremacy. To those of us interested in being part of a movement that will build a new, human society in this country, this means that we must begin to pay far more attention to the issue of white supremacy, and therefore to the issue of prisons, and therefore to the issue of Marion and Lexington.

It is for these reasons that the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown exists. We hope that you agree with us and that you will join with us in the pursuit of these goals.

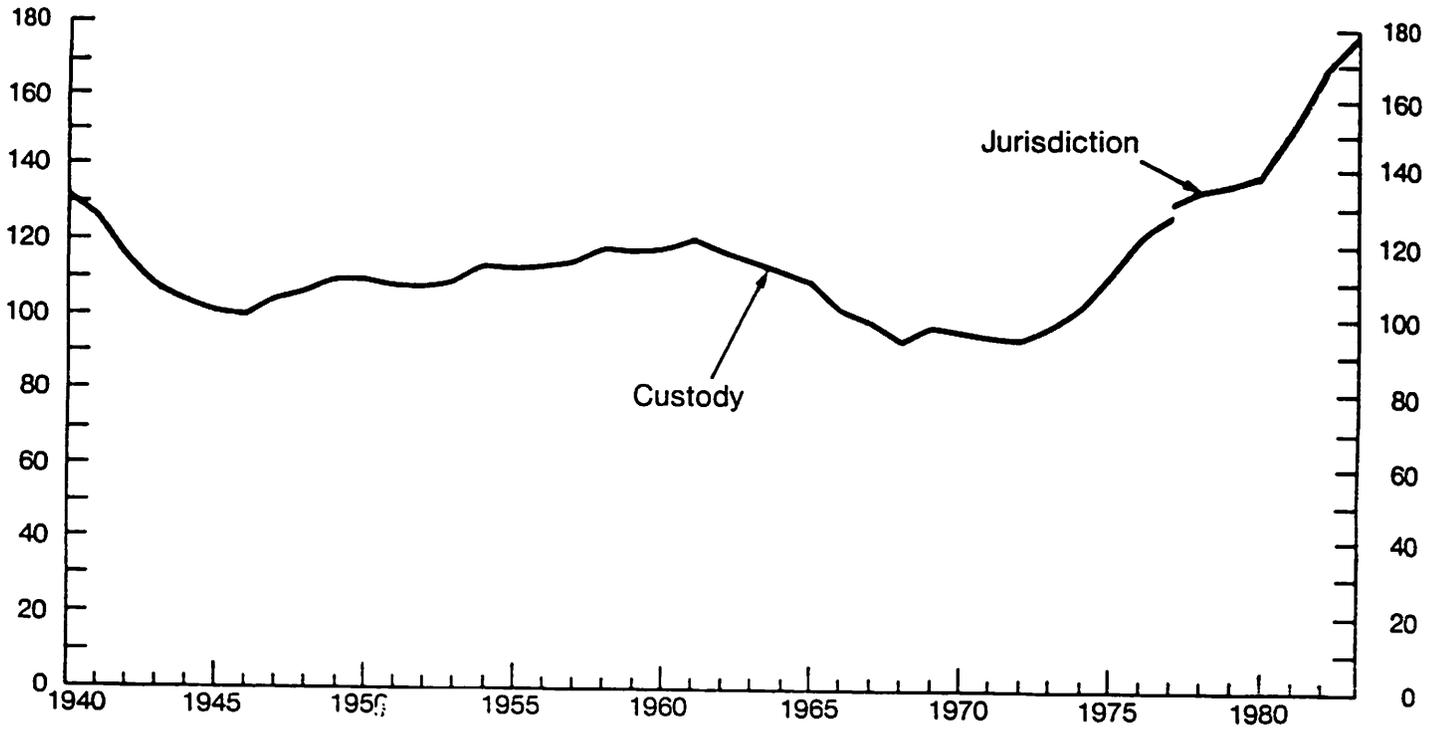
Some General Facts About Imprisonment

1. As of June 30, 1986 there were about 529,000 people in state and federal prisons and about 250,000 people in jails.
2. The U.S. is adding about 1000 prisoners per week or 52,000 per year. There is no state that has as many as 50,000 prisoners.
3. About 7% of all prisoners are federal prisoners.
4. Women constitute about 5% of all prisoners.

U.S Imprisonment Rates Per 100,000 Population

<u>Year</u>	<u>Rate</u>	<u>% Black</u>	<u>% Spanish Speaking</u>
1930	104	23	
1940	131	34	
1950	109	--	
1960	117	37	2
1970	96	41	7
1980	138	46	8
1981	153	--	--
1982	170	46	9
1983	179		
1984	188		
1985	201		
1986 (6/30)	219		

U.S. Imprisonment Rate, 1925 - 1983



U.S. Imprisonment Rates, By Race

<u>Year</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Total</u>
1980	567	173	90	138
1981	618	201	97	153
1982	686	216	108	170
1983	713	232	114	179

Blacks and Hispanics in the Illinois Prison System, 1980 -1985

<u>Year</u>	<u>% Black</u>	<u>% Hispanic</u>
1980	59	2
1981	61	4
1982	62	6
1983	61	6
1984	61	7
1985	60	7

**Some International
Imprisonment Rates
U.N. Data, 1980**

<u>Country</u>	<u>Rate</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Rate</u>
Belgium	44	Italy	19
Denmark	48	Netherlands	17
Finland	94	Spain	22
France	55	U.K.	80
	South Africa	361	
	U.S. - white	90	
	U.S. - Black	567	

**Lifetime Probability of Imprisonment,
by Race and Sex, U.S., 1979**

Black men	18.7%
white men	3.3
Black women	1.5
white women	0.2

On any given day this year, about two and a half percent of Black men will be in prison.

There are now about 3,000,000 Black men in the United States who have been in prison.

The Box and Hale Study

- Imprisonment rates are highly correlated with unemployment rates
- Imprisonment rates are not correlated with crime rates
- Unemployment rates are not correlated with crime rates

"In times of rising unemployment, the judiciary send more people to prisons than can be accounted for by any concurrent rise in crime or any increase in the court's workload."

"This increased use of imprisonment [during times of increasing unemployment] is not a direct response to any rise in crime, but is an ideologically motivated response to the perceived threat of crime posed by the swelling population of economically marginalized persons."

William Nagel's Famous Study

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