

CHAPTER 1

Invisible Men

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

On January 20, 2009, 1.8 million people of all races, colors, and creeds stood on the mall in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the inauguration of Barack Obama, America's first African American president. Journalists hailed the historic moment, and commentators from across the political spectrum questioned whether Obama's presidency marked the beginning of a postracial America. At the same time that the crowds in Washington watched Obama take the oath to uphold the Constitution, 2.3 million Americans sat invisible in America's prisons and jails, nearly half of them black.

The American prison system is both historically and comparatively unique. The United States now incarcerates a higher fraction of its population than at any other time in recorded history, and the United States leads the world in the percentage of its population held behind bars. Over one in one hundred American adults is living in a federal, state, or local prison or jail (Pew Research Center on the States 2008). If we include individuals on parole or probation, the numbers are even more startling. Nearly 5 million men and women are on probation, on parole, or under some form of community supervision. As a consequence, one in thirty-one American adults, or over 3 percent of the U.S. adult population, is under some form of correctional supervision (Glaze and Bonczar 2008). The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that if contemporary imprisonment rates continue, one out of every three black men will serve time in a federal or state prison (Bonczar 2003).

Criminals are under the near-constant gaze of the media. Gruesome crimes lead local television newscasts. Crime stories make newspaper headlines every day. Several large metropolitan-area newspapers devote whole sections of otherwise dwindling daily papers to crime reporting. Jonathan Simon (2007) has persuasively argued that since the declaration of war on crime in the 1960s, Americans have become increasingly fascinated with crime and criminality. Unabated press coverage of crime fuels fears of victimization and misperceptions about trends in crime. As a result, Americans have woefully inaccurate perceptions of their own risk of victimization and continue to believe that crime is on the upswing despite decades of declines in violent crime rates.

Just as criminals are under the gaze of the media and the public, individuals involved in the correctional system are closely supervised by correctional authorities. Some inmates face constant monitoring through video and other forms of surveillance in state-of-the-art supermax prisons (Rhodes 2004). Even inmates in minimum security facilities are continually supervised, repeatedly counted, and their movements carefully documented. Parolees and probationers are also routinely tracked through either electronic surveillance techniques or regularly scheduled meetings with parole and probation officers.

The intensive press coverage of America's criminals and the extensive supervision of inmates by correctional authorities belie the invisibility of inmates, parolees, probationers, and others involved in the criminal justice system to the outside world. Inmates are a social group isolated socially, physically, and statistically from much of the rest of society. The vast majority of our nation's inmates come from very few jurisdictions, and the facilities in which they are housed are even fewer in number (Heyer and Wagner 2004). Even our national data systems, as well as the social facts they produce, are structured around a normative kind of economic, political, and domestic life that commonly eludes those under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

Inmates and former inmates are less likely than otherwise similarly disadvantaged men to hold down steady legitimate jobs, to participate in civic life, and to live in settled households. Even their institutionalization involves a segment of the state cut off from the usual methods of social accounting. We categorically exclude inmates and former inmates from the social surveys routinely used to gauge the condition of the U.S. population, and we systematically undercount them in the U.S. Census and social surveys.

More than one hundred years ago, Émile Durkheim (1895/1982, 54) coined

the term “social fact” to describe phenomena that both characterize and explain features of society: social facts are “the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively.” In his own research, Durkheim commonly relied on statistics such as rates of births, marriages, or suicides to isolate and examine social facts.

This book documents how our collective blindness hinders the establishment of social facts, conceals inequality, and undermines the foundation of social science research, including that used in the design and evaluation of social policy. The decades-long expansion of the criminal justice system has led to the acute and rapid disappearance of young, low-skill African American men from portraits of the American economic, political, and social condition. While the expansion of the criminal justice system reinforces race and class inequalities in the United States, the full impact of the criminal justice system on American inequality is obscured by the continued use of data collection strategies and estimation methods that predate prison expansion.

BECOMING INVISIBLE

As Ralph Ellison so poignantly conveyed in his landmark book *Invisible Man* (1952), African Americans were socially invisible in pre-civil rights America. Racial discrimination, segregation, and exclusion contributed to a system of institutions, laws, and customs that maintained racial inequality and was premised on the subjugation and invisibility of African Americans (see, for example, Alexander 2010, 20–35). The civil rights era offered African Americans the promise of being accepted as visible citizens in American society. The Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) signaled a new era of greater protections for the rights of African Americans and other groups, particularly in relation to education, employment, and voting.

The promise of the civil rights era has been undercut by a new form of invisibility manufactured by mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex. Yet the invisibility of large segments of the American population and the inequality it conceals is not a natural or inevitable product of prison growth. In this book, I trace America’s demographic charter to the constitutional mandate to conduct the decennial Census. I explore how the shifting demands of policymakers and researchers have led to increasing reliance on data collected from surveys of individuals living in households. I also document the impact of mass incarceration on the representativeness of individuals living in households. Incarceration is concentrated among the most disad-

vantaged segments of the American population, and as a consequence those same individuals and social groups are invisible in many accounts of the U.S. population.

Chapter 2 begins by observing that since the founding of the United States the federal government has collected information every ten years in the decennial Census that documents the size and distribution of the population for the purposes of political apportionment. The U.S. Census Bureau and other federal data-collecting agencies have not always done a good job of collecting data on the full range of American experiences. Prior to emancipation, the number of slaves living in households was recorded on Census forms, yet no other information about them was collected, and they counted as only three-fifths of a person for the purposes of political apportionment. The repeal of slavery and the establishment of equal representation guaranteed by the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments signaled the end of the “three-fifths compromise.” Still, throughout much of the twentieth century African Americans were under-enumerated in U.S. population counts. Hispanics, Native Americans, and members of other minority groups have also been significantly under-enumerated at different points in American history (Anderson and Fienberg 1999; Snipp 1989, 2003).

Although there is evidence that the Census has improved its enumeration of blacks, Hispanics, and other minority groups, other methods of demographic and social data collection commonly used by the federal government are now increasingly problematic. Historical expansions of “grants-in-aid,” most notably linked to the New Deal in the 1930s and the Great Society programs of the 1960s, accompanied an increased reliance by federal, state, and local governments on data about the condition of the population. Grants-in-aid commonly redistribute federal revenue to state and local governments. The amount of money allocated to local jurisdictions is often determined by formulas that include information about population size and characteristics provided by the Census and other federal data collection efforts. Since the 1930s, much of that data has been provided by surveys that are primarily restricted to people living in households, such as the Current Population Survey (CPS).

When the Current Population Survey was initiated in 1939 as the Sample Survey of Unemployment (Anderson 1988), incarceration rates were low and the exclusion of inmates from social surveys had relatively little consequence for the construction of social statistics. National surveys proliferated in the 1960s

and 1970s along with the expansion of programs that employed grants-in-aid. Surveys initiated in the 1960s and 1970s adopted the same household-based sampling mechanism employed by the Current Population Survey, which categorically excludes the institutionalized and systematically undersamples the itinerant and homeless. To be sure, even at midcentury limiting sampling to individuals living in households excluded some subgroups of the population. Throughout most of the twentieth century and especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the largest group excluded was active-duty military.

Over the past thirty-five years, as the penal population has increased, surveys have not adapted their sampling frames to include the growing number of incarcerated Americans or itinerant former inmates. Today the size of the prison population far exceeds the size of America's active-duty military. The active-duty military population consists of approximately 1.4 million men and women who, in very broad terms, are generally representative of the American population (Government Accountability Office 2005; Kane 2005). The total inmate population now tops 2.3 million, and incarceration is so disproportionately concentrated among low-skill black men that it has become a routine life event for this demographic group (Pettit and Western 2004). As a consequence, penal system growth distorts accounts of the U.S. population derived from surveys that draw their samples from people living in households. Yet researchers, policymakers, and the public rarely consider the implications of our collective reliance on increasingly biased samples of the U.S. resident population generated by sample surveys of people living in households.

Chapter 3 engages with the idea that the public, policymakers, and researchers have not ignored inmates entirely. We are a culture fascinated by criminality, and newspapers and broadcast media are rife with images of crime and deviance. Once people are locked up in prisons or jails, however, they get less attention in the media until they are released, paroled, or furloughed. While there is little media coverage of former inmates who reintegrate into mainstream society after incarceration, repeat offenders are commonly featured in media accounts and political campaigns. Prominent policymakers—both Democrat and Republican—have made their careers out of being “tough on crime.” And although Republicans claim much of the credit—or are targets of blame—for “tough on crime” legislation, Democrats have also been active proponents of the war on crime and the resulting penal expansion.

At the same time that the media has promulgated images of criminality and victimization, scholars have been slow to produce basic descriptive work documenting the scope of criminal justice expansion and the demographic contours of mass incarceration. We know, for example, that the prison and jail population has grown dramatically over the past thirty-five years. But we know less about the distribution of incarceration across social and demographic groups. For example, how has the composition of inmates changed over time? How do incarceration rates vary over time and in relation to gender, race, age, and indicators of social class like employment and education? How many people have ever spent time in a correctional facility or some other form of correctional supervision? How many people know, live with, or are related to someone who has been involved in the criminal justice system, and how is that experience distributed across the population?

Instead, scholarly attention has focused on calculating the behavioral implications of criminal justice contact. Administrative, survey, and experimental data have all been employed in an effort to estimate the outcomes of criminal justice contact and incarceration in the contemporary United States. For example, numerous studies have examined how criminal justice contact and incarceration affect employment and wage outcomes (Western 2002, 2006; Pager 2003, 2007; Apel and Sweeten 2010; Lyons and Pettit 2011). Other studies have investigated how the experience of incarceration affects voting and civic engagement (Uggen and Manza 2002; Manza and Uggen 2006; Burch 2010). And finally, a growing body of scholarship investigates how criminal justice contact influences family life, health, and community engagement (see, for example, Clear 2007; Foster and Hagan 2007; Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011; Geller et al., forthcoming; Massoglia 2008; Wildeman 2009).

Unfortunately, administrative and survey data are often narrow in scope, and the same data sets that fail to include current inmates in their samples commonly fail to collect data on prior criminal justice contact from the people they do interview. True experiments in the field are rare, and a measure of uncertainty clouds even the most rigorous studies. It is extraordinarily difficult, in a statistical sense, to identify the effects of incarceration on a range of life outcomes precisely because criminal justice contact and incarceration are disproportionately concentrated among certain subgroups of the American population. Research cannot easily sort out demographic from carceral effects. As a consequence, the findings of causally oriented research are

continually debated, and fundamental questions about the effects of incarceration remain unresolved. Meanwhile, basic descriptions of the growth and distribution of criminal justice contact have received scant attention.

This book is designed to address some of the shortcomings of previous work through attention to the consequences for accounts of racial inequality in America of excluding inmates and former inmates from conventional data sources. Although the explicit goal of most censuses is to provide accurate population counts and the stated aim of most sample surveys is to be representative of a larger population, the rapid and dramatic growth in the U.S. criminal justice system has left key holes in accounts of the economic well-being, political engagement, and health status of the American population. The exclusion of the institutionalized from household-based surveys renders current inmates mute in statements of the American population's condition, and extremely high rates of residential instability and homelessness contribute to the invisibility of former inmates in official accounts of the population and its characteristics derived from the Census and household-based social surveys.

In Chapter 4, I illustrate how the exclusion of inmates from sample surveys profoundly influences the measurement of racial inequality in educational attainment, employment, and average wages. For example, there are significant discrepancies in estimates of the high school dropout rate between different data sources (see, for example, Heckman and LaFontaine 2010; Warren and Halpern-Manners 2009). Data from the Current Population Survey, meant to be representative of the U.S. population, places the high school dropout rate of young men at 13 to 16 percent and shows evidence of declines in the black-white gap in high school completion over the past few decades. Yet large urban school districts that are disproportionately black routinely report that 50 percent or more of their students drop out.

Although some discrepancy in measures from different data sources is to be expected because of the different aims of the surveys, the exclusion of inmates from the Current Population Survey, as Chapter 4 illustrates, contributes to a systematic bias in estimates of high school dropout rates. Inmates have extremely high dropout rates. Including inmates in estimates suggests a nationwide high school dropout rate among young black men more than 40 percent higher than conventional estimates using the CPS would suggest, and no improvement in the black-white gap in high school graduation rates since the early 1990s. Chapter 4 also reveals that similar bias affects conventional

estimates of employment and wages. In 2008 nearly one in five young black men did not finish high school, black male dropouts were more likely to be in prison or jail than to be employed, and relative wages among young black men had seen little improvement over the previous twenty years.

In Chapter 5, I examine how decades of criminal justice expansion conceal racial inequality in voting. One of the most studied phenomena of contemporary American politics is the famous decline in voter turnout through the late 1990s. The decline in voter turnout was held to be particularly acute among whites, while voter turnout among African Americans held steady from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. The twenty-first century has generally witnessed increases in voter turnout, especially among historically disenfranchised groups. The candidacy of Barack Obama has been linked to record high turnout among young African Americans. In chapter 5, I examine how trends in voter turnout are influenced by increases in incarceration. Although incarceration has undoubtedly disenfranchised large segments of the African American male population, incarceration also artificially inflates turnout rates among African American men because inmates and former inmates are underrepresented in surveys used to gauge trends in voting. Mass incarceration has narrowed the electorate sufficiently to generate an illusion of growing democratic engagement among young black men.

The effects of criminal justice expansion extend well beyond the lives of those incarcerated. Chapter 6 considers the impact of mass incarceration on children, families, and communities. Existing large-scale, national data collection strategies are not particularly well suited to address questions about the collateral consequences of decades of penal system growth. Surveys commonly used to gauge trends in American health and well-being, like the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), adopted the same household-based sampling frame employed by the Current Population Survey. As a result, they also categorically exclude the institutionalized population and undersample former inmates with weak connections to households.

Although ethnographic and qualitative research has illuminated the broader effects of incarceration, we know less than we should about the aggregate impacts of incarceration on the health and well-being of inmates and their children, families, and communities owing to the limitations of existing survey data. In chapter 6, I piece together data from a number of different

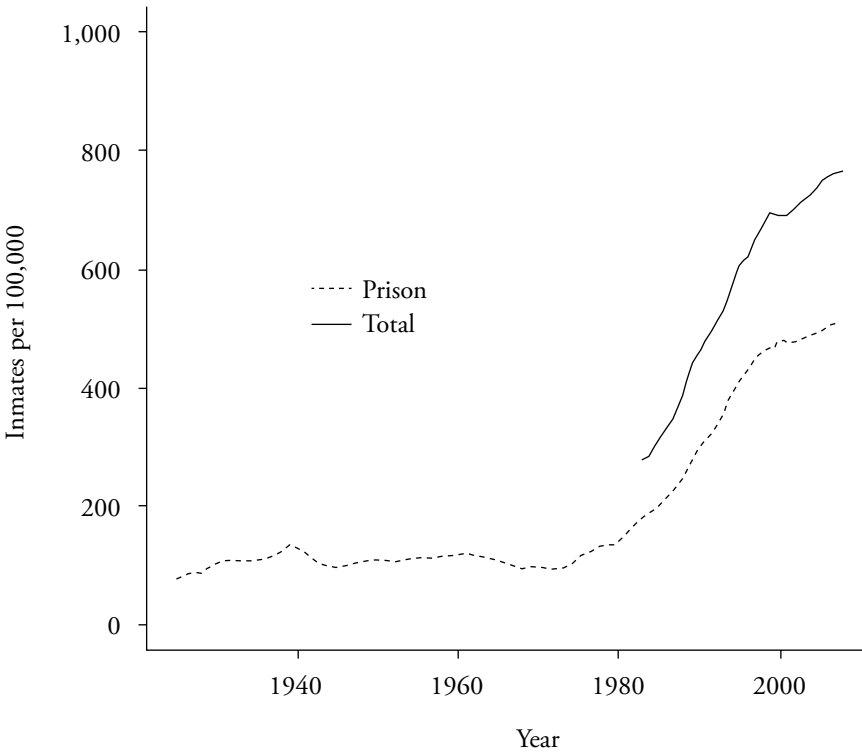
sources and review related research to illustrate the reach of incarceration into the lives of disadvantaged children and communities. This chapter shows that over 2.6 million children had a parent in prison or jail on any given day in 2008, as many as 12 percent of American children have had a biological father in prison or jail (Foster and Hagan 2007), and one-quarter of black children will experience parental imprisonment before their eighteenth birthday (Wildeman 2009). The extent of disadvantage that these children face is obscured because their parents—both fathers and mothers—are commonly underrepresented in social statistics. Likewise, existing data tell us relatively little about the impact of incarceration on the communities that inmates hail from and often return to, even though there is reason to believe that the consequences of mass incarceration for America's most disadvantaged communities are likely to be profound (see, for example, Rose and Clear 1998; Clear 2007).

The contemporary American criminal justice system is unique in both historical and cross-national perspective, and its implications for social science research and social policy are startling. Decades of penal system growth and high concentrations of incarceration among certain social and demographic groups skew comparative estimates of educational attainment (Heckman and LaFontaine 2010), employment (Western and Beckett 1999; Western and Pettit 2000), and wages (Western and Pettit 2005). Although there is reason to think that prison growth should influence myriad other social statistics, there is little evidence on that score.

This book provides a comprehensive examination of the effects of prison and jail growth on the construction of social statistics in a number of domains. In short, penal expansion has generated a class of citizens systematically excluded from accounts of the American populace. This exclusion raises doubt about the validity of even the most basic social facts and questions the utility of the data gathered for the design and evaluation of public policy and the data commonly used in social science research. As a consequence, we have lost sight of the full range of the American experience.

PENAL SYSTEM GROWTH IN THE UNITED STATES

When statistics on the size of the prison population were first recorded in 1925, 79 of every 100,000 Americans were held in federal or state prisons, generating an imprisonment rate of 0.079. The imprisonment rate, or the

Figure 1.1 U.S. Imprisonment Rate, 1925 to 2008

Source: Author's compilation based on data from U.S. Department of Justice (2009).

Note: Total includes inmates in prisons and jails.

percentage of Americans housed in federal or state prisons, hovered close to 0.1, or 100 in 100,000, until the mid-1970s. The long-term stability in the imprisonment rate prompted some prominent criminologists to claim the existence of a “natural” or stable incarceration rate (Blumstein and Cohen 1973).

Theories of stable incarceration rates were upended during the prison expansion that began in the mid-1970s (see figure 1.1). Between 1975 and 2009, the U.S. imprisonment rate grew at an average annual pace of 4.7 percent. This is a stunning increase considering that the imprisonment rate adjusts for population growth over the period. The incarceration rate, which includes inmates housed in local jails, grew almost as briskly, at 4.0 percent per year since 1982, when reliable data first became available.

By 2009, 2.3 million people were housed in America's prisons and jails (West and Sabol 2009; Minton and Sabol 2009). The U.S. imprisonment rate had reached 512 per 100,000, nearly six times the imprisonment rate that prevailed in 1925, when statistics were first reported. And if we include inmates housed in local jails, 768 of every 100,000 Americans were held in correctional facilities. Sociologist David Garland (2001) has coined the term "mass incarceration" to characterize the uniquely modern social phenomenon of extraordinarily high incarceration rates.

Mass incarceration is not only a contemporary development but also a distinctly American one. Until the mid-1970s, the incarceration rate in the United States was similar to the incarceration rate in France and Germany, among other industrialized nations (Whitman 2003). Even as recently as the mid-1990s, the United States lagged behind Russia in the proportion of the population held behind bars (Mauer 1994). Now, after more than three decades of penal expansion, the United States is the world leader in incarceration (International Centre for Prison Studies 2008). The United States outranks every other country for which there are available data on incarceration rates, including Rwanda, its closest competitor, which posted an incarceration rate approximately 80 percent of that of the United States (International Centre for Prison Studies 2008). Table 1.1 shows that in the mid-2000s the United States incarcerated a higher fraction of its population than any other advanced industrialized country. In fact, the incarceration rate in the United States is over ten times the incarceration rate in Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, Finland, and Denmark.

High incarceration rates are found throughout the United States. There is substantial variability in the proportion of the population that is incarcerated in different states, yet all U.S. states have incarceration rates that exceed those found in other advanced industrialized nations (figure 1.2). Thus, American prison growth is truly national in scope.

Decades after civil rights legislation provided for the social, economic, and political rights of people of color, race and class inequality in incarceration is at historic highs. To be sure, race and class disproportionality in incarceration rates reflects important differences in rates of offending (see, for example, Hawkins 2011). However, there is general agreement that the massive buildup in the size of the penal population has not been due to large-scale changes in crime or criminality. Instead, a host of changes at the local, state, and federal levels with respect to law enforcement and penal policy are implicated in the

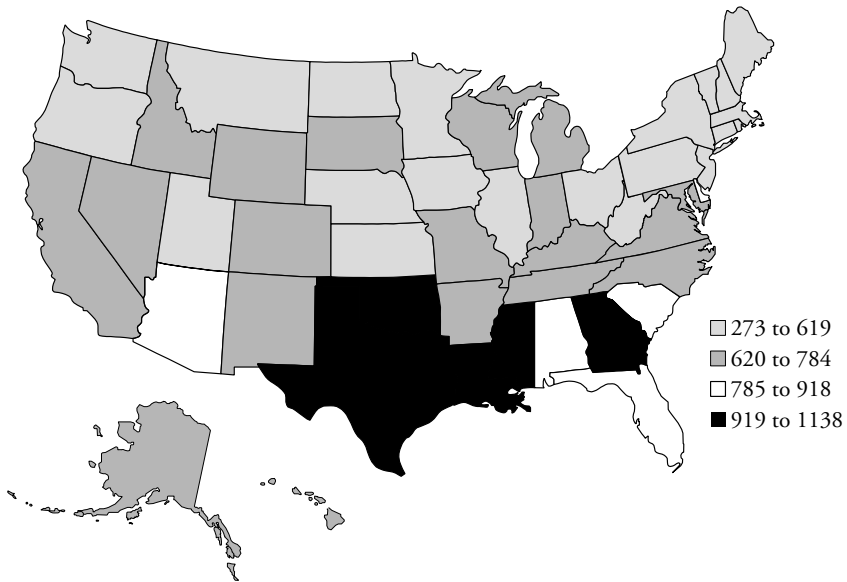
Table 1.1 Incarceration Rates in Twenty-One Advanced Industrialized Nations, Mid-2000s

Country	Incarceration Rate (per 100,000 Total Population)
United States	760
Russian Federation	626
Poland	224
Czech Republic	201
Spain	162
Luxembourg	155
United Kingdom: England and Wales	152
Hungary	149
Australia	129
Canada	116
Netherlands	100
France	96
Austria	95
Belgium	93
Italy	92
Germany	88
Sweden	74
Norway	69
Slovenia	65
Finland	64
Denmark	63

Source: Author's compilation based on data from World Prison Brief database (International Centre for Prison Studies 2008).

expansion of the prison system. Law enforcement agencies have stepped up policing, prosecutors have more actively pursued convictions, and there have been myriad changes in sentencing policy that now mandate jail or prison time (Mauer 2006; Tonry 1995; Western 2006). However, while most scholars agree that “mass imprisonment” (Garland 2001) was not driven by increases in crime or criminality, there is no consensus explanation for the punitive turn in American criminal justice since the 1970s.

Figure 1.2 State Variability in Incarceration Rates per 100,000 Population, 2005



Source: Author's compilation based on Beck and Harrison (2006), table 12.

Prevailing economic explanations for prison expansion have roots in Georg Rusche's conceptualization of the prison system as an institution to manage surplus labor (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1939/2003). Arguments in this vein attribute the growth of incarceration to two sources. The first emphasizes the growth in the prison-industrial complex that is driven by demands stemming from the combination of prison guard unions, construction interests, and private security and prison firms that have a financial stake in the enterprise. The second argument cites a ready supply of poorly educated, mostly minority men turning to crime as a means of economic survival in a post-industrial economy. Empirical research has drawn connections between prison growth and the labor interests of corrections officers (Beckett 1997) and between high rates of incarceration among black and low-skill men and periods of labor inactivity (Western 2006).

Other scholars have persuasively argued that penal system growth must be considered in relation to a long history of racial inequality in the United States. For example, Loïc Wacquant (2000, 2001) draws attention to the ra-

cial aspects of social control by making historical parallels between the criminal justice system and other institutions that subordinated the interests of African Americans, such as slavery and Jim Crow. Michelle Alexander (2010) draws a number of parallels between the contemporary criminal justice system and Jim Crow segregation; she draws attention to how criminal justice policy and practice disproportionately affect African Americans in ways that undermine prospects for racial equality.

Political conditions have also been associated with prison policy, and the Republican Party plays a central role in explanations of prison expansion. Analysts commonly trace the beginning of the prison buildup to Barry Goldwater's elevation of crime and disorder as a campaign theme in the 1964 presidential election (Beckett 1997). Research also finds a positive correlation between the representation of Republicans in federal and state legislatures and the imprisonment rate (Jacobs and Carmichael 2002; Jacobs and Helms 1996). David Garland (1990) conceptualizes the penal system as a welfare institution—a government-sponsored effort to deal with society's failures.

Although Democrats may have been late to the “tough on crime” party, they were not immune to the punitive turn in American criminal justice policy. High incarceration rates are found throughout the country and even in strongly Democratic states with Democratic governors or Democrat-controlled legislatures. Highly visible Democratic Party leaders—from Bill Clinton to Joseph Biden—have endorsed “tough on crime” policies, and “tough on crime” legislation generally enjoys broad-based support. Such legislation, including policies that established a system of financial incentives associated with the seizure of property, both enable and encourage state and local jurisdictions to more strictly fight the war on drugs (Alexander 2010).

Although explanations for contemporary prison and jail growth remain a source of debate, growth of the criminal justice system itself is indisputable. Even in the face of steep crime declines through the 1990s, the penal system continued its historic expansion into the twenty-first century. Although women and Hispanics represent two of the fastest-growing segments of the incarcerated population, spending time in prison or jail continues to be most heavily concentrated among men, African Americans, and those with low skills, as indicated by their failure to complete high school (Western 2006). One in one hundred American adults is housed behind bars, yet the number for African American men is one in nine (Pew Research Center on the States 2008).

The extent of race and class disproportionality in contemporary patterns of

Table 1.2 Civilian Incarceration Rates, Men Ages Twenty to Thirty-Four, by Education, 1980 to 2008

	1980	1990	2000	2008
White men				
Less than high school	2.4%	3.8%	7.7%	12.0%
High school	0.8	1.4	2.3	2.0
Some college	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.3
All	0.6	1.1	1.6	1.8
Black men				
Less than high school	10.6	19.6	30.2	37.2
High school	4.7	7.1	11.7	9.1
Some college	1.9	2.9	2.1	2.1
All	5.2	8.3	11.2	11.4

Source: Author's calculations. See the methodological appendix for details.

incarceration is striking. In the 1930s, blacks were three times more likely to be incarcerated than whites; in the 1990s the ratio increased to more than seven times that of whites (Duster 1997). As table 1.2 shows, incarceration rates among black men continue to be about seven times higher than those for whites. By 2008, the civilian incarceration rate among black men age eighteen to sixty-four was 8 percent, compared to 1.2 percent among non-Hispanic whites. Among young men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four, the incarceration rate for African American men was 11.4 percent, compared to 1.7 percent for non-Hispanic whites. Among those with the lowest levels of education, 37.2 percent of black men and 12 percent of white men were incarcerated.

The extreme disadvantage experienced prior to incarceration by prison and jail inmates can be seen in their extraordinarily low levels of educational attainment. Although there is some disagreement about the fraction of the U.S. population with a high school diploma (see, for example, Heckman and LaFontaine 2010; Warren and Halpern-Manners 2007, 2009; Warren 2005), estimates typically place the high school dropout rate close to 15 percent of the adult population. Table 1.3 indicates that by 2008 more than half of all male inmates—white, black, or Hispanic—between the ages of twenty and thirty-four had not completed high school. Among young, male, black in-

Table 1.3 Educational Distribution of Inmate Population, Men Ages Twenty to Thirty-Four, 1980 and 2008

	1980		2008	
	White	Black	White	Black
Less than high school	40.7%	52.7%	52.7%	61.8%
High school/GED	54.2	34.3	35.5	30.6
Some college	16.1	13.1	11.8	7.7

Source: Author's calculations. See the methodological appendix for details.

mates, more than six in ten had not completed high school or a general equivalency degree (GED). Between 1980 and 2008, as the overall educational attainment of the American population increased, the fraction of inmates with less than a high school diploma grew.

“Point in time” incarceration rates, which summarize the fraction of a given group that is incarcerated at any given time, are important determinants of the fraction of the population excluded from conventional household-based surveys. Surveys that draw their samples from people living in households categorically exclude inmates living in correctional institutions. The number and distribution of currently incarcerated individuals, then, is a key indicator of the characteristics of the population likely to be underrepresented in conventional accounts of the population that rely on surveys like the Current Population Survey.

At the same time, “point in time” incarceration rates only partially represent the total number of people at risk of undersampling in conventional surveys. Former inmates may be particularly likely to be excluded from social surveys that sample from households because they have high rates of residential mobility, instability, and homelessness (California Department of Corrections 1997; Morenoff, Harding, and Cooter 2009). Lifetime risks of imprisonment, therefore, may be an even better gauge of the size and distribution of the population rendered invisible in social statistics by the growth of incarceration.

The risk of imprisonment reflects the percentage of a specified population or group that can expect to serve time in prison before a given age. Table 1.4 indicates that the lifetime risks of imprisonment have also grown during the period of prison expansion. Moreover, the risks of imprisonment are increasingly concentrated among African American, low-skill men (see also Pettit

Table 1.4 Cumulative Risk of Imprisonment by Ages Thirty to Thirty-Four, 1979 to 2009

Year	All		Less Than High School		High School/GED		Some College	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
1979	1.4%	10.4%	3.8%	14.7%	1.5%	11.0%	0.4%	5.3%
1989	2.3	14.1	8.6	28.3	2.5	12.6	0.7	5.0
1999	3.8	21.5	14.4	46.0	5.0	20.2	1.0	6.6
2009	5.4	28.0	28.0	68.0	6.2	21.4	1.2	6.6

Source: Author's calculations. See the methodological appendix for details.

Notes: The 1979 cohort was born between 1945 and 1949; the 1989 cohort was born between 1955 and 1959; the 1999 cohort was born between 1965 and 1969; the 2009 cohort was born between 1975 and 1979.

and Western 2004). Five percent of white men and 28 percent of black men born between 1975 and 1979 spent at least a year in prison before reaching age thirty-five. The risks of spending time in prison for this birth cohort were significantly higher among high school dropouts: 28 percent of white and 68 percent of black dropouts had spent at least a year in prison by 2009.

Exposure to imprisonment now rivals or exceeds exposure to other social institutions long thought vital to the transition to adulthood, such as the completion of schooling, employment, or marriage. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama was chided for saying that black men were more likely to go to prison than to go to college (see Alexander 2010, 185). Although his claim may seem to be far-fetched and to contradict notions of black progress, it was not too far from the truth. In fact, black men are more likely to go to prison than they are to complete college (Pettit and Western 2004). Spending time in prison has become more common than completing a four-year college degree or military service among young black men. And young, black, male high school dropouts are more likely to spend at least a year in prison than they are to get married. In short, among low-skill black men, spending time in prison has become a normative life event, furthering their segregation from mainstream society.

CONCLUSION

The criminal justice system and penal system growth fundamentally influence the construction of the social statistics commonly used in policy formulation and evaluation and in social science research. The disproportionate concentration of incarceration within particular social and demographic groups makes any portrait of the American social condition derived from these statistics incomplete, and it also obscures the extent of disadvantage within the groups where incarceration rates are highest. High rates of incarceration among black men—and black men with low levels of education in particular—have profound implications for accounts of their social standing and that of their children, families, and communities where they live prior to and following incarceration.

Data from the Census and ongoing federal surveys are routinely employed by policymakers and bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., in state governments, and in localities across the country. The Obama administration has repeatedly made the case for data-driven decision-making, congressional apportionment and redistricting hinge on the results from the 2010 Census, and lawmakers

across the country use population estimates often provided by the federal government to design and evaluate a host of social programs. Yet 2.3 million or more Americans are overlooked as a matter of design in the most commonly used data sources, and they are undercounted in others.

Insofar as inmates differ in systematic ways from individuals living in households, data gathered through household-based surveys offer a biased glimpse into the American experience. The remainder of this book sheds light on the implications of this biased account for our understanding of black progress.