

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/oscar-film-nominees-highlight-shared-history-black-american-life-mass-incarceration>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

For the last several years, the Academy Awards have taken place during Black History Month. Considering the role that race and incarceration play in the films nominated for best picture, this year presents a timely opportunity for reflection.

Of the three nominated films that have a predominantly black cast, two *Moonlight* and *Fences* have lead characters who have spent time in prison, jail, or juvenile detention. These similar biographies, taking place 60 years apart, highlight the relationship between black Americans and incarceration throughout U.S. history. (Another Oscar nominee this year, the documentary *13th* which features an interview with Vera President Nick Turner details this history more thoroughly, focusing on the loophole in the 13th Amendment in which slavery is abolished except in cases of criminal conduct.)

Indeed, while black Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, they are 40 percent of those behind bars. While the reasons for their incarceration vary, one significant contributor is the war on drugs. Although the difference between reported rates of drug use between white and black Americans is negligible, black people are still 13 times more likely than white people to go to prison for a drug conviction, and comprise 62 percent of people imprisoned for such convictions. In 2016, we explored [similar disparities in marijuana policing](#) in New Orleans.

These disparities play out nationally, devastating opportunities for economic advancement. For example, [Pew Charitable Trusts found](#) that imprisonment reduces a person's annual wages by 40 percent, which has resulted in nearly four times greater loss in aggregate lifetime earnings for black males than white males.

Studies have also shown that the growth in paternal incarceration has contributed to [elevated rates of homelessness among black children](#) by thinning family finances and placing additional [strains on mothers](#). These strains present dangerous consequences for the [physical and mental health of black communities](#), contributing to a cycle of poverty and incarceration and debt that has existed for generations.

The video below, which highlights our research on [the costs and consequences of criminal justice](#) specifically bail, fines, and fees in New Orleans, demonstrates this cycle.

[Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform](#), a recent Vera report that is part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur's Safety and Justice Challenge, an initiative to change the way America thinks about and uses jails, also demonstrates a massive discrepancy in the median net worth among black and white women and Latina women. This discrepancy is both a consequence of and a factor in the history of criminal justice involvement within minority communities.

As this year's line-up of Oscar film nominees demonstrates, there's a troublesome marriage between black life and American incarceration that, over generations, has become commonplace. Recognizing this reality and understanding its causes and consequences is the first step toward brokering a necessary divorce. As Black History Month draws to a close, the work continues.

PUBLICATION

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