

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/scoping-the-problem>

Campaign and Advocacy

The U.S. incarceration rate [increased dramatically between 1970 and 2000, growing by about 400 percent](#) and resulting in the highest rate of incarceration in the world. This rise wasn't by accident. Elected officials and **policymakers made deliberate decisions that grew the prison population.**

The rise of mass incarceration may seem like a recent phenomenon, but it is a repeating pattern throughout this country's history. **From America's founding to the present, there are stories of crime waves or criminal behavior followed by patterns of disproportionate imprisonment of those forced to the margins of society:** Black people, immigrants, Native Americans, refugees, and others.

The result has been the [persistent and disproportionate impact of incarceration on people of color, immigrants, and people experiencing poverty](#). From 1850 to 1940, racial and ethnic minorities including foreign-born and non-English speaking European immigrants made up 40 to 50 percent of the prison population. In 2015, about 55 percent of people imprisoned in federal or state prisons were Black or Latino.

The rise of mass incarceration may seem like a recent phenomenon, but it is a narrative that repeats itself throughout this country's history.

The year 1865 should be as notable to criminologists as is the year 1970. While it marked the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment, it also triggered [the nation's first prison boom](#) when state governments arrested and incarcerated increasing numbers of Black Americans.

A century later, [mass incarceration began to pick up steam](#) as politicians took steps to curb gains from the Civil Rights Movement and to link crime with race. From President Lyndon Johnson's War on Crime to President Richard Nixon's infamous Southern Strategy, politicians began to focus on law and order messages with explicit racial undertones, setting the stage for the next dramatic increase in incarceration beginning in 1970, with a rise in harsher drug laws, punitive policing, and longer sentences.

Although in recent years we've seen [some initial signs of reform and a decrease in incarceration rates](#), there is much work to be done to truly end the decades-long practice and related harms of mass incarceration. **Vera is committed to ending mass incarceration once and for all, to stop the dehumanization of people of color, and to build safe communities that truly value dignity and respect for everyone.**

Join us to end mass incarceration

We can end centuries of injustice

Thank you
for signing
up!

Join us in the
fight for justice.

Help us spread
the word!

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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