 America’s prisons and jails have produced a new social group, a group of social outcasts who are joined by the shared experience of incarceration, crime, poverty, racial minority, and low education.

This is a profound institutionalized inequality that has renewed race and class disadvantage.

The social inequality produced by mass incarceration is sizable and enduring for three main reasons: it is invisible, it is cumulative, and it is intergenerational. The inequality is invisible in the sense that institutionalized populations commonly lie outside our official accounts of economic well-being. Prisoners, though drawn from the lowest rungs in society, appear in no measures of poverty or unemployment.

The inequality is cumulative because the social and economic penalties that flow from incarceration are accrued by those who already have the weakest economic opportunities. Mass incarceration thus deepens disadvantage and forecloses mobility for the most marginal in society. Finally, carceral inequalities are intergenerational, affecting not just those who go to prison and jail but their families and children, too.

Class inequalities in incarceration are reflected in the very low educational level of those in prison and jail. The legitimate labor market opportunities for men with no more than a high school education have deteriorated as the prison population has grown, and prisoners themselves are drawn overwhelmingly from the least educated. State prisoners average just a tenth grade education, and about 70 percent have no high school diploma.[3](https://www.amacad.org/publication/incarceration-social-inequality#footnote3_q5yrg3h)

Disparities of race, class, gender, and age have produced extraordinary rates of incarceration among young African American men with little schooling. Figure 1 shows prison and jail incarceration rates for men under age thirty-five in 1980, at the beginning of the prison boom, and in 2008, after three decades of rising incarceration rates. The figure reports incarceration separately for whites, Latinos, and African Americans and separately for three levels of education. Looking at men with a college education, we see that incarceration rates today have barely increased since 1980. Incarceration rates have increased among African Americans and whites who have completed high school. Among young African American men with high school diplomas, about one in ten is in prison or jail. Most of the growth in incarceration rates is concentrated at the very bottom, among young men with very low levels of education. In 1980, around 10 percent of young African American men who dropped out of high school were in prison or jail. By 2008, this incarceration rate had climbed to 37 percent, an astonishing level of institutionalization given that the average incarceration rate in the general population was 0.76 of 1 percent. Even among young white dropouts, the incarceration rate had grown remarkably, with around one in eight behind bars by 2008. The significant growth of incarceration rates among the least educated reflects increasing class inequality in incarceration through the period of the prison boom.