



BY JOSH MACPHEE

Barred for life

How social inequality and prison population growth are two sides of the same set of cuffs



Bruce Western

BY TIMOTHY HARRIS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Harvard professor Bruce Western says our criminal justice system hurts us more than we realize.

Bruce Western is professor of sociology and director of the Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. His recent work has focused on the link between social inequality and the growth of the prison and jail population in the United States. Western finds that the penal system has become a common presence in the lives of poor Americans, with lasting effects on their life chances.

In "Punishment and Inequality in America" (Russell Sage Foundation, \$17.95), Western asks what role incarceration plays in the increasing economic and racial inequality in America. He finds that rising rates of imprisonment among young black men without a college education have caused a rift in African-American society, and that those with less education are increasingly separated from those with a higher education. The book also chronicles the social and economic effects of mass incarceration: the connection between serving prison time and reduction in earnings; the skewed statistics on wages and employment; and the destabilization of families.

Timothy Harris: *What do we mean when we use the term mass incarceration?*

Bruce Western: Mass incarceration describes the penal system as it has

emerged in the United States in the last decade or so. It's really capturing two ideas. One is: We've got a highly unequal system of incarceration where the influence of prisons and jails is felt overwhelmingly in poor communities. And the second part of the story is the very, very high rate of incarceration. So this has produced really astronomical rates of criminal justice involvement among, in particular, poor young men and poor young men of color. These men now have a life experience trajectory through adulthood that's really wholly different from anyone else in American society, and they're largely cut off from all of the opportunities of American society because of the way the penal system has grown.

T.H.: *The Pew Center Report cites one in 99 Americans are behind bars, or one in 36 are affected if you include those on probation. Are those statistics still current?*

B.W.: Yeah, they're roughly accurate. The system has grown a little bit in the few years since the Pew report (came out in Feb. 2008). I tend to think, as large as those numbers are, they understate the magnitude of the problem because the truth is not everyone is equally at risk of going to prison. If we were to focus on young African-American men who have dropped out of high school, the number is not really one in 100, but one in three. If we were to think about the lifetime likelihood of going to prison for those African-American men, the chances they'll go to prison at some point in their lives is now about two-thirds,

or 66 percent.

T.H.: *Can you describe the downward spiral that economically disadvantaged communities find themselves in?*

B.W.: This all started really in the 1960s, with the origins of deindustrialization in American cities. Historically, men without much schooling from poor and working-class families could find jobs that paid decent wages in urban industry. Then, starting in the mid-1960s, urban manufacturing industry began to move out of the inner cities, and this created huge employment problems for poor, urban communities. Urban living conditions became worse, particularly through the 1970s, and people moved out, so large pockets of poor people with really poor economic opportunities were left behind. And then, into this setting, came the criminal justice system, which became more punitive through the late 1970s, and by the 1990s, the drug war began to ramp up. Drug enforcement by the police escalated and focused on poor neighborhoods in big cities and mid-sized cities.

The criminal justice system became tougher in other ways as well. Community corrections became less rehabilitative and more punitive, and very long sentences were introduced for people who were convicted for violent offenses. So, you had these large numbers of poor young men who had high rates of unemployment, largely through the process of deindustrialization, and these men were swept into the criminal justice system in