

Black Men Show Little Signs of Progress in 40 Years

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WASHINGTON (NNPA) –Black men are no better off than they were more than 40 years ago, due to mass incarceration and job losses suffered during the Great Recession, according to a new report by researchers at the University of Chicago.

Derek Neal and Armin Rick, the co-authors of the study, found that reforms in the criminal justice system at the state-level largely contributed to disparities in arrests and incarceration rates that ultimately stifled educational and economic progress for Black men.

“The growth of incarceration rates among Black men in recent decades combined with

“Today, Black-White gaps in math and reading scores among youth and Black-White gaps in overall educational attainment among young adults are quite similar to the corresponding gaps observed around 1990,” stated the report which also suggested that “relative to Whites, labor market outcomes among Black men are no better now and possibly worse than they were in 1970.”

Neal, an economics professor, said that he was surprised that the rise in our nation’s prison population, which correlated with the fall in employment rates for Black men, really was a policy choice and that the war on drugs was just a small part of a much bigger story.

Beginning in the 1980s, in an effort to get



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the sharp drop in Black employment rates during the Great Recession have left most Black men in a position relative to White men that is really no better than the position they occupied only a few years after the Civil Rights Act of 1965,” the co-authors wrote.

The report cites research conducted by James Smith and Finis Welch published in 1989 that showed, “the black-white gap in completed years of schooling among males ages 26-35 fell from 3.9 years of schooling in 1940 to 1.4 years in 1980.”

Blacks also experienced “dramatic economic and social progress” during that time period. That progress slowed for Black men during the 1990s, and in some cases, reversed course entirely.

tough on crime, states eliminated discretionary parole, established independent sentencing commissions, and crafted “Three Strikes and You’re Out” enhanced sentencing guidelines for repeat offenders.

Truth-in-Sentencing (TIS) Incentive Grants Program gave states money to build prisons and indirectly encouraged state officials to adopt policies “requiring sentenced offenders to serve large portions of their sentences.”

Neal said that it wasn’t one or two types of crimes that we got tougher on, it was across the board.

“We started to lock people up for a really long time relative to what we had done in the past,” said Neal.

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justice policies accounted for more than 70 percent of the growth in the prison population between 1986 and 2006.

The United States leads the world when it comes to locking people up “with 2.2 million people currently in the nation’s prisons or jails – a 500 percent increase over the past thirty years,” according to The Sentencing Project.

The report said that “on any given day in 2010, almost one in ten black men ages 20-39 were institutionalized,” and “because turnover among prison populations is quite high, these results suggest that far more than ten percent of prime age black men will serve some time in prison or jail during a given calendar year.”

Neal explained that the change in how we punish people in the state criminal justice system and adopted harsher penalties for all types of crimes was across the board that affected people that were arrested in roughly the same ways regardless of whether you were Black or White.

“However, as a fraction of the population, Blacks have always been more likely to be arrested than Whites, which is not surprising given the historical patterns of discrimination, lower earnings and labor market opportunities,” said Neal.

Black men over 20 years-old still face a double-digit unemployment rate, the highest rate among all adult worker groups. According to the Labor Department, the jobless rate for Black men was 10.9 percent compared to 4.9 percent for White men, 4.8 percent for White women and 9 percent for Black women.

The same economic crisis that crippled many Black families and robbed nearly half of all wealth from the Black community, also forced cash-strapped states to cut spending in the billion-dollar prison industry. The prison boom was just an unlikely casualty of the Great Recession, according to Neal.

Neal also said that the “Smart on Crime” initiative proposed by Attorney General Eric Holder in 2013, that will ultimately affect the lives of thousands of nonviolent, drug offenders, was just “a drop in the bucket,” because those policies will mostly affect people doing time in federal prisons. Most offenders are locked up in local jails and state prisons.

Local jails, state and federal prisons combined house close to a million Black men.

“I’m not saying it’s a trivial thing, but when you’ve got a million people behind bars, a reduction of [less than 50,000] is a good start, but it’s nothing to write home about,” said Neal.

Neal said that if you’re a Black man 25-35 years-old without a high school diploma, you’re about as likely to have a job as you are to be in prison; under 25 without a high school diploma, you’re more likely to be in prison.

“You have to get to the 35 and above age group, before you’re more likely to have a job than be in prison, said Neal. “I don’t think the typical person on the street or the typical congressman knows how messed up things are.”

Neal added: “It’s important to know the truth.”

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