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## Two Separate Societies: One in Prison, One Not

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By Marie Gottschalk  
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Forty years ago, the Kerner Commission concluded in its landmark study of the causes of racial disturbances in the United States in the 1960s: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white -- separate and unequal." Today we are still moving toward two societies: one incarcerated and one not. The Pew Center on the States released a study in February showing that for the first time in this country's history, more than one in every 100 adults is in jail or prison. According to the [Justice Department](#), 7 million people -- or one in every 32 adults -- are either incarcerated, on parole or probation or under some other form of state or local supervision.

These figures understate the disproportionate impact that this bold and unprecedented social experiment has had on certain groups in U.S. society. Today one in nine young black men is behind bars. African Americans now comprise more than half of all prisoners, up from a third three decades ago.

Sen. [James Webb](#) (D-Va.) held a remarkable set of hearings last October on mass incarceration in the United States. In his opening statement, Webb noted that "the United States has embarked on one of the largest public policy experiments in our history, yet this experiment remains shockingly absent from public debate."

The leading presidential candidates have not identified mass imprisonment as a central issue, even though it is arguably the country's top civil rights concern. Many of today's crime control policies fundamentally impede the economic, political and social advancement of the most disadvantaged blacks and members of other minority groups. Prison leaves them less likely to find gainful employment, vote, participate in other civic activities and maintain ties with their families and communities.

Congress recognized some of these barriers recently when, after years of delay, it approved and sent to the [White House](#) the Second Chance Act, which [President Bush](#) signed into law last week. This legislation seeks to ease the reentry of prisoners into society by providing modest increases in support for mentoring programs, drug treatment, job training and education.

Bruce Western of [Harvard](#) soberly concludes in his landmark book "Punishment and Inequality in America" that mass imprisonment has erased many of the "gains to African American citizenship hard won by the civil rights movement." Sen. [Barack Obama](#) glancingly made some similar points in an address at [Howard University](#) last September. But he generally has not focused on the perils of mass incarceration. Neither has Sen. [Hillary Clinton](#), though the \$4 billion anti-crime package she unveiled last week did call for elimination of the federal mandatory five-year sentence for minor crack cocaine violations. As for Sen. [John McCain](#), civil rights and criminal justice policy are not among the 15 issues the Republican nominee highlights on his Web site. But America's space program did make the top 15.

At the hearings last fall, Webb underscored a basic truth sidelined in most discussions of crime and punishment: The explosion of the prison population wasn't driven so much by an increase in crime as by the way we chose to respond to crime. Even former president [Bill Clinton](#), whose administration was an accomplice in the largest prison buildup in U.S. history, conceded in a keynote address at a [University of Pennsylvania](#) symposium in February commemorating the Kerner anniversary: "Most of the people who went to prison should have been let out a long time ago."

A change of heart by Bill Clinton and other public figures will not be enough to reverse the prison boom. In rare instances, public officials have been moved by strong personal beliefs to empty their prisons. During his brief tenure as [Britain's](#) home secretary early in the 20th century, [Winston Churchill](#) expressed deep skepticism about what could be achieved through incarceration, and he began releasing prisoners. Political leadership has been critical for major reductions in incarceration in other countries. But in many cases, the public and experts on criminal justice had to push politicians to begin emptying their prisons and jails.

It is a national disgrace that the U.S. incarceration rate is five to 12 times that of other industrialized countries as well as being the highest in the world. As Churchill once said, "The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country."

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