

Cellblock vs. College

A million reasons there are more Black men in college than in prison and why more work needs to be done

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By [Ivory A. Toldson](#) and Janks Morton

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“Consider this, if all 1,127,170 black males who are currently enrolled in undergraduate programs eventually graduated, the number of total black males with college degrees would increase by 71%, nearly achieving parity with white males.”

Nearly 10 years ago, the Justice Policy Institute released the report “Cellblocks or Classrooms” (Ziedenberg & Schiraldi, 2002), which highlighted a disturbing pattern of states reducing funding for colleges and increasing spending on corrections. The report admonished federal and state governments for abdicating their role of providing equitable social resources and access to higher education, while building a colossal prison system, largely on the backs of nonviolent drug offenders. While the report should have been a wakeup call to policymakers, one line resonated and echoed more than any other: “Nearly a third more African American men are incarcerated than in higher education.” Today, the line is typically not sourced or qualified, and frequently stated, “There are more black men in jail than in college.”

Today, two realities exist. First, there are approximately 395,443 more black men in college than in prison. Approximately 1,236,443 black men are enrolled in institutions of higher education (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2010), and 841,000 are serving time in jails and prisons (West, 2010). Second, black men continue to be overrepresented in the criminal justice system, and more work needs to be done to address deep and persistent inequities in arrests, convictions, and sentencing.

Black men in college

In the United States, black men are enrolled in various types of institutions of higher education, including public, private not-for-profit, private for-profit, four-year, and two-year programs. In addition, black males are represented in undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree programs. In single institutions, more black men are enrolled at the University of Phoenix-Online Campus and Strayer University than any other college or university. These two colleges account for 27,258 black male undergrads and 7,725 black male graduate students. Central Texas College (2-year college) has the largest number of black male students among public colleges with 7,397 black male students.

With 7,129 black male students, Miami Dade College has more black males enrolled than any public 4-year university. Numbers 2 through 9 respectively include University of Maryland-College Park, Florida A & M University, North Carolina A & T State University, Troy University (AL), Texas Southern University, CUNY New York City College of Technology, Florida State College at Jacksonville, and Prairie View A & M University (TX). Together, these 10 universities enroll 40,000 black males. Five of the ten, top public 4-year colleges for enrolling black men are historically black colleges and universities (HBCU). Numbers 11 through 13, Jackson State University (MS), Southern University and A & M College (LA), and Morgan State University (MD), are also HBCUs.

The top 10 private not-for-profits, 4-year universities for enrolling black men are Excelsior College (NY), Columbia College (MO), Morehouse College (GA), Liberty University (VA), **Howard University** (DC), Saint Leo University (FL), Park University (MO), Webster University (MO), Nova Southeastern University (FL), and Hampton University (VA). These universities together account for 25,775 black male students. Among Ivy League Universities, Harvard University enrolls the largest number of black males with 893; almost half of these (444) are graduate students.

In summary, nearly 140,000 black males are enrolled in for-profit, private colleges and universities and about 572,000 black males are enrolled in 2-year colleges. At public 4-year colleges, there are about 355,000 black males, and at private not-for-profits, 4-year universities, there are about 170,000 black males (Knapp, et al., 2010).

Black men in prison

Trends over the last ten years have shown little evidence that the United States has experienced a radical reversal of criminal justice policies. There are 49,400 more black men in jail and prisons today than there were ten years ago; however the rate of incarceration has not change. In 2000, there were 4,777 black men in jail for every 100,000 black men in the U.S. population, compared to 4,749 black men in prison in 2009. Although the rate increase among white males was higher during that time period (from 683 to 708), the current rate for black males is still almost 7 times that of white males (West, 2010). During the previous 10-year period (1990-1999), the average annual change in the prison population was 5.8 percent (Beck, 2000). During 2000-2009, the average annual change in the prison population was 1.8 percent; however, the corresponding average annual change for the federal prison population was 4.1 percent. The rapid expanse of the federal prisons began with federal drug laws, which appears to continue to reshape the total prison population. In 2009, black males represented 40 percent of the total male prison population, compared with 45 percent in 2000.

Conclusions

The U.S. Census estimates that approximately 17,945,068 people in the U.S. population are black males, irrespective of age. Among them, about 6.3 percent are in college and 4.7 percent are in prison. The remaining 89 percent have already graduated from college, already served a prison sentence, have a life trajectory that does not involve college or prison, or are too young for either to apply. The prison to college population comparison, from its onset, has been a little dubious, because it essentially compares college life, a time and age restricted experience, to prison life, a condition with an unlimited range of sentences and ages. If we use comparable age restrictions we find 164,400 black male inmates between 18-24 years old, and 674,000 black male college students between 18-24 years old (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011); a ratio of about 4-to-1. Among the 10,131,605 black males in the U.S. who are 25 years or older, 1,577,795 (16 percent) have completed college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Most research suggests that college completion is a much greater issue than college enrollment. Consider this, if all 1,127,170 black males who are currently enrolled in undergraduate programs eventually graduated, the number of total black males with college degrees would increase by 71%, nearly achieving parity with white males.

Beyond the numbers, Cellblocks or Classrooms (Ziedenberg & Schiraldi, 2002) argued for fair economic, educational, and criminal justice policies, as well as responsible allocation of public resource from state and federal governments. It is inherently wrong when public resources are allocated in ways that expand correctional systems, especially through incarcerating nonviolent offenders, while reducing access to institutions of higher education. Recent evidence supports the premise that priorities to incarcerate compete against priorities to educate. Today, Louisiana, the state with the highest rate of incarceration among males (1,665), has the lowest percentage of black males who have completed college (9 percent). Other states with low percentages of black males who completed college (9-10 percent), Mississippi (incarceration rate = 1,363), Arkansas (incarceration rate = 1,007), and South Carolina (incarceration rate = 1,014), also had incarceration rates well above the national average of 954. By contrast, Vermont, the

state with the highest percentage of black males with college degrees (46 percent), has an incarceration rate of 528 for males.

Making a difference

First, it is time to retire the line, "There are more black men in jail than in college." Not only is this statement untrue today, it undermines strategies to prepare, recruit, and retain black men in college. Most evidence suggests that the percent of black men in college, or college educated, and those in prison are so far apart socially, that to juxtapose one on the other is inherently absurd. In reality, college bound black males and black males at risk for incarceration typically have completely different emotional, social, and educational needs, and black community leaders should not confuse one with the other.

Efforts to increase black males' participation in college involve:

- (1) improve counseling and advisement in predominately black grade schools;
- (2) mentorship and internships for first generation college students;
- (3) ensuring every high school has a college bound curriculum;
- (4) sponsor college tours;
- (5) support black male initiatives in college; and
- (6) advocate for funding for Pell Grants and needs-based scholarships, and universal access to public institutions of higher education and historically black colleges and universities.

Efforts to reduce the number of black males in prison involve:

- (1) eliminate zero tolerance and excessive punitive measures in predominately black grade schools;
- (2) provide resources, such as mentoring and tutoring, for students with learning and behavioral disorders;
- (3) shift the focus of law enforcement toward violent crimes and away from nonviolent offenses;
- (4) eliminate racial inequities in charges, convictions and sentences;
- (5) reintroduce and strengthen prison-based educational and job training programs; and
- (6) advocate for sentencing reform, elimination of mandatory minimums, stopping the expansion of private, for-profit prisons, and eliminating excessive public expenditures on prison.

When reviewing *Cellblocks* or *Classrooms*, there's no evidence that the authors intended to sensationalize problems facing black men in the United States. More meaningful and palatable lines like "choose classrooms over cellblocks" were written with more prominence. Today, the widespread and contentious notion that "there are more black men in jail than in college" is not the fault of the Justice Policy Institute. Rather, it is the fault of journalists looking for a sound bite, politicians trying to arouse a crowd, program managers and researchers who would rather assert the need to exist than to demonstrate the efficacy of their techniques, and the list goes on of people who feel the need to be intentionally provocative. Lost in the feedback are young black men who are trying to reconcile such an ominous conclusion with their reality.

Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D. is a senior research analyst for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, associate professor at Howard University School of Education, and editor-in-chief of the Journal of Negro Education. Direct any correspondence to itoldson@cbcfinc.org.

Janks Morton is an award winning documentary filmmaker and founder and CEO of iYAGO Entertainment Group, LLC.

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