



Mass Incarceration and Over-Policing are Hunger Issues



Joseph Molieri/Bread for the World

Why are mass incarceration and over-policing hunger issues?

Mass incarceration and over-policing contribute to hunger and poverty in ways many do not recognize. “Mass incarceration” refers to our country’s extremely high rate of imprisonment and the unjustly disproportionate incarceration of people of color.

While these are new advocacy issues for Bread for the World, they are familiar to many churches, due to both biblical mandates and soaring post-1980 incarceration rates.

Currently, 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States. One in three adults has a criminal record of some kind.¹

Over-policing is a key cause of mass incarceration. It happens when police forces target communities of color and use aggressive tactics. African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are at higher risk of racial profiling, discrimination, and violence.² Arbitrary traffic stops and arrests for minor infractions are examples of symptoms, fueled by systemic problems such as “policing for profit”—when police have financial incentives for ticketing and arrests.

Over-policing and mass incarceration frequently drive low-income people deeper into hunger and poverty. People who cannot pay traffic tickets, for example, can lose their driver’s license and thus their transportation to work. They can even be jailed. Many lose their jobs as a result.

People who serve jail or prison time face even more formidable barriers upon release. They and their families are more likely to be hungry and poor than other U.S. residents due to greater difficulty finding jobs, laws barring them from safety-net protections such as SNAP (formerly food stamps), and discrimination in other areas such as housing. Mass incarceration and over-policing trap people in a cycle that makes it much harder to provide for their families’ basic needs.

Finally, mass incarceration and over-policing are hunger issues because they are expensive. They consume taxpayer dollars that could be used instead to reduce hunger—for example, through nutrition assistance as a short-term hunger solution and educational investments as a longer-term solution.

Ending mass incarceration and over-policing is crucial to ending hunger and food insecurity in the United States by 2030.

Quick facts

- **Mass incarceration and over-policing are hunger issues.** They make it harder for people to make ends meet. Public policies should be more restorative in order to keep millions of families from being vulnerable to hunger.
- **Helping those in prison is biblical.** Lamentations states that God pays attention when human rights are not respected. Matthew tells us that what we do for those who suffer, we do to God. 1 Corinthians reminds us, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” As Christians, we are called to serve and to love as Christ loves, especially those with great need.
- **Biased policing unfairly targets communities of color.** Although it has been documented that all communities commit crimes at roughly the same rate, African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are between two and seven times more likely to be stopped, ticketed, or arrested as their white counterparts.
- **Many returning from incarceration work hard to make ends meet despite steep barriers.** Finding employment after imprisonment is difficult or nearly impossible for most returning citizens – 75 percent in one study.³ We should help them help themselves.

1 in 5 people returning from jail or prison earns less than \$7,600 a year. This is only 1/7 of the average household income (\$56,516).⁴ Nearly 1 in 4 households headed by returning citizens lives in deep poverty.



Mass incarceration and over-policing increase the risk of hunger and poverty. The impacts of this on individuals, families, and communities include:

- Less access to food, safety-net protections, and housing
- Loss of household income, lower wages, and lower earning power
- Difficulty securing and maintaining employment
- Added debt
- Voting restrictions

Less access to sufficient nutritious food, safety-net protections, and housing

- 32 states have partial or complete bans on SNAP benefits.⁵ Yet the National Institutes of Health found that 91 percent of returning citizens reported being food-insecure.⁶
- Nearly 80 percent of returning citizens were either denied or ineligible for housing because of their own or a family member's past conviction.⁷

Loss of household income, lower wages, and lower earning power

Parents who are incarcerated lose their jobs, pushing their children deeper into hunger and poverty.

- When people are released from jail or prison, their earning power is 40 percent less than before imprisonment.

At age 48, returning citizens will have earned \$179,000 less than if they had never been incarcerated.⁸

Difficulty securing and maintaining employment

Workers with criminal records face difficulty re-entering the job market. People who have been ticketed risk losing their driver's license and thus their transportation to work.

- Over-policed communities have higher rates of unemployment, hunger, and poverty.

Added debt

Fines, fees, and court costs strain the budgets of families that are already struggling.

- On average, households with an incarcerated family member owe almost \$14,000 in court fees alone—nearly the annual income of many households in over-policed areas.⁹

Voting restrictions

Many formerly incarcerated people in the United States are stripped of the right to vote, unlike those in many other countries.

- Losing the right to vote also means losing the power to help elect officials who are committed to ending hunger and poverty.

2.7 million children have parents behind bars and live in households that have lost income because parents are incarcerated. Children of color are disproportionately affected.

Children who are: African-American **6X** more likely

Latino **2X** more likely

...to have an incarcerated parent than white children.

Endnotes

¹ Removing Barriers to Opportunities for Parents with Criminal Records and Their Children. Center for American Progress. December 2015. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09060720/CriminalRecords-report2.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Who Pays: The True Cost of Incarceration on Families. Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. September 2015. <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf>

⁴ Collateral Costs: Incarcerations' Effect on Economic Mobility. The Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf

⁵ Six States Where Felons Can't Get Food Stamps. The Marshall Project. February 2016. <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/02/04/six-states-where-felons-cant-get-food-stamps#.B7AJ3tuzh>

⁶ A Pilot Study Examining Food Insecurity and HIV Risk Behaviors Among Individuals Recently Released from Prison. National Institute of Health. April 2013. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3733343/pdf/nihms469405.pdf

⁷ Who Pays: The True Cost of Incarceration on Families. Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. September 2015. <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf>

⁸ Collateral Costs: Incarcerations' Effect on Economic Mobility. The Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf

⁹ Who Pays: The True Cost of Incarceration on Families. Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. September 2015. <http://ellabakercenter.org/sites/default/files/downloads/who-pays.pdf>

¹⁰ Collateral Costs: Incarcerations' Effect on Economic Mobility. The Pew Charitable Trusts. 2010. www.pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf