

IRP focus

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Mass incarceration and prison proliferation in the United States

Poverty, criminal justice, and social justice

Bruce Western

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Understanding the effects of the U.S. prison boom on rural communities

John M. Eason

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The two articles in this issue address two distinct but related topics: mass incarceration and prison proliferation. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. rate of incarceration has grown dramatically, greatly outpacing that of Western European countries; approximately 6.6 million people are currently under some type of correctional supervision in the United States. At the same time, the number of prisons in the United States has grown from about 500 in 1970, to over 1,800 today. The number of prisons more than tripled during the “prison boom” period of 1970 through 2000.

The first article summarizes the April 2019 Robert J. Lampman Memorial Lecture given by Bruce Western. Western describes three methodologies he has used to explore and understand mass incarceration in the United States: demographic analysis of U.S. incarceration as a whole; an in-depth study of people in the year after their release from prison in one American city; and personal narratives from those former prisoners. He argues

that mass incarceration is intimately connected to the very harsh conditions of poverty in the United States, and that meaningful criminal justice reform will need to account for this reality, both in its policy specifics and in its underlying values.

The second article, by John Eason, examines the effects of prison-building on rural towns during the prison boom. Eason finds that prison-building can both help and hurt rural communities. In particular, he found that towns that built prisons before and during the early part of the prison boom experienced positive economic effects, and that this prison-building may have helped slow the economic decline in these towns during the economic downturn of the 1980s. He suggests that significantly reducing the number of prisons in rural communities, or even discontinuing future prison-building, may have unintended consequences, including increasing poverty in rural communities of color.

This issue also includes a “Research to watch” feature, describing an ongoing project by Julie Poehlmann-Tynan and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, looking to improve family visits between children and an incarcerated parent by providing coaching during jail and home visits, providing families with tablets so that children can have in-home video visits with their incarcerated parent, and encouraging changes at the correctional system- and facility-level to support child-parent contact. ■