

# Crime, Punishment, and American Inequality

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## **Abstract**

The growth in income inequality over the last 25 years has been tracked by the growth in prison and jail incarceration rates. We report age-specific incarceration rates by education, race and ethnicity and relate these to the growing dispersion of men's incomes. We then review research linking the growth in the penal system to rising inequality. Some researchers trace rising inequality to rising crime, but others link the growth in inequality to shifts in criminal justice policy, which fuel prison populations independently of criminal offending. Although theory is suggestive and some empirical results indicate the connection between the new inequality and the prison boom, a compelling empirical test awaits direct measurement of the imprisonment risks of marginal men, and a richer model of criminal offending.