

7/6/87 RW
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Window on Oppression

Recently Steven Whitman (a lecturer at Northwestern University) wrote a column in the *Chicago Tribune* titled, "The crime of black imprisonment." The following facts noted by Whitman are a stark exposure of the oppression of Black people in the U.S., especially in terms of racism in the courts and prisons.

- Imprisonment rates are measured as the number of inmates per 100,000 people in the population. By mid-1986 more than a half-million people were in state and federal prisons. This overall prison rate is about twice as high as it had ever been before 1972.
- In 1983 (the last year for which racial data are available), the imprisonment rate was 713 for Black people compared to 114 for whites. This means that a Black person is *six times* more likely to go to prison than a white person. In Illinois, a Black person is ten times more likely to go to prison.
- In terms of international imprisonment rates: According to the latest available comparative data (from 1980), white people in the U.S. go to prison at a rate similar to that for most Western Europeans. Meanwhile, *Blacks in the U.S. go to prison more often than blacks in South Africa!* In fact, the U.S.'s Black imprisonment rate is the highest in the world.
- A 1979 government survey revealed that about one out of every five Black men would go to prison in his lifetime. The imprisonment rates have spiraled since then, and the proportion is now closer to one out of every four.
- The total number of Black men in the U.S. who have been in prison is about 3 million, roughly the population of Chicago.

Whitman notes that such a dramatic rise in the imprisonment of Blacks *does not* correspond to the increase in the crime rate. William Nagel, a well-known criminologist, found no relationship between the crime rate (or violent crime rate) and the imprisonment rate and no relationship between the crime rate (or the violent crime rate) and the proportion of black people in a state. But, Whitman points out, "Nagel discovered a very strong relationship between the imprisonment rate and the proportion of Black people. In other words, people go to prison in increasing numbers because they are black, not because of a rise in the crime rate."

Whitman says, "It is no coincidence that the rise in black imprisonment accompanies the rise of the Klan and the Nazis, attacks on black people in Howard Beach, Queens; in Forsyth County, Ga.; and in Marquette Park, Uptown and other areas of Chicago. . . . If prisons are indeed a window to society, what does this look at the prison system tell us? Most important, we are confronted with the undeniable reality that this society, built on a foundation of slavery and racism, is staying its course. The system of white supremacy has not been diminished but is in fact intensifying." □