

Systematic incarceration of African American males is a wrong, costly path

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Mental health experts from Meharry Medical College School of Medicine have released the first comprehensive report on the correlation between the incarceration of African American males and substance abuse and other health problems in the United States. Published in *Frontiers in Psychology* on the 12th of November, the report looks at decades of data concerning the African American population rates of incarceration and subsequent health issues. The authors conclude that the moral and economic costs of current racial disparities in the judicial system are fundamentally avoidable, especially if more resources are spent on education and treatment.

"Instead of getting health care and education from civil society, [African American males](#) are being funneled into the [prison system](#). Much of this costly practice could be avoided in the long-term by transferring funds away from prisons and into education," says Dr. William D Richie, assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and [Behavioral Sciences](#) at Meharry Medical College, lead author of the paper.

Money would be better spent on treatment than on incarceration

The study highlights the fact that with regard to African American males in the prison system, individual States are paying more to lock up non-violent offenders than they are for education, since 60% of incarcerations are due to non-violent, illicit drug-related crimes. The

authors also point to a previous study from 2,000 showing that the total cost of substance abuse—be it incarceration, crime or treatment—is over \$500 billion per year for the US.

These and other statistics have led the authors—scientific experts often called upon to testify in court—to conclude in the paper that: "Spending money on prevention and intervention of [substance abuse treatment](#) programs will yield better results than spending on [correctional facilities](#)."

Need more teachers of color

Even though [crime rates](#) have dropped across the country over the past two decades, incarceration rates have continued to skyrocket—with black people accounting for a largely disproportionate 38% of inmates. More alarmingly, incarceration rates for African American males jumped 500% between 1986 and 2004. And while substance abuse increases the chances of individuals' ending up in prison, those without any previous history of substance abuse have a higher risk of substance abuse once they leave the prison system, and could more easily fall back into the judicial system instead of getting a solid job or education.

According to Richie, much of this disparity is due to a fundamental problem of perception on both sides. For example, negative reinforcement of disruptive behavior is prevalent already in preschool—young children of color are often treated more harshly for behavior similar to their white peers.

"One step in the right direction, would be to have more black teachers during the early stages of development" says Dr. Richie. "From a behavioral scientific perspective, having teachers that look like the students and the parents of students from an early age could go a long way in changing perceptions of authority for black youth."

Getting more African American teachers means increasing the number of African Americans in the higher education system and getting them out of the [incarceration](#) system. In the end, the authors conclude, effective treatment of substance use disorders and alternatives to prison would cost the United States much less and improve the lives of African American males, their families, and the entire country.

More information: Overview of substance use disorders and incarceration of African American males, Mukku Venkata K, Benson Timothy G, Alam Farzana, Richie William Donald, Bailey Rahn Kennedy, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, [DOI:10.3389/fpsy.2012.00098](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2012.00098)

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