



Press Release

The Links Between Incarceration and Poverty in the United States

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The United States currently has an estimated 2.2 million people incarcerated, and the incarceration rate is over four times higher than it was 50 years ago. In a new paper, AAF's Director of Human Welfare Policy Tara O'Neill Hayes and Margaret Barnhorst examine the characteristics of the incarcerated as well as some of the causes. Nearly half of those imprisoned are non-violent drug offenders, accused people held pre-trial because they cannot afford their bail, and others who have been arrested for failure to pay debts or fines for minor infractions, they find. A disproportionate share are low-income and minority. As a result, any effort to address the incarceration rate will need to address poverty, racial bias, and harsh penalties for certain crimes, they argue.

They conclude:

The United States is currently imprisoning roughly 1 million people for low-level drug offenses, property crimes, and various offenses indirectly related to their poverty. Roughly half a million people are imprisoned because of their inability to pay for their release. An estimated 10 million people owe \$50 billion in legal fees, fines, and penalties. The use of cash bail and monetary penalties punishes people for their poverty, disproportionately impacts racial and ethnic minorities, and fails to provide a deterrent. Future policy solutions should work to alleviate poverty and unemployment and to impose non-monetary punishments for low-income offenders when appropriate. Without reducing poverty and income inequality, racial bias, and the overcriminalization of activities related to poverty, the United States will not meaningfully reduce its prison population.

[Read the analysis.](#)