

One in ten US high school dropouts incarcerated

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A new study reveals that a staggering one in ten American male high school dropouts, ages 16 to 24, is either in prison or juvenile detention.

Among young black male high school dropouts, more than a fifth, 22.9 percent, are incarcerated, compared to 7.2 percent among Asians, 6.6 percent among whites, and 6.2 percent among Hispanics, according to the study conducted by researchers at Northeastern University in Boston. The ratio behind bars or in detention remains high even among young men with a high school diploma, among whom 1 in 35 are caught up in the criminal justice system.

The unemployment rate among high school dropouts is extremely high, the study reports. In 2008, 54 percent of dropouts ages 16 to 24 were unemployed, as compared to 32 percent with high school diplomas, and 13 percent with a college degree in the same age group. Among young black dropouts, the unemployment rate was 79 percent, compared to 54 percent for whites and 47 percent for Hispanics (including illegal immigrants.)

“We’re trying to show what it means to be a dropout in the 21st Century United States,” Andrew Sum, who directed the study, told the *New York Times*. “It’s one of the country’s costliest problems. The unemployment, the incarceration rates—it’s scary.”

Sum said the unemployment rate among young dropouts has increased across the board since the study was conducted in 2008.

According to more recent data, among all 16- to 24-year-olds, unemployment has increased from 13 to 18 percent in one year. For 16 to 19-year-olds,

unemployment rose to 25.9 percent in September, the highest rate recorded since 1948.

Using a different measure of joblessness, the unemployment to population ratio, 52.2 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds are unemployed, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The Northeastern University study, “Consequences of Dropping Out of High School,” also reveals that young female dropouts are nine times more likely to become single mothers than their counterparts who earn college degrees. This is owed in large measure to unemployment, Sum argued.

“None of these guys can afford to own a home, they just don’t have any money,” Sum said. “It wasn’t like this 30 years ago. Back in the 1970s, my friends in Gary would quit school in senior year and go to work at US Steel and make a good living, and young guys in Michigan would go to work in an auto plant. You just can’t do that anymore. Today, you have a lot of dropouts who are jobless year round.”

About a fifth of the nation’s 16- to 24-year-old population lives in poverty or in near-poverty conditions. Among high school dropouts, that figure increases to nearly 37 percent; for high school graduates the figure falls to 22 percent, and among those who have bachelor’s degree or further education, 10 percent live in poor or near-poor households, the study found.

The study’s statistics on incarceration rates corroborate other recent data on the prison system. The US has both the largest prison population in the world

and the highest incarceration rate. As of 2008, over 1 percent of the adult population was behind bars, some 2.3 million people. For African American men age 20 to 34, one in nine was behind bars in 2008.

The enormous growth of the prison system in the 1980s and 1990s was largely the result of “get tough on crime” mandatory sentencing requirements. These measures also targeted the youth.

In the US Supreme Court’s new term last week, justices heard arguments related to two cases in which juveniles—a 13-year-old and 16-year-old—were given life sentences in prison with no possibility for parole for committing crimes that were not murder. Attorneys are challenging the punishment under the Eighth Amendment’s interdiction against cruel and unusual punishments.



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