**Incarceration Rates for Blacks Have Fallen Sharply, Report Shows**

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Incarceration rates for black Americans dropped sharply from 2000 to 2009, especially for women, while the rate of imprisonment for whites and Hispanics rose over the same decade, according to a report released Wednesday by a prison research and advocacy group in Washington.

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The declining rates for blacks represented a significant shift in the racial makeup of the United States’ prisons and suggested that the disparities that have long characterized the prison population may be starting to diminish.

“It certainly marks a shift from what we’ve seen for several decades now,” said Marc Mauer, the executive director of [the Sentencing Project](http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/index.cfm), whose report was based on data from the federal [Bureau of Justice Statistics](http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/), part of the Justice Department. “Normally, these things don’t change very dramatically over a one-decade period.”

The decline in incarceration rates was most striking for black women, dropping 30.7 percent over the ten-year period. In 2000, black women were imprisoned at six times the rate of white women; by 2009, they were 2.8 times more likely to be in prison. For black men, the rate of imprisonment decreased by 9.8 percent; in 2000 they were incarcerated at 7.7 times the rate of white men, a rate that fell to 6.4 times that of white men by 2009.

For white men and women, however, incarceration rates increased over the same period, rising 47.1 percent for white women and 8.5 percent for white men. By the end of the decade, Hispanic men were slightly less likely to be in prison, a drop of 2.2 percent, but Hispanic women were imprisoned more frequently, an increase of 23.3 percent.

Over all, blacks currently make up about 38 percent of inmates in state and federal prisons; whites account for about 34 percent.

More than 100,000 women are currently incarcerated in state or federal prisons. The overall rate of incarceration varies widely from state to state, as does the ratio of blacks to whites and Hispanics.

But the trend is clear, Mr. Mauer said, adding that no single factor could explain the shifting figures but that changes in drug laws and sentencing for drug offenses probably played a large role. Other possible contributors included decreasing arrest rates for blacks, the rising number of whites and Hispanics serving mandatory sentences for methamphetamine abuse, and socioeconomic shifts that have disproportionately affected white women.

Alfred Blumstein, an expert on the criminal justice system at Carnegie Mellon University, said his own findings from research he conducted with Allen J. Beck of the Bureau of Justice Statistics also indicated that the rate of incarceration for blacks was declining compared with that for whites.

“A major contributor has been the intensity of incarceration for drug offending,” Dr. Blumstein said, “and that reached a peak with the very long sentences we gave out for crack offenders, stimulated in large part by the violence that was going on in the crack markets.”

But crack cocaine has become far less of an issue in recent years, he noted, a fact reflected in revisions of federal sentencing laws. And inmates serving time for crack offenses are now emerging from prison, “so there would be a disproportionate black exodus from prison that as a result would be reflected in a lowering of the incarceration-rate ratio,” he said.

Mr. Mauer said that especially for black women, the drop in incarceration compared with whites was “all about drug offenses.”

In New York State, for example, where the overall prison population has dropped substantially, for women “virtually the entire decline was a decline in drug offenses,” he said. Increasingly severe drug laws and stiff sentences for drug offenses resulted in disproportionate numbers of black women going to prison, he said, “and now they are disproportionately benefiting from reductions in that area.”

“We’re not going to see necessarily the same level across all 50 states, but the patterns are there,” he said.

One thing that has not changed, Mr. Mauer said, is that incarceration rates for women as a whole continue to increase at a higher rate than those for men.

“All we’ve seen is a shifting in which women are locked up,” he said.