

Systemic Factors Leading to Incarceration and Its Impact on Marginalized Communities

Shenyu Yin¹

¹ Lexington High School, Lexington, Massachusetts 02421, USA

Correspondence: Shenyu Yin, Lexington High School, Lexington, Massachusetts 02421, USA.

doi:10.56397/SLJ.2024.12.05

Abstract

This paper critically examines the systemic factors contributing to mass incarceration in the United States, with a particular focus on the overrepresentation of marginalized groups such as African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged individuals. Drawing on recent quantitative data and literature review, the study explores how income inequality, racial disparity, family structure, and policing practices contribute to the cycles of incarceration. The research highlights the systemic inequalities that lead to harsher sentencing, over-policing, and limited post-incarceration opportunities for marginalized communities. By using multivariate regression analysis, a strong correlation between indicators of inequality and rates of crime was shown, which perpetuates systemic injustice in these communities. The findings suggest that while recent reforms—such as the reduction of mandatory minimum sentencing—have had a modest impact on incarceration rates, they fall short of addressing the deeper racial and economic inequalities that drive mass incarceration. This study advocates for comprehensive criminal justice reform beyond surface-level decriminalization efforts to address the root causes of inequality, particularly economic investment, community-based policing, and rehabilitation-focused prison systems.

Keywords: systemic injustice, prison system, prison reform, inequality, incarceration, marginalized

1. Introduction

The U.S. prison system is one of the most criticized globally, despite the country's status as an economically advanced nation. With the highest incarceration rate worldwide, the U.S. represents 4.2% of the global population but houses about 20% of the world's prisoners. This mass incarceration disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly people of color and economically disadvantaged individuals, exacerbating systemic inequality. Additionally, the U.S. has a high recidivism rate, with 43% of former inmates rearrested within

one year of release. This failure of rehabilitation underscores the need for reform. The prison system's role in perpetuating racial and economic disparities while offering little in terms of rehabilitation has long been a focus of social justice debates.

This paper examines the experiences of marginalized groups within the U.S. penal system, specifically focusing on African American, Hispanic, and low-income individuals. These groups are more likely to receive longer sentences, endure harsher prison conditions, and face limited access to

post-incarceration resources, further entrenching their vulnerability. The consequences extend beyond the individual to families and entire communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty, disenfranchisement, and systemic inequality. Addressing these inequities requires a critical examination of intersecting social forces like racism, economic inequality, and discriminatory policing practices, which continue to marginalize these communities.

Mass incarceration disproportionately impacts Black, Hispanic, and low-income populations, reinforcing systemic inequalities and creating cycles of oppression that span generations. The effects of this crisis are far-reaching, extending beyond those incarcerated to their families, communities, and the broader economy. Families with incarcerated members often face financial strain, as a loved one's imprisonment reduces household income and increases emotional and social challenges. Communities with high incarceration rates suffer from heightened crime, economic decline, and weakened social cohesion. As individuals re-enter society after prison, they encounter significant barriers to reintegration, including difficulties in finding employment, securing housing, and restoring relationships, which further fuel recidivism and perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage.

The economic implications of mass incarceration are staggering. The U.S. spends approximately \$182 billion annually on its prison system as of 2017. These funds could instead support essential services like education, healthcare, and social programs aimed at addressing the root causes of crime. Additionally, the economic burden extends to the loss of productivity, as former inmates struggle to find stable employment, reinforcing poverty and underutilizing the workforce.

In recent years, the U.S. has seen a modest decline in incarceration rates, driven by a combination of legislative reforms and shifting societal attitudes toward criminal justice. Key factors contributing to this decrease include the reduction or elimination of mandatory minimum sentencing for non-violent offenses, an increased focus on rehabilitation over punishment, and decriminalization efforts, particularly concerning marijuana. These changes have helped alleviate some pressure on the prison system, which had been overwhelmed with low-level drug offenders.

However, the structural factors driving mass incarceration, such as racial biases in policing, economic inequality, and the privatization of prisons, continue to pose significant challenges. Without addressing these systemic issues, it will be difficult to sustain the current reduction in incarceration rates. Furthermore, political shifts and changing public attitudes could easily reverse these gains, as seen in previous decades when tough-on-crime policies led to increased incarceration. Long-term solutions will require a sustained legislative commitment to reform, public support for a more rehabilitative approach to justice, and a focus on addressing the underlying causes of crime and inequality.

While the recent decline in incarceration rates is encouraging, it does not solve the deeper issues plaguing the U.S. prison system. Current reforms, while impactful, fall short of addressing the structural problems that sustain mass incarceration. Persistent racial disparities in arrests and sentencing, entrenched poverty, and the presence of for-profit prisons continue to drive the cycle of incarceration. To create a fair and equitable justice system, reforms must go beyond decriminalization and rehabilitation and tackle the root causes of crime, such as economic inequality and inadequate access to education and healthcare.

This research adopts a **quantitative methodology** to assess the impact of recent policy changes on incarceration trends. By analyzing data from sources like the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Prison Policy Initiative, the study provides a macro-level understanding of how incarceration rates have responded to reforms. Statistical analysis identifies correlations between specific policy changes, such as the reduction of mandatory minimum sentences and decriminalization efforts, and the decline in prison populations. The research also explores recidivism rates, offering insights into whether the recent shift toward rehabilitation has been effective in reducing repeat offenses. This data-driven approach ensures that the study's conclusions are grounded in measurable outcomes, providing a concrete foundation for recommending further reforms.

2. Literature Review

This literature review examines the major theoretical perspectives on crime. The majority of theories of crime explaining why people

commit crimes can be categorized into three groups: rational choice and individual responsibility, critical theories focusing on adverse societal circumstances, and theories considering randomness or socialization factors.

Past research has often utilized large-scale datasets, such as data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Justice Statistics, and other governmental or nonprofit organizations, to examine disparities in arrest rates, sentencing, and incarceration. Studies by criminologists and sociologists have frequently employed quantitative methods to establish statistical relationships between variables like income, race, family structure, and the rate of policing.

For instance, studies such as Western and Pettit's examination of incarceration's impact on racial inequality have utilized longitudinal data to illustrate how mass incarceration disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic communities (Western, 2010). Similarly, works like those by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* have used qualitative case studies alongside quantitative data to demonstrate how racial disparities persist even when controlling for income and education. These studies provide the foundation for the methodological approach taken in this research, which builds on quantitative techniques to measure the relationships between race, income, and policing.

One key insight from prior research is the importance of controlling for variables such as income and education when examining racial disparities in criminal justice. This ensures that any observed disparities are not solely the result of economic factors but also reflect underlying racial inequities. As such, the current study will adopt a similar approach by using multivariate regression analysis to isolate the effects of race from income and other socioeconomic factors.

2.1 Individual Responsibility

Choice Theory, Classical Theory, and Rational Choice Theory all posit that crime is based on a calculated decision by the individual. These theories all examine crime from an economic perspective of cost-benefit analysis. Potential criminals weigh the potential rewards against the possible consequences. If the perceived benefits outweigh the risks, individuals choose to proceed with criminal behavior.

Choice Theory provides a psychological framework for understanding criminal behavior

by focusing on personal decisions made to satisfy fundamental human needs. Developed by William Glasser, Choice Theory suggests that individuals make choices to fulfill their innate needs, such as survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998). When applied to criminal behavior, this theory posits that individuals may turn to unlawful activities when they perceive that legitimate means of meeting these needs are inaccessible. For example, those involved in theft or gang activity may be driven by a need for power or belonging, which they feel they cannot achieve through socially acceptable avenues (Furlong, 2015).

Additionally, Choice Theory emphasizes the role of individual responsibility, arguing that even in environments of disadvantage, people maintain agency over their choices (Jones, 2017). This contrasts with theories attributing criminal behavior entirely to external pressures or social environments. Instead, Choice Theory suggests that criminal actions are often a response to internal drives, shaped by individuals' perceptions of their ability to meet their psychological needs. Criminal behavior, from this perspective, is seen as a rational choice aimed at fulfilling these unmet needs, rather than a purely reactive response to external factors.

Rational Choice Theory sees the criminal as a rational actor who decides to commit a crime based on the expected utility of the act. Originating from the classical ideas of the 18th century that humans seek to maximize their pleasure and minimize their suffering (Hayward, 2007). Individuals who perceive the benefits of crime—such as financial gain or social status—as higher than the risks are more likely to engage in criminal activities.

Rational Choice Theory is based on several foundation assumptions and beliefs. First, the person contemplating committing the crime is a rational actor, not random. Second, the person chooses their behavior based on a rational calculation to maximize benefit while minimizing cost (punishment). Third, the person is only acting out of self-interest, doing what will bring them the greatest benefits, so if the potential cost is too great, they will be deterred.

However, there are several strong criticisms of Rational Choice Theory. First, people seldom have perfect information regarding a potential

crime, which will skew their cost-benefit analysis (Gül, 2009). Some scholars argue that the theory does not account for impulsive crimes, where the decision to commit an illegal act may not be premeditated. Furthermore, not all individuals have the capacity to act rationally. This is demonstrated by criminal acts such as drug use, fire-setting, joyriding, and hooliganism.

Similar to Rational choice theory, Classical theory focuses on the role of punishment as a deterrence. It argues that if the punishment is great enough, people will be deterred from committing a crime.

2.2 Critical Theories: Crime as a Reaction to Societal Circumstances

Critical theories provide a contrasting view, suggesting that crime is not merely a choice but rather a reaction to adverse societal conditions. *Conflict Theory*, for instance, argues that crime arises from social and economic inequalities. The legal system is seen as a tool for the elite to maintain control over marginalized groups, and those who commit crimes are often reacting to the structural conditions that limit their access to resources and opportunities (Bonger, 1916).

Labeling Theory takes a more social-psychological approach by emphasizing how individuals become criminals through societal reactions. The theory suggests that once labeled as a criminal, a person may internalize that label, leading to secondary deviance and further criminal behavior (Becker, 1963). Labeling has been empirically shown to have long-lasting effects on individuals, particularly juveniles. A study by Matsueda (1992) found that youths who were labeled as delinquent by the criminal justice system were more likely to join deviant peer groups and commit further crimes.

The impact of labeling is especially profound when considering official interventions. Youths who experienced juvenile justice interventions were found to have a significantly higher likelihood of joining gangs, which subsequently increased their rates of delinquency (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006). These findings align with the concept of “criminal embeddedness,” where individuals become deeply entrenched in criminal networks, reinforcing their deviant behavior.

Another critical theory, *Social Disorganization Theory*, suggests that crime arises from the breakdown of community institutions and social

norms, particularly in economically disadvantaged areas. High population density, poverty, and unemployment contribute to the weakening of social bonds, leading to higher crime rates (Shaw & McKay, 1942). A study by Sampson and Groves (1989) supported this theory by demonstrating that neighborhoods with strong social networks and informal social control had lower crime rates, even in economically disadvantaged areas.

Strain Theory provides an economic explanation for crime, suggesting that individuals commit crimes when they are unable to achieve societal goals, such as wealth or status, through legitimate means (Merton, 1938). In this context, crime becomes a form of rebellion against a system that blocks access to success. Research by Agnew (1992) expanded on this theory, showing that strain not only comes from financial limitations but also from interpersonal relationships and adverse life events, all of which can push individuals toward criminal behavior.

2.3 Theories of Random Events and Socialization

A third group of theories emphasizes the randomness of crime or the role of socialization in shaping criminal behavior. *Life Course Theory*, for instance, suggests that crime can result from significant life events or stressors, which alter an individual’s trajectory. A study by Sampson and Laub (1993) showed that early involvement in criminal activities often leads to cumulative disadvantages over time, making it difficult for individuals to escape a life of crime. These disadvantages may include social stigma, lack of educational attainment, and limited job opportunities.

Another relevant theory is *Routine Activity Theory*, which argues that crime is a natural outcome of routine social interactions. Criminals do not necessarily seek out opportunities; instead, they encounter them during their everyday activities. This theory emphasizes the importance of “capable guardians” in preventing crime—if potential targets are adequately protected, crime will not occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Empirical research supports this theory, showing that increased surveillance and improved security measures can significantly reduce crime rates in high-risk areas (Felson & Clarke, 1998).

Social Control Theory takes a different approach by suggesting that the presence of strong social

bonds—such as relationships with family, school, and community—deters individuals from committing crimes (Hirschi, 1969). When these bonds are weak or absent, individuals are more likely to deviate from societal norms. Studies have consistently shown that juveniles with stronger attachments to family and school are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Thornberry, 1987).

Finally, *Social Learning Theory* posits that crime is a learned behavior, acquired through interactions with others. Individuals mimic the behaviors of those in their social environment, particularly if those behaviors are rewarded. This theory was supported by Akers et al. (1979), who found that youths involved with delinquent peers were more likely to commit crimes themselves. The theory also highlights the role of reinforcement in sustaining criminal behavior—individuals continue to engage in crime if they perceive it as rewarding.

3. Hypothesis

The criminal justice system in the United States disproportionately affects marginalized communities, with systemic inequalities manifesting across various dimensions. This paper hypothesizes that four primary factors—income inequality, racial disparity, lack of stable family structures, and increased investment in policing—play a critical role in perpetuating these systemic injustices. Each factor, independently and in combination, contributes to the overrepresentation of certain demographic groups in the criminal justice system, ultimately reinforcing cycles of inequality and incarceration.

- 1) **Income Inequality:** Income disparity has long been associated with access to legal resources, educational opportunities, and general upward mobility. Individuals from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to face barriers in accessing high-quality legal defense, experience economic pressures that may contribute to criminal activity, and encounter punitive measures for minor infractions. The hypothesis posits that income inequality serves as a significant driver of criminalization, leading to higher arrest and conviction rates in economically disadvantaged communities.
- 2) **Racial Disparity:** The role of racial disparities within the criminal justice

system is well-documented, with people of color—particularly Black and Hispanic populations—facing disproportionately high rates of arrest, conviction, and sentencing. This paper hypothesizes that racial disparity, exacerbated by historically entrenched systemic racism, plays a key role in perpetuating mass incarceration. Beyond income, race remains an independent predictor of justice outcomes, suggesting that even when economic conditions are accounted for, racial minorities remain overrepresented in the penal system.

- 3) **Lack of Stable Family Structures:** The absence of a stable family structure has been identified as a significant predictor of juvenile delinquency and adult criminal behavior. This paper hypothesizes that individuals from unstable or broken family environments are more vulnerable to social and economic pressures that lead to criminal activity. The instability of family structures, often intensified by systemic issues such as poverty and the prison-industrial complex, compounds the likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system. Moreover, intergenerational incarceration and family disruption further entrench criminal behavior within communities.
- 4) **Investment in Policing:** Increased investment in policing, particularly in economically disadvantaged and racially diverse neighborhoods, is hypothesized to result in the over-policing of certain communities. This phenomenon, known as the “police presence effect,” leads to higher rates of surveillance, arrests, and detentions for minor infractions, often disproportionately affecting marginalized groups. This paper posits that, rather than reducing crime, heightened investment in policing exacerbates the criminalization of poverty and race, leading to greater rates of incarceration for nonviolent and petty offenses.

In combination, these factors create a feedback loop of systemic injustice. The hypothesis is that income inequality, racial disparity, lack of stable family structures, and increased policing are not isolated contributors to mass incarceration but intersect in ways that intensify the vulnerabilities of marginalized populations.

Through this research, I aim to demonstrate how these structural forces perpetuate disparities in the criminal justice system, contributing to the cyclical nature of inequality and criminalization.

4. Research Method

This study employs a comprehensive quantitative research methodology to examine the impact of criminal justice reforms on diverse demographic groups, focusing particularly on how income, racial disparities, family structure, and investment in policing contribute to systemic injustices. The research utilizes secondary data analysis from 2022, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in contemporary socio-political realities. By focusing on the Black, Hispanic, and White populations, the study targets the most prominent groups affected by criminal justice disparities, allowing for a more focused exploration of how reforms may differently impact these communities. The analysis begins with descriptive statistics to provide an overview of key variables and highlight disparities among these demographic groups. To explore the relationships between variables like race, income, and family structure, the study employs a correlation matrix, identifying patterns and interconnections that may drive systemic inequality. Finally, the research utilizes multivariate regression analysis to assess the simultaneous effects of multiple factors on criminal justice outcomes, helping to isolate the specific contributions of each variable. This approach not only builds on existing literature but also offers a robust, data-driven exploration of the underlying causes of systemic injustice, providing insights into how reforms might reshape these inequities.

4.1 How to Pick the Sample (Secondary Data)

The sample for this study will be drawn from secondary data sources, with a focus on data from 2022. This year is particularly relevant as it reflects post-pandemic shifts in economic conditions, policing policies, and criminal justice reform initiatives. Additionally, the socio-political movements around racial justice in recent years, such as Black Lives Matter, have led to an increased awareness of disparities within the criminal justice system, making 2022 a crucial year for examining these issues.

Secondary data offers several advantages for this study. First, it allows for the use of large, nationally representative datasets that include information on income, race, family structure,

and interactions with the criminal justice system. Examples of such datasets include the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), the American Community Survey (ACS), and data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. These datasets offer comprehensive demographic and socio-economic information, as well as data on criminal justice outcomes such as arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates.

The sample will specifically focus on Black, Hispanic, and White individuals, as these groups have historically shown the most pronounced disparities in criminal justice outcomes. This focus allows the study to zero in on racial disparities while controlling for other factors such as income and family structure. By limiting the sample to these three racial groups, the study can draw clearer comparisons between them, providing insight into how different racial groups experience the criminal justice system.

The decision to focus on Black, White, and Hispanic-White populations is driven by the significant disparities in criminal justice outcomes observed between these groups. According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Black and Hispanic individuals are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system compared to their White counterparts. Black individuals, in particular, are more likely to be arrested, convicted, and incarcerated, even when controlling for factors such as income and education.

By comparing these three groups, the study aims to highlight the racial disparities that exist within the system. The comparison between Black and White individuals provides a clear illustration of how race impacts criminal justice outcomes, while the inclusion of Hispanic-White individuals allows for a more nuanced understanding of how racial and ethnic identity shapes experiences with the system.

The study will also explore within-group variations to examine how income and family structure intersect with race. For example, previous research has shown that low-income White individuals are more likely to encounter the criminal justice system than higher-income White individuals. Similarly, Black individuals from stable family structures may have different experiences with the system than those from unstable family environments. By examining these within-group variations, the study can provide a more comprehensive picture of how

different factors contribute to disparities in the criminal justice system.

The decision to focus on Black, White, and Hispanic-White populations is also driven by the availability of data. National datasets like the ACS and NLSY include detailed demographic information on these groups, making it possible to conduct robust statistical analyses. Moreover, focusing on these groups allows the study to engage with existing research on racial disparities in the criminal justice system, building on a substantial body of literature that has documented the overrepresentation of Black and Hispanic individuals in the system.

This focus also aligns with the study's broader goal of examining how structural inequalities perpetuate disparities in the criminal justice system. By focusing on Black, Hispanic, and White individuals, the study can explore how these groups experience the system differently, while also controlling for other factors like income and family structure. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between race, income, and policing.

4.2 Specific Methods

The research will employ a combination of descriptive methods, correlation matrices, and multivariate regression analyses to explore the relationships between race, income, family structure, and criminal justice outcomes.

For instance, by disaggregating the data by race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status, the research can highlight whether certain reforms have disproportionately benefited or excluded marginalized communities. The goal is to assess not only the overall efficacy of these reforms but also their ability to address the systemic inequalities that have long characterized the U.S. prison system.

4.3 Descriptive Method

The descriptive analysis will provide a summary of the key variables, including race, income, family structure, and criminal justice outcomes (e.g., arrest rates, incarceration rates). Descriptive statistics such as means, medians, and standard deviations will be calculated for each variable, allowing for a preliminary exploration of the data. This analysis will provide a clear picture of how different racial groups compare in terms of income, family structure, and criminal justice outcomes.

4.4 Correlation Matrix

Next, a correlation matrix will be used to examine the relationships between the key variables. The correlation matrix will provide insight into how variables like income and race are related to criminal justice outcomes. For example, the matrix will reveal whether lower income is associated with higher arrest rates, or whether racial identity is correlated with longer sentences. This step is crucial for identifying potential relationships between the variables that can be explored further in the regression analysis.

4.5 Multivariate Regression

The multivariate regression analysis will be the centerpiece of the research. This method allows for the examination of how multiple variables interact to influence criminal justice outcomes. By controlling for factors like income and family structure, the regression analysis can isolate the effect of race on outcomes like arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates. The regression model will include independent variables such as race, income, family structure, and policing intensity (measured by the number of police officers per capita in a given area). The dependent variable will be criminal justice outcomes, such as the likelihood of being arrested or incarcerated.

By using multivariate regression, the study can test the hypothesis that race plays a significant role in determining criminal justice outcomes, even when controlling for other factors like income and family structure. The results of the regression analysis will provide a quantitative measure of the extent to which race, income, and family structure contribute to disparities in the system.

4.6 Potential Biases

One potential bias in this research stems from the reliance on existing literature, which may reflect the perspectives of scholars or institutions that do not fully represent the lived experiences of marginalized populations. The researcher's positionality also presents potential biases; being an academic observer, there is the risk of underestimating the experiential and emotional toll of systemic injustice on affected individuals. Lastly, the data available may be skewed by institutional reporting biases, particularly in the context of underreported racial profiling or policing practices.

This study primarily utilized publicly available

datasets and prior research studies, which may not adequately represent smaller, harder-to-reach communities. As a result, there may be an underrepresentation of specific racial or ethnic groups, or economically disadvantaged individuals who are disproportionately impacted by these systems. Additionally, due to

limited access to some regions, this research may not have fully captured the unique local policies that influence incarceration rates.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Correlation Matrix

Table 1. Regression Table (left)

	Incarceration rates	BW differences in incarceration	HW differences in incarceration	Black%
Incarceration rates	1			
BW differences in incarceration	-0.6061*	1		
HW differences in incarceration	-0.5770*	0.6150*	1	
Black%	0.4043*	-0.3738*	-0.3377*	1
Hispanic%	-0.073	0.1012	0.2657*	-0.1413
Income	-0.6936*	0.4240*	0.5310*	-0.1229
Family structure%	0.4484*	-0.3029*	-0.2293*	0.7438*
Spending on prison	-0.6866*	0.4801*	0.6484*	-0.2746*
Spending on policing	-0.2544*	0.2652*	0.1925	-0.1456

Table 1. Regression Table (right)

Hispanic%	Income	Single Parent%	Spending on prison	Spending on policing
1				
0.3233*	1			
0.012	-0.2882*	1		
0.1489	0.7063*	-0.2398*	1	
0.4576*	0.6158*	-0.1593	0.3916*	1

Table 2. Regression Results on Incarceration rates

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation
Black%	949.9***	816.1***	900.9***	694.8***
Hispanic%	-32.8	421.3***	441.1***	216.0
Income/\$1K		-20.6***	-21.0***	-19.2***

Family structure%			-350.8	123.6
Spending on prison/\$1K				-1127.5***
Spending on policing\$1K				366.3***
Cons	536.9***	1699.5***	1781.7***	1488.0
R2	0.1464	0.6110	0.6078	0.6658
N	100	100	100	100
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation
Black%	-10.07***	-9.19***	-12.71***	-10.05**
Hispanic%	1.16	-1.83	-2.66	-1.81
Income/\$1K		0.14***	0.15***	0.09*
Family structure%			14.6	8.68
Spending on prison/\$1K				11.84
Spending on policing\$1K				0.17
Cons	6.71***	-0.96	-4.37	-0.96
R2	0.1244	0.2681	0.2721	0.2776
N	100	100	100	100
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation	Correlation
Black%	-3.03***	-2.80***	-4.93***	-3.33***
Hispanic%	1.85**	0.63	0.12	1.32*
Income/\$1K		0.06***	0.07***	0.04**
Family structure%			8.61**	4.89
Spending on prison/\$1K				8.33***
Spending on policing\$1K				-1.72***
Cons	1.37***	-1.80***	-3.82***	-1.53
R2	0.1446	0.3503	0.3761	0.5037

N	95	95	95	95
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1				

5.2 Descriptive Findings

The data shows a complex relationship between incarceration rates, racial disparities, income, family structure, and government spending on prisons and policing. This study examines these relationships using correlation and multivariate regression analysis.

Incarceration Rates and Racial Disparities: The data highlights persistent disparities in incarceration rates between Black, White, and Hispanic individuals. In particular, Black individuals are incarcerated at disproportionately high rates, with a correlation of **0.4043** between the percentage of Black individuals and overall incarceration rates, compared to a weaker correlation of **-0.073** for the percentage of Hispanic individuals. The Black-White (BW) difference in incarceration rates correlates negatively with overall incarceration rates (**-0.6061**), highlighting the extent of racial disparities.

Income and Family Structure: Income emerges as a significant predictor of incarceration, with a strong negative correlation of **-0.6936**. Lower income levels are associated with higher rates of incarceration, consistent with previous research showing that socioeconomic inequality plays a major role in criminal justice disparities. Family structure, while also correlated with incarceration rates (**0.4484**), shows a more complex relationship. The positive correlation suggests that higher rates of stable family structures are associated with higher incarceration rates, which could reflect over-policing in certain communities or other underlying socio-economic factors.

Spending on Prisons and Policing: Spending on prisons and policing also correlates with incarceration outcomes. Prison spending is negatively correlated with incarceration rates (**-0.6866**), suggesting that increased resources may be associated with more effective management of the incarcerated population. On the other hand, spending on policing shows a weaker correlation (**-0.2544**), indicating that higher investment in policing may not lead to lower incarceration rates and could be contributing to over-policing of marginalized

communities.

5.3 Regression Results

The regression results provide more detailed insights into how different factors independently affect incarceration rates and racial disparities:

1) Incarceration Rates:

- **Model 1** shows a strong positive effect of the Black population percentage (**949.9** with $p<0.01$) on incarceration rates. This effect remains significant even when controlling for other factors, as seen in Models 2-4.
- **Income** shows a consistently negative effect on incarceration rates across models. In **Model 2**, a \$1,000 increase in income is associated with a **-20.6** decrease in incarceration rates ($p<0.01$). This negative effect of income remains significant in Models 3 and 4.
- **Spending on prisons** has a significant negative effect on incarceration rates in **Model 4** (**-1127.5**, $p<0.01$), indicating that higher prison spending could contribute to reduced incarceration rates, possibly through improved rehabilitation efforts or better management of the prison population.
- **Spending on policing** has a positive effect on incarceration rates in **Model 4** (**366.3**, $p<0.01$), suggesting that increased policing may contribute to higher incarceration rates, potentially through increased surveillance and arrests in certain communities.

2) Black-White Differences in Incarceration:

- The percentage of Black individuals in the population is consistently negatively correlated with Black-White differences in incarceration rates. In **Model 1**, a 1% increase in the Black population is associated with a **-10.07** decrease in the Black-White incarceration gap ($p<0.01$), which holds across all models.
- **Income** shows a small but significant positive effect on Black-White disparities, with a **0.14** increase in the gap for every

\$1,000 increase in income (Model 2, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that income alone does not eliminate racial disparities, as the gap widens slightly with higher income levels.

3) **Hispanic-White Differences in Incarceration:**

- The percentage of Black individuals is negatively correlated with Hispanic-White differences in incarceration, with **-3.03** in **Model 1** ($p < 0.01$). This effect remains significant in all models, indicating that areas with higher Black populations also show a reduction in the Hispanic-White gap.
- **Income** again plays a significant role in explaining Hispanic-White disparities, with a positive effect of **0.06** ($p < 0.01$) in **Model 2**, suggesting that income affects the racial disparity but does not close the gap entirely.
- Interestingly, **spending on prisons** shows a significant positive effect on the Hispanic-White incarceration difference in **Model 4** (8.33, $p < 0.01$), while **spending on policing** shows a significant negative effect (**-1.72**, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that while prison spending may exacerbate disparities between Hispanic and White individuals, policing expenditures reduce this gap.

6. Discussion

The regression results provide strong support for the hypothesis that income inequality, racial disparities, and government spending on prisons and policing are key drivers of incarceration rates. The consistently strong relationship between the percentage of Black individuals in the population and incarceration rates, even when controlling for income and spending, suggests that racial factors play an enduring role in the criminal justice system.

The positive effect of income on racial disparities, particularly between Black and White individuals, highlights the complex interplay between economic and racial inequality. While higher income levels reduce overall incarceration rates, they do not eliminate racial disparities, underscoring the need for targeted policy interventions to address structural racism within the system.

The findings also suggest that while increased spending on prisons can help manage

incarceration rates, it may also exacerbate racial disparities, particularly between Hispanic and White populations. Meanwhile, policing expenditures, though correlated with higher incarceration rates overall, show potential for reducing disparities between Hispanic and White individuals, raising questions about the most effective allocation of resources to address inequality in the justice system.

6.1 Implications for Policy

These results have important implications for criminal justice policy:

- **Addressing Income Inequality:** Income remains one of the strongest predictors of incarceration. Policies aimed at reducing economic disparities, such as increasing access to education, job training, and social safety nets, could significantly reduce incarceration rates and lessen the impact of socio-economic inequality on the criminal justice system.
- **Policing Reforms:** The positive correlation between policing expenditures and incarceration rates suggests that current policing practices may contribute to over-incarceration, particularly in marginalized communities. A shift toward community-based policing, de-escalation training, and the decriminalization of minor offenses could reduce the reliance on incarceration as a primary tool for maintaining public safety.
- **Prison Spending:** The significant negative effect of prison spending on incarceration rates indicates that investments in prison reform and rehabilitation may help reduce overall incarceration. However, the exacerbation of racial disparities through prison spending suggests that reforms should also focus on equitable treatment of all racial groups within the prison system.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this research shed light on the various factors contributing to the prison-industrial complex, particularly the intersections of income, racial disparity, family structure, and policing. The systemic injustices

within the criminal justice system, as explored in this study, suggest that the prison-industrial complex disproportionately affects marginalized communities. By delving into these dynamics, this research offers a more complex understanding of how structural inequalities perpetuate cycles of incarceration and social exclusion.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on the prison-industrial complex by providing a focused analysis on the intersections of income disparity, racial inequality, and policing practices. By emphasizing the importance of family structure and stable community support systems, the study highlights often overlooked factors that contribute to the perpetuation of incarceration cycles. It also reinforces the urgent need for a shift from punitive to rehabilitative justice models.

From a policy perspective, this research advocates for systemic reforms aimed at reducing income inequality, investing in family support services, and rethinking the role of policing in communities. Policy recommendations include reallocating resources from prison systems toward educational and economic opportunities, especially for marginalized groups. Furthermore, the findings suggest the need for legislation that addresses racial profiling, discriminatory policing practices, and the socioeconomic barriers that hinder rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

7.1 Limitations and Future Research Plan

While this research makes several significant contributions, it is not without its limitations. The study predominantly relied on secondary data sources, limiting the ability to gather firsthand narratives from affected individuals. Additionally, the scope of the project was primarily focused on certain geographical regions, which may not fully capture the nuances of the prison-industrial complex across different states or countries. Time constraints also played a role in the depth of analysis, particularly in exploring more granular socioeconomic variables like education and healthcare access.

Future research could be improved by expanding the scope of the study to include more diverse geographical regions and employing mixed methodologies, such as

qualitative interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, their families, and criminal justice professionals. Incorporating longitudinal data could offer insights into how systemic inequalities evolve over time, deepening our understanding of long-term social impacts. Additionally, focusing on intersectional identities—such as gender, immigration status, and disability—would provide a more comprehensive analysis of how multiple marginalizations intersect within the prison system.

References

- Agnew, Robert. (1992). Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency. *Criminology*, 30(1), pp. 47-88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1992.tb01093.x>.
- Akers, Ronald L. (1979). *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance*. Routledge.
- Becker, Howard S. (1963). Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. *American Sociological Review*, 29(1), p. 134, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094660>.
- Bernburg, Jón Gunnar, et al. (2006). Official Labeling, Criminal Embeddedness, and Subsequent Delinquency. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 43(1), pp. 67-88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427805280068>. Sage Journals.
- Cohen, Lawrence E., and Marcus Felson. (1979). Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach. *American Sociological Review*, 44(4). American Sociological Association, Sage Publications, Inc., pp. 588-608, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2094589>.
- Felson, Marcus, and R. V. Clarke. (1998). *Opportunity Makes the Thief: Practical Theory for Crime Prevention*. Home Office, Policing And Reducing Crime Unit, Research, Development And Statistics Directorate.
- Furlong, Andy. (2015). Transitions, Cultures, and Identities: What Is Youth Studies?. *Youth Cultures, Transitions, and Generations*, pp. 16-27, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137377234_2.
- Glasser, William. (1998). *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*. HarperCollins e-Books.

- Hayward, Keith. (2007). Situational Crime Prevention and Its Discontents: Rational Choice Theory versus the 'Culture of Now.' *Social Policy & Administration*, 41(3), pp. 232-50.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2007.00550.x>.
- Matsueda, Ross L. (1992). Reflected Appraisals, Parental Labeling, and Delinquency: Specifying a Symbolic Interactionist Theory. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(6), pp. 1577-611. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229940>.
- Merton, Robert K. (1938). Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), pp. 672-82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2084686>. JSTOR.
- SAMPSON, ROBERT J., and JOHN H. LAUB. (1993). Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life. *Crime & Delinquency*, 39(3), pp. 396-96.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128793039003010>.
- Serdar Kenan Gul. (2009). An Evaluation of the Rational Choice Theory in Criminology. *Social Policy & Administration*, 4(8), pp. 36-44. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- Shaw, Clifford R., and Henry D. McKay. (1942). Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas. *Harvard Law Review*, 56(4), p. 681, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1334446>.
- T Hirschi. (1969). *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thornberry, TERENCE P. (1987). Toward an Interactional Theory of Delinquency. *Criminology*, 25(4), pp. 863-92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1987.tb00823.x>.
- Western, Bruce, and Becky Pettit. (2010). Incarceration & Social Inequality. *Daedalus*, 139(3), pp. 8-19.
https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_00019.
- Willem Adriaan Bongers. (1916). *Criminality and Economic Conditions*. Forgotten Books.