Crime and the Great Recession

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Common sense tells us that crime should increase during hard times. After all, more than 90 percent of the serious "index" crimes reported each year in the government's Uniform Crime Reports involve some kind of financial remuneration. And we've all seen examples of people taking desperate actions when they are cold, broke, and hungry, whether through first-hand observations or fictional characters like Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath.*

Yet there is much evidence that crime rates and economic indicators often diverge. For example, crime increased during certain expansionary periods in the 1960s and, as I'll show below, it decreased between 2007 and 2010. This isn't because crime is unrelated to economic conditions, but because it is related to so many other things as well. Most criminal offenses are closely correlated with age and sex, for example, so the number of young men in a population is an important driver of crime rates. With regard to specific offenses, crimes such as auto theft have been reduced with changes in vehicle security and enforcement practices.

Moreover, there are countless *countervailing* influences that make some types of crime less likely during periods of economic contraction. For instance, the most recent recession has left many abandoned homes that increase opportunities for vandalism. At the same time, however, it has also kept a great number of people within the relative safety of their homes, because they are less likely to be going to work or out to dinner.

Of course, a deep and prolonged recession remains a special cause for concern among criminologists. Although we debate the precise timing or "lag structure" of its effects, we worry a lot about how children and adolescents will react to the grinding poverty of the Great Recession or to the diminishing opportunities they might foresee ahead of them. We are also very interested in whether recession-linked criminal justice policies—particularly the deep cuts to law enforcement and correctional budgets—will affect crime rates. It is too early to gauge these effects, but we now have enough data to draw some provisional conclusions about crime and recession from 2007 to 2010.

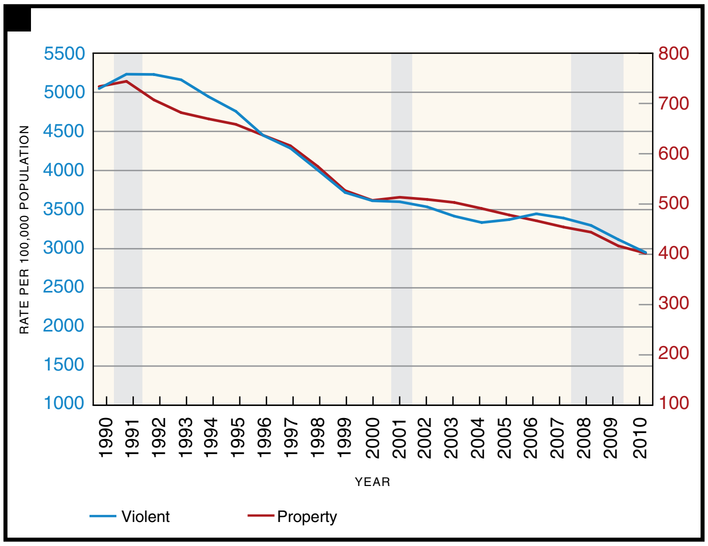
Crime

Crime has been declining by many measures for many years. To determine whether the crime rate is rising or falling, criminologists generally look to three primary data sources: (1) "official statistics" that the F.B.I.'s Uniform Crime Reports compiles from law enforcement agencies; (2) victimization information from the National Crime Victimization Survey; and, (3) self-reported information from repeated cross-sectional surveys, such as the Monitoring the Future study of high school students. I will introduce and present some information from the first two of these sources below.

Crimes Known to the Police

According to the Uniform Crime Reports, serious "Part I" crime reported to the police is lower today than at any time in the past two decades. Rates of both violent offenses (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) and property offenses

FIGURE 1. Crimes Known to the Police per 100,000 Population, 1990–2010



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(motor vehicle theft, burglary, and larceny-theft) plummeted by more than 40 percent from 1990-2010.

Crimes such as rape and murder are quite rare relative to larceny-theft, burglary, and motor vehicle theft, but there is good evidence that all of these offenses have declined. The next figure compares the average annual rate of decline before the Great Recession (between 1990 and 2006) versus the recessionary period from 2007-2010. Six of the 7 crimes dipped more from 2007-2010 than in the preceding years, with the steepest decreases occurring for motor vehicle theft, robbery, and murder. The only exception to this pattern was burglary, which dropped by 2.5 percent per year before 2007 and 1.2 percent per year thereafter. Larceny-theft, the most common Part I crime, also fell by a relatively modest 2.8 percent per year in the recent period. Nevertheless, all 7 of these commonly reported serious crimes has declined significantly in the past three years.

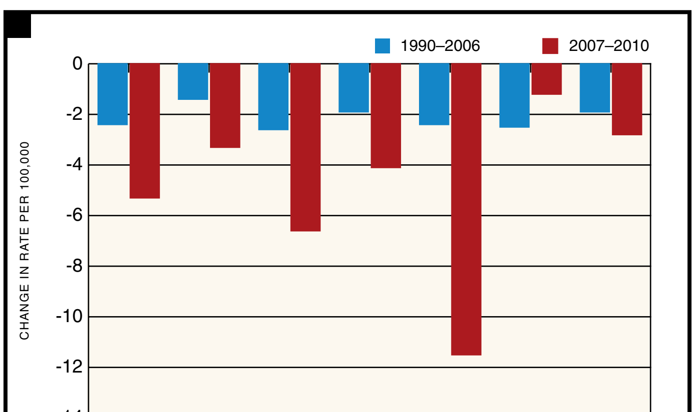
Crimes Reported by Victims

Because many criminal acts are never reported to the police, discussions of crime trends must also address the so-called “dark figure” of unreported crime. According to data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, there has also been a broad-based and long-term decline in crime. The NCVS measures crime independently from the UCR, gathering data from a nationally representative sample of households rather than law enforcement agencies. According to these data, the rate of violent victimization has fallen by 70 percent since 1993—from approximately 50 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older to 15 per 1,000 in 2010. The property crime victimization rate has declined by over 60 percent during this period, from 319 per 1,000 households in 1993 to 120 per 1,000 households in 2010. Most consider the slight rise in 2006 to be a methodological artifact, due to a change in survey methodology for that year.

When the NCVS victimization data tell the same story as the official statistics in the UCR, criminologists are generally more confident that we are observing a trend rather than a “blip” or a mirage. This appears to be the case with the crime drop from 2007-2010. As in the official statistics, all of the offenses except burglary have declined at a steeper rate since 2007 than from 1993-2010 (the NCVS was redesigned in 1993, so I begin here rather than in 1990). Motor vehicle theft is falling fastest, at about 13 percent per year since 2007. Moreover, rape, robbery, assault, and theft victimization have all dropped by at least 6 percent per year during the recession.

Consistent with the Uniform Crime Reports data, burglary is declining at a somewhat slower rate over the period. Some have speculated that these crimes are falling less steeply because of the recession -- and because markets for illegal drugs have become less lucrative in many urban areas. Regardless of the cause, the drop for burglary has been modest by both UCR and NCVS measures, hinting that a reversal in its downward trend may be likely in coming years.

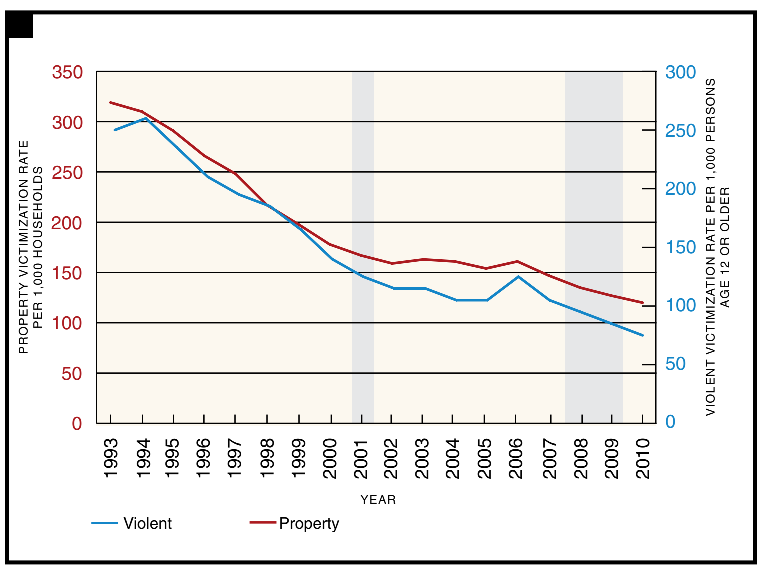
FIGURE 2. Short and Long-term Drop in Crime per 100,000



	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Agg. assault	Auto theft	Burglary	Larceny theft
1990–2006	-2.4%	-1.4%	-2.6%	-1.9%	-2.4%	-2.5%	-1.9%
2007–2010	-5.3%	-3.3%	-6.6%	-4.1%	-11.5%	-1.2%	-2.8%

Source:

FIGURE 3. Decline in Violent and Property Crime Victimization, 1993-2010



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Punishment

It is generally easier to get accurate measures of punishment than of crime, since the Bureau of Justice Statistics does an excellent job assembling reliable information on correctional populations in the United States. Data from the Bureau's *Correctional Populations in the United States* reveal a dramatic and unprecedented increase in the number of Americans under correctional supervision, from about 1.8 million in 1980 to over 7.3 million in 2007. People incarcerated in prison and local jails account for about one-third of this number. The remainder are being supervised on conditional release in their communities, either on probation (often in lieu of a prison sentence) or parole (generally following prison for the remaining portion of the sentence).

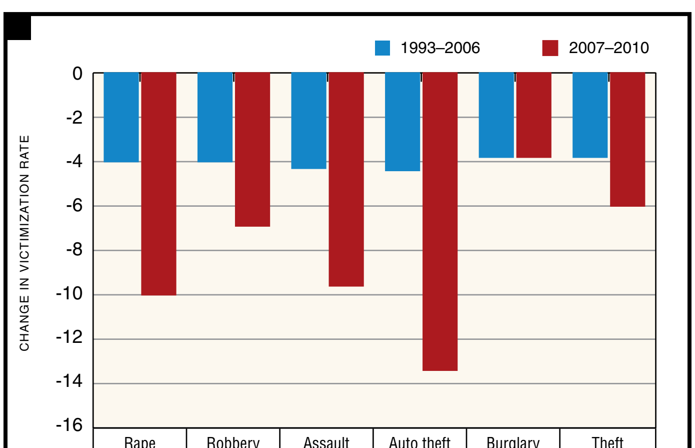
The figure below documents this rise, but it also shows how correctional populations have declined by about 3.7 percent since 2007. Prison incarceration has been relatively flat at approximately 1.5 million, but both probation and jail populations declined between December 31, 2007 and December 31, 2010. Perhaps due to recession-related early prison release practices, parolees i*ncreased* over this period, from about 826,000 to 840,676 in 2010.

Although several correctional populations have dipped during the recent recession, this represents a tiny drop from an enormous bucket. In fact, United States incarceration rates remain five to seven times higher than those of other democratic nations (see, for example, Roy Walmsley's *World Prison Population List, 8th Edition*). To provide some perspective on the scale of American punishment, Sarah Shannon and I prepared the cartogram below for the new Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology.

Here, the sizes of the nations in the map are adjusted in proportion to their relative incarceration rates. The United States looks bloated because it has the highest total jail and prison incarceration rate in the world (756 per 100,000 in 2008). Nations with low incarceration rates, such as Canada, Northern Europe, and much of Africa, shrivel just as dramatically on the map, while nations that are large in land area but lower in incarceration rates, such as China and India, are also noticeably smaller. Although prison populations are growing worldwide, only Russia (629) and Rwanda (604) have incarceration rates that come anywhere near the U.S. rate -– and the recession has done little to change this situation.

But the degree of criminal punishment also varies dramatically *within* the United States. Louisiana's 2010 rate of 867 per 100,000 is more than 5 times higher than Maine's rate of 148 per 100,000. There is also tremendous regional variation in punishment, with imprisonment rates in the South long exceeding those of the Northeast and Midwest (though racial disparities in punishment tend to be much higher in the North

FIGURE 4. Change in NCVS victimization rate, 2007-2010



	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Auto theft	Burglary	Theft
1993–2006	-4.0%	-4.0%	-4.3%	-4.4%	-3.8%	-3.8%
2007–2010	-10.0%	-6.9%	-9.6%	-13.4%	-3.8%	-6.0%

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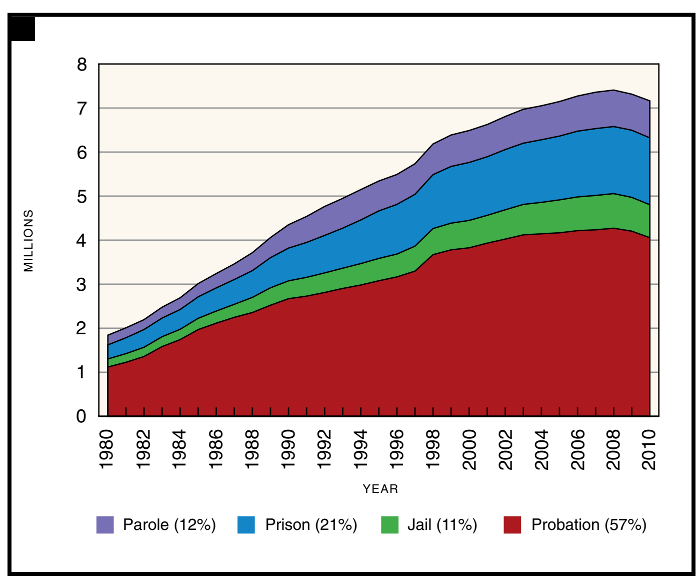
FIGURE 5. Correctional Populations in the United States, 1980-2010



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than in the South). The figure below shows the highest current incarceration rates in a belt stretching across Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and South Carolina.

While these broad regional patterns have not changed dramatically since the start of the recession, some states have continued to expand incarceration while others have begun to scale back. State prison costs vary dramatically, but estimates vary from about $25,000 to $50,000 per inmate per year. Given the recent financial exigencies in many states, some observers expect a shift away from prisons and toward less expensive community-based alternatives, such as probation and parole.

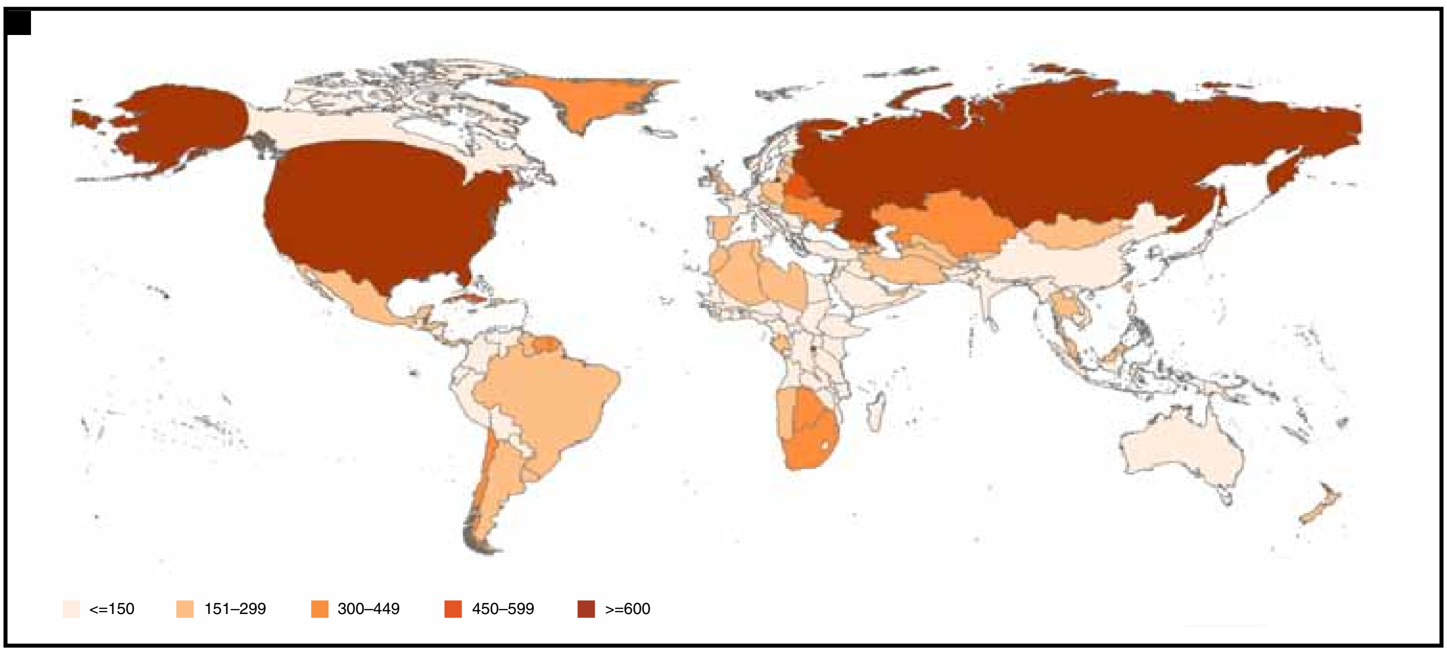
As the figure indicates, states such as Alaska, Georgia, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York all reduced their imprisonment rates by 10 percent or more between 2007 and 2010. In contrast, Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia have all *increased* their rate of prison incarceration by at least 6 percent.

While informative, the general trends discussed thus far obscure some gross and persistent inequalities. In particular, the story of American criminal punishment is deeply intertwined with racial disparities. In 2010, the incarceration rate for African American males was over 3,000 per 100,000, a rate more than 6 times that of white males and 65 times that of white females. The next figure shows how these rates changed between 2007 and 2010. To date, these extreme racial disparities in punishment have been little affected by the recession.

Crime and Complacency

This brief review of statistics before and since the Great Recession's onset provides clear evidence for a decline in crime from 2007-2010. It also shows a consistent, albeit less steep, drop over that period in most correctional popula-

FIGURE 6. Cartogram of World Incarceration Rates per 100,000 Population (Shannon and Uggen, 2012)



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tions. To date, then, there is little evidence that great numbers of people have "turned to crime" in response to economic recession.

Of course, these broad trends reveal little about the specific causes of crime. As noted at the outset, the demographic, economic, and social forces that drive crime rates higher or lower are always changing simultaneously, complicating efforts to isolate the net recession effect. While few rigorous studies span the Great Recession era, criminologists are beginning to understand why crime has dropped so precipitously since the 1990s (and, for some offenses, since the 1980s).

To explain the long-term global drop in property crime, for example, Eric Baumer and Kevin Wolff cite both "target hardening" (including better home security and the proliferation of cell phones) and improving *subjective* economic conditions. In measuring the latter, researchers such as Richard Rosenfeld, Robert Fornango, and Steven Messner are looking well beyond unemployment rates, showing how factors such as consumer confidence help explain rates of robbery and burglary. Others point to the short-term incapacitative effects of high incarceration rates, though punishment alone cannot explain the crime decline.

Regardless of the long-term trends, however, there is little evidence to date that other factors are masking a recession-linked upsurge in crime. The lone exception to this pattern may be burglary, which has dropped a bit less than other crimes since 2007. Nevertheless, even burglary has continued to fall throughout the recession, at a rate of about 1 percent per year in the official statistics and 4 percent per year in victimization surveys.

While there is much good news to report, however, a myopic focus on positive crime *trends* can obscure a really big and disturbing picture—the outsized *levels* of crime and punishment in America. Rates of U.S. crime and (especially) punishment remain unusually high by international standards. And none of the foregoing analysis provides any reassurance that recent trends will not reverse in the near future. There is simply no way to determine at this point how the crime picture will look in 2015, particularly if the economic situation worsens or fails to improve. In fact, preliminary 2011 statistics show that crimes such as burglary could once again be rising in several jurisdictions.

Even more importantly, the costs of crime and the pains of punishment fall disproportionately on those least equipped to bear them. While the news thus far should assuage our worst fears, the crime effects of this recession are likely to be felt more harshly and directly in the years to come.

FIGURE 7. Imprisonment per 100,000 in the United States, 2010

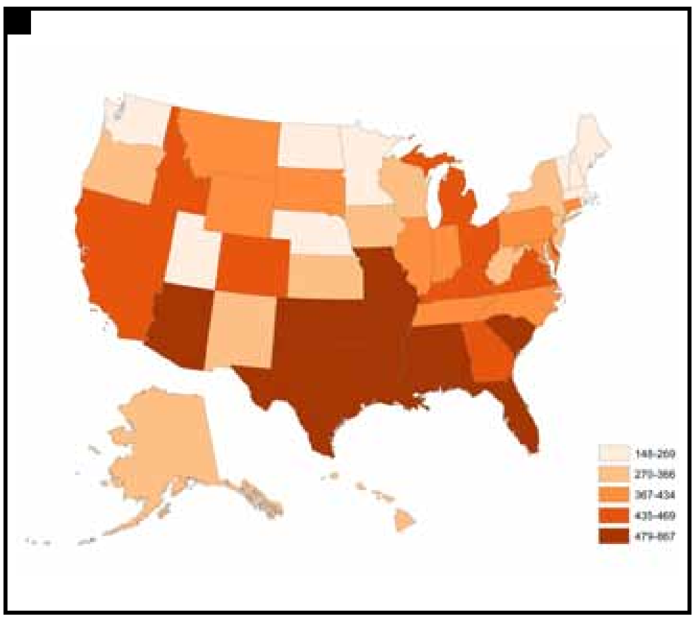

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FIGURE 8. Changes in State Incarceration Rates, 2007-2010.

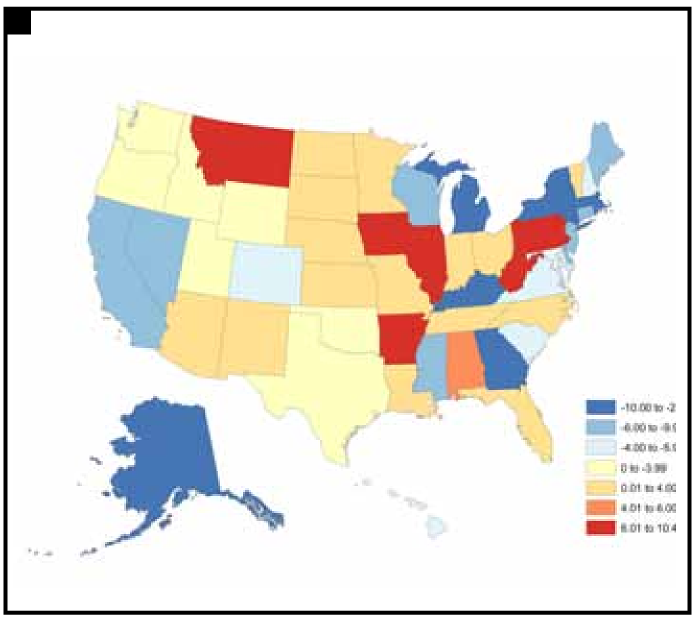

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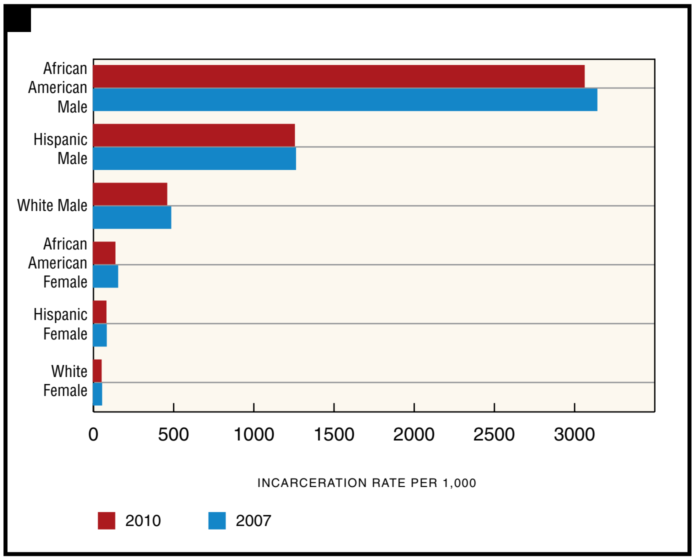
FIGURE 9. Incarceration Rates by Race, Ethnicity, and Sex



Source:

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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