

**Highlighting New
Poverty Research**by **Becky Pettit**

"Enumerating Inequality: The Constitution, the Census Bureau, and the Criminal Justice System," forthcoming, *Connecticut Public Interest Law Journal*

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The West Coast Poverty Center's **POVERTY RESEARCH FLASH** highlights new research by Center faculty affiliates and others on causes, consequences, and effective policy responses to poverty, with an emphasis on changing labor markets, demographic shifts, family structure, and social and economic inequality. More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wcpc.washington.edu

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Enumerating Inequality: The Constitution, the Census Bureau, and the Criminal Justice System

Background/Issue. The U.S. prison population has grown significantly since the mid-1970s. As of 2008, there were 2.3 million people in federal, state, and local prisons and jails and an additional 7.3 million people under the supervision of the criminal justice system. A disproportionate share of inmates are minority and low-skill men, and the risks of becoming involved with the prison system are highest among this group. For example, nearly 60 percent of black men without a high school diploma can expect to spend time in state or federal prison.

In a forthcoming article, WCPC Faculty Affiliate and Associate Professor of Sociology Becky Pettit argues that much existing data on social and economic inequality is misleading because current data collection methods systematically exclude a large and growing share of Americans. In particular, Pettit argues, the growth of the prison population and the life circumstances of many former inmates have made these millions of Americans, including a disproportionate share of low-skill African-American men, invisible. In addition to its political and economic consequences, the invisibility of these individuals to demographers (and policymakers) means that various commonly-accepted assumptions about the population and its social and economic health may be overly optimistic.

The data that most researchers rely on to create social and economic indicators come from the decennial Census and from more frequent surveys of samples of individuals drawn using probability-based sampling from households and intended to be representative of the broader population, such as the Current Population Survey. However, both of these sources of information fail to count various populations. Pettit argues that the growth of the prison population concentrates the undercount among disadvantaged and minority men.

In theory, the decennial Census covers the entire population. In practice, the Census is subject to undercounting because of non-response and an inability to locate various individuals. Although the magnitude of the undercount has declined over time and was estimated at well under one percent of the overall population in 2000, researchers estimate that up to 3 percent of the African American population and 5 percent of African American men may have been excluded from the 2000 Census data. One contributing factor to the substantial undercount of African Americans may be the fact that disadvantaged persons often live in unstable circumstances. Former prison inmates may be particularly likely to be difficult to reach.

The growing prison population poses a greater threat to surveys that use statistical sampling, many of which draw their samples from the universe of households, specifically excluding the institutionalized population. As a result, sample-based surveys may miss 1 in 9 black men between the ages of 22 and 30 and nearly one-third of black men with less than a high school diploma. Between the invisibility of the incarcerated and the difficulty of locating non-institutionalized men, 16 percent or more of black men may be excluded from commonly-used data about the population.

Implications. Pettit identifies three major ramifications of the mismatch between the way population data are gathered and the growth of the prison population. First, the exclusion of these individuals from the Census data used for apportionment of congressional seats denies those individuals and their communities' proportional representation. Second, these data sets are used to allocate a substantial share of public resources. Currently, 16 percent of the federal budget is allocated to state and local governments through general revenue sharing or grants-in-aid, with much of those allocations linked to data about population size and characteristics. To the extent that these statistics are misleading, resources may be poorly targeted. Finally, the invisibility of these men from social statistics misstates the American social condition, especially as it concerns African Americans. Existing data may overstate progress by, for example, masking higher unemployment rates and lower relative wages if those who are excluded are more disadvantaged than those who are counted. Addressing the issue of statistical invisibility would therefore provide a more accurate picture of the population and its condition.

Poverty Research Flash

The West Coast Poverty Center serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the west coast states. The Center, located at the University of Washington, is one of three regional poverty centers funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE). More information about the West Coast Poverty Center is available from our website: www.wcpc.washington.edu

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Enumerating Inequality: The Constitution, the Census Bureau, and the Criminal Justice System

New research from Becky Pettit

As of 2008, there were 2.3 million people in federal, state, and local prisons and jails and an additional 7.3 million people under the supervision of the criminal justice system. In a forthcoming article, WCPC Faculty Affiliate and Associate Professor of Sociology Becky Pettit argues that the growth of the prison population and the life circumstances of many former inmates have made these millions of Americans, including a disproportionate share of low-skill African-American men, invisible because current data collection methods tend to exclude or overlook this large and growing share of Americans. Between the invisibility of the incarcerated in many surveys and the difficulty of locating non-institutionalized, low-skill men in the decennial Census, 16 percent or more of black men may be excluded from commonly-used data about the population. In addition to its political and economic consequences, the invisibility of these individuals to demographers (and policymakers) means that various commonly-accepted assumptions about the population and its social and economic health may be overly optimistic.