Background on Wisconsin’s Prison System: Key Workforce Issues

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1. Wisconsin has the highest incarceration rate for African American males in state prisons and local jails among all the states in the United States, according to 2010 U.S. census data. One in eight African American men, ages 18-64, was in jail or state prison at the time of the census count. The state’s black male incarceration rate is nearly double the national average.1

2. The number of imprisoned black males of prime working age has increased to such an extent that over half (54%) of all African American men from Milwaukee County in their 30s and half of men in their early 40s have been or are currently incarcerated in adult Department of Corrections (DOC) institutions.2 A third of the incarcerated black men from the county had only non-violent offenses and 40% were drug offenders.

3. Wisconsin also leads the nation in incarceration of its Native American men with 1 in 13 working age Native American men in state prisons or local jails in 2010. By contrast, Wisconsin’s rate of incarceration of white men (about 1 in 80) is similar to the national average.

4. The prison population in Wisconsin has more than tripled since 1990, fueled by increased government funding for drug enforcement (rather than treatment) and prison construction, three-strikes rules, mandatory minimum sentence laws, truth-in-sentencing replacing judicial discretion in setting punishments concentrated policing in minority communities, and state incarceration for minor probation and supervision violations.

5. In the 12-year period from 1990 through 2011 Wisconsin incarcerated over 105,000 of its residents in state correctional facilities. Upon release these ex-offenders often face a lifetime of barriers to employment, limitations on their access to educational opportunities and social services, and the stigma of being labeled “ex-cons.”

6. Wisconsin spends over $1 billion a year on Department of Corrections expenditures ($1,274,863,300 budgeted in 2011-2012, with annual per capita operations costs of $33,414 per prisoner).3 To finance the high state levels of imprisonment and supervision of offenders, the Wisconsin governor and legislature allocate more state taxpayer dollars for the Department of Corrections than for the entire University of Wisconsin higher education system (including UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, all of the other four-year and two-year UW campuses, and UW-Extension).4

7. Mental illness is a critical factor for many incarcerated and released prison inmates. A third (32%) of the 20,544 men and three-fourths (76%) of the 1,198 women in Wisconsin state correctional facilities in September 2013 had been diagnosed with mental health conditions. Of these, 7% of the men and 26% of the women were classified as having bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, personality disorders, or severe depression.5
8. The opportunity for a second chance in Wisconsin after prison is limited by the court system that maintains a website, the Consolidated Court Automation Program (CCAP), listing the arrest and incarceration records of its adult state residents, usually for the rest of their lives. As noted by a Wisconsin State Public Defender report, “Widespread record availability has profoundly impacted individuals’ ability to move beyond an arrest or criminal conviction. Any potential employer, landlord, creditor, or government program administrator can check criminal court records at any time; therefore any prior conviction (or criminal charge, even if ultimately dismissed) becomes an easily detectible and a frequently permanent blemish upon an individual.”

9. The driver’s license is essential for getting to job sites and for avoiding arrests for illegal driving, yet only 10% of African American men with DOC incarceration records have a valid Wisconsin driver’s license with no recent suspensions and revocations. The most frequent reason for license suspensions and revocations in Wisconsin is financial (i.e., failure to pay fines and forfeitures), and not for unsafe driving.

10. The link between mass incarceration and poverty can be seen in Milwaukee County where two-thirds of imprisoned African American men came from six zipcodes in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. The ability of ex-offenders to support their families is very limited for many released inmates. Most Milwaukee ex-offenders return from prison into inner city neighborhoods that have extremely large job gaps (i.e., 25 to 1 in May 2009) between the number of active job seekers compared to available full-time work. Ex-offenders’ successful reentry into the workforce is critical for the public safety and economic well-being of local communities. They are now, however, competing with unemployed and underemployed skilled and unskilled workers for jobs that become available.

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1 The findings in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are from John Pawasarat and Lois M. Quinn, Wisconsin’s Mass Incarceration of African American Males: Workforce Challenges of 2013 (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 2013). The totals are based on analysis of Wisconsin Department of Corrections data files of adults incarcerated from January 1990 through January 2012.
2 Nearly half (49%) of all the African American men in their 30s in the state of Wisconsin have already spent time in state prison.
3 Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau, Adult Corrections Program (Informational Paper #56, January 2013).
5 Wisconsin Department of Corrections Division of Adult institutions, “Corrections at a Glance: September 2013.”
7 John Pawasarat, Suspension and Revocation Status Report for Milwaukee County (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, May 2012)
8 Survey of Job Openings in the 7 Counties of Southeastern Wisconsin: Week of May 25, 2009 (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, 2009).

For more information, see the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute website at www.eti.uwm.edu.