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## Ethnic and Racial Studies

**Becky Pettit (2012) *Invisible Men: Mass Incarceration and the Myth of Black Progress*, New York: Russell Sage, 156 pp, \$29.95**

This book stands as a correction to conventional survey approaches and assumptions that form the evidential basis of social policy towards, and social research about, the conditions of poor African American men in the US. As the author states (xii) 'Tangential connections to households, curtailed political rights, and weak attachments to the labour market relegate ex-inmates to a liminal status in which they are rarely counted, much less considered, for the design of social policy and in the conduct of social science research.' Not counted, progress in the condition of such men is much over stated and their existence rendered invisible. While 2.3 million inmates of prisons and jails 'sat invisible' in 2009, half of them black, many, many more suffer the exclusionary consequences of leaving prison. Their fearful hyper visibility in the US media portrayals belies their concealment and disappearance in social and economic life. Most of all, the household-centred approach of population surveys hides the real extent of inequality and poverty among young, low skilled black men in the US. The inexorable growth of the penal system disproportionately concentrated on certain racial and social groups distorts generalisations about the socio-economic status and conditions of the American population because of these missing 2.3 plus millions.

In exploring the consequences of this statistical exclusion of inmates from US data, the author attempts to show how racial and social inequality are concealed over generations creating a myth of black progress. Different chapters in the book cover different dimensions of this narrowing of administrative and survey data, which profoundly influences the measurement of racial inequality in educational attainment, employment, and average wages. Bias in estimates of for example, high school dropout rates, or trends in voting, because more young black men are likely to be in prison or jail disguises the fact that little of the claimed improvement in schooling and employment over the last few decades has actually been achieved. It is simply that large numbers of young black men have been taken out of the equation or consideration. Or, they take themselves out by eluding identification by formal authorities and eschew formal attachments to work and family in an effort to avoid the criminal justice system and prison. The overall conclusion is clear enough – that the parlous state of social conditions among African American men is underestimated as conventional survey data overstates their level of education, economic well-being, political participation, and social integration.

In setting out to examine the effects of US prison and jail growth 'on the construction of social statistics in a number of domains', and questioning the validity and usefulness of data for the design and evaluation of public policy and social research, the book assumes that policy is importantly informed by evidence in the first place, rather than ideology or political exigency. Therefore the problem to be overcome – poor data gathering and bias sampling – is itself sufficient reason to explain or proffer a solution. What is missing from this account is an admission that US economic, social, health and penal policy over many years has eschewed addressing social and racial inequality in any substantive way. Indeed, as writers

like Joseph Stiglitz in *The Price of Inequality* (2013) and many others have shown, US social mobility has declined and inequality greatly increased since the 1970s, especially since the Civil Rights movement and among African Americans, despite an explosion of pre-crash, low waged, insecure employment opportunities. To be fair to the author – and to her credit – she carefully shows the reader in chapter four that the ‘illusions of progress’ in areas such as education, employment and wages, are in part explained by the contribution incarceration plays. But only in part, given wider forces that drive American inequality. The author however, wants to go further by stating ‘The criminal justice system rivals deindustrialisation and segregation in its effects on the educational and economic opportunities of black men.’ (69) Mass incarceration (particularly of black men) is seen as the fundamental and overriding cause of racial inequality and disadvantage both in terms of its direct effects on the individuals imprisoned and in its indirect effects on their children, families and communities (examined in chapter 6).

Improving the ways administrative and survey data is collected and analysed, updated in their assumptions and reader to dig deeper (especially better incorporating inmates), are important and necessary tasks. Especially if this data is comprehensive and large enough and builds in longitudinal dimensions as is the case in Scandinavia so as to be able to apply powerful causal and comparative modelling to the causes of crime and victimisation, and to policing and criminal justice processes, to uncover relationships and variables, including race and ethnicity. Mass incarceration (even by ethnicity and race alone) is no longer the preserve of ‘American exceptionalism’, and has become a strong feature of some European and Australasian societies, particularly in relation to ‘immigrants’ and indigenous peoples. ‘Social facts’ – including the effects of incarceration – and their enumeration however, depend for their efficacy on what people want to know and what is worth knowing and, whether there is the political will to reflect on the past, present and future consequences of incarcerating a third of African American men. The author has successfully shown how poor the tools are and has gone some way to say what is needed to truly dissect and understand the social conditions of disadvantaged black men in US society. Whether this paucity and poverty of methods and data is benign or malign neglect can be left open.

## References

Joseph Stiglitz (2013) *The Price of Inequality*, London: Penquin Books.

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