

# Two in five African-American women know a prisoner, according to study

June 11 2015, by Ted Boscia

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African-American adults – particularly women – on average have a significantly larger share of their social circle behind bars than whites, according to the first national estimates of Americans' ties to prisoners.

The research, led by University of Washington associate professor of sociology Hedwig Lee '03 and co-authored by Cornell associate professor of policy analysis and management Christopher Wildeman, shows further [racial inequality](#) wrought by the U.S. prison boom, with potentially harmful consequences to families and communities lacking social supports to raise children and manage households.

The article, in *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, analyzes data from the 2006 General Social Survey to examine blacks and whites' self-reported ties to acquaintances, [family members](#), neighbors or people they trust in state or federal prison. The data tell a grim story:

- 44 percent of black women and 32 percent of [black men](#) have a family member in prison, compared to 12 percent of white women and 6 percent of white men;
- Black women are far more likely to have an acquaintance (35 percent vs. 15 percent), family member (44 percent vs. 12 percent), neighbor (22 percent vs. 4 percent) or someone they trust (17 percent vs. 5 percent) in prison than are white women;
- On average, black men report having 17 confidants and white men 688 acquaintances, yet black men are far more likely to have a confidant in prison than white men are to have even one

acquaintance imprisoned.

"Our estimates show even deeper racial inequalities in connectedness to prisoners than previous work might have implied," said Wildeman, a professor in Cornell's College of Human Ecology. "Because imprisonment has negative consequences not only for the men and women who cycle through the system but also for the parents, partners and progeny they leave behind, mass imprisonment's long-term consequences of racial inequality in the United States might be even greater than any of us working in this area had originally suspected."

"We think this work can bring visibility to a significant proportion of our population dealing with the day-to-day and long-term consequences of having a family member in [prison](#)," Lee added.

In the past four decades, the U.S. incarceration rate has become the highest in the world. According to recent estimates, the U.S. imprisonment rate is 716 per 100,000 individuals, outpacing repressive nations such as Russia and well beyond other developed countries. Currently, one in every 15 adult black men is behind bars compared to one in every 106 adult [white men](#).

The article, "Racial Inequalities in Connectedness to Imprisoned Individuals in the United States," is co-authored by Tyler McCormick at the University of Washington and Margaret Hicken at the University of Michigan. The study was unfunded.

**More information:** "Racial Inequalities in Connectedness to Imprisoned Individuals in the United States." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*. Published online: 20 May 2015. DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X15000065](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X15000065)

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