

Mass incarceration results in significant increases in industrial emissions, study finds

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Mass incarceration is as much an environmental problem as it is a social one, according to a new Portland State University study that finds increases in incarceration are significantly associated with increases in industrial emissions.

Julius McGee, the study's lead author and an environmental sociologist,

argues that the construction and maintenance of prisons, the production of goods and materials used inside prisons and the use of [prison labor](#) to manufacture industrial equipment for the government and [private companies](#) all contribute to increased emissions.

"As we shift the population into prisons, we see a clear impact on how economic development contributes to emissions," said McGee, an assistant professor of urban studies and Black Studies at PSU.

The [prison population](#) began to grow in the 1970s, largely as a punitive response to the [social movements](#) that emerged post-World War II, McGee said. Today, more than 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the U.S.

Between 1980 and 2004, 936 prisons were built in the U.S., compared with the 711 prisons built in the 168 years prior. McGee says the construction of new prisons, as well as the renovation of existing prisons, require substantial amounts of fossil fuels. Cement, for example, is one of the largest emitters of carbon dioxide in the built environment.

"This is housing infrastructure that otherwise wouldn't have been built," McGee said, adding that most incarcerated people are forcibly removed from inner-city neighborhoods and transported to massive warehouse-like structures in rural areas.

Mass incarceration disproportionately affects black and brown people—those whose contributions to carbon dioxide emissions are relatively small, McGee said. But once they go to prison, they become coerced consumers of industrial goods and increased industrial activity. Prisoners require beds, clothing, hygiene products and furniture—and the prison supply companies that manufacture and distribute these goods have continuously expanded their production in response to a growing incarcerated population.

Lastly, prison labor programs help to stimulate industrial growth by reducing the cost of labor. Prisoners are paid as little as \$.023 to \$1.15 per hour or sometimes not at all.

"Employment in industrial manufacturing has gone down, but manufacturing in total dollars has not gone down," McGee said. "What's changed is where the labor and jobs are."

If companies did not use prison labor, McGee says, they'd use unionized labor, which requires them to invest more in workers and less into expanding growth.

"Industrial manufacturing has exploited workers, consumers, and the environment by continually reducing the cost of labor, increasing the demand of industrial goods, and increasing the use of fossil fuels," the study reads. "Incarceration allows these patterns to continue unabated, and in many instances provides the tools necessary to accelerate the pace at which such patterns recur."

More information: Julius Alexander McGee et al, Locked into Emissions: How Mass Incarceration Contributes to Climate Change, *Social Currents* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/2329496520974006](https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496520974006)

Provided by Portland State University

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