



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

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Community Action

## Minnesota and the nation in the age of mass incarceration

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*Poor people, especially those of color, are worth nothing to corporations and private contractors in they are on the street. In jails and prisons, however, they can each generate corporate revenues of \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year.*

– Chris Hedges

*Prison is the only form of public housing that the government has truly invested in over the past five decades.*

– Marc Lamont Hill

Earlier this week, the NACCP kicked off its 108th Annual Convention in Baltimore with a panel discussion titled “New Voices, New Visions: Moving Beyond Mass Incarceration.” The seminar, hosted by national political commentator and CEO of the Washington DC-based IMPACT Strategies Angela Rye, also included the likes of State’s Attorney for Baltimore the Honorable Marilyn J. Mosby, Georgetown University Michael Eric Dyson, and Colin Warner, the subject of the upcoming major motion picture *Crown Heights*.

Warner, a Brooklyn resident and native of Trinidad spent nearly 21 years in prison for a crime that he did not commit. Now among the most critical, yet conveniently overlooked aspects of poverty in America is the mass incarceration of its citizens. Consider recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics and the

Justice Policy Institute that reveals that more than 2.2 million Americans are currently serving time in local jails and state and federal prisons. This is a nearly 800% increase during the last five decades.

Furthermore, a report from the US Department of Education illustrates that over the last 35 years, state and local funding for corrections has increased at a rate more than three times spending on public education.

There are another 4.75 million adults who are ensnared in the criminal justice system through their parole or probationary status. When you add this figure to the number actually behind bars, the math shows that approximately 1 out of every 35 American adults is directly involved with a department of corrections somewhere in this nation. Not to mention that there are already tens of thousands of American kids caught up in the juvenile justice system.

The precipitous spike in the U.S. prison population since the 1970s has paralleled the proliferation of America’s poor which now counts roughly 44 million people among its ranks while another 100 million or so can be classified as economically insecure. The link between poverty and contact with the criminal justice system has been well established and in 2011, Alexander Busansky of the National Council on Crime Delinquency, wrote “The grim truth is that children in poverty face an increased likelihood of entering child protective services and the juvenile justice system. Similarly, adults in poverty are more likely to enter the criminal justice and adult protective services systems.”

While Minnesota continues to boast one of the lowest per capita incarceration rates in the United States, that measure is immediately tempered by the fact that the

state ranks near the top nationally in the disproportionate imprisonment of minorities, particularly African Americans and Native Americans.

Although African Americans make up slightly more than six percent of all Minnesota residents, a July 2017 summary from the Minnesota Department of Corrections shows that they account for 34.4% of the total adult prison population. That same summary reveals that Native Americans, while accounting for little more than one percent of state residents, currently make up 9.6% of the Minnesota prison population. This represents an increase of nearly one percent (up from 8.8%) in the past two years alone.

It would seem that the disparate incarceration rate among Minnesotans of color is commensurate with some of the state's other key racial distinctions, which include among others one of the nation's highest homeownership gaps, one of its highest academic achievement gaps, and one of the highest black/white employment gaps.

When discussions around poverty occur in this country – whether in the media, academia, human service industry, and even in our homes – familiar topics such as education, healthcare, employment, housing,

transportation, and others often dominate the debate. Nonetheless, we must continue to study, understand, and address the role that our criminal justice system plays in the underpinning and perpetuation of poverty throughout our communities. We have already lost generations of young people to the crisis of mass incarceration. We can't afford to lose anymore. Their absence not only affects that quality of life for them and their families, but for all of us.

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