



## Why Are So Many Black American Men In Prison And Cannot Vote?

**W**hy are so many Black American men in our state and federal prisons? This question brings great concern for Returning Citizens and their family members.

According to the Marshall Project, "taxpayers invest over \$80 billion to incarcerate millions of prisoners. Family members of inmates spend an additional \$2 to \$8 billion in telephone calls, and prison visits to make prison life bearable for their loved ones.

Many women work two and three jobs to assist their loved ones and pay their household bills." Based on the data, it appears that prison is a booming business used to support the judicial and penal systems and employ residents of rural communities.

One private prison threatened to sue the state of California due to the dwindling number of inmates in their private prisons. It bears to reason that "someone" must go to prison to support the prison complex financially.

On November 20, 1979, there were only 13 prisons in the state of Florida. I recall the date well, as it's the day I was released from prison. Today, there are 67 prisons in Florida, mostly located in rural communities.

Additionally, 30,870 or 33.2% White males are in

prison, while 39,874 or 45.4% Black Americans are in our Florida prisons, according to the Florida Department of Corrections 2019-2020 Annual Report. Black Americans comprise a majority of the prison population.

Why are so many Black Americans imprisoned, and how does it impact the democracy process at large?

Florida leads the nation in people serving a life sentence under the "two strikes" law formally called the Prison Release Reoffender law. In addition, "almost all state prosecutors seek to enhance the sentence of all eligible defendants," according to the Marshall Project.

An example of such flagrant action is evident in the Tampa Bay area. Hillsborough County had 3,405 eligible cases and chose to enhance 1,828 or 54% of their cases. Pasco and Pinellas County had 5,486 eligible cases and enhanced all 5,486 cases. This means a defendant often received more time.

It's an odd scenario considering the accused are supposed to be advised of the direct consequences of a guilty plea by the judge or his attorney as mandated by Florida Rules of Criminal Procedure 3.171 and 3.172 (j). 80% to 90% of the Public Defenders cases result in a

plea bargain. One wonders how many current incarcerated citizens and Returning Citizens understood the impact of taking a plea bargain.

Black American men make up roughly 7% of the Florida population, yet over 45% are incarcerated and stripped of their voting rights. Votes that could shift policies if Black, Brown, and poor individuals were heard at the ballot box.

In an effort to reduce the well-known "school to prison pipeline" and create a uniform plea bargain system that is equitable for all residents, returning citizens and their families must speak up and use their voices for change.

### How Can You Make A Difference?

Complete the Survey on page 10-A.

COACH Foundation, Inc. is requesting a copy of the Plea Agreement of currently incarcerated people and Returning Citizens who were not advised they would be unable to vote or complete their sentence until all fines, fees, and court costs were paid in full. We are working to promote a more uniform plea bargain system.

Comments and questions are welcome and can be emailed to [wdixon2558@aol.com](mailto:wdixon2558@aol.com) or mailed to COACH Foundation, Inc. PO Box 310747 Tampa, FL 33680.

Please note: the intent of this article is not to give legal advice. Please seek the help of an effective post-conviction attorney if you have a legal question or the judge did not inform you that you cannot vote or complete your sentence until you've paid all your fines, fees, and court cost.