We are the Drug Policy Alliance.

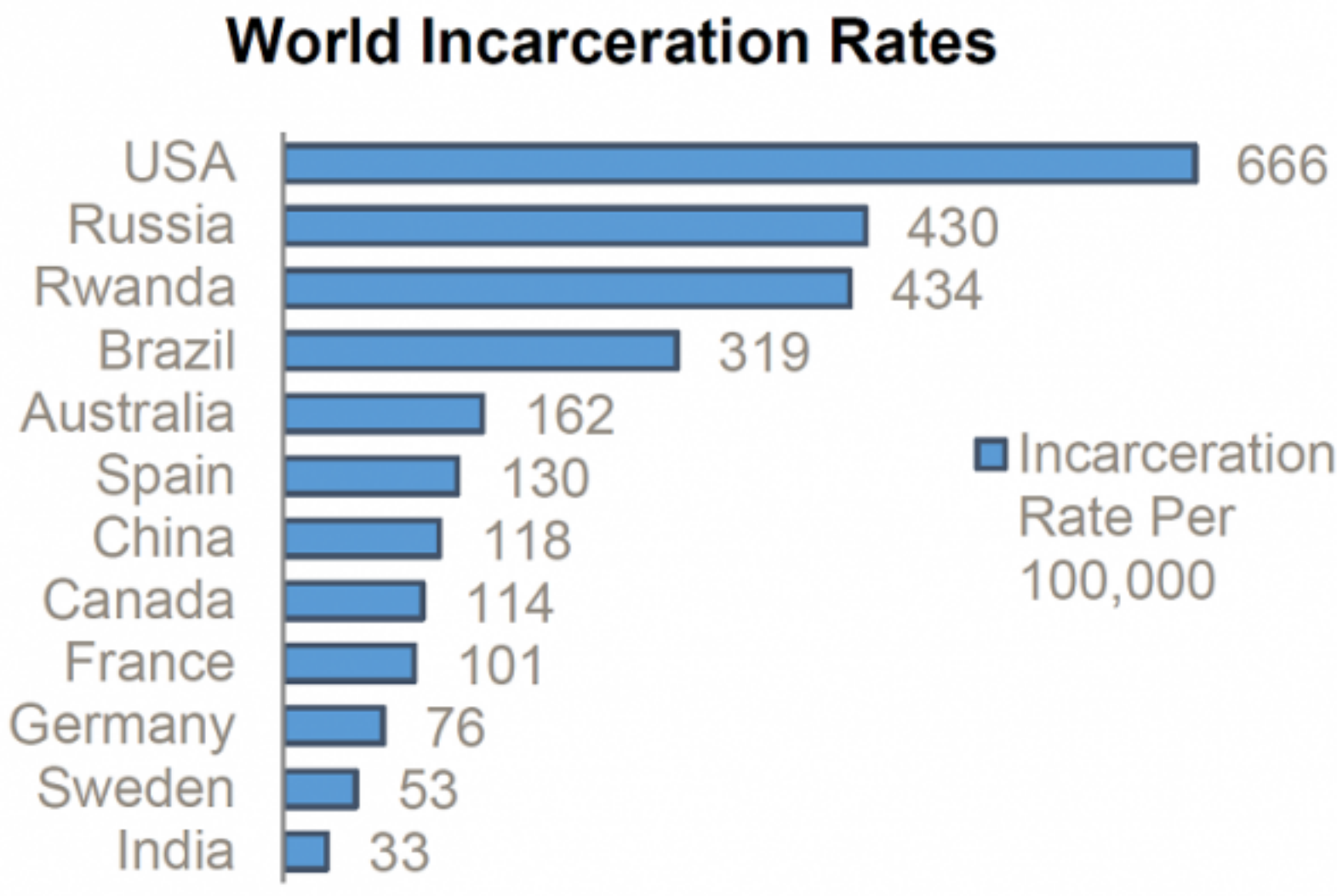
JANUARY 25, 2018

RESOURCE

The Drug War, Mass Incarceration and Race (English/Spanish)

Overview

With less than 5 percent of the world's population but nearly 25 percent of its incarcerated population, the United States imprisons more people than any other nation in the world – largely due to the war on drugs. Misguided drug laws and harsh sentencing requirements have produced profoundly unequal outcomes for people of color. Although rates of drug use and sales are similar across racial and ethnic lines, black and Latino people are far more likely to be criminalized than white people.



Source: International Centre for Prison Studies, World Prison Brief.

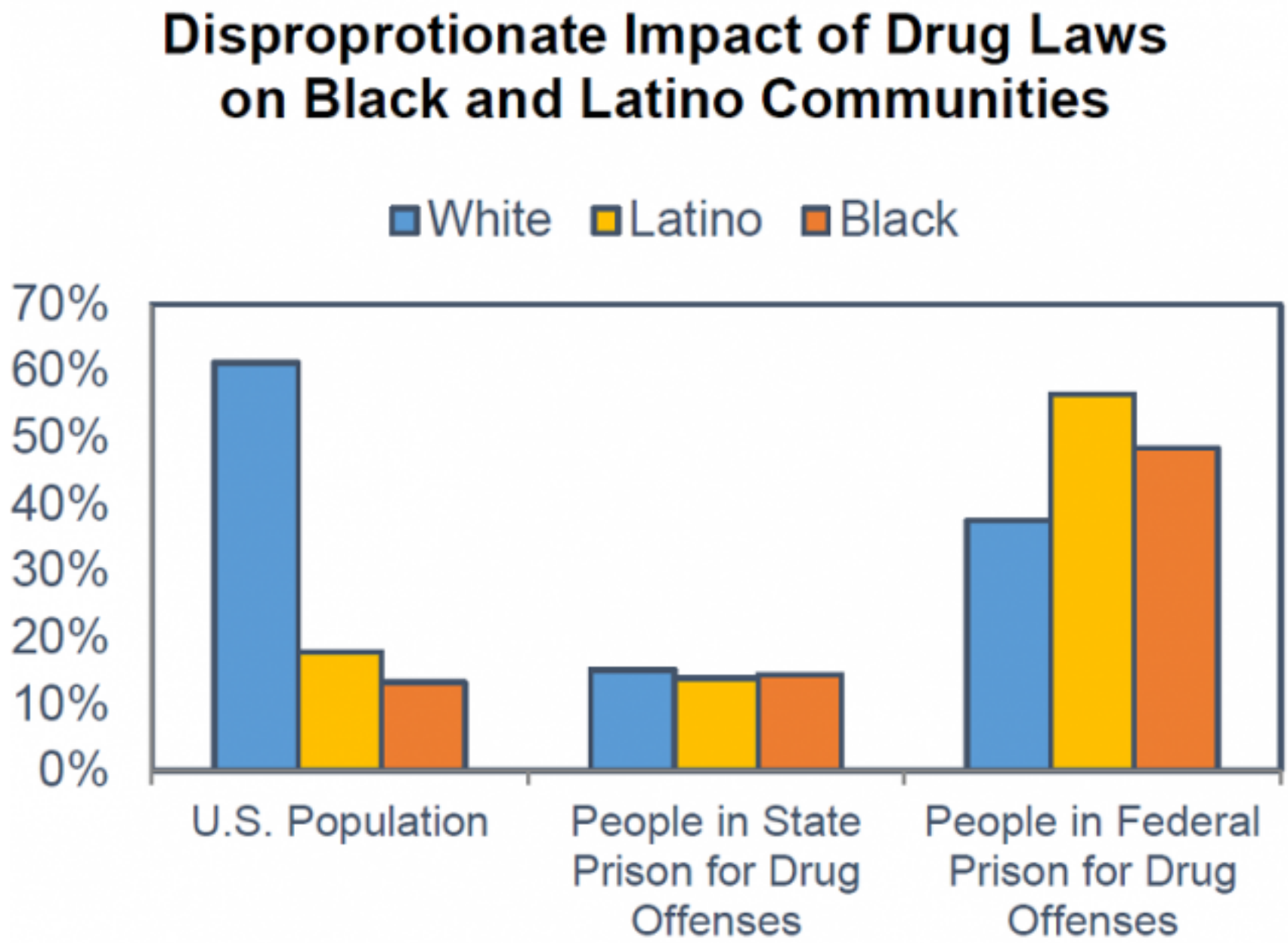
Key Facts

The Drug War Drives Mass Incarceration and Racial Disparities in U.S. Judicial Systems

- **There were more than 1.5 million drug arrests in the U.S. in 2016. The vast majority – more than 80% – were for possession only.**

- **People of color experience discrimination at every stage of the judicial system and are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, harshly sentenced and saddled with a lifelong criminal record. This is particularly the case for drug law violations.**

- **Research shows that prosecutors are twice as likely to pursue a mandatory minimum sentence for black people as for white people charged with the same offense. Among people who received a mandatory minimum sentence in 2011, 38% were Latino and 31% were black.**



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Bureau of Justice Statistics

Mass Incarceration Destroys Families

- **2.7 million children are growing up in U.S. households in which one or more parents are incarcerated. Two-thirds of these parents are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, including a substantial proportion who are incarcerated for drug law violations.**

- **One in nine black children has an incarcerated parent, compared to one in 28 Latino children and one in 57 white children.**

Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration

- **Punishment for a drug law violation is not only meted out by the criminal justice system, but is also perpetuated by policies denying child custody, voting rights, employment, business loans, licensing, student aid, public housing and other public assistance to**

people with criminal convictions.

- Such exclusions permanently relegate millions of Americans to second-class status, disproportionately people of color.

- One in 13 black people of voting age are denied the right to vote because of laws that disenfranchise people with felony convictions.

"Nothing has contributed more to the systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States than the War on Drugs." - Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow (2010)

Recommendations

1. Decriminalize drug possession, removing a major cause of arrest and incarceration of primarily people of color, helping more people receive drug treatment and redirecting law enforcement resources to prevent serious and violent crime.

2. Eliminate policies that result in disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates by changing police practices, rolling back harsh mandatory minimum sentences, and repealing sentencing disparities.

3. End policies that exclude people with a record of arrest or conviction from key rights and opportunities. These include barriers to voting, employment, public housing and other public assistance, loans, financial aid and child custody.

Download the fact sheet in English

Download the fact sheet in Spanish

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DRUG USERS

FEDERAL STUDENT AID ACCESS

MASS CRIMINALIZATION

RACE AND THE DRUG WAR

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

FACT SHEET

FEATURED RESOURCES

Best Practices: Protecting Immigrants When Decriminalizing or Legalizing Marijuana

DPA Podcast Episode 39: After Her Son Overdosed and Died, Jessie Dunleavy Realized it Was Preventable

DPA Podcast Episode 38: Keri Blakinger Reports on the Criminal Justice System That Once Held Her

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TAKE ACTION

Dismantle the Drug War

For the first time ever, we're finally seeing real momentum to decriminalize drugs at both the state and federal level. Join the fight to end the criminalization of people who use drugs.

Take action. →

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