

# Mass Incarceration in America's Prison System

## The Torture of Prisoners

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The courageous struggle of the prisoners at Pelican Bay should make many more people sit up and take notice and ask—and find the answers to—some important questions about the U.S. prison system.

*Why does the U.S., which has 5% of the world's population, have 25% of its prisoners?*

*Why has the number of prisoners in the U.S. gone from half a million in 1980 to over 2.3 million in the last three decades?*

*Why are so many of those incarcerated in the U.S. people of color?*

*And why does the U.S. routinely carry out torture in its prisons?*

The truth of the matter—and the bigger context for the inhumane conditions in maximum security units like the Pelican Bay Prison SHU—is that this system, with its police, laws, courts, and prisons is using *mass incarceration* to enforce oppressive economic and social relations, especially in terms of the systematic subjugation of Black people as a people. And I really encourage people to read the special *Revolution* issue on prisons, “From the Hellholes of Incarceration to a Future of Emancipation,” which provides a deep analysis of mass incarceration in the United States.

This system of U.S. capitalism, from its very *inception*, has, in large part, been built on and developed by carrying out the most brutal oppression of Native Americans, Black people and other people of color.

This oppression has been woven into the *whole fabric* of U.S. society, from the days of slavery until today. It has been and is an integral part of the economic and social structure in this country. White supremacy has and continues to maintain Black people in a subjugated position in every aspect of society. And all this has created, and today still maintains a “master class” of white people and a “pariah class” of Black people.

In this way, the systematic oppression of Black and other people of color has been, and continues to be, part of the very glue that holds U.S. society together—even as it has gone through different changes and been enforced in different ways. The outright ownership of Black people under slavery gave way to Jim Crow segregation and Ku Klux Klan terror. And now we have what has been called “the new Jim Crow” of police brutality and murder and the mass incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Black people.

The subjugation of Black people is a pillar of this system—a part of the economic and social

relations in society, and white supremacy is a key element in the dominant ideology. And this is why this system cannot get rid of the oppression of Black people—because to do so would mean tearing up and undermining the whole economic, social and ideological/culture basis of U.S. society.

*Why has there been such a drastic increase in the U.S. prison population?* This has never been in response to crime—crime rates have actually gone down over the last three decades. This has been about control and suppression. It started in response to the mass upsurges among Black people in the '60s—which shook the system and had a huge impact throughout society. At the same time, globalization and de-industrialization had devastated the inner cities and millions of Black people, especially the youth, who could no longer be profitably employed, were seen by this system as an unwanted, volatile “surplus” that had to be controlled. Concessions from the system, like programs that were supposed to address poverty and inequality, were being snatched back, leading to further impoverishment.

As the special *Revolution* issue on the oppression of Black people said, “Two things were at work: the needs of capital, which continued to gain advantage from racist discrimination and ghetto-ization of millions of African-Americans; and the necessity of the capitalists to not disrupt—and in fact to reassert and reinforce with a vengeance—the social glue of white supremacy—the ways in which the lie of the ‘master class’ were so integral to so many people’s understanding of ‘being American.’” (“The Oppression of Black People, The Crimes of This System and the Revolution We Need.”)

U.S. imperialism needed the subjugation of Black people more than ever, but could no longer do this in the naked, openly racist forms it had in the old Jim Crow. It is in this context that in 1969, H.R. Haldeman, President Nixon’s top assistant, wrote in his diary that “[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.” It is in this context that the “war on drugs” was launched—which has been the biggest factor behind the exponential rise in mass incarceration.

*Why are prisoners routinely tortured in U.S. prisons?* The kind of extreme torture being carried out in places like the Pelican Bay SHU is a function of the whole way this system has criminalized, demonized and dehumanized a whole section of society. It has to do with repressing those who this system *fears*; those this system sees have the *potential* to rise up against their conditions of oppression in a way that would really challenge their rule. The kind of torture being carried out in the Pelican Bay SHU serves as a brutal way to control those in prison. And it has a broader effect of mass terror against Black people throughout society.

The terror carried out by KKK lynch mobs in the South meant that *any* Black person had to walk in fear. Today, police brutality and murder, the practice of racial profiling and random “stop and frisk”; and mass incarceration targeting Black people and all the terror that entails—means that today *any* Black person has to walk in fear.

Today, mass incarceration is the leading edge of the oppression of Black people. This continues to have a devastating impact on those who are imprisoned: Many lives are ruined; many youth are literally thrown away, their potential wasted. It is almost impossible for those this system has branded a “felon” to make any kind of life for themselves if they ever get out of prison. Having a criminal record means you will face legal discrimination in things

like employment and housing *for the rest of your life*. All this is not only horrible for the individuals involved—it is a terrible thing for society. And all this has a broader devastating effect on mothers, fathers, spouses, children, and other loved ones; on the Black community as a whole. The “war on drugs”—and all it means in terms of taking away the rights and ability of Black people to get jobs, decent housing, etc.—is a way to continue the oppression of Black people, but with the veneer and appearance of equality.

The United States goes around claiming it is the “leader of the free world” and protector of democracy and human rights. But the prisoners’ hunger strike has objectively exposed the complete *illegitimacy* and hypocrisy of this system. This *system* is responsible for the torture of prisoners. The very needs and workings of this system have led to the mass incarceration of so many Black and Latino people. And getting rid of this system is the only way we can get to a whole different kind of society where there will no longer be the living hell of mass incarceration and the people as a whole can be truly liberated.

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