



# The Challenge of Prisons

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [Public Policy](#)

Date : November 8, 2009



## Central Prison

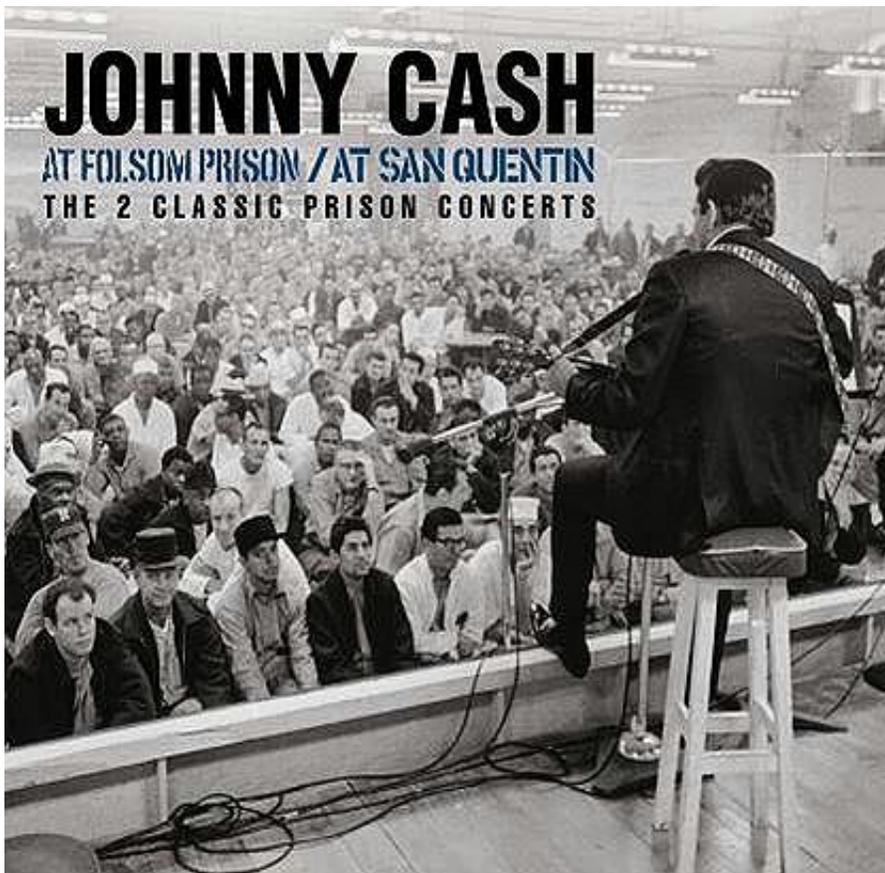
When I used to work on corrections issues, I would take our summer law clerks to visit Central Prison in Raleigh. Each person came away with a range of impressions and lots of questions, especially if it was their first exposure to a prison. In my experience everyone left with at least one common question—How can it be that so many black men are locked up? It is striking and disturbing, and it is difficult to avoid feeling intuitively that something is badly wrong with a system that produces such a result. I was reminded of that feeling when I read an article called “[Can Our Shameful Prisons Be Reformed](#)” in the most recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*.

The article is written by a Georgetown University law professor, David Cole, and it offers a thoughtful perspective on prison reform, especially our country’s high incarceration rate—and particularly for black men. We imprison more people than any other country in the world by miles



and miles. “African-Americans are 13 percent of the general population, but over 50 percent of the prison population. Blacks are incarcerated at a rate eight times higher than that of whites—a disparity that dwarfs other racial disparities.” Today “African-Americans and Latinos make up 70 percent of the incarcerated population, and that population has skyrocketed.”

This was not always the case. Cole says that African-Americans comprised 30% of the prison population in the 1950s. I remember thinking that something had changed when I looked at photographs of Johnny Cash’s famous concert at Folsom Prison in January 1968 (one of my favorite records—the duet with June Carter on “Jackson” is a classic). The inmates were overwhelmingly white, which was jarring when compared with my experience in visiting North Carolina prisons.



Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison

Now one out of every three black males born in an impoverished urban home can expect to spend time in jail during his life. “If white male babies faced anything like such prospects,” according to Cole, “the politics of crime would look very different.”

In the course of loosely reviewing three new books on the subject, the article highlights a number of issues around prison reform. The high cost of incarceration. It costs a minimum of \$20,000 per



year to keep someone in prison, and “[s]everal states now spend more on state prisons than state colleges.” The significantly greater penalties for many offenses over the last 30 years, especially drug offenses. The relatively low support for ex-offenders. The article concludes that “our addiction to punishment should be troubling not only because it is costly and often counter-productive, but because its race and class disparities are morally unacceptable. The most promising arguments for reform, therefore, must appeal simultaneously to considerations of pragmatism and principle.”

There is no easy answer to the problem of crime and incarceration, which is inextricably bound up in questions of poverty and race. I recommend this article as an introduction to an important issue that does not get nearly enough attention. If we do not take on the challenge of our growing and expensive prisons in these tough economic times, it is hard to imagine when it will happen. I have long believed that the education of every citizen should include a visit to a maximum-security prison—it is far too easy to ignore the many different costs of imprisonment if you never see the consequences of our criminal justice policy choices.