

# The Ghetto and the Prison

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Loic Wacquant, Untitled Essay, in [Race, Incarceration, and American Values](#) 57 (Glenn Loury, ed., 2008).

If there is a single issue that ought to dominate all others in scholarship about race, it should be the hyperincarceration of black men. And if I had to recommend one piece of scholarship on this issue to read, it would be a recently published essay by Loic Wacquant. Wacquant contributed this essay (which has no title) to a slim and elegant volume edited by Glenn Loury. Wacquant's short contribution is more than just provocative; it is a bit mind blowing, for reasons that I will explain. The essay draws on a decade's worth of work by Wacquant, synthesized here into seven short pages. I am happy to note that, owing to Loury's visibility, both the issue and Wacquant's contribution now are finally likely to get the attention they deserve.

Wacquant sets out his argument in four steps. First, Wacquant argues that hyperincarceration targets a very specific population by race and class: poor black men in the crumbling ghetto. Several commentators have suggested that the spike in incarceration rates can be attributed to a general increase in crime and punishment. Using available statistics, Wacquant demonstrates that we are imprisoning more people even controlling for the crime rate; the number of convictions per 10,000 "index crimes" has quintupled, from 21 in 1975 to 106 in 1999. Moreover, these new convictions are of black men: the predominant race of prisoners has flipped, from 70% white just after World War II to the current rate of 70% non-white.

Second, Wacquant links these statistical changes to the collapse of the segregated ghetto. Wacquant notes that both the advent of hyperincarceration and the collapse of the ghetto began in the mid-1970s. Wacquant traces the collapse of the ghetto to a number of social and economic factors, including the shift in the economy from manufacturing to services and white flight to the suburbs. He then links, both temporally and structurally, the rise of the prison state to the collapse of the ghetto.

Third, and most provocatively, Wacquant proposes that the prison is "an instrument of ethno-racial control," designed to contain the population coming from the collapse of the ghetto. In particular, Wacquant argues that the prison has replaced the ghetto as the distinctively modern apparatus of social control. Where the ghetto marked poor black men merely as destitute and therefore unworthy to participate in social or economic life, the prison now marks them as dangerous and deviant, as a way to justify their exclusion.

Finally, Wacquant argues for a move to common ground as the appropriate political response. Dismantle prisons because they cost the state too much to run, particularly during this time of strained budgets. Dismantle prisons because they are self-reinforcing; by taking black men out of neighborhood networks, incarceration aggravates the very problem it is supposed to remedy.

I found Wacquant's third argument—that prisons are meant to replace the ghetto as a means of social control—to be the most provocative. But Wacquant is appropriately subtle. This is not a conspiracy-theory story, nor is it a neo-slavery story. Although the ghetto was a state created phenomenon (via Jim Crow and zoning laws), the collapse of the ghetto is not state-generated. At the same time, Wacquant

holds the state fully accountable for its response to collapse—the creation of an alternative ghetto to segregate and contain the city’s population of poor black men.

I am most impressed by Wacquant’s brilliant exposition of the complicated relationship between race and class. Indeed, I chose the piece precisely for this reason. Wacquant is at his most persuasive when he documents that hyperincarceration targets *poor* black men. Indeed, as he points out, the likelihood that black men with some college education would serve time at any point in their lives actually has decreased. But the city’s poor black men have been left to fend for themselves in the face of an ever-shrinking social safety net, as welfare has become workfare, and now prisonfare.

In Wacquant’s account, the city’s unskilled marginal populations are funneled through the gauntlet of the informal, deregulated job market and the shrinking social welfare state. Those who fail to make it through this maze intact are warehoused in the remnants of the ghetto and now, increasingly, in “the penitentiaries that have become its direct satellites.”

Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres have written about the way in which our most marginal populations serve as the miner’s canary with regard to larger structural arrangements that affect us all. In this period of economic collapse, where more of the country’s population now faces insecure work and a deregulated informal economy, we would do well to heed Wacquant’s call for alternative strategies to the penal state.

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