Report Summary

INTENDED AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: STATE RACIAL DISPARITIES IN IMPRISONMENT

While it is well known that national rates of imprisonment for African Americans are higher than for other groups, substantial variation exists among the states in the degree of racial disparity in the use of incarceration. In addition, the increasing rate of incarceration of African American males is now creating a variety of unintended consequences of great concern. Highlights of the report include:

Racial Disparities in State Incarceration
- From 1988 to 1994, 38 states and the District of Columbia experienced an increase in the racial disparity in their rates of incarceration. Nationally, the black rate of incarceration in state prisons during this period increased from 6.88 times that of whites to 7.66.
- Twelve states and the District of Columbia incarcerate African Americans at a rate more than ten times that of whites.

Causes of Increasing Disparities
- The national prison population increase from 1988 to 1994 has been led by a 51.9% increase for violent offenders -- 146,700 -- and a 155.5% increase for drug offenders -- 123,000.
- From 1986 to 1991, there was a 465.5% increase in the number of African Americans imprisoned for drug offenses in state prisons.
- The increase in the number of imprisoned violent offenders was similar for both blacks and whites from 1986 to 1991 -- 31,000 for blacks and 33,000 for whites, but the increase in the number of black drug offenders far outpaced that of whites, by 66,000 to 15,000.

Impact of Incarceration
- One in seven (14%) African American males is either currently or permanently disenfranchised from voting as a result of a felony conviction.
- Research has documented that a first-time arrest for a property crime results in a 7% decline in incomes.

Policy Recommendations
- Job creation can have a substantial impact on violent crime. Research has shown that there is little racial difference in rates of violence when controlling for marriage and stable employment.
- Restore appropriate judicial discretion, particularly for low-risk drug offenders. Such policies at the federal level could result in savings of $515 million over a three-year period.
The full report, "Intended and Unintended Consequences: State Racial Disparities in Imprisonment," is available for $8.00 from The Sentencing Project, 514 10th St. NW, Suite 1000, Washington, D.C. 20004; (202) 628-0871.