

The University of Chicago  
THE IRVING B. HARRIS GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES

# Incarcerated Mothers

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The Chicago Project on Female Prisoners  
and Their Children

*Comments to the Congressional Black Caucus, September 14, 2002*



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Project Support to Date:  
Center for Human Potential and Public Policy  
Open Society Institute

Comments Presented to

The Congressional Black Caucus Legislative Conference 2002

Ex-Offender Policy Task Force

Congressman Danny K. Davis - Chair

September 14, 2002

Washington, D.C.

Good Afternoon, my name is Susan George. I am a clinical psychologist and a public policy researcher on the staff of the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. I am here to talk to you about a research project on female offenders and their children currently underway at the Harris School.

- We know that since 1980 the number of women in U.S. jails and prisons has been doubling every 7 to 8 years.
- We know that these women are among the poorest and most economically disadvantaged women in the United States.
- We know that 85% of these women are mothers and most were single custodial parents at the time they were arrested.
- And we know that the children they leave behind face an increased risk of entering the foster care system.
- Finally, we know that most women are non-violent offenders arrested on minor drug and theft offenses.

This change in the U.S. prison population has taken place with virtually no understanding of the consequences for these women's ability to function as an effective

parent and provide for their families after their release. Neither have the consequences for the children been systematically studied, understood or considered.

Why do we know so little, and why have we been willing to pay the enormous cost of incarcerating these women without asking ourselves if the money might not be better spent addressing their mental health problems, their addictions, and helping them acquire the education and skills necessary to provide for their families.

*The Chicago Project on Female Prisoners and Their Children*, is a multi-year project that is using data made available to us through collaborations with the Illinois Department of Corrections and a number of other state agencies. With these data we are tracking, for the years 1990 to 2000, the histories of the 14,700 women admitted to prison in Illinois and their estimated 35,000 children, as they move through the criminal justice system, foster care, welfare programs, and the legitimate labor market. We believe that there may be a strong cost benefit argument to be made in favor of providing alternatives to incarceration for many of these offenders.

I would like to present the findings from the first phase of this project which is an analysis of the Illinois Department of Corrections Admissions and Exit Files. After I do that I will give you some of the facts and figures regarding the cost of incarceration.

Over an 11-year period the number of women going to state prison in Illinois tripled. Single mothers are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. prison population. Beginning in the 1980's the number of women in state prison in this country has doubled every seven to eight years.

The graph in front of you now (See figure 1) is the breakdown by race of who is going to prison in Illinois. For those of you that may be interested in Hispanics or other

minority groups, I am not going to present on those groups today because in Illinois they make up a very small number of women going to prison. Most of the story about women going to prison in Illinois is about the African American and white community. The line at the bottom is the white population, the line at the top is the African-American population—you can see where the growth has been. I am not going to show you a breakdown by Cook County versus the rest of Illinois but if I did it would look very similar.

- We know that of women admitted to prison in Illinois in FY 2000 that a third of those women were 35 years of age and older.
- We know that nearly three-quarters of them had not graduated from high-school.
- We know that nearly three-quarters of them identify themselves as having a drug or alcohol addiction.

I am now going to talk to you a little bit about the children of these women. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics in 1998 on any given day in the United States, a quarter of a million children had a mother behind bars. Most of these children were under ten years of age. One in ten women in the United States is either pregnant or has just given birth.

Looking at the numbers in Illinois, in FY 1990 just over 2000 children had a mother go to prison. In FY 2000, 7,500 children had a mother admitted to state prison. 5000 of those children were from Cook County. Again for a breakdown by race, (See Figure 2) the line at the top is the African-American community. We can't really talk about children by race because all we can identify is the race of the mother, but in terms

of race of the mother this is the breakdown. Keep in mind that we know that nationally that the numbers of women going to state prison is doubling about every 8 to nine years, but the numbers of children affected in Illinois is doubling every five.

I want to take a minute and explain to you how this is happening because it helps you understand who these women are. This is the only time I'm going to ask you to look at numbers (See table 1). We took the Admission Files and we broke them into five categories: women reporting have no children, women reporting having one child, two children, three children, and we created a category of women reporting having 4 or more children. I want you to know that in the category of "4 or more children" the average was five children and there are women in that category reporting as many as 14 children. If you look at the first set of numbers under the heading 1990, you'll see that about equal numbers of women fell into all five categories with slightly more women in the categories of fewer children and slightly less in the categories of more children. If you look at 2000 the opposite is true. There are slightly less women in the smallest categories and the largest category—the category of women having 4 or more children—statewide is 28%. It is not on this table, but in Cook County a full one-third of women admitted to state prison in FY 2000 fall into this category—of the roughly 2000 women admitted so state prison from Cook County in FY 2000 one in three had an average of five children. If you limit it to women going to prison for drug offenses, 52% fall into that category. I want to say that the costs of incarceration to children are never tallied.

What are women going to prison for? (See Figure 3) After being stable for nearly 70 years the rates of women going to prison in the United States began to climb dramatically in the 1980's. While there is disagreement about the cause of this, it is true

that it coincided with the onset of tougher sentencing for drug offenses. Overwhelmingly women going to state prison in Illinois are serving a year or less. That is not to say that that is all the time they serve over a lifetime—one of the differences between the male and female prison population is that women seem to be more likely to be arrested and serve multiple spells in jail and prison. However, the length of the time served does give us some indication that they are serving time for lesser offenses. The story is pretty much told in Illinois by looking at drug offenses and property offenses. Someone said to me the other day, “What are property offenses?” So in case you are not familiar with what I am talking about—retail theft a lot of what we are talking about when we are talking about property offenses for women. If you look at the percentage of property offenses involving breaking and entering or having a gun it is a very small part of the picture. A third of the women admitted to state prison in Illinois in FY 2000 were admitted for property offenses, the most common property offense in that category was retail theft under \$150.00.

Forty-four percent of women admitted in that same year were admitted for drug offenses. And if you talk to the women a lot of women in for property offenses will tell you they have a drug problem. Possession or trafficking in small amounts of illegal substances, shoplifting, writing bad checks, and using stolen credit cards—these are not crimes that the economists would tell us that there is much benefit that accrues to society by incarcerating the offenders. The benefit to society accrues from incarcerating violent offenders and sex offenders. There is not a lot of benefit to society—at least in the economic understanding of benefit—of locking up someone who walked out of store with a shirt, even if they have done it more than once.

I now want to talk to you about costs. Our back of the envelope calculation, is that from the time of arrest until the time a woman is admitted to the state prison system the cost to taxpayers is about \$31,000. Another \$20,000 to \$25,000 is spent on operating costs for housing her in prison for a year. The capital costs of the bed she is using is \$7,500 per year. And we know from the Bureau of Justice Statistics that one in ten women in state prison has a child in the non-kin foster care system—that is \$25,000 a year. So if you add up the costs directly associated with arresting and incarcerating a woman for one year, and add \$2,500 for the one in ten chance that her child(ren) are in foster care—you arrive at an estimated \$65,000.

There is currently no information available about how incarceration effects a woman's ability to come out and take care of her children. And there is no information about what the consequences are for the children of these disruptions, but a large child development literature suggests they are likely to be substantial. If women are subject to the same forces as men it is likely that once they leave prison that their ability to provide financially for their families is harmed from that point forward.

It is important to keep in mind that the available evidence tells us that incarcerated women:

- Have higher rates of mental illness than other groups of women, or incarcerated men.
- 52% are likely to have experienced sexual abuse as children.
- Three-quarters have suffered violence in an intimate relationship as an adult

The kind of programs that we have taken a look at and that we believe are likely to make a difference for these women are comprehensive programs offering mental health,

substance abuse, domestic violence, education, job training, job placement, and safe housing along with parenting training. The costs of these types of programs are about \$35,000 to \$40,000 in the first year with another \$15,000 to \$20,000 in the second year.

In closing I would like to say that we are currently in the process of matching the 1990-2000 IDOC Admission and Exit Files for female offenders to:

- Illinois Unemployment Insurance records 1995-2000
- AFDC/TANF records 1990-2000
- Food Stamp records 1990-2000
- Medicaid Records 1990-2000
- Department of Children and Family Services 1975-2000.

So we will be able to provide a lot more information on these women and their children—information that we hope will be of use to policy makers and can guide the development and implementation of programs to improve the outcomes for these women and their children.

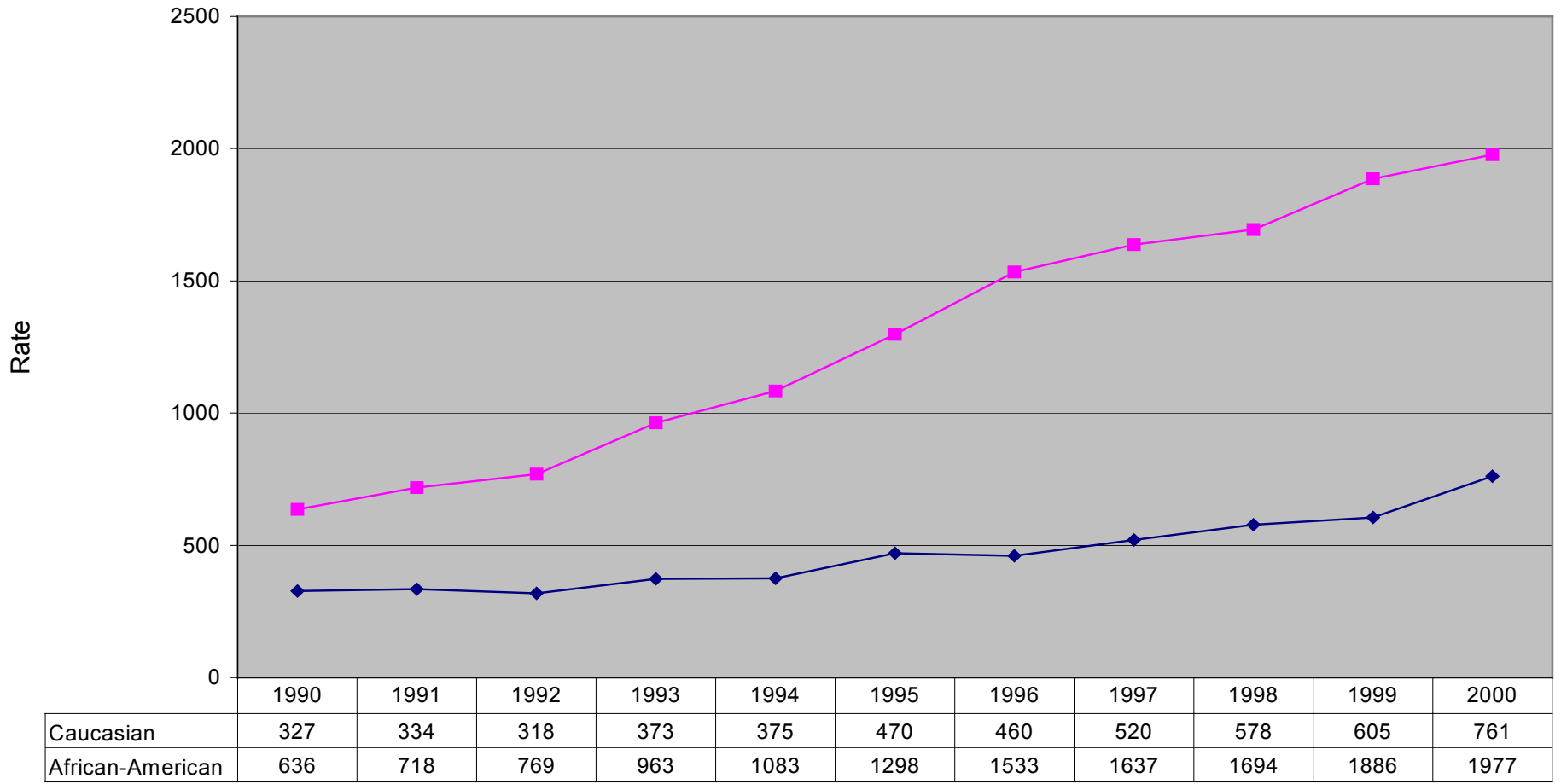
I would also like to bring to your attention, that in Illinois the Governor has just signed HB 1961 which authorizes the Cook County Sheriff's Department to move forward in developing a program to keep women who would otherwise be sent to prisons downstate to remain in Chicago and receive a comprehensive set of services designed to improve outcomes and reduce recidivism. We hope that if funded and implemented that the program will provide an opportunity to rigorously evaluate its effects and compare them to business as usual.

State Senator Barack Obama says, “Everyone know prisons are a budget buster—the question is, does anything else work?” We think there are a lot of reasons to believe that the right program will work.

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**Figure 1**  
**NUMBER OF ADMISSIONS : BY RACE**



◆ Caucasian    ■ African-American

**Figure 2**  
**NUMBER OF CHILDREN: BY RACE**

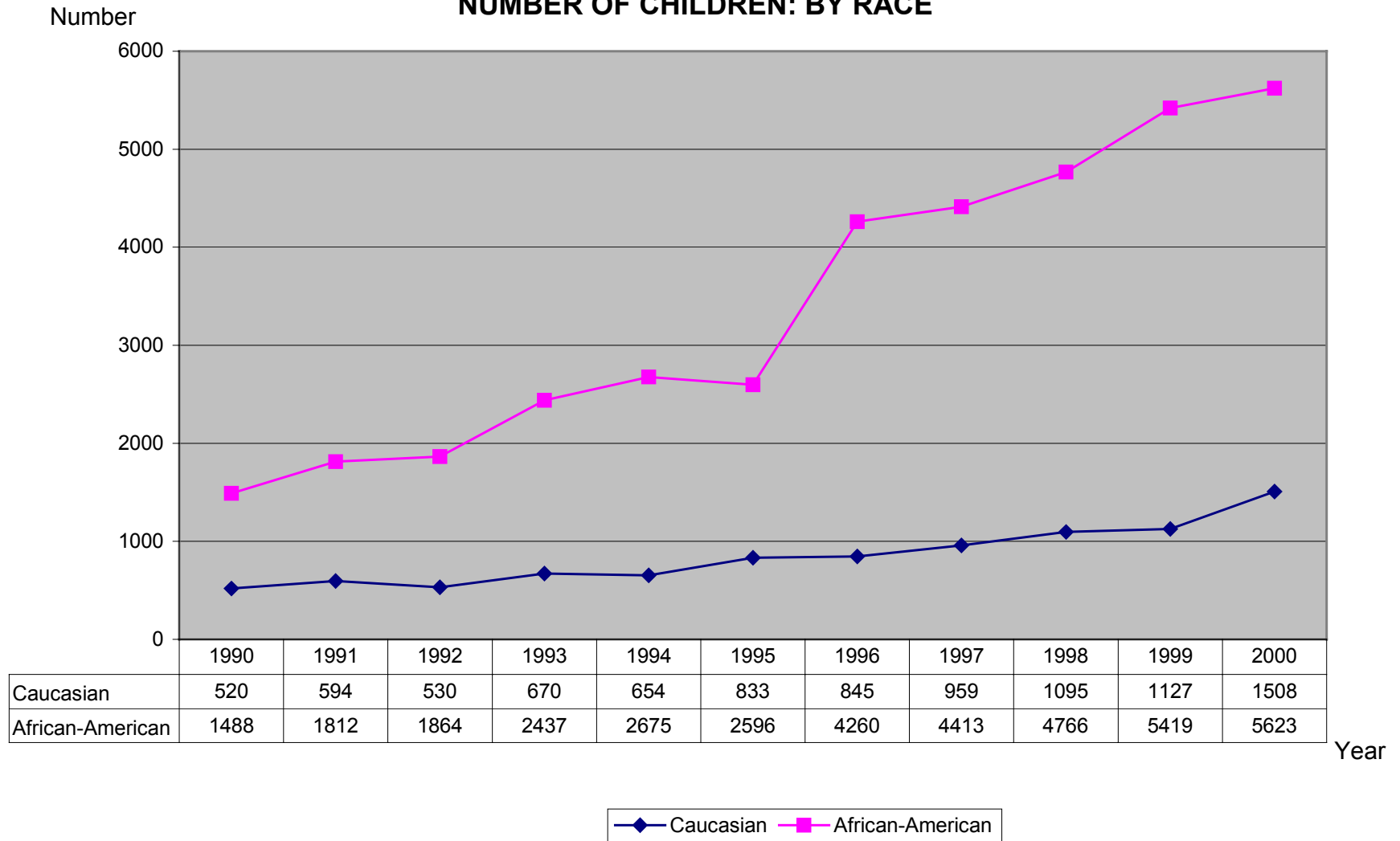


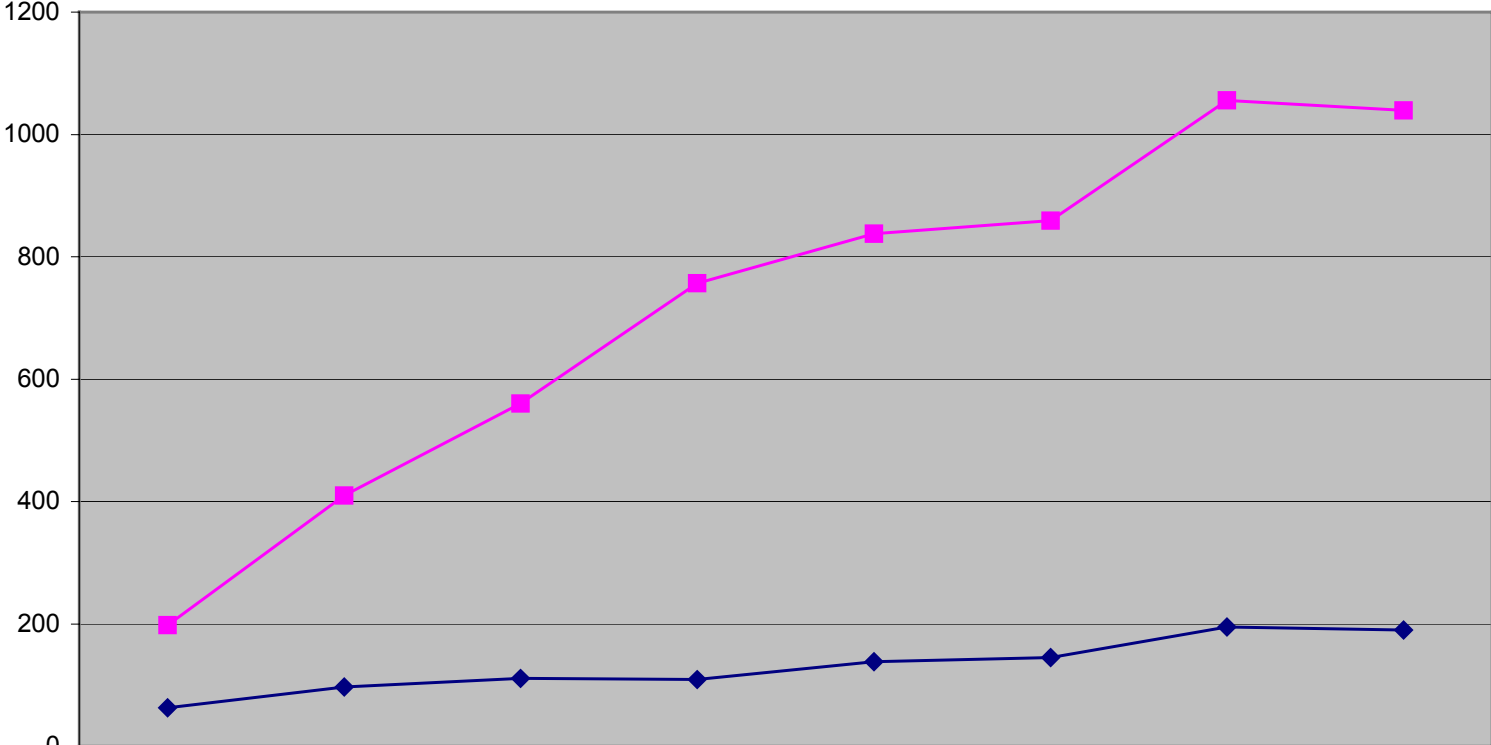
Table 1  
The Number of Women Admitted to Prison and The Number of Their Children

	1990		2000			
	number of <u>inmates</u>	% of total <u>population</u>	number of <u>children</u>	number of <u>inmates</u>	% of total <u>population</u>	number of <u>children</u>
no children	203	20.3%	0	448	15.5%	0
1 child	232	23.2%	232	491	17.0%	491
2 children	204	20.4%	408	553	19.1%	1106
3 children	174	17.4%	522	579	20.0%	1737
Four or more children <sup>1</sup>	186	18.6%	922	821	28.4%	4193
<b>Totals</b>	<b>992 inmates</b>	<b>2084 children</b>		<b>2892 inmates</b>	<b>7527 children</b>	

<sup>1</sup> The average family size for women in this category is 5 children, the range is 4 to 14.

**Figure 3**  
**DRUG OFFENSE : BY RACE**

Number



	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
◆ Caucasian . . .	63	97	111	109	138	145	195	190
■ African-American . . .	198	410	560	757	838	859	1056	1039

Year

◆ Caucasian . . .    ■ African-American . . .

