Population Impact of Mass Incarceration Under New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws: an Analysis of Years of Life Lost*

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Now entering their 30th year, New York State's "Rockefeller drug laws" (RDLs) mandate long prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenders and account for more than 100,000 individuals incarcerated since 1974. Throughout the 1990s, the average annual RDL prison population averaged more than 20,000; on January 1, 2002, there were 19,164 inmates in New York State prisons under RDL (median age 35 years, 78% New York City residents, 94% black and Hispanic). This analysis evaluates the population impact of RDL by employing a public health model often used to assess the severity of wars and natural disasters, calculating the years of life lost (YLL) associated with RDL incarcerations over their 30-year history.

New York State Department of Correctional Services data and US vital statistics were used to calculate the age-specific YLL of the population incarcerated under RDLs between 1974 and 2002, with each person-year of incarceration considered as a YLL; this sum was divided by the life expectancy (LE) for this population (i.e., $YLL = \text{Population LE} - \text{Mean age of RDL inmates}$).

Between 1974 and 2002, there were more than 286,000 person-years of incarceration under RDLs. With a median age of 35 years and LE of 68 years, this translates to a YLL equivalent to 8,667 deaths in a population with this age and racial/ethnic composition (see the Table).

The use of YLL to assess the population impact of imprisonment under New York's RDLs establishes a basis for understanding the magnitude and public health significance of massive drug incarcerations. It also allows us to compare the impact of RDLs to other events more readily understood as disasters that have had a profound effect on New York City in recent times (e.g., there were 2,617 deaths in the World Trade Center, with a similar age distribution as RDL, yielding a total of 102,806 YLL). The fact that the YLLs of drug incarcerations are almost triple (275%) those of the World Trade Center attacks suggests the relative magnitude and population impact of these incarcerations. Further, while blacks and Hispanics represent only two-thirds of the New York State population, over 94% of the RDL inmates are minorities, and more than 70% come from a few inner-city communities of New York City. Thus, this overall assessment of YLL minimizes the actual impact of these laws on the specific populations and communities most affected by drug incarcerations.

*The full report is accessible on-line at: www.nyam.org.

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TABLE. Years of life lost to Rockefeller Drug Law (RDL) incarcerations in New York State, 1974–2002*

Total years of incarceration (YLL)	Median age†	Life expectancy‡	Mortality equivalent§
286,000	35	68	8,667

*RDL population data 1974–2002, New York State Department of Correctional Services.

†Median age as of 2001 for all groups.

‡Life expectancy estimates based on *US National Vital Statistics Report*, 48(18), February 7, 2001.

§RDL mortality equivalent = YLL/LE – Median age.

While a year in prison is clearly different from a death, imprisonment carries its own burden of stigma and loss. The effects of removal and incarceration of so many (mostly male) members of poor minority families are profound—over 120,000 children had parents incarcerated under RDLs. Further, the adverse effects on communities, where 40% of the young men may be under criminal justice control, has much in common with the acute effects of disasters and war.

The population impact of the RDLs (as measured by YLL) suggests that massive drug incarcerations are appropriately viewed as disastrous events for the affected communities. In the United States, where New York's drug laws have served as a model for other state and federal drug laws, there are now more than 500,000 individuals incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses—equal to the YLL associated with more than 15,000 deaths. Over the last 30 years of the United States' "war on drugs," the total YLL for drug incarcerations is equivalent to more than 200,000 deaths, double the number of US soldiers killed in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The need to reform these laws and find more effective and less-damaging responses to widespread drug use in our society is a pressing social, humanitarian, and public health priority.