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The Negro Goes To Sing Sing

By IRA DE A. REID

SING SING prison is located thirty miles up the east bank of the Hudson River from New York City; beneath a high bluff, where more than three hundred years ago the Sinck Sinck Indians built their signal fires. Originally called the Mount Pleasant Prison, it is historically the third of New York's state prisons. The Sing Sing cell block, built entirely by prisoners, was completed in 1828. Because the inmates are committed from the counties of New York State which average one-twentieth of the United States' population, Sing Sing—as far as the racial and nationality composition of its population is concerned—may be truly called the most representative of American prisons.¹

Despite the fact that more than twenty-five hundred Negroes have been committed to Sing Sing since 1920, they have always been an integral part of the prison's population. One hundred and two years ago they formed 23 per cent of the prison population. In 1931 Negro admissions were 23.9 per cent of the total, the highest ratio they have ever shown. If Negroes were present in Sing Sing in the same ratio at which they are found in the total population of southern New York State, 2,500 (the number of black admissions between 1920 and 1931) would be about 550.

¹ Lawes, Lewis E. *Life and Death in Sing Sing*. New York. Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1928. p. 30.

The following table shows the growing volume of Negro commitments to Sing Sing during the past twelve years, with comparative figures for earlier periods:

ADMISSIONS TO SING SING PRISON BY COLOR

for the
Twelve-Year Period 1920-1931
and 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1875

Year	Total Admissions	Negro Admissions	Per Cent Negro
1931	1,393	333	23.9
1930	1,088	235	21.7
1929	1,098	244	22.2
1928	1,005	220	21.9
1927	1,196	231	19.3
1926	1,452	255	17.6
1925	1,217	209	17.1
1924	1,086	173	15.9
1923	897	127	14.3
1922	1,457	216	14.1
1921	1,264	141	11.2
1920	1,055	150	14.2
1875	1,067	63	5.9
1870	473	28	6.0
1860	438	33	7.5
1850	228	46	20.2

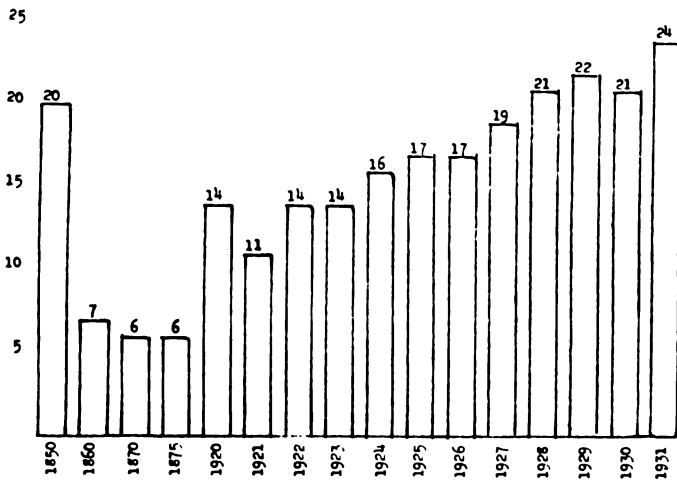
A significant fact obtainable from an analysis of commitments to Sing Sing is that criminal activity is not the monopoly of any racial or nationality group. Nevertheless, it is true that in every main group of crimes, but especially in assault, homicide and burglary, Negroes exceed the numbers which might be expected from their rank in the population of this district. In an analysis of 5,000 men committed to Sing Sing during the period 1923-1927, 4,097 were whites, 895 were Negroes and 8 were Orientals. Warden Lawes' analysis of the crimes for which these prisoners were committed showed that 65 per cent of those committed for robbery were of Italian, English and Irish stock; 62 per cent of those committed for larceny were of Jewish, English and German stocks; and 76 per cent of those committed for assault and 74 per cent for homicide were of Negro, Italian and Irish stocks.²

The relative percentage of Negroes as compared with other races in vari-

² op. cit. p. 37.

NUMBER OF NEGROES IN EVERY 100 ADMISSIONS TO SING SING PRISON

1850, 1870, 1875 and 1920-1932



Negroes in Every 100 of District's Population
4 in 1930; 3 in 1920

ous types of crimes is shown in the following table:

Proportion of Negroes and of Other Specified Racial and Nationality Groups Committed for Various Types of Crime, in Comparison with Their Population Expectancy, of 5,000 Men Committed to Sing Sing Prison, 1923-1927

Population Expectancy	Negro	English	Irish	Italian	German	Jewish	Russian-Polish
Offense	0.03	0.39*	0.14	0.14	0.15	0.17	0.06
Robbery	.12	0.20	0.14	.31	.12	.06	.02
Larceny	.13	.17	.12	.07	.13	.32	.02
Forgery	.03	.20	.07	.07	.22	.35	.02
Burglary	.24	.08	.16	.13	.10	.20	.05
Assault	.35	.04	.20	.21	.13	.02	.01
Homicide	.27	.07	.19	.28	.10	.02	.01
Sexual	.13	.10	.10	.18	.20	.03	.20

Negroes admitted to Sing Sing during this period had four times their population expectancy in commitments for robbery, larceny and sexual offenses; eight times for burglary; nine times for homicide and eleven times for assault.

No valid deductions may be made from the statistical data given until due allowance is made for other physical, social and economic factors which represent the total situation. Thus, the Warden's "practical pictures" of types of crimes in which Negroes show a high frequency of commitments illustrate general types that are summarized in the following patterns:

BURGLARY: The chief offenders are native-born Negroes; foreign-born of Jewish stock, or United States born of Irish stock; between twenty-two and twenty-six years of age; intermediate grade education; dull mentality and below par physically; may be psychopathic or drug addict; menial employment; indolent and unwilling to work; likely to be second offender.

ASSAULT: The chief offenders are—native-born Negroes, foreign-born Italians and United States-born of Irish stock; between twenty-two and twenty-six years of age; comparatively illiterate; dull or psychopathic mentally and superior physically; common labor; willing to work but slow; first offender.

HOMICIDE: The chief offenders are white, foreign-born Italians, native-born Negroes, United States born of Irish stock; between twenty-seven and thirty-one years of age; comparatively illiterate; unstable and paranoiac mentally; normal physically; good worker; first offender.³

On April 1, 1930, there were 2,481 inmates in Sing Sing of whom 563 or 22.68 per cent were Negroes. The average age of these Negro

*Federal Census does not differentiate.

³ *ibid.* pp. 47-48.

inmates at the time of conviction was 28 years, 8 months and 13 days.

Robbery, assault, burglary and larceny were the chief offenses for which these 563 Negroes were committed. The present Sing Sing Negro population exceeds its population expectancy of four per cent in all crimes save rape, sodomy, forgery and miscellaneous offenses.

OFFENSES FOR WHICH NEGRO INMATES WERE SENTENCED TO SING SING AND PER CENT DISTRIBUTION AS OF APRIL 1, 1932

Offense	Commitments	Distribution Per-Cent
Robbery	199	35.4
Assault	86	15.3
Burglary	73	13.0
Larceny	70	12.4
Manslaughter	43	7.7
Carrying Concealed Weapons	33	5.8
Homicide	29	5.1
Forgery	9	1.6
Sodomy	5	.9
Rape	4	.7
All other	12	2.1
	563	100.0

In Sing Sing's resident Negro population there are 5 awaiting execution for murder, 19 serving terms of twenty or more years to life, 9 serving life sentences, 2 serving sentences commuted from execution to life, 44 serving indeterminate sentences of a minimum of fifteen or more years and 35 serving determinate sentences of fifteen or more years.

There are more foreign-born Negroes in Sing Sing's population today than ever before. In 1929, 19 or 7.8 per cent of the total Negro admissions were foreign-born. In 1930, foreign-born Negroes admitted numbered 27 or 11.4 per cent of the total Negro admissions. The number reached a new high, of 45 or 13.5 per cent of all Negro admissions in 1931.

A rather detailed analysis of the factors attending the commitment of 80 Negroes to Sing Sing Prison during 1930 disclosed that among Negroes, as among other races, broken homes, poverty, bad social and leisure habits, lack of intelligent and sympathetic guidance, unemployment and the shifting of jobs with more unemployment very definitely affected each of the cases studied.⁴

The analyst in this study endeavored to list the circumstances present at the time the crime was committed. These appeared as follows:

⁴ Reid, Ira De A. *The Negro's Relation to Work and Law Observance*. National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, Report on the Causes of Crime. Vol. I, Part III (1931), pp. 219-256.

**SOCIAL FACTORS IN CRIMES COMMITTED BY
80 NEGRO OFFENDERS
Sing Sing Prison, 1930**

(Per cent of frequencies listed in descending rank order)

	Per Cent of Cases
Unemployment	59
Bad social and leisure habits	54
Emotionalism	15
Drunk	10
Gambling	5
Gangs	5
Other	4

In these days of industrial depression, more so than normally, being out of work undoubtedly has a very direct and common relationship with crime. In the 47 cases of unemployment covered in this study it is difficult to conclude that "being out of work" with the implication of "being out of money" was a cause. The fact of the matter appears to be that unemployment leaves the individual in idleness—with time to contact chronic idlers, to seek any amusement and excitement to avoid ennui or thought of future consequences, if he does not find work. These factors, plus the fact that the Negro worker lives so near the fringe of marginal existence that there is seldom any money surplus, are outstanding aspects of this situation.

Bad social and leisure habits show a high frequency. Long before hunger drives the offender into predatory acts, other social factors have entered the picture. Social emulation, improvident expenditure of leisure, commercialized vice, leisure-class dictates—all have provided a much more dangerous and sordid motive for crimes against property in particular than simple hunger.

Drinking was a factor in only eight of the 80 cases studied, the greatest association being found linked with crimes against the person.

Emotionalism was found to be a direct factor in crimes committed against the person. This factor is difficult to define, but refers to situations in which the individual has shown loss of emotional perspective and has disregarded his own immediate interest, as well as the remote consequences of the act, and under conditions in which there could be no predatory interest or trend.

Those chance circumstances which would

augment the probability of a crime's occurrence in a weak or highly suggestible individual, while their absence would perhaps decrease the probability, are classed as circumstantial factors. These factors did not appear in more than 4 per cent of the cases studied.

Gangs, as a factor in the crimes of Sing Sing's Negro prisoners, operated in only four instances. It might be noted in this connection that 31 of 67 Negro offenders worked with Negro accomplices. Eighteen of the men and their Negro accomplices are known to be in Sing Sing, as are two white, one Mexican and one other accomplice whose race is not known.

While it cannot be said that any one factor is responsible for the present social status of the Sing Sing Negro offenders, it is true that a thorough examination of all factors bearing on the offense and of all traits and conditions relating to the situation shows a multiplicity of causations that find their roots deep in the social status of a minority population.

The presence of an unusual large Negro population in Sing Sing, therefore, finds its genesis in a sufficiently large number of other factors to invalidate the opinion that high rates of crime and incarceration are due to an inherent racial criminality. Such evidence as there is indicates that social status, political status, and economic and environmental influences are strong factors. One white student of the subject concludes that

There is little comfort for the native white American in casting the blame for crime on the Negro. Even if they are more criminal—which is open to doubt—the causes lie in the social structure for which the white American is primarily responsible.⁵

Our specific knowledge of the correlation between these factors and crime, particularly in the impersonal metropolitan centers, is limited. Ere we can stem this rising tide of color in Sing Sing, some very definite improvements in community life must be undertaken; these to be based upon "continuous scientific and unprejudiced accumulation and interpretation of facts, and their application in the building up of programs of social improvement."⁶

⁵ Dexter, Robert C. *Social Adjustment*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf. 1927. p. 312.

⁶ Glueck, Sheldon and Eleanor T. *500 Criminal Careers*. New York. Alfred A. Knopf. 1930. p. 337.

