

Racial Disparities Are Rising in Oklahoma Prison Admissions During the COVID-19 Pandemic

BACKGROUND

As COVID-19 continues to spread, incarcerated people and those who work in jails and prisons are particularly vulnerable. Overcrowding and other conditions make it virtually impossible to practice social distancing and maintain an adequate level of sanitization.

Statistics released by the Oklahoma Department of Corrections show that incarcerated people have far higher positive rates for COVID-19 than the state average. More than a quarter (25.7%) of the incarcerated population tested for COVID-19 were positive over the last nine months, leading to 36 deaths possibly related to the virus (including 11 in November alone).¹

The Department of Corrections announced in March that they would work with local Sheriffs to stop new admissions from county jails across the state. However, new analysis of the most recently available prison admissions data from March through June 2020 shows that more than 300 people were admitted to DOC custody in June.² Of those people, Black Oklahomans were sent to prison at even higher rates of disproportionality than usual - all as COVID-19 cases behind bars began to rise.³

¹ Oklahoma Department of Corrections, COVID-19 Stats Report, December 10 2020, <https://oklahoma.gov/doc/covid-19-stats.html>

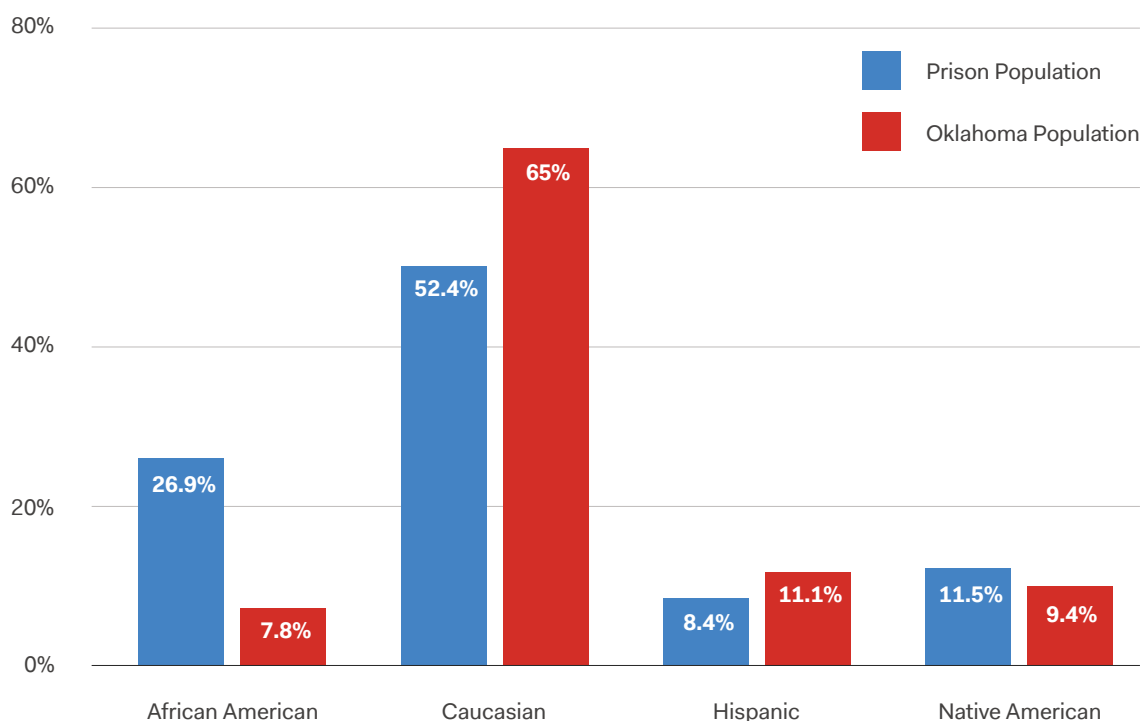
² June 2020 was the first month with more than 10 prison admissions since the Department of Corrections announced they would slow prison admissions during the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Oklahoma prison figures cited in this report use data from the Oklahoma Department of Corrections.

Oklahoma has one of the highest imprisonment rates for Black people in the United States.

Currently, Black Oklahomans make up 8% of the state population but 27% of the current prison population.⁴ Black Oklahomans are imprisoned at a rate of 19.83 per 1,000 residents, more than 4 times the white imprisonment rate in Oklahoma (4.1 per 1,000 residents) and Oklahoma has one of the highest rates of Black imprisonment in the US.⁵

BLACK PEOPLE ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPRISONED IN OKLAHOMA
State and Correctional Populations, by Race



⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population Estimates, July 1, 2019, (V2019) -- Oklahoma, U.S.," Quick Facts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/OK>.

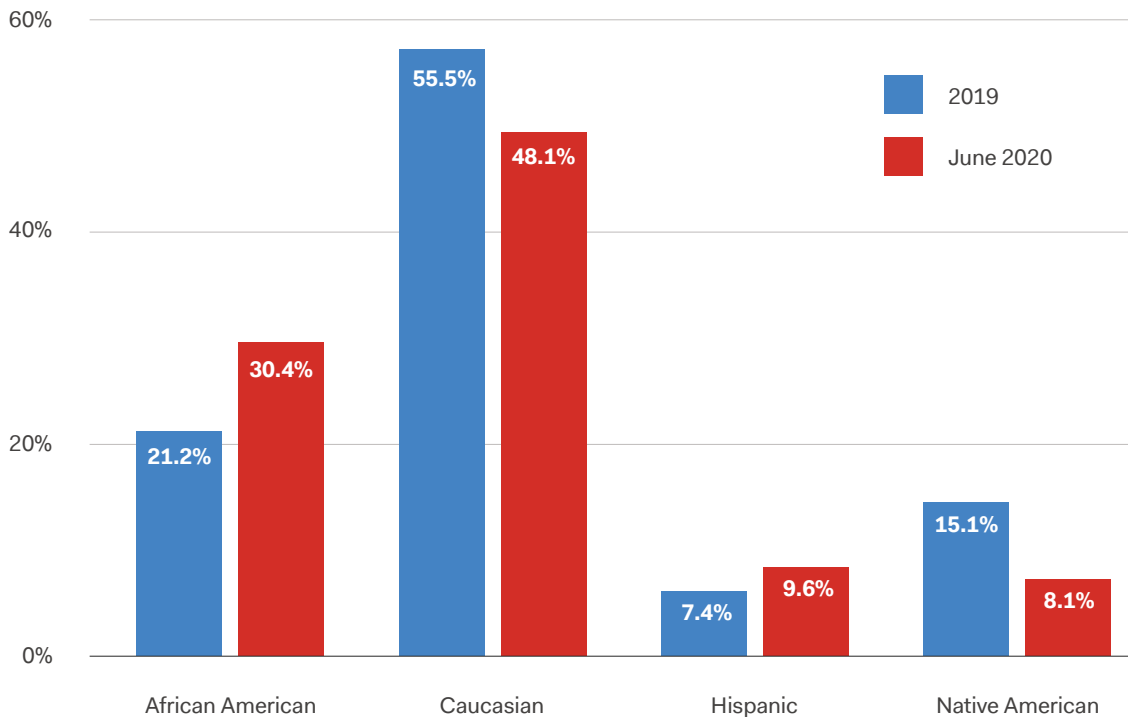
⁵ Ibid; Oklahoma Department of Corrections data, and E. Ann Carson, "Prisoners in 2019," U.S. Department of Justice, October 2020, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.

During COVID, the proportion of prison admissions for Black Oklahomans was nearly 1.5 times higher than usual.

In 2019, Black people accounted for 21% of all prison admissions in Oklahoma. However, Black people made up 30% of prison admissions in June 2020, a 43.5% increase from the prior period.

BLACK PEOPLE ARE BEING ADMITTED INTO PRISON DURING THE PANDEMIC AT HIGHER-THAN-USUAL RATES

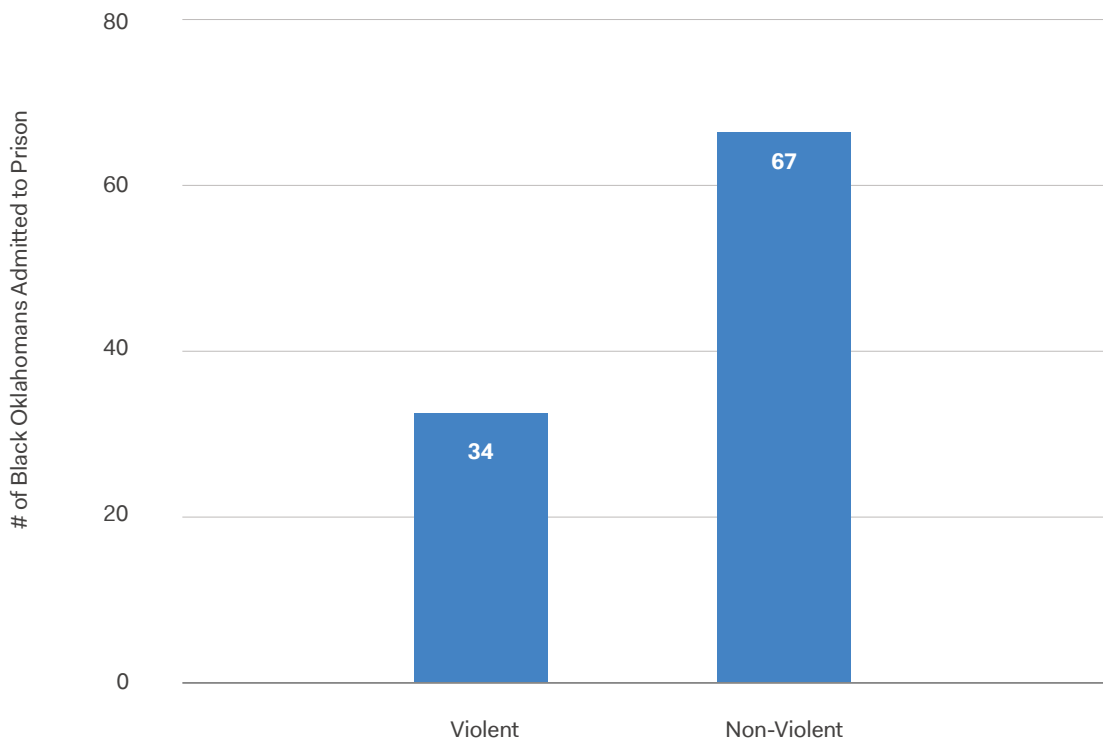
Admissions in June 2020 compared to 2019 admissions



During COVID, most Black Oklahomans were admitted to prison for nonviolent offenses.

The majority of Black people admitted to prison in June 2020 were sent for nonviolent offenses such as possession of a controlled substance with the intent to distribute or unauthorized use of a motor vehicle.

2/3 OF BLACK OKLAHOMANS ADMITTED TO PRISON IN JUNE WERE INCARCERATED FOR NON-VIOLENT OFFENSES



During COVID, most Black Oklahomans admitted to prison were from Tulsa County.

A disproportionate number of people admitted to DOC custody in June 2020 came from Tulsa County, 53.5% compared to 14% in a typical month. Though Black people make up 11% of Tulsa's population, they made up 38% of Tulsa's prison admissions during this time.

Oklahoma should shrink racial disparities and continue to reduce its prison population as other states have done.

The racial disparities in June 2020 prison admissions in Oklahoma are a cause for serious concern. Prison and jail COVID-19 outbreaks are compounding racial inequalities. Black people are disproportionately more likely to contract COVID-19 and die of it, as are people in prisons and jails across the country.⁶ Oklahoma also has the second-highest imprisonment rate and the second-highest Black imprisonment rate in the country.

Public safety and public health experts have identified decarceration - the practice of lowering prison populations - as a crucial tool for preventing the transmission of COVID-19 in prison facilities.⁷ Oklahoma lawmakers should follow the lead of states like [Arkansas](#), [Kentucky](#), and [New Jersey](#) and further reduce incarceration and admissions as the virus continues to spread and incarcerated people continue to die.

⁶ Engel et al., "Racial Disparities and COVID-19," Council on Criminal Justice, November 2020, https://cdn.ymaws.com/counciloncj.org/resource/resmgr/covid_commission/Racial_Disparities_and_COVID.pdf

⁷ "Decarcerating Correctional Facilities during COVID-19: Advancing Health, Equity, and Safety," National Academies of Science Engineering, & Medicine, October 2020, <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/best-practices-for-implementing-decarceration-as-a-strategy-to-mitigate-the-spread-of-covid-19-in-correctional-facilities#sectionPublications>