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## Issue Brief: African Americans/Violence in the U.S.

### Key Words

Violence, African Americans, Gangs, Black Panthers, Incarceration Population, Militant Organizations

### Description

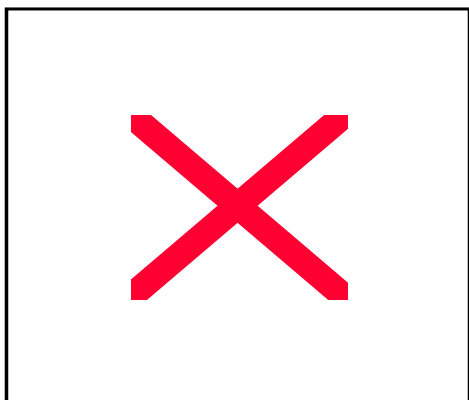
This brief focuses on the association between violence and African Americans in the United States today. There is a common perception in American society associating African Americans with violence. This brief will discuss how the significant proportion of African Americans in jail relative to the other races, an increase in gang membership among blacks, and the historical perception of militant black organizations have all lead to America's increasing association between African Americans and violence.

### Key Points

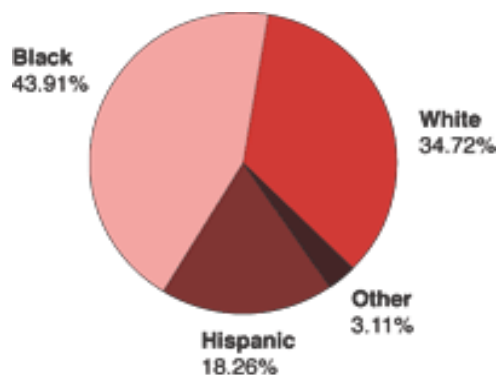
- African Americans consist of 44 percent of the people jailed in America; however, only 27 percent of that population was jailed for crimes of violence.
  - 27 percent of the white jailed population was also sentenced for crimes of violence.
- 34 percent of all gang members in the United States are African American.
- The Black Panthers Party of the 1960s embodied the stereotypical militant black mentality that is associated with African Americans today.
  - Unlike most gangs today, the Black Panthers were a gang centered on political activism with the goal of achieving Black Power.

### Images

**Figure 1.**  
U.S. Population by Race



**Figure 2.**  
State and Federal Inmates by Race



<sup>1</sup> Source: Percentages calculated from data in Table 13, Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002," April 6, 2003. White and Black excludes Hispanics.



The Bloods and the Crips are two rival gangs that started in Los Angeles, California and have since spread throughout the country. The two gangs are predominantly black and very violent.



The Black Panthers were a militant political organization founded in the 1960s to promote Black Power. The group left an indelible mark on American society's perception of African Americans.

## **Brief**

In 2003 the African American population in the United States was 12.32 percent of the overall population; however, the African American population made up approximately 44 percent of the state and federal inmates. This high incarceration rate among blacks is one reason that the general public often associates violence with the black population.

The high incarceration rate among blacks is deceiving though because of the 44 percent of black inmates jailed, only 27 percent were jailed for crimes of violence – 38 percent were sentenced for drug related offenses. Because of the stricter drug laws that began with the national war on drugs in 1972, the number of blacks jailed for drug related offenses has increased dramatically – thus increasing the overall jailed population of African Americans. In comparison, 24 percent of the white jailed population consists of inmates sentenced on drug charges while 27 percent were incarcerated for crimes of violence. Although the cumulative totals of inmates for the two populations differ, the percentage of inmates jailed for crimes of violence within the respective jailed populations is the same.

A driving force behind this violent perception of African Americans is American popular culture and its idolization of the 'black gangster'. African American gangs like the Bloods and the Crips originated on America's East and West coasts. For the last several years, the gangs have been franchising out to different towns across the country and spreading their influence to places previously uninhabited by gangs. Most recently, black gangs have made a significant migration from the coasts into the southern United States. Currently 34 percent of all gang members in America are African American. These gangs often form in the poor areas of even poorer cities and have grown to be an accepted part of the local culture. Ironically many people join the gangs to be shielded from the violence in their area, yet in the end are often apart of some type of gang violence. Over the last 20 years, gang violence has increased dramatically. A large portion of the black inmates who were sentenced for crimes of violence committed an act of gang violence. The images of the black gang and black gangster are firmly rooted in

our society today and popular culture continues to reinforce the negative association we have between African Americans and violence.

Many of the African American gangs in the United States are militant; however, the Black Panther Party established around 1966 in Oakland, California was a militant group with political intentions. The Black Panthers were founded to promote the Black Power Movement and did so through violence. At rallies the group made a point of carrying loaded guns and rifles to intimidate anyone who opposed them. The Panthers were a very public organization and through their ten-year reign were associated with killings, extortion, and prostitution. The Black Panthers wanted to gain power through violence. For the Panthers, there was a correlation between increasing Black Power and increasing militancy – the more violent they were, the more influence and popularity they received. The Black Panthers left an indelible mark on the consciousness of American society. Their high profile militant tactics were a prominent piece of the foundation upon which today's violent perception of African Americans is based.

The association between violence and African Americans today in American society is very strong. It is an association rooted in history, and with popular culture's focus on black violence, the growing number of black gang members, and the increasing black inmate population, it is an association that only seems to grow stronger in the eyes of many Americans.

### **General References**

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Triplett, William. "Gang Crisis." *CQ Researcher* (2004): 263-281.

### **Websites**

Bloods: <http://www.gangsorus.com/bloods.htm>  
Crips: <http://www.gangsorus.com/crips.htm>  
US Census (Incarcerated Population): <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm>