from papers. And then when you do a search, you're actually searching over those claims," says Olson. Consensus staff manually flag contentious or disproven claims – for example, that vaccines cause autism, says Olson. "We want to get to a state where all of that is automated," says Salem, "reproducing what an expert in this field would do to detect some shoddy research."

Meghan Azad, a child-health paediatrician at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, asked Consensus whether vaccines cause autism, and was unconvinced by the results, which said that 70% of research says vaccines do not cause autism. "One of the citations was about 'do parents believe vaccines cause autism?', and it was using that to calculate its consensus. That's not a research study giving evidence, yes or no, it's just asking what people believe."

Mushtaq Bilal, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, tests AI tools and tweets about how to get the most out of them. He likes Elicit, and has looked at Consensus. "What they're trying to do is very useful. If you have a yes/no question, it will give you a consensus, based on academic research," he says. "It gives me a list of the articles that it ran through to arrive at this particular consensus."

Azad sees a role for AI search engines in academic research in future, for example in replacing the months of work and resources required to pull together a systematic review. But for now, "I'm not sure how much I can trust them. So I'm just playing around," she says.

RACIAL INEQUALITIES DEEPENED IN US PRISONS DURING COVID

The proportion of incarcerated people who were Black and Latino increased during the pandemic.

By Myriam Vidal Valero

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the largest decrease of the US prison population in the country's history. Now, newly compiled data show that white people disproportionately benefited from this reduction.

Around the pandemic's start in early 2020, the proportions of Black and Latino people in the US prison population began to increase, while the proportion of white people started decreasing. The researchers who made the discovery, published on 19 April, attribute it largely to the shorter sentencing, on average, that white people receive in US courts (B. Klein *et al. Nature* https://doi.org/j6rr; 2023). (Although the word 'Latino' is used throughout this story, the study included women, men and other genders where data were available).

"This finding is somewhat unexpected because of the progress that's been made in recent decades in reducing prison populations and racial disparities in them," says Robert Sampson, a sociologist at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the size of the US prison population dropped by at least 17%: courts in almost every state closed, admissions fell to about 30% of pre-pandemic levels and roughly 200,000 people were released.

To investigate the impact of this change on the racial composition of prisons, researchers in biology, mathematics, data science and history compiled more than 20 years' worth of demographic records on prison populations in all 50 states and Washington DC.

Black and Latino people are disproportionately incarcerated in the United States relative to their share of the general population. The researchers found that the proportion of incarcerated Black people had been decreasing in the seven years before 2020 (see 'Prison disparities'). In March 2013, Black people accounted for about 41.6% of prison populations. By March 2020, the percentage had fallen to 38.9%. But by November 2020, during the height of COVID-19 restrictions, the percentage of incarcerated people who were Black climbed back up to 39.8%.

Surprising reversal

To explain the reversal, the researchers examined racial differences in admissions, releases and sentencing. Neither admissions nor releases alone could explain the trend.

The team found that the trend could be explained largely by the longer sentences that Black people receive, on average, combined with the pandemic-induced reduction in admissions. "Black people are, on average, serving sentences that are 20% longer than white people," says study co-author Brennan Klein, a network scientist at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts.

The team found that the proportion of imprisoned people who were Latino increased as well, but not by as much as the proportion of those who were Black. This was mainly because the differences in sentencing for Latino people compared with white people vary between states. For example, in Illinois, both Black and Latino people serve longer sentences than white people do, but in Texas, white and Latino people's sentences are similar.

By the end of 2021, the proportion of incarcerated people in the United States who were Black or Latino had returned to pre-pandemic levels, as admission rates began to increase. But the study's authors hope their results will help to reshape how the criminal-justice system addresses racial inequalities. "We can look at the way that we sentence people, who we sentence and how long we sentence people. And that alone will help us reduce these really alarming disparities," says Elizabeth Hinton, a historian at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and a co-author of the study.

PRISON DISPARITIES

During the height of pandemic restrictions, the proportions of incarcerated people in the United States who were Black and who were Latino* rose, while the proportion who were white fell.

*Includes women and men.