

US prison population hits 1.7 million

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The US prison population reached 1.7 million in 1997, according to a recently released US Justice Department report. If this decade's current growth rate continues, 2 million Americans will be behind bars by the year 2000.

As a proportion of the American population, the number of imprisoned people in the US has quadrupled over the last twenty-five years. Some 1.2 million inmates are in federal and state prisons, up from 774,000 in 1990, and another 567,000 are in local jails. There are as many incarcerated Americans as there are people in Houston, the fourth-largest city in the nation, and more than twice the number who live in San Francisco.

The US trails only Russia in the share of its citizens in jail. The total US incarceration rate of 645 people per 100,000 is six to ten times higher than most industrial nations, according to the Sentencing Project, a group that advocates alternatives to prison. By contrast, only 36 out of 100,000 Japanese citizens are in jail. In the state of Texas alone, there are 80,000 people in jail, larger than the prison population in France or the United Kingdom, and roughly equal to the number incarcerated in Germany, a country of 80 million, four times more populous than Texas.

The prison figures are one of the sharpest expressions of the social distress and inequality that afflict American society. While the past two decades have seen an enormous increase in wealth for the top 10 percent of the population, living standards have stagnated or declined for the vast majority. Tax breaks to big business and sweeping cuts in social programs have contributed to the social conditions that produced crime, drug use and other symptoms of social crisis.

Federal spending on jobs and job training for low-income people dropped by half during the 1980s. Meanwhile, between 1980 and 1993, federal spending on 'correctional activities' rose, in current dollars, by

521 percent. In California, four times as many black men are in state prison as are enrolled in public colleges and universities. The Los Angeles County jail system, where over 3,000 of the more than 20,000 inmates are receiving psychiatric services, is said to be the largest mental health institution in the US, and also, according to some accounts, the largest homeless shelter.

The growing ranks of the incarcerated has also led to the proliferation of for-profit, private prison companies. One such company, Correctional Services Corporation, recently reported a 50 percent rise in profits.

The greater the social inequality, the more the political establishment and the media have rejected the conception that crime is the product of social conditions. Instead they blame the individual and criminalize the poor. Thus America has seen the return of chain gangs, the trying of children as adults, a sharp increase in state executions and an ever-expanding prison population.

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