

Two million incarcerated in the US

Helen Halyard
1 February 2000

Two million people are expected to be incarcerated in US prisons and jails by February 15 of this year, according to data released by the Justice Policy Institute (JPI) last month. Over the last decade the prison population increased by 840,000, a 61 percent rise over the 1980s, and nearly 30 times higher than the average increase over each of the five decades preceding 1970.

According to official figures, the United States already has the highest number of inmates in the world, followed by China and Russia. With 5 percent of the world's population, the US has a quarter of all prisoners—2 million out of 8 million. In addition, another 3.6 million Americans are currently on probation or parole. The US rate of incarceration—672 out of every 100,000 people—is second only to Russia. By comparison, France imprisons around 90 people for every 100,000.

The Institute's report, entitled, "The Punishing Decade: Prison and Jail Estimates at the Millennium," details the sharp increase in the prison population during the 1990s, the disproportionate number of black youth in jail and the rising social costs of the prison construction boom.

The report notes that the passage of mandatory minimum sentences for drug offenses led to the jailing of large numbers of black youth from the inner cities. Even though blacks make up only 13 percent of the US population, half of the 1.2 million state and federal prisoners are black.

In the nation's capital and the nearby city of Baltimore, Maryland, for instance, half the young black men are under some form of criminal justice control. The study points out that a black male born in 1991 stands a 29 percent chance of being imprisoned at some point in his life, compared to Hispanic males at 16 percent and white males at 4 percent.

What the majority of the 2 million prisoners have in

common is that they come from the working class and the poorest sections of society. Many of the people in jail, moreover, suffer from mental illness, and, due to the large-scale closure of mental health facilities, had no access to treatment before being incarcerated. Even after being arrested and thrown in prison, they have been denied help.

In issuing the report, JPI Director Vincent Schiraldi commented, "It can truly be said that the 1990s have been our most punishing decade. As we enter the new millennium, the ascendance of prisons as our decade's major public works project and social program is a sad legacy." JPI policy analyst Jason Ziedenberg added, "We have to find alternatives to incarceration to solve America's pressing social problems."

For the proponents of law-and-order in Washington, the fact that 2 million Americans are behind bars is not a major cause for concern. On the contrary, many consider it a sign of progress. Congressman Bill McCollum, the Florida Republican who chairs the House of Representatives' Crime subcommittee, said the high prison population had contributed to falling crime rates. "One of the principal reasons for punishment is deterrence—the message it sends," he said. "There are a substantial number of people who do not commit crimes because they do not want to go to prison."

Even if one were to accept the arguments of these reactionaries at face value, what does it say about American society if millions, and potentially millions more, are engaged in criminal activity? If a large classroom of children suddenly became stricken with the same disease, doctors would search for the source of the illness by examining the children's environment. But the big business politicians and the news media reject any examination of the social causes of crime. Instead, they insist its source is the criminal himself, the bad seed, etc., deliberately ignoring the

correspondence of higher crime rates and drug use with declining neighborhoods and schools, poverty, racism and other social problems. This method conveniently leaves the social system and its political representatives off the hook.

The explosion in the prison population has taken place largely under the Clinton administration. While Clinton and the Republican Congress have gutted spending for welfare and other social programs, they have poured billions into hiring more police and building more prisons and boot camps. At the same time Democrats and Republicans from Washington to the state and local level have supported tougher sentencing laws, such as “three strikes and you’re out,” the trying of juveniles as adults, and the death penalty.

Far from alleviating the social crisis, the growth of the prison population has worsened conditions, particularly for poor families. From 1980 to 1995, the number of women in prison increased by 417 percent, compared to a 235 percent increase for men. A study done in 1991 showed that three-quarters of the women in prison were mothers. The long-term effects of this policy, including its psychological impact on the young, are incalculable. Many of the children who pass through the juvenile justice system either have a parent incarcerated or come out of foster care.

The total cost of incarcerating Americans in state and federal prisons and jails in 1999 was \$39.04 billion and will top \$41 billion in the year 2000. The JPI pointed out that the United States spends 50 percent more incarcerating 1.2 million violent offenders than the entire \$16.6 billion the federal government is currently spending on welfare programs that serve 8.5 million people. For the first time, in 1995, more money was spent on prison construction than on building colleges.

This amounts to a colossal waste of economic and human resources which could be better used to improve social conditions. The spending, however, has been spurred on by the burgeoning business in prison construction, contracting to private prison companies and other lucrative ventures.

Taken as a whole, the figures in the JPI report represent an indictment of American capitalism. Beneath the thin veneer of prosperity, the contradictions of American society are intensifying. What the growth in the prison population demonstrates above all is that a society that is neither willing or able

to meet the vast needs of its population is compelled to rely on brute force to defend the economic elite.



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