

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.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact