

US prison population to reach a record two million by year's end

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The US prison population will reach two million late this year, according to a report by the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics. Last year the number of inmates in the nation's prisons and jails reached nearly 1,932,000, a record number. While the US accounts for just 5 percent of the global population, 25 percent of the world's prisoners are in American prisons and jails.

That the US incarcerates its citizens in record numbers is an indictment of a society claiming, at least until the recent signs of an economic downturn, to be enjoying an era where people “never had it so good.” No other industrialized country even comes close to imprisoning as high a percentage of its population. Included among these prisoners are also more than 3,600 death row inmates. While the vast majority of countries have abandoned capital punishment, the US has carried out over 700 executions over the last quarter-century.

Although crime rates have decreased in the US in recent years, incarceration rates rose sharply in the 1990s, due in large part to stiffer sentencing laws and drug-related sentences pursued by prosecutors and politicians intent on appearing “tough on crime.” Since the end of 1990, the total imprisoned population has risen by more than 783,000 inmates, a nearly 70 percent rise. The number of inmates increased at a greater rate during the Clinton administration than under either Ronald Reagan or George Bush. While the number of prisoners in state and federal correctional facilities grew at a slower rate in the 12-month period ending June 30, 2000, the number of prisoners still increased by 56,660, or 3 percent.

Not only are Americans locked up in record numbers, those incarcerated in the nation's prisons and jails are overwhelmingly working class and poor and

disproportionately minority. The mentally ill also make up a significant portion of the prison population. Beefed-up laws targeting juvenile offenders have also sent increased numbers of young people to prison, a growing number of them housed in adult facilities.

The Justice Department's report shows that black males are imprisoned in record numbers in the US, with 791,600 black men behind bars, an all-time high. On any given day, nearly one in eight black males aged 20 to 34 are in jail or prison. Racial minorities account for nearly 80 percent of all state drug offenders, many of whom end up as prison inmates.

About a quarter million mentally impaired inmates are also incarcerated in the nation's prisons. Human Rights Watch estimates that 200 to 300 mentally ill prisoners are on death row, and reports that 35 mentally retarded individuals—those testing at IQs lower than 70—have been executed in the US since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976.

On Tuesday, the US Supreme Court heard the case of Johnny Paul Penry, a mentally retarded man on death row in Texas. Penry's lawyers argued that jurors in his case were given a “hopelessly confusing instruction” when they sentenced Penry to death in the 1979 murder of a 22-year-old woman. They contend he has the mental capacity of a seven-year-old and suffered severe abuse as a child that should have been taken into account by the jury in his sentencing.

The high court also announced on March 26 that this autumn they will hear the case of North Carolina death row inmate Ernest McCarver, an individual whose lawyers argue is mentally retarded. The justices will consider whether the execution of mentally handicapped people violates the US Constitution's ban on “cruel and unusual punishment.” To date, the Supreme Court has upheld the right of states to execute

the mentally impaired as well as individuals convicted for crimes committed when they were juveniles.

Over the last decade, many states have adopted tough laws targeting youth, eating away at the longstanding principles of the juvenile justice system which were aimed at rehabilitating and assisting suspected young offenders.

In Florida, which has adopted some of the most draconian juvenile justice laws, 16-year-olds can be prosecuted as adults for any felony, and children as young as 14 can be sent to the adult prison system for certain burglary and assault offenses. A *Miami Herald* investigation found that when juveniles are sent to adult prisons they are more likely to be assaulted than adult inmates. The *Herald* study also found that once released, they are more likely to be accused of future offenses than juveniles convicted of similar crimes and sent to juvenile facilities.

On March 9 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 14-year-old Lionel Tate was convicted of second-degree murder in the death of a six-year-old girl, an incident that took place when Tate was 12. Tate is currently being held in a juvenile facility while his lawyers appeal the conviction.

While the prison population continues to grow, men and women are also steadily being released from the “corrections” system, having completed their sentences or been granted parole. It is estimated that close to half a million former inmates will be released over the next several years. These individuals, the majority of them male, typically have low-levels of education and few work skills and will find it increasingly difficult to find work in view of the mounting layoffs due to the economic downturn. Many employers refuse to hire ex-inmates, and former prisoners are rarely protected by anti-discrimination laws.

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