

US prison population—over 2 million—hits new record

12 percent of black men in 20s and early 30s incarcerated

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The ostensible reason for the US military conquest of Iraq—named “Operation Iraqi Freedom”—is to dispense the blessings of American-style democracy over the ruins of bombed-out cities and the corpses of untold thousands of “liberated” Iraqis.

A new report on the US prison population sheds light on the brutal reality that underlies the supposed blessings of contemporary democracy in capitalist America for broad sections of the US working class. The Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics’ report—“Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002”—shows that as of midyear 2002 a record 2,019,234 prisoners were incarcerated in American state and federal facilities.

The US has a higher percentage of its citizenry in prison than any other country in history, and accounts for an astonishing 25 percent of the world’s prison population.

The report points to some truths, at once staggering and damning, about the social and political conditions facing the most impoverished and oppressed sections of the working class. More than a quarter of US inmates in mid-2002—a total of 596,400—were black males between the ages of 20 and 39. This means 12 percent of black men in their 20s and early 30s—more than one in ten—are in jail or prison. The report calculates that over the course of a lifetime, 28 percent of all black men will have spent some time behind bars.

Since 1990, the prison population has exploded, almost doubling from 1,148,702 in 1990 to 2,019,234 in mid-2002. While the stock market boom of the 1990s meant super-enrichment for the upper layers of society, growing numbers of people—a disproportionate number of them young and African-American—were

being locked up in the nation’s prisons and jails.

The numbers of inmates held in local and county jails rose by 5.4 percent last year, rising to 665,475, the largest growth in the jail population in five years. The majority of people sent to jail are awaiting trial or serving sentences of a year or less. This increase is directly related to the deepening economic slump affecting working and poor people, with the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicating that the increase is most likely due to a growth in poverty-related crimes, such as burglary.

The growth of the federal prison population accounts for a disproportionate share of the increase. In 1990 there were 58,838 prisoners in federal custody; in 2002 this number grew to 148,783. In the 12 months ending June 30, 2002, 8,893 additional prisoners came under the jurisdiction of the federal system. Some of this increase can be accounted for by the Federal Bureau of Prisons’ takeover of prisons operated in Washington DC. But it is also a result of measures enacted by Congress increasing the number of federal offences, including many related to drug crimes and gun possession.

In the 12 months ending June 30, 2002, several states experienced substantial increases in their prison populations, including: Rhode Island, up 17.4 percent; New Mexico, up 11.1 percent; and West Virginia and Maine, up 8.7 percent each.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics report also shows that the rate of imprisonment varies widely based on where a person lives. The three states with the highest rates of incarceration were all in the South—Louisiana, with 799 sentenced prisoners per 100,000 state residents, Mississippi (728) and Texas (685). This contrasts with

much lower rates in three Northern states: Maine, with 137 sentenced prisoners per 100,000 state residents, Minnesota (139) and North Dakota (167). It is noteworthy that these three Northern states are among 12 states without the death penalty, while Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas all practice capital punishment.

Relative to their number in the US population, men are about 15 times more likely than woman to be imprisoned. However, “equal rights” for women is slowly gaining momentum, with the average annual growth rate in the number of female inmates averaging 5.4 percent, compared to the 3.6 percent average annual increase for men. Just as women are now “free” to serve—and die—in military combat, their numbers are gradually increasing in the prison population.

The US is a leader not only in incarceration, but also in capital punishment. There are more than 3,600 condemned inmates on death rows across the US. On March 19, on the eve of the Bush administration’s attack on Iraq, federal death row inmate Louis Jones, 53, was put to death. Jones was a veteran of the 1991 Gulf War, and his lawyers argued that he suffered from Gulf War Syndrome, which made him violent and drove him to rape and murder a young servicewoman. President Bush rejected his appeal for clemency.

Since the war on Iraq began, the state of Texas has passed a grisly landmark. On March 20, Keith Clay became the 300th person put to death in the state. Of the 839 individuals executed since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, 301 have been sent to their deaths in Texas. George W. Bush, during his five years as Texas governor before assuming the presidency, presided over 152 of these state killings. These executions included women, the mentally impaired and those sentenced to death for crimes committed as juveniles.

The huge and growing prison population in the US testifies to the unprecedented level of social inequality that constitutes the single most significant aspect of American society. Fantastic levels of wealth for a privileged elite go hand in hand with worsening economic insecurity for the broad masses, and chronic poverty for tens of millions of the most oppressed—the breeding grounds for petty crime, drug abuse and all of the other symptoms of a dysfunctional and diseased social order. This oligarchic social structure is increasingly maintained by means of repressive laws,

police violence and racism.

The steady rise in the US prison population has continued under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, as the two parties vied to champion repressive “law-and-order” measures, while funneling ever greater shares of the national wealth to the uppermost social layers.



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