

US: record numbers in prison and on parole

Peter Daniels
3 August 2004

A report released July 26 by the US Department of Justice reveals that the prison boom in the United States shows little signs of slowing, despite a significant decline in crime rates in the past decade.

What the report terms the “correctional population,” all those in prison or jail as well as on probation and parole, reached a new record of almost 6.9 million as of the end of last year. This figure, about 3.2 percent of the adult population, is nearly as large as the population of New York, the nation’s largest city.

According to the Justice Department statistics, the number of people under correctional supervision has skyrocketed from 1,842,100 in 1980 to almost 6.9 million today, a rate of increase of nearly 400 percent in less than 25 years—a period when the country’s population, by comparison, grew by less than 20 percent.

Even though the crime rate has fallen, tougher sentencing rules and conditions of parole, along with the ongoing campaign for the imprisonment of low-level drug offenders, are continuing to produce record numbers.

The number of those in jails and prisons remains over 2 million, a figure it reached several years ago. As of 2003, 691,301 were held in local and county jails, and 1,387,269 in federal and state prisons. These numbers represent a 3.9 percent jump in the jail population and 2.3 percent for those in prisons, compared to the previous year.

A record 4.8 million adults were on probation or parole in 2003, an increase of 73,000 over 2002. Of this total of 4.8 million, 4,073,987 were on probation, an increase of 1.2 percent over 2002, and 774,588 were on parole. Probation generally constitutes a substitute for imprisonment after conviction of a crime. Parole consists of continuing supervision after inmates have served part of a prison term. Texas, the leader in prisons and capital punishment nationwide, had

534,260 on parole or probation. California followed with 485,039.

The US prison population is already the highest in the world. During the 1990s there was a period when Russia, after the collapse of the USSR, had the distinction of the highest rate of incarceration. Recently, however, widespread amnesties have been implemented to ease enormous overcrowding in Russian jails. On the heels of the record prison-building boom and rise in expenditures for police and prisons in the last quarter-century, the US is now unchallenged in this category.

In 1980 the number in prison or jail was 503,000. By 1990 this had reached more than 1,148,000, and by 2000 it was 1,937,000. The growth rate has fallen slightly since the beginning of this century, but at current rates the figure for those imprisoned will reach about 2.5 million by the end of this decade.

The social implications and significance of these numbers are rarely discussed in the media or “polite society” and they didn’t get serious mention at the recently concluded Democratic Convention in Boston. But the quadrupling of the number of men and women in prison, on probation or parole in less than a generation is the direct result of government policies, implemented by both capitalist parties in bipartisan fashion on a local, state and federal level. It amounts to a virtual police-state assault on sections of the working class.

Minority workers and the poorest sections of the working class generally have been singled out. About 56 percent of those on probation are white, 30 percent black, and 12 percent Hispanic. Among the parolees, 41 percent are black and 18 percent Hispanic. This compares to a total black and Hispanic population of about 25 percent in the country as a whole.

Tougher sentencing policies and the so-called war on drugs of the last several decades has had a devastating

impact on black men, even though drug use itself is no higher among racial minorities than among the population as a whole. One in eight black men in their twenties and thirties are behind bars, compared to 1 in 63 white men. For black male high school dropouts, 41 percent of those between 22 and 30 years old were locked up as of 1999, and this astounding figure is probably even higher today.

There are numerous economic, political and social considerations behind this conscious policy of repression and imprisonment of the most oppressed and vulnerable layers of the population. One thing can be stated with certainty: the 400 percent growth in the prison population has little to do with the crime rate. Crime figures were useful in encouraging the law-and-order drive, but the prison boom had very different purposes. It is primarily a means of dealing with the problem of chronic joblessness, and above all of dividing the working class on the basis of law-and-order demagoguery, using thinly disguised racial stereotyping and fear.

The prison boom has produced a million or more new jobs for prison guards and others, largely in poverty-stricken rural sections of the country where no other jobs are available. It has also served to “improve” the official unemployment rate, since those behind bars are not counted as jobless. The growth of the prison population has also provided a supply of virtual slave labor in certain labor-intensive sectors of the economy, as the use of prison labor has grown rapidly. Although the prison boom has certainly been expensive, it has so far been judged by the authorities to be worth the costs.

The statistics on imprisonment, released by the federal government itself, expose the lie that capitalism, following the collapse of Stalinism and various forms of national reformism around the world, has resolved its contradictions and proven its superiority as a system of social organization.

As one academic authority on imprisonment stated last year, “Why, in the land of the free, should 2 million men, women and children be locked up?” Why, indeed?

The “land of the free” is characterized today by levels of inequality that are common in the poorer sections of the globe. The bourgeois democracy that developed and the democratic rights that were won in struggle in the first 200 years of American history are not compatible

with these levels of social polarization.

Under conditions where millions of manufacturing jobs have disappeared in the last 20 years, and where most sections of the economy have been deregulated to remove all restrictions on exploitation and profit-making, there is simply no future for millions of workers and young people. The response of the ruling oligarchy is not spelled out directly. It is framed in terms of “public safety,” the war against crime, and today the “war on terror.” And it means, quite simply, relentless attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class at home as well as abroad. The future for millions of workers and youth is to end up behind bars or to be used as cannon fodder in imperialist wars, such as the current war in Iraq.

On a per capita basis, the US imprisons three times more of its people than Iran, four times more than Poland, five times more than Tanzania and seven times more than Germany. This is one very significant sign of the depth of the social and economic crisis in the very center of world capitalism.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact