

US prison population continues to soar in 2005

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The recent explosion of US government-authorized torture, renditions and indefinite detention demonstrates how the Bush administration and the wealthy elite it represents are spreading “freedom and democracy” throughout the world in the name of the “war on terror.” New statistics on the domestic prison population reinforce the notorious reputation the US has earned for injustice and inequality at home as well.

According to the federal Justice Department’s Bureau of Justice Statistics’ annual report, “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2005,” last year the nation’s prisons and jails held 2,186,230 prisoners—an increase of 56,428, or 2.6 percent over midyear 2004. This is an average of nearly 1,100 new inmates each week—more than twice the rate of population growth for both the US and the world, according to Census Bureau data.

The BJS statistics indicate that 738 per 100,000 of the population were incarcerated last year, up from 725 per 100,000 the year before. According to the report, as of midyear 2005, 1 in every 136 US residents were imprisoned. If this ratio excluded children from the total population, the percentage of those incarcerated would likely be closer to 1 in every 100 residents.

The US incarcerates by far the largest proportion of its population of any country in history, accounting for a quarter of the world’s prisoners in its corrections system. The US also has the most actions criminalized of any country, and routinely doles out mandatory sentences lasting decades. On any given day in America, more than 7 million of its residents are under some form of supervision of the corrections systems.

Since the late 1970s, when many “tough on crime” measures were adopted, the national prison population has increased sixfold. The most dramatic increase occurred in the past decade, coinciding with the economic polarization and dismantling of social programs during the Clinton and second Bush administrations. Minor theft, property and drug crimes have been “combated” with aggressive mandatory sentences. As social infrastructure and industry has crumbled, the richest 1 percent have accumulated unparalleled fortunes.

According to the BJS report, the incarcerated population has increased at an average rate of 3.4 percent annually in the decade between 1995 and 2005. The number in custody of the federal system expanded by 7.4 percent, state prisons increased

their populations by 2.5 percent, and the number of inmates held in local jails grew by 3.9 percent over the decade. The incarceration *rate* over the decade is even more damning: overall, the state incarceration rate rose by about 14 percent, and the federal rate rose by 72 percent.

During this period, despite a drop in violent crime, the prison industry ballooned into a \$40-billion-a-year industry thanks to the punitive “war on drugs” targeting the nation’s poorest and minorities. More essentially, the rise in incarceration—like the prevalence of drug addiction—is a result of the erosion of economic opportunities, industry, access to education, health care, and drug treatment programs, and the consequent despair of large numbers of the working class. This deterioration is coupled with fundamental changes in the legal system itself. Funding has significantly shifted away from public defense and rehabilitation toward more aggressive prosecution and policing. Simultaneously, legislatures have imposed rigid, severe sentencing policies, effectively removing much of the flexibility and thus independent power from the judicial system.

Of the different levels of facilities, the state system grew at an overall slower rate than federal or local systems. However, in the 2004-2005 period, 10 state systems grew by more than 5 percent, mostly in the Northwest and Midwest regions. States experiencing the highest growth rates included Montana (7.9 percent), South Dakota (7.8 percent) and Minnesota (6.7 percent). Meanwhile, Southern states continued to pull up the total number of new inmates in state prisons. Florida added 2,812 persons to its state facilities, the Texas state prison population rose by 2,228, and North Carolina was up by 1,482 state inmates. Together, these three state systems accounted for more than 40 percent of total growth in the state prison population. Twelve state systems reported decreased populations, with most in the Northeast, where sentencing is less draconian.

Not surprisingly, privately operated prison facilities absorbed the most inmates in the South and West, where racism, determinate sentencing policies and capital punishment dominate the courts. Texas reported holding 15,414 federal inmates in wholly privatized prisons in 2005, followed by Oklahoma (5,812 prisoners) and Florida (5,423). The BJS statistics reveal that four states, all in the West, held more than

a quarter of their total inmate populations in privately run prisons. Overall, private facilities held 6.7 percent of state and federal inmates, representing a growth rate of 2.7 percent, slightly more than the total rate of 2.6 percent. Such for-profit facilities are most egregious and least accountable for mistreatment of prisoners and violating international and Constitutional rights of prisoners.

The penal system is privatized throughout, by degrees. Most prisons contract out food preparation, transportation and maintenance obligations to private corporations. Because incarceration has become such a lucrative venture for business and investors, rational sentencing limits and leniency for nonviolent violations are discouraged. The same conflict of interest afflicting all of capitalist society—the subjugation of human and social well-being to the profit motive—finds a sharp expression in America’s prisons.

Throughout the system, inmates are subjected to brutality from one another and from guards. Cost-cutting and close quarters have led to capacity rates exceeding 95 percent at the local level, 99 percent at the state level, and an intolerable 140 percent at the federal level, where violent and nonviolent offenders are forced into constant, often hostile contact. Serious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, mental illness, physical and sexual assault are all rampant and unmanaged in the large penitentiaries.

The BJS statistics reveal that the largest actual increase in incarcerations came at the local jail level, where 62 percent of prisoners are held without even being convicted of a crime. In 2005, US local jail authorities supervised nearly 820,000 persons, the vast majority held in overcrowded and ill-equipped facilities. Most who were held pretrial either were denied release by judges or could not afford to post bail. Between June 2004 and 2005, the number held in custody of local jails rose by 33,539, according to the BJS Census of Jail Inmates. In absolute numbers, this increase is the largest since 1997. The census data also demonstrate the sharp increase over the decade; since 1995, the national jail population on a per capita basis has increased by nearly a third.

The inequalities present in every facet of American life are starkly revealed in incarceration demographics. African-American men continue to suffer an extremely disproportionate rate of incarceration compared to that of white men. In 2005, blacks were five times as likely as whites to be jailed in local facilities. Consistent with rates over the past decade, an estimated 12 percent of young black men were incarcerated last year. This translates into an even more astonishing incarceration rate over the course of a lifetime, with nearly a third of all black men in America imprisoned at some point.

The incarceration rates of ethnic minorities reflect the pattern and purpose of the prison system as a means of containment for the social ills and discontent experienced by the working poor. Funding for work training and drug treatment programs falls far short of amounts required to effectively wage a “war on drugs”

and raise the educational and cultural level of those who are behind bars. Rather, politicians at all levels of government bend over backward to bring the maximum security “industry” to poor regions and pour funding into high-visibility police enforcement, drug raids, prosecutorial advantage and long-term lockdowns.

The punitive rather than rehabilitative approach has led to very high levels of recidivism, particularly for those committing nonviolent offenses such as drug possession, shoplifting and child support non-payment. Various “three strikes” laws around the country effectively funnel the poorest prisoners, found guilty of the most minor crimes, into the most crowded, dangerous and oppressive conditions. And upon release, many former convicts are confronted with a permanent disenfranchisement in terms of voting rights and employment opportunities.

The detrimental effects of the prison cycle extend to entire families, amounting to a paralyzing form of collective punishment for the working class. The Bureau of Justice Statistics calculated that the rate of incarceration for women in the decade ending in June 2005 was 4.7 percent, much higher than the 3 percent rate of male imprisonment. According to a new report from the Women’s Prison Association, “Hard Hit: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women, 1977-2004,” women are the fastest growing population in prison, surpassing the growth rate of the male population in every state. In fact, since 1977, the female prison population has surged by 757 percent. Like their male counterparts, minority women are disproportionately targeted for long sentences.

Most incarcerated women are low-income mothers of more than one child, and most are convicted of drug addiction or of aiding in the support of a male drug offender, such as a cohabiting boyfriend or husband. While drug addiction is indeed a significant problem confronting the working class in the US, addictions must be addressed as a social epidemic in need of infrastructure and support networks. When the poor and ill are criminalized, such infrastructure is further strained. The current management of those addicted to drugs and those involved by association is a direct reflection of the intimate and unsavory connection between the ever-more expansive war on drugs and the solvency of the prison industry. In order to remain profitable, more prisoners must be found.

The BJS report is available in PDF

The Women’s Prison Association report can be downloaded as a PDF



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