

Massive US prison population continues to grow

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A report released December 1 by the Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) documents a persistence and expansion of America's vast prison population. In a country whose government addresses itself to the rest of humanity as the world's leading democracy, almost 2.2 million individuals are behind bars, and this number is increasing at an unsustainable rate.

According to the report, "Prisoners in 2005," there were 2,193,798 people incarcerated in the United States as of December 2005. An additional 4.1 million were on probation and around 800,000 more on parole. This amounts to more than 7 million people—or 1 in 32 American adults—who were under some sort of supervision by the US prison system as of 12 months ago.

The full report can be downloaded on the BJS web site, [here](#).

Since the government endeavor in the 1970s to get "tough on crime," the US prison population has increased six-fold. The largest growth has been experienced during the Clinton and Bush administrations, which have slashed social programs, cut taxes for the rich and made the market an object of worship.

The resulting social decay, polarization and disappearance of economic opportunities for broad sections of the population have been accompanied by a growth of petty crime and drug use. The government has aggressively combated the latter by expanding the prison system and imposing large mandatory sentences for nonviolent offenses such as drug possession, as a "deterrent" to potential offenders.

Today, the US has the highest incarceration rate in the world. According to the BJS report, 737 out of every 100,000 American residents were incarcerated at

the end of 2005—up from 725 the previous year and up from 605 in 1995. In other words, one out of every 136 men, women and children in the US is behind bars.

This past year, the sharpest increases in prison population were found in the country's poor and rural areas. Last year, South Dakota's inmate population increased by 11 percent, while Montana's rose by 10.9 percent and Kentucky's by 10.4 percent. On the whole, the nation's prison population increased by around 2 percent.

Due both to racism and economic deprivation, the proportion of black men in prison continues to be staggeringly high. Of black males aged 25-29, 8.1 percent are currently in prison. This compares to 2.6 percent of Hispanic men and 1.1 percent of white men.

In general, men are presently 13 times more likely than women to go to jail, although this is slowly changing. The number of female inmates grew last year by 2.6 percent, while the male inmate population grew only 1.9 percent. Since 1995, the number of male inmates has increased by 34 percent, while the female prison population has grown by 57 percent. This has largely been attributed to harsher sentencing for offenses such as drug use, as well as for crimes of association—many women are behind bars simply for living with a husband or boyfriend convicted of drug possession.

When considering these figures, it is important to remember the deplorable conditions in the prisons themselves. In the large penitentiaries, perennially overcrowded, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, physical and sexual assault and drug addiction are pervasive. The BJS report finds that federal prisons are currently operating on average at 34 percent above the maximum capacity for which they were designed.

One perhaps significant development noted in the

report is that the population of military prisons increased over the year 2005 at a rate more than three times greater than that of the general prison population. While the number of military inmates is comparatively small—around 2,300—the population increased markedly, by 6.7 percent.

Prison is big business in the US—the industry itself is worth \$40 billion a year. Recently, overcrowded state prison systems have begun to rely on private prison contractors to house inmates, and some of these companies have been very successful. These for-profit prisons, as one might expect, have become notorious for violations of inmates' basic constitutional rights.

The populations of these private prisons are also growing rapidly. During 2005, the number of federal inmates incarcerated in this way increased by 9.2 percent and the number of state inmates by 8.8 percent. Overall, around 107,000 of the country's inmates are now incarcerated for profit, though many more prisons contract out services such as food, sanitation and clothing.

It should be noted that the same companies employed to manage burgeoning prison populations in the US were tapped when the American military needed jails in Iraq—to the tune of tens of millions of dollars in defense contracts.

In the final analysis, the figures cited in this report contribute to a portrait of a society in an advanced stage of social decay.

In the United States can be found levels of social inequality of unique and historic proportions. More billionaires than any other country in the world—more than half of the world's billionaire population—live in America, and these 400-some people between them control more than \$1.25 trillion.

In the US, the average CEO now earns hundreds of times the wage of the average worker. A tiny layer at the top of American society lives in conditions of luxury and extravagance insulated from and largely incomprehensible to the overwhelming majority of the population, and this tiny layer, through its enormous economic assets, asserts its control over all of America's major political, social and economic institutions.

This social layer, when it encounters a complex social problem, is chronically incapable of solving it in a progressive manner; its responses are generally

characterized by ignorance and shortsightedness, on the one hand, and brutality, on the other.

Faced with a social fabric that is coming apart at the seams, this elite responds by criminalizing and incarcerating a larger and larger proportion of its own population.



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