

US prison population at all time high

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The “war on terror” is endlessly peddled by the American political establishment as a crusade for freedom and liberty around the world. Yet, as the latest prison figures again demonstrate, far from representing freedom, justice and democracy, the United States is notorious for its propensity to jail its own population.

The US incarcerates a far higher percentage of its population than any other country, with its prison population accounting for fully a quarter of the world’s prisoners. In 2006, newly released Census Bureau data indicate, the US incarcerated population stood at 2.1 million. According to separate figures put out by the Justice Department, by June 30, 2006, the prison population stood at well over 2.2 million.

No other country in the world comes close to these numbers. The far more populous China ranks second, with a prison population of approximately 1.5 million. The number of incarcerated persons in the US now exceeds the population of all but three cities in the country, and is equivalent to the combined populations of Seattle, Boston, Atlanta and Washington, D.C.

The number of inmates held in US state and federal prisons in 2006 was more than double the 1990 prison population, according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. The research and advocacy group The Sentencing Project estimates that in 2006, one in every 133 Americans was in prison or jail. Excluding the child population from the total brings this ratio close to one in every 100 adults behind bars.

Minorities continue to make up an enormously disproportionate percentage of the incarcerated. Approximately 41 percent of the adult correctional population were black in 2006, and 19 percent were Hispanic. One in every nine black men between the ages of 25 and 29 were incarcerated in 2006, as were one in 26 Hispanic and one in 59 white men of the same age group. According to the Justice Department’s

Bureau of Justice Statistics, black men have a one in three chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives; Hispanic men have a 17 percent chance; white men have a 6 percent chance.

The Census survey also found an increase of the female incarcerated population. As a percentage of the total prison population, women increased from 8 percent in 1990 to 10 percent in 2006.

Since the late 1970s, the prison population has increased sixfold, and the number of people on probation or parole has also skyrocketed. The overall correctional population (either in prison or on parole) has grown during this time from 1.8 million to well over 7 million people. Another 4.3 million ex-convicts live in the US. The total population of the United States is approximately 300 million.

The figures from the Justice Department and Census measure the number of prisoners at any given time. However, during the course of one year, a far larger number of people spend at least some time behind bars. According to the 2007 Public Safety Performance review by the Pew Charitable Trusts, more than 600,000 people are admitted to state and federal prisons, and more than 10 million spend time in local jails, over the course of any given year.

Driving this increase in prisoners has been a shift from rehabilitative to punitive “tough on crime” policies. The incarceration rate increased dramatically beginning in the early 1990s, in tandem with a drastic growth in inequality and the dismantling of social programs. While the rich amass ever-higher concentrations of wealth, social infrastructure and economic opportunities have deteriorated.

The crumbling of industry, education, healthcare and drug rehabilitation programs in America finds its consequences in all the social ills plaguing society’s poorest layers—unemployment, debt, despair, addiction, homelessness—and gives rise to domestic disturbances,

theft, and property and drug crimes. The response of the ruling elite to these problems is more prisons.

Another unsurprising consequence of this economic polarization has been an increasingly aggressive policing of minor crimes. State legislatures have enacted laws that have removed much of the judicial system's ability to make independent decisions outside of severe sentencing laws. Drug possession, child support non-payment, shoplifting, and other various minor offenses catch more of the poor in "three-strikes laws," which mandate long sentences for repeat offenders.

At the same time, funding has been redirected away from public defense and rehabilitation programs and toward prosecution and punishment. Even as violent crime has dropped over the past decade, longer and more rigid mandatory sentences for non-violent offenses have resulted in the huge growth in incarceration.

As Allen Beck, deputy director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, told the *Washington Post*, "The growth wasn't really about increasing crime but how we chose to respond to crime. When you increase the likelihood of a person going to prison for a conviction, and then you increase how long you keep them there, it has a profound effect."

According to a new report from The Sentencing Project, drug arrests have more than tripled in the last 25 years, to a record 1.8 million arrests in 2005. The so-called war on drugs has pushed the number of incarcerated drug offenders up by 1,100 percent since 1980. During this same period, rates of drug use declined by half.

The overwhelming majority of drug arrests are for possession of marijuana, and most persons in prison for a drug offense have no history of violence or high-level drug selling activity.

The racial disparity is enormous in drug sentencing as well. The Sentencing Project reports that while blacks constitute 14 percent of regular drug users in the US, they make up 37 percent of those arrested for drug offenses and 56 percent of those held in state prison for drugs.

The number of prisoners held without being sentenced is also on the rise, according to the Justice Department figures. In 2006, 62 percent of jail inmates were awaiting trial, up from 51 percent in 1990 and 56

percent in 2000. Most were arrested on drug offenses.

The number of prisoners held in private, for-profit facilities rose by more than 10 percent in one year. This represents a dramatic leap in the growth of the for-profit prison industry that dovetails with the growth of police state measures at large. The prison industry—the network of private companies that operate the prison system—now has annual revenues of approximately \$40 billion a year.

Virtually all of these prisons are horrifically overcrowded. State prisons were operating at 99 to 113 percent of capacity, and the federal prison system was operating at 134 percent of capacity. This compounds the dangers and brutality of prison life. Inmates are exposed to physical and sexual assault, and put at risk for diseases such as HIV/AIDS or developing mental illness.



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