

US leads world in imprisoning its people

More than one in 100 adults behind bars

Kate Randall
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In both raw figures and as a percentage of the population, the US is the world leader in the rate at which it puts its people behind bars. A new report using state-by-state data says a record 2,319,258 Americans were in jail or prison at the start of 2008—one out of every 99.1 adults.

The report by the Pew Center on the States also documents record increases in financial outlays for incarceration, with the 50 US states spending more than \$49 billion on prisons last year, almost five times more than the \$11 billion spent 20 years ago.

The statistics in the report reflect a society that, while exporting violence in aggressive wars abroad, metes out parallel punishment on its population at home.

The rate of increase for prison costs last year was six times higher than the rate of increase for higher education spending. With many US states strapped for cash and facing budget shortfalls, the spending for prisons and jails has resulted in a proportionate decrease in spending on education and other social needs.

The study notes that mandatory sentencing laws and “get tough on crime” measures pushed by state legislatures have contributed to the burgeoning prison population. Even in states where crime rates have decreased, the numbers of imprisoned continue to grow.

A 1986 federal law mandated prison terms for crack cocaine offenses that are up to eight times longer than those involving powdered cocaine. Minorities, workers and the poor are far more likely to be sentenced for crack cocaine offenses.

The rate of incarceration for African Americans is significantly higher than for the overall population. An astonishing one of every nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars. For black women ages

35 to 39, one in 100 is imprisoned, compared with one in 355 white women of the same age.

Between 1990 and 2000, the prison population increased by about 80 percent. One of the biggest contributing factors was the adoption by states of “three-strikes-and-you’re-out” laws mandating draconian sentences, no matter the nature of the third offense. Legislation was also passed curtailing the discretion of state parole boards in deciding when an inmate can be released.

Notably, these increased incarceration figures have had little or negative impact on the rate of repeat offenders.

The incarcerated population increased last year in 36 states as well in as the federal prison system. The largest percentage increase was in Kentucky, which had 12 percent more inmates in state prisons and jails at the beginning of this year than at the beginning of 2007. While the state’s crime rate has increased by only about 3 percent over the last three decades, the state’s prison population has increased by 600 percent.

As in the US South as a whole, the prison population in Florida has surged, close to doubling over the last 15 years. The state’s inmate population increased from 53,000 to more than 97,000 between 1993 and 1997. The Pew study notes that analysts attribute this growth mainly to a host of correctional policies and practices adopted by the state.

In 1995, the Florida legislature abolished “good time” credits and discretionary release by the state’s parole boards. The study notes that now “all prisoners—regardless of their crime, prior record, or risk to recidivate—serve 85 percent of their sentence.”

A new “zero tolerance” policy adopted by Florida also mandated that probation officers report all technical violations by paroled prisoners. This measure

alone has resulted in a 12,000 jump in the prison population while the actual crime rate has declined.

Without a change in these policies, the prison population in Florida is expected to reach nearly 125,000 inmates by 2013. The report notes that based on this projection, “the state will run out of prison capacity by early 2009 and will need to add another 16,500 beds to keep pace.”

The amount spent to keep Americans behind bars is as staggering as the numbers incarcerated. Thirteen states now spend more than \$1 billion a year out of their general funds on their corrections systems.

California is the leader, spending \$8.8 billion last year on the more than 171,000 prisoners in the state, a 216 percent increase over 20 years earlier. California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger last year signed a bill authorizing \$7.9 billion in additional spending on corrections, to pay for 53,000 more prison and jail beds.

The Pew study shows that state corrections budgets now consume 6.8 percent of state general funds. This means that one in every 15 dollars from states’ discretionary funds goes towards prison costs.

As a percentage, in fiscal year 2006 transportation was the only category of spending by states to increase more than costs for prisons and jails, which increased by 9.2 percent during this period. This increase outpaced spending on education and Medicaid.

A comparison of the funds spent by states on higher education with spending on incarceration provides a revealing glimpse into priorities. In 2007, states collectively spent \$72.88 billion on higher education, an increase of 121 percent over the \$33 billion spent in 1987. During this same period, prison-related spending rose 315 percent, with states spending a combined \$44 billion in 2007, up from \$10.6 billion two decades earlier.

As both a percentage of its population and in real numbers, the US prison population outranks the inmate populations of the 26 European countries with the largest numbers of prisoners. The Russian Federation, with a reported prison population of 889,598, is second. Denmark, with 3,626 prisoners, has the lowest rate of these countries.

These 26 countries, with a combined population of 802.4 million, imprison 1.8 million; the US, with a population of about 300 million, imprisons close to 2.3

million. According to the study, China, with an estimated population of 1.3 billion, has the second highest number of prisoners behind bars, 1.5 million.

These extraordinary figures are one reflection of the enormous social contradictions of American society. The United States is the most unequal of any industrialized country and ranks high on every measure of stress, depression, alienation and other social ills. Despite the US’s self-declared status as a beacon of democracy and freedom, American capitalism has no humane, rational or progressive response to social problems. Instead, social problems are treated as police matters.



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