

US prison population at record high

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10 December 2009

More than 7.3 million people were under the authority of the US corrections system at the end of 2008, according to new government data. This figure amounts to 1 in 31 adults in the country, by far the highest rate in the world. Over 2.3 million adults are held in prisons and jails throughout the US, and 5.1 million are on supervised parole or probation.

The federal Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), in issuing its annual figures for 2008 on Tuesday, announced that the year had seen a slowing rate of growth in national incarceration, a trend attributed to lower court case volume and shortfalls in state funding for prisons.

Last year, the number of people who were put in jail or prison dropped by 0.5 percent over the previous year, while the number of those released rose by 2 percent, the result of cash-strapped states discharging a share of their nonviolent prisoners.

Overall, however, the correctional system population increased by 0.5 percent in 2008, and the prison population grew by 0.8 percent. Significantly, the number of prisoners held as detainees in Immigration and Customs Enforcement cells soared by 12 percent, to 34,000 last year.

The BJS data indicates that the incarceration rate for black men and women fell by 9 percent last year, which the Justice Department attributed to fewer drug-related convictions. Nevertheless, black males continue to be sentenced at a rate 6.5 times that of white males. For every 100,000 black men in the US, 3,161 are in prison.

The rate of incarceration for Hispanics is likewise disproportionately high, with 1,200 of every 100,000 behind bars in 2008. For white men, the imprisonment rate has grown from 449 to 487 per 100,000 over the past decade.

BJS data indicates that a number of states registered declines in their prison populations. Most of the

declines were on the order of several hundred or smaller.

Georgia registered a decrease of 1,537. According to data released in March by the Pew Center on the States, however, Georgia led the nation in prisoners as a share of population last year, with a staggering 7.92 percent of its residents living under the corrections system, or 1 in every 13 adults. Georgia's immigration detention population grew by 43 percent over the year, to 2,075.

New York, which housed a prison population of 60,347 last year, reported a decrease of 2,273. Michigan dropped by 1,495. Georgia, New York and Michigan combined to account for more than half of the total decline in prisoners.

Several states expanded their prison operations over the year, in spite of budget crises. Growth in Pennsylvania (up 4,178 prisoners), Florida (up 4,169), Arizona (1,843) and North Carolina (1,512) accounted for most of the increase in the national prison population.

The Pennsylvania prison population, including both state and federal facilities, rose by 9.1 percent to 50,147 in 2008. Montana registered a 20.6 percent increase in female prisoners.

Several states hold well over 100,000 prisoners. California held 173,670 prisoners in 2008; Texas held 172,506; in Florida 102,388 were jailed.

US prisons are typified by dire conditions. Prisoners often face physical and sexual violence from other inmates and the brutality of guards. Most state and federal prisons are operating at full or overcapacity. Disease is rampant, including chronic and fatal infections like tuberculosis and hepatitis. In 2008, 1.5 percent of male prisoners and 1.9 percent of female inmates in state and federal facilities were HIV positive or had AIDS, a rate 2.5 times that of the general population.

The sheer scale of its corrections system exposes the

pretenses of the American state as the global defender of democracy. Over the past quarter century, the US prison population has grown by nearly 275 percent. Since the late 1970s, the number of prisoners has increased sixfold.

At the same time, large numbers of arrests result in people being tossed into holding cells to wait for hearing dates without legal representation. The public defender system, starved of funds and crippled by caseloads, offers little protection to the poor. In 2007, 17,148 attorneys working out of fewer than 1,000 public defender offices received nearly 6 million indigent defense cases. Half of these cases were over misdemeanor charges.

Under various “zero-tolerance,” “war on drugs,” and “three strikes” policies in the 1990s, the corrections system swelled at an annual rate of 6.5 percent. The shift to severe “tough on crime” sentencing for petty theft or drug addiction problems coincided with the prodigious expansion of the prison industry, including the growth of lucrative private, for-profit prisons and paid prisoner-housing arrangements within the county jail systems.

The growth in the corrections system is an expression of the decades-long offensive of the American ruling class on the working population that has resulted in record social inequality, and the destruction of virtually all of the previous components of the social safety net.

The past 30 years have seen the systematic dismantling of welfare, and the de-funding of mental health institutions, drug treatment centers, and prisoner education and rehabilitation programs. The collapse of industry, health care and education has created conditions that inevitably promote drug dependence, theft and other petty crimes, domestic disturbances, and other social miseries. The response of the ruling elite is the expansion of the prison system.



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