

US prison population increases for first time since 2009

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The United States held a staggering 1,574,700 persons in state and federal prisons as of December 31, 2013, an increase of approximately 4,300 prisoners, or 0.3 percent, from year-end 2012, according to a new report. The rise was the first reported since a peak of 1,615,500 prisoners in 2009.

The report from the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)—“Prisoners in 2013”—shows that the tendency toward a slight reduction in the US prison population in the years since the official end of the recession appears to have been short-lived.

The imprisonment *rate* for all prisoners decreased marginally from 480 prisoners per 100,000 US residents in 2012 compared to 478 per 100,000 in 2013, but this rate continued to dwarf those of every European country and the vast majority of the world, according to available statistics.

The BJS prisoner count does not include the more than 850,000 prisoners held at local jails across the nation. Taking these people into account, the incarceration rate rose to 716 per 100,000 US residents as of October 2013. While the US makes up about 5 percent of the world's population, it incarcerates about one-quarter of all prisoners on the planet.

The number of inmates held under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FOB) declined slightly, by 1,900, in 2013. More than 50 percent of prisoners under federal jurisdiction were sentenced for drug-related crimes, down from 56 percent in 2001.

These slightly lower federal figures, however, were offset by a large increase of inmates in the state prisons, which held an estimated 6,300 more prisoners at the end of 2013 than at year-end 2012. This jump in state prison numbers suggests that policy changes adopted by many states, such as giving second chances to those on probation and keeping nonviolent drug offenders out

of prison, may have outlived their effectiveness in reducing the prison population.

Florida, California and Texas, the states with the largest prison populations, saw some of the greatest increases last year. California, for example, saw its prison population grow by 1,447 to 135,981. Reforms implemented in the state in 2011 under the Public Safety Realignment Plan—which sentenced some new nonviolent, non-sex offenders to community programs or jails, and slowed the reimprisonment of parole violators—were no longer resulting in a reduction of prisoners by 2013.

As of June 2013, 55.3 percent of California's 134,160 prisoners were serving either “enhanced” sentences as two-strike or three-strike offenders, life sentences with or without parole, or were on death row.

In 2013, Florida saw its prison population rise by 4.1 percent, to 103,028, while the number of inmates incarcerated in Texas rose by 2.1 percent, to 168,280. Other states seeing significant increases included Colorado (5.3 percent), Delaware (5.8 percent), Maryland (5.6 percent), Massachusetts (6.3 percent), Oregon (5.3 percent), West Virginia (8.4 percent) and Wyoming (9.2 percent).

Males continue to make up 93 percent of prisoners, compared to 7 percent for women. However, the female prison population saw a statistically significant increase of 2.3 percent from 2012 to 2013. An additional 2,395 women were incarcerated in state prisons last year, along with 120 more in federal facilities. White females comprised 49 percent of the female prison population, compared to 22 percent for black females. However, the imprisonment rate for black females—113 per 100,000—was twice the rate for white females.

The number of male inmates increased by 0.1 percent in 2013. However, compared to the US population, the

male prison population continued to be disproportionately represented by blacks (37 percent) and Hispanics (22 percent), compared to whites (32 percent).

Almost 3 percent of black males in the US were imprisoned as of December 31, 2013, and more than 550,000 black men and women are incarcerated nationwide. In the age range with the highest imprisonment rate for males, 25-39, black males were imprisoned at rates at least 2.5 times greater than Hispanic males and 6 times greater than white males.

The BJS does not track the income levels of prisoners. A recent US Federal Reserve survey, however, found that the annual income of typical US household fell 12 percent between 2007 and 2013, and that much of this decline took place during the “recovery” presided over by the Obama administration.

The burgeoning social chasm between the super-rich and the vast majority of US families leads to economic insecurity and financial desperation for many. Undoubtedly, many of these working-class and financially marginalized individuals are targeted by police and prosecutors and are ending up in the state and federal prison system in growing numbers.

This is especially true for the younger sections of the population. According to the BJS report, at the end of 2013, a majority of prisoners in state and federal prisons, 58 percent, were 39 and younger, and 28 percent were below the age of 30. Many older prisoners, arrested and sentenced in the prime of life, have served years if not decades in prison.

The rise of the number of US citizens incarcerated in the nation’s prisons is more evidence of the police-state apparatus being built up by government at both the federal and state level to confront the rising social anger being produced by growing income inequality, austerity measures and police violence.



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