

# US state prison population soars as education spending plummets

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The prison populations in most US states are at historic highs. Prisons in 36 US states incarcerate three times as many people as they did in 1978. State prison systems account for 87 percent of the total prisoner population, or roughly 1.3 million in 2013 compared to about 270,000 in 1978. But even as states spend more on prison operations, they are spending less on education for children and young adults, particularly in high-poverty neighborhoods.

A new report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) paints a devastating picture of a polarized society in which the prison and police-military apparatus is being continually expanded while vital social programs are starved for funds. CBPP estimates that if state corrections spending had been held to mid-1980s levels, adjusted for inflation today the 50 US states would have about \$28 billion more each year between them to allocate to non-prison related expenditures.

At least 30 states are spending less in general funding per student this year for K-12 schools than before the recession hit in 2008; 14 states have reduced funding by more than 10 percent. Spending cuts for higher education have been even deeper, with the average state spending 23 percent less per student since the recession. There is also a direct correlation between increased prison spending and education cuts, with many states with the highest incarceration rates making the deepest education cuts.

The growth of the prison population has far outpaced US population growth. In the late 1970s, states imprisoned around 120 individuals for every 100,000 residents. This rate peaked at 450 individuals per 100,000 in 2007, and has fallen only slightly since. Ten states—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma and

Texas—had incarceration rates exceeding 500 prisoners per 100,000 residents in 2013.

State prison populations have ballooned as states have sent a substantially larger share of offenders to prison and have kept them incarcerated longer. The likelihood that an offender will go to prison has risen sharply over the past 30 years. This is particularly true for those convicted of drug-related crimes, for whom the likelihood of being sent to prison rose by 350 percent between 1980 and 2010.

“Three-strikes” and “truth in sentencing” provisions, combined with aggressive prosecutions by state authorities, have led to longer prison sentences as well. The report cites Pew Center on the States estimates, which show that between 1990 and 2009, the average time served for property crimes rose by nearly 25 percent, while the time served for violent and drug crimes grew by roughly 37 percent.

The impact of high incarceration rates has been especially acute “for a small but geographically concentrated number of neighborhoods,” CBPP notes. A 2010 paper by two Harvard criminologists found that in a small subset of clustered Chicago neighborhoods, over 4,000 per 100,000 residents were incarcerated—*eight times the rate* for Chicago as a whole. Another study found that the incarceration rate for North Carolina was 335 per 100,000 residents statewide, but was *8,000 per 100,000 adult residents* in one neighborhood.

Neighborhoods with the highest incarceration rates also have high levels of poverty, unemployment and racial segregation. People returning to their communities after prison sentences lack employable skills. Nearly 40 percent of prisoners have not finished high school, compounding the difficulty in finding employment. A Pew study found that total earnings by

age 48 are more than 50 percent lower among men who have been incarcerated compared to those who have not.

Another study found that if state-level incarceration rates had not increased between 1980 and 2004, the official poverty rate would have fallen by roughly 20 percent over that same period. More than 2.7 million children have a parent behind bars, a significant factor driving child poverty.

State funding for prisons has dwarfed education spending. Adjusted for inflation, state spending for prisons grew by 141 percent from 1986 to 2013, while K-12 education spending rose by 69 percent, and higher education spending by merely 5.6 percent. (See Figure 4)

The three states with the deepest education funding cuts—Alabama, Arizona and Oklahoma—are among the 10 states with the highest incarceration rates. Kansas, which saw its imprisonment rate rise by 228 percent from 1978 to 2013, had 19,000 more students in state schools last year than in 2009, but employed 665 fewer teachers.

Preschool funding has been particularly hard hit, with 28 of the 40 states that fund preschool spending less on these programs than before 2008. Cuts in state funding for colleges and universities have been devastating. Arizona and Louisiana, both in the top 10 for incarceration, have cut their budgets for higher education by more than 40 percent.

In areas where large numbers of people are removed and placed in prison, entire neighborhoods are robbed of human capital. In turn, these are the same neighborhoods that are seeing the biggest cuts in education funding. The CBPP report found that the average teacher in a high-poverty school district in Alabama had 19 students in the classroom in 2011, compared to a wealthier district, with 13.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities makes numerous recommendations for reforms aimed at reducing the prison population and increasing funding for education, particularly in the poorest working class neighborhoods. This advice will fall on the deaf ears of state and federal authorities and politicians in both the Democratic and Republican parties, whose policies are motivated by the interests of the super-rich.

Under conditions of growing social inequality, particularly in the wake of the recession, the Obama

administration and the states have worked to build up repressive police-military powers, including the vast prison apparatus, while at the same time gouging spending for social programs.



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