

Study says US jails have become “massive warehouses” for the poor

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A study released Wednesday by the Vera Institute of Justice, entitled “Incarceration's Front Door: The Misuse of Jails in America,” argues that American jails have become “massive warehouses” for the poor since the early 1980s.

The study exposes the onerous conditions that even a brief stay in jail imposes on the poorest and most vulnerable sections of American society. Jails have been transformed, according to the authors, from temporary detention facilities for those awaiting trial into a “a gateway to deeper and more lasting involvement in the criminal justice system.”

According to the study, American jails process nearly 12 million admissions in a typical year, nearly double the level in 1983 and equal to the combined populations of New York City and Los Angeles. The jail population at any given time has skyrocketed even more over the same period, more than tripling to 731,000, fueled by a more than 50 percent increase in the average length of stay in jail. The study notes that because the percentage of the jail population awaiting trial has ballooned from 40 percent to 62 percent, “it is highly likely that the increase in the average length of stay is largely driven by longer stays in jails by people who are unconvicted of any crime.”

Spending by local governments on jails have likewise exploded by 235 percent over the same period, reaching \$22.2 billion in 2013. “Even this figure fails to capture the true costs of jails to local jurisdictions,” the study argues, because “money spent on jails ... often comes out of the budget of non-correctional agencies. Cities and counties have to cover most costs themselves, drawing on the same pool of tax revenue that supports schools, transportation, and an array of other public services.”

Despite the explosive growth of the American prison

system, which has resulted in the country having the highest prison population of any country on the planet, crime has actually plummeted during the same period. The study notes that the number violent crimes and property crimes, after peaking in 1991, have fallen by 49 and 44 percent, respectively.

Nearly three-quarters of the inmate population are in jail for “nonviolent traffic, property, drug, or public order offenses,” according to the report. Three fifths have not been convicted of a crime and are awaiting either trial or resolution of their cases. African Americans comprise a disproportionate share of the jail population, at 36 percent.

The report notes that a disproportionate number of inmates are repeat offenders struggling with mental illness or substance abuse. In New York City, only 473 people, almost all of whom struggled with substance abuse or a mental illness accounted for over 10,000 admissions and 300,000 days in jail, mainly for misdemeanors and violations. The authors state that jails have become “de facto mental hospitals” that “fill the vacuum created by the shuttering of state psychiatric hospitals.” However, over 83 percent of mentally ill inmates receive no mental health care while in jail. Mentally ill inmates also spend much lengthier periods in jail, for example 43 days on average in Los Angeles, compared to an average of 18 days amongst the general population.

Huge numbers of inmates are in jail simply because they are unable to pay the increasingly onerous bails set by judges. In New York City, over half of all jail inmates are in jail because they cannot afford to pay a bail of \$2,500 or less. Nationwide, only 23 percent of suspects are released on their own recognizance, down from over half thirty years ago, and bail amounts in felony cases increased 43 percent between 1992 and

2009 to \$55,400. For many people who cannot afford to post bail, according to the study, “a guilty plea may, paradoxically, be the fastest way to get out of jail.”

Regardless of whether they are actually convicted, spending even a few days in jail has a damaging effect on the lives of the incarcerated. The report found that among adult males, “hourly wages decreased by 11 percent, annual employment by nine weeks, and annual earnings by 40 percent as a result of time spent in jail or prison.”

Many jails charge inmates fees for various “services,” such as clothing and laundry, medical care, and “even core functions such as booking,” according to the report. Many people find themselves back in jail for failing to pay these fees, a situation that the authors compare to debtor's prisons. A lawsuit filed this week against the city government in Ferguson, Missouri alleges that the city has “built a municipal scheme designed to brutalize, to punish and to profit” by imprisoning people unable to pay fines and traffic tickets.

The explosion of incarcerations in local jails is bound up with the increasingly vindictive policing policies towards minor offenses, especially drug-related crimes. Nearly 75 percent of all inmates are in jail for “nonviolent traffic, property, drug, or public order offenses,” according to the report.

The study singles out the “broken windows” theory of policing, according to which a crackdown on minor “quality of life” offenses supposedly reduces the level of more serious crimes. It was infamously implemented in New York City by current police chief Bill Bratton in 1994, resulting in a staggering 2,760 percent increase in misdemeanor marijuana arrests and giving rise to the Department's infamous “vertical policing” and “stop-and-frisk” programs. The authors cite an “exhaustive review” by the National Research Council that found no strong evidence that aggressively policing minor offenses reduces or prevents more serious crimes.

The growth of mass incarceration and increasingly brutal policing in the United States is a reflection of the pervasive growth of social inequality in the United States. While the most vulnerable sections of society are brutalized and imprisoned under the flimsiest of pretenses, the financial oligarchs who run society are allowed to commit crimes with total impunity.



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