

Mass Incarceration

A civil liberties briefing



The United States of America has the world's largest prison population (over 2 million) and world's highest rate of incarceration (737 Americans per 100,000).¹

We house 25 percent of all prison inmates on earth, though we represent just 5 percent of the world's total population.

It wasn't always this way. Mandatory minimum sentencing, the War on Drugs, and other "tough on crime" campaigns caused the U.S. prison population to explode by 700 percent from 1970 to 2005.

Unsurprisingly, prison spending has also skyrocketed. We now spend four times more on incarceration per capita than we do on education.²

Who Are We Locking Up?

Nearly half of all the inmates incarcerated in our state prisons are **nonviolent offenders**,³ and nearly half of these nonviolent offenders are serving time for low-level drug offenses.⁴

These mass incarceration statistics paint a gloomy picture all by themselves. But it gets even worse when we examine the fundamental racial bias embedded in our national War on Drugs.

1 out of every 15 African American males over the age of 18 is currently in prison. African Americans in this country are over five times more likely to be in prison than their white counterparts⁵, and these are just the median numbers; in certain parts of the country, things are much worse.

We also know that African Americans and white Americans engage in drug offenses, possession, and sales at roughly comparable rates. Some data even suggests that white Americans actually use more drugs than African Americans.⁶ **Yet African Americans are sent to prison for nonviolent drug offenses at 10 times the rate of white Americans.**⁷

The Cost of Mass Incarceration

The impact of this systemic racial inequality on communities of color cannot be overstated. Entire generations have been removed from their neighborhoods and from their families while their white counterparts remain out of jail. When these people return home, their criminal records put them at a disadvantage. Often, they join the ranks of the growing underclass, individuals unable to obtain employment or housing, trapped in perpetual poverty.

Under these circumstances, some lose hope and return to crime. Others continue to struggle in a system that seems designed to stigmatize them for the rest of their lives. Whichever way they go, taxpayers end up paying the bill.

This is not a sustainable model. No one wants to be labeled "soft on crime," but our criminal justice system is perched on the brink of financial meltdown with the world's largest prison population.

Becoming "Smart on Crime"

In Ohio, bipartisan groups of legislators have passed modest legislation to partially reform harsh sentencing laws and make it easier for formerly incarcerated people to reenter society after serving their time.

These back-end reentry policies can help people put their lives back together after being incarcerated, **but they must be coupled with meaningful front-end efforts to lower the number of people going to prison and jail.**

Bringing the focus back to rehabilitation and decriminalization could reduce the number of low-level, nonviolent drug offenders in prison and remedy some of the problems associated with prison overcrowding and racial disparity without sacrificing public safety.



Web Resources

1. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/uk/06/prisons/html/nn2page1.stm>
2. <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/03/14/states-spend-times-incarcerating-educating-studies-say-464156987/>
3. <https://www.aclu.org/combating-mass-incarceration-facts-0>
4. <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounders/usa/incarceration/>

5. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-07-18-prison-study_N.htm?csp=34
6. <http://healthland.time.com/2011/11/07/study-whites-more-likely-to-abuse-drugs-than-blacks/>
7. <http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>