

CORRECTIONS in the U.S. — The Picture Today...

The U.S. currently holds the highest incarceration rate per capita of all western nations. There are over 2 million men and women incarcerated in the U.S. During the past decade the U.S. prison population has more than tripled. Mandatory sentencing laws, "tough on crime" policies lengthening prison terms, and a dependence on prison as our primary defense against crime have created a massive prison system that absorbs \$40 billion per year. States currently spend more on prisons than they do on health, education or housing programs.

Today, one out of every 25 males in the U.S. is under the direct supervision of the criminal justice system, either incarcerated, on parole, or on probation. Among young black males the number is one in three; among young Hispanic men, one in eight.

Our costly prison beds have been dedicated increasingly over the past decade to non-violent offenders.

A profile of the U.S. prison population shows high rates of drug and alcohol problems, under-education, unemployment, and a high incidence of AIDS. Most inmates are from broken families; and a large percentage have parents, siblings, or children who have served time.

More than 94% of these offenders will eventually be released from prison and return to our communities. Will their experience in prison have made them better neighbors and more contributing members of the community? Or will they return to their community and their families more violent and abusive than when they left? Prison policy will significantly influence the way many will go.

Think About It

1. There are approximately 2 million people incarcerated in the U.S.
2. The U.S. now incarcerates 6 to 10 times as many people as any other industrialized country in the world.
3. In the past two decades, about 1000 new prisons and jails have been built in the U.S.
4. The U.S. criminalizes more acts than any other country in the world. The U.S. criminalizes acts that in other countries would require community service or drug treatment or would not be considered a crime at all.
5. One in every 150 people are locked up on any given day in the U.S.
6. Three-quarters of prisoners have a history of drug or alcohol abuse and one-sixth have a history of mental illness.
7. Although most people "age out of crime," U.S. prisons are becoming the largest "geriatric wards" in the world. In 1994, California incarcerated 5000 people over the age of 50. At the 1998 rate of incarceration, that number would near 50,000 by the year 2005.
8. Billions of dollars have gone from the public treasury into private corporations to design, build, and maintain prisons. This has happened while over 14 million children in the U.S. live in poverty.
9. The enormous increase in America's inmate population can be explained in large part by the sentences given to people who have committed non-violent crimes. Seventy-one percent of those sentenced to state prison in 1996 were convicted of non-violent crimes (including 30% for drug offenses and 29% for property offenses).
10. The rate of growth for women in prison has been nearly double that for men in the past two decades. One-third of women in prison are currently serving a drug sentence.
11. Since 1991, the rate of violent crime in the U.S. has fallen by 20%, while the number of people in prison or jail has nearly doubled.
12. Almost 1 out of every 3 black men between the ages of 20 to 29 is in the criminal justice system (incarcerated, on probation, or on parole). Black males have a 29% chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives; hispanic males, a 16% chance; white males, a 4% chance.
13. Over 94% of the nearly 2 million people in prison will be returning to their communities.

For more facts about prisons and prisoners, go to www.sentencingproject.org