

# The Growth of **INCARCERATION** in the United States

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SEPTEMBER 2014

ISSUE BRIEF

## Consequences for Individuals

After decades of stability, U.S. federal and state prison populations escalated steadily between 1973 and 2009, growing from about 200,000 people to 1.5 million. The increase was driven more by changes in policy—measures that imprisoned people for a wider range of offenses and imposed longer sentences—than by changes in crime rates. Has this greater reliance on incarceration yielded significant benefits for the nation, or is a change in course needed?

To answer that question, a committee of the National Research Council examined the best available evidence on the effects of high rates of incarceration. The committee found no clear evidence that greater reliance on imprisonment achieved its intended goal of substantially reducing crime. Moreover, the rise in incarceration may have had a wide range of unwanted consequences for society, communities, families, and individuals. The committee's report, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*, urges policymakers to reduce the nation's reliance on incarceration and seek crime-control strategies that are more effective, with better public safety benefits and fewer unwanted consequences.



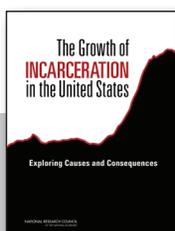
### **Incarceration's Rise Has Changed the Prisoner Population**

Nearly all of the growth in incarceration is concentrated among those with no college education, disproportionately young African American men. The current prison population is comprised mostly of persons who have had few economic opportunities and many obstacles to social mobility; though their criminal responsibility is real, it is embedded in a context of social and economic disadvantage. A significant number of them are burdened with other problems as well; for example, recent Bureau of Justice Statistics surveys found that more than half of all inmates suffered from some kind of mental health problem and/or drug dependence.

Approximately 1 of every 14 prisoners is female, and a majority of them are mothers who must grapple with being separated from their children. Compared with imprisoned men, women are sentenced more often to prison for nonviolent crimes and are more likely to enter prison with mental health problems or develop them while incarcerated.

### **Growth of Incarceration Led to Overcrowding, Fewer Rehabilitative Opportunities**

The growth of incarceration in the U.S. has changed prison conditions in ways that have been harmful to some prisoners and undermined their chances of successfully re-entering their communities after release. Higher incarceration rates have led to overcrowding; many state and federal prisons operate at or above 100 percent of capacity, and cells designed for a single inmate often house two or more. While overcrowding did not drive up lethal violence in prisons as some feared, persistent overcrowding is associated with a range of health and



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behavior problems. As prison populations increased, inmates have had fewer opportunities to participate in rehabilitative programs. In addition, overcrowding strains a prison system's ability to provide basic, necessary services such as proper screening and treatment for medical and mental illnesses.

## Former Prisoners Face Barriers to Employment and Health Care

After release, former prisoners face a range of hurdles that may hinder their chances of making successful transitions into society and contributing to their communities.

- Those with a criminal record often face lower earnings and lower employment rates than those without, and they are disproportionately denied jobs. Several studies of former prisoner populations report that roughly half remain jobless up to a year after release.
- Many states deny occupational licenses to those with a criminal record limiting access to jobs in areas such as plumbing, food catering, and hair cutting.
- Individuals with felony convictions sometimes must forfeit all or some of their pension, disability, or veteran's benefits. Many are ineligible for public housing, student loans, food stamps, and other forms of assistance.
- Continuity of health care during a prisoner's transition back to the community is important but unfortunately often absent. During the two weeks following release, inmates are nearly 13 times more likely to die than the general population, and they are 129 times more likely than the general population to die of a drug overdose—a risk level that reflects insufficient drug treatment during and after incarceration.

These impacts are concentrated in poor minority neighborhoods that already suffer from an array of social, economic, and public health disadvantages.

## Policymakers Should Explore Alternatives, Improve Prison Conditions, Reduce Unnecessary Harms

In addition to reducing the nation's reliance on incarceration and seeking a wider set of tools with which to respond to crime, policymakers should take steps to improve prison conditions in ways that will reduce incarceration's harmful effects and foster the successful reintegration of former prisoners when they are released. When carried out properly, for example, certain forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy, drug treatment, academic programs, and vocational training appear to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. Also, the use of long-term isolation should be reviewed, since it can create or worsen psychological problems in some inmates and make their return to the community more difficult. In addition, a broad review should be conducted of the penalties and restrictions faced by former prisoners in their access to social benefits, rights, and opportunities that might otherwise promote their successful reintegration into society.

## Principles to Guide Policy

In a democratic society, policymakers need to consider not only empirical evidence but also principles and values as they determine policies for punishment. The following four principles have helped shape criminal justice in the United States and Europe for hundreds of years. Policymakers should consider these principles as they weigh sentencing and prison policies:

- **Proportionality:** Is the severity of sentences appropriate to the seriousness of the crime?
- **Parsimony:** Is the punishment the minimum necessary to achieve its intended purpose?
- **Citizenship:** Do the conditions and consequences of punishment allow the individual to retain his or her fundamental status as a member of society, rather than violating that status?
- **Social justice:** Do prison policies promote and not undermine the nation's aspirations to be fair in terms of the rights, resources, and opportunities people have?

These principles should complement the objectives of holding offenders accountable and combating crime. Together, they help define a balanced role for the use of incarceration in U.S. society.

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This issue brief is one in a series prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the report *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice and the MacArthur Foundation. Any findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the study committee and do not necessarily reflect those of the sponsors.