

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

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ISSUE BRIEF

Prison Conditions

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.

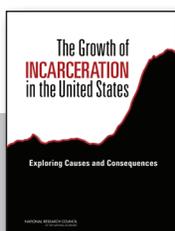


Growth of Incarceration May Have Altered Prison Conditions in Harmful Ways

The growth of incarceration has exposed many more people to the powerful psychological stressors of prison life, including material deprivation, restricted movement, a lack of meaningful activity, absence of privacy, and high levels of interpersonal danger and fear. The persistent threat of victimization, together with prison structure and routines that—while institutionally necessary—erode personal autonomy, undermine prisoners' chances of living a normal life when released. Because disproportionate numbers of minority citizens and an increasing number of mentally ill persons were incarcerated during this period of rapid prison growth, these groups were especially adversely affected.

In addition, rising rates of incarceration led to severe overcrowding, which worsened the conditions of confinement in many prison systems. Many state and federal prisons still operate at or above 100 percent of capacity, and cells built for a single prisoner often house two or more. Persistent overcrowding is linked with a range of poor consequences for health and behavior. Higher prison populations have also left some prison systems struggling to provide prisoners with basic services such as proper screening and treatment for medical and mental illnesses.

The growth of incarceration coincided with a reduced commitment to rehabilitation and to programming that can prepare prisoners to return to society. The percentage of prisoners participating in academic or vocational programs has declined; the availability of offerings is seldom sufficient to meet demand, with several studies showing extensive wait lists.



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In addition, over the past several decades, many prison systems increasingly relied on confining prisoners on a long-term basis in the most restrictive kind of isolation, so-called supermax prisons. Research shows that long-term isolation or solitary confinement in prison settings can inflict the kind of emotional damage that makes successful reintegration into society especially difficult.

Policymakers Should Reduce Use of Incarceration, Improve Prison Conditions

Given that high rates of incarceration have not clearly yielded substantial crime-control benefits and may have had high economic, individual, and societal costs, policymakers should revise current criminal justice policies to significantly reduce the rate of incarceration and to seek more effective and less harmful alternatives. Less restrictive and potentially less psychologically damaging alternatives may be more appropriate for a number of the people who are currently incarcerated, better serving both them and the needs of society.

Regardless of how many people are sent to prison and for how long, the nation's prisons should be safe and humane, for the sake of both the prisoners and the communities to which they will return. The physical and psychological needs of prisoners should be properly addressed in a way that is mindful of the reality that nearly all return to society. The way prisoners are treated and the opportunities they are provided will directly affect their eventual success or failure outside of prison and have important consequences for society. Legislators and prison authorities should improve prison conditions with the goal of increasing prisoners' chances of reentering society with social relationships intact and better prepared to make a positive transition to productive lives in their communities. When used appropriately, for example, certain forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy, drug treatment, academic programs, and vocational training appear to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

In the effort to improve conditions and minimize the risk of harm to which prisoners are exposed, policies and practices that isolate prisoners need to be reviewed. Although certain highly disruptive inmates may at times need to be separated from others, use of isolation should be minimized and accompanied by specific criteria for placement and regular, meaningful reviews for those confined. Isolation also should be acknowledged as inappropriate for certain especially vulnerable populations, such as the seriously mentally ill.

Efforts to understand and improve prison conditions would be aided by greater transparency and better collection of data on the nature of the prison experience. A national database should be created to regularly collect standardized information on factors such as housing configurations, participation in vocational programs, visitation practices, and other aspects of prison life.

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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