

The Facts About Crime

1. In the past 30 years, crime rates have fallen dramatically.

While there is a widespread public perception that crime rates have skyrocketed, the reality is that from 1970-1994, violent crime rates remained remarkably stable. Since 1994, violent crime has fallen. In fact, violent crime in 2002 was at its lowest level ever recorded.¹ Property crime has been on a steady decline since 1974.²

2. Violent crime constitutes only 4.6% of arrests in the US.³

Even within this “violent” category, the actual physical violence is often overstated. The vast majority of violent crimes are assaults where one person hits or slaps another or makes a verbal threat. Only about 20 percent of the victims of violent crime nationally went to a hospital emergency room.⁴

3. In the past 30 years, the murder rate has NOT steadily increased.

In fact, the murder rate in this country dropped 43% from 1980 to 2000 to the lowest level it has been since 1966.⁵

4. Every year an inmate spends in prison costs taxpayers an average of \$22,000.

As prisoners get older, the cost of maintenance rises, ultimately reaching an average of \$69,000 per year for those over the age of fifty-five. A study by a Stanford University professor estimated that the cost of a life term for an average California prisoner is \$1.5 million.⁶

5. 2.1 million Americans are currently incarcerated.

State and federal prisons hold 1.3 million people, local jails hold 631,240, and 108,965 are held in juvenile facilities. The remainder are in INS, territorial, military or other facilities.⁷ This number is triple what it was in 1985 (700,000).⁸ In addition, there are 4.6 million persons on probation or parole, bringing the total to 6.7 million citizens—over 3 percent of the adult population—under the supervision of the criminal justice system.⁹

6. Locking up more offenders for longer periods of time does not significantly reduce the crime rate.

Academic research has shown little or no correlation between rates of crime and the number of people in prison.¹⁰ States with high rates of imprisonment may or may not have high rates of crime, while states with low rates of crime may or may not have high rates of imprisonment. North Dakota and South Dakota, which are virtually identical in terms of demographics and geography, provide an example. South Dakota imprisons its citizens at more than twice the rate of North Dakota¹¹, but crime between the states is roughly the same¹² and has been for decades. Nationally, the fact that the prison population has quadrupled and there are still about 12 million crimes¹³ reported each year should further illustrate the point that we can not incarcerate-away the crime problem.

7. Prisons and the fear of crime are becoming one of America’s biggest growth industries.

In 2001, federal, state and local governments spent an estimated \$49 billion on corrections.¹⁴ The crime control portion of the police and judicial budgets is an estimated \$51 billion.¹⁵ Private security costs \$104 billion.¹⁶ Combine the prisoners and the crime-fighters and you have 4% of the U.S. workforce consumed by this industry.¹⁷

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¹ US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (hereinafter BJS). *Violent Crime Rate Trends* <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/viortrdtab.htm>> viewed April 17, 2004

² BJS, *Property Crime Trends*, <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/house2.htm>> viewed April 17, 2004.

³ BJS, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2002*. Table 4.8. (hereinafter *Sourcebook 2002*)

⁴ BJS, *Injuries from Violent Crime, 1992-1998*, June 2001.

<<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cv00.pdf>> viewed August 12, 2002.

⁵ BJS Homicide rate trends, <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/tables/hmrttab.htm>>

⁶ Zimbardo, Phillip. November 1994. *Transforming California’s Prisons Into Expensive Old Age Homes for Felons*. San Francisco: Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice.

⁷ BJS, *Prisoners in 2001*, July 2002.

<<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p01.pdf>> p. 1. viewed August 12, 2002.

⁸ BJS, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2000*. Combining data from tables 6.21 and 6.27 Washington, DC: USGPO, 2001.

⁹ BJS, *National Correctional Population Reaches New High*, Tables 1-2 <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ppus00.pdf>> viewed August 12, 2002.

¹⁰ See generally, Blumstein and Wallman, eds. *The Crime Drop in America*, Chapter 4. Cambridge University Press (2000)

¹¹ BJS, *Sourcebook 2000*. Table 6.28.

¹² BJS, *Sourcebook 2000*. Table 3.122.

¹³ BJS, *Sourcebook 2000*. Table 3.120.

¹⁴ In 1997, these governments spent a \$43.5 billion (BJS, *Sourcebook 2000*. Table 1.2.) when the prisoner population was 12% smaller than it is today. We increased the 1997 figure to make it proportional with the population increase. As we ignored inflation since 1997, our figure is conservative.

¹⁵ Nils Christie, *Crime Control as Industry*, Routledge: NY 3rd ed. (2000) p. 138.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.