



NEW PRISON POPULATION FIGURES SHOW SLOWING OF GROWTH BUT UNCERTAIN TRENDS

New figures released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that the growth rate of prisoners in the U.S. continued to slow in 2000, including a decline of 0.5% in the second half of the year. Despite this decline, the number of inmates held under the jurisdiction of state and federal corrections reached a high of 1,381,892, representing a 79% increase from 773,905 in 1990.

The current rate of incarceration of 699 persons per 100,000 populations still leaves the U.S. as the world leader in this regard. The current Russian rate of incarceration, second in the world, is 644 per 100,000, based on an inmate population of 934,000. A prisoner amnesty approved by the Russian Parliament in 2000 has resulted in the release of more than 120,000 to date, with as many as 250,000 additional prisoners expected to be released by 2004. The U.S. rate of incarceration is generally 5-8 times that of comparable industrialized nations such as Canada and the countries of western Europe.

Factors Contributing to the Slowing Rate of Growth

While it is difficult to assess the slowing rate of growth of prisoners nationally, several factors appear to be contributing to this trend. These include:

Decline in Crime Rates – Crime rates have declined nationally since 1991 and the number of felony convictions have stabilized in recent years. While these trends failed to affect prison growth in the early years of the decline (most likely due to the lagged impact of sentencing practices), it is likely that they are now contributing to this development.

Increased Use of Parole in Some States – Prison officials in many states have a great deal of discretion in determining how long inmates stay in prison. Some states have begun increasing the rate of parole release as a means of reducing the inmate population. In Texas, for example, behind only California in the size of its prison system, corrections officials are now granting more paroles. The proportion of inmates eligible for parole who were approved for release in 2000 reached one in four, up from just one in six in 1999. In Pennsylvania, prison officials have increased the use of halfway houses as a means of facilitating parole releases.

Policy Changes in Parole Revocations – Offenders admitted to prison as a result of a parole revocation have constituted an increasing proportion of prison admissions over the past twenty years, reaching 37% of admissions by 1998. In some states there are indications that corrections officials are attempting to respond to technical violations of parole through increased supervision in the community or the use of intermediate sanctions rather than returning offenders to prison. Texas has reduced its revocation rate from one of every two inmates in 1992 to one in three by 1997.

Expanded Drug Treatment Options – The rise of drug offenders in state and federal prisons represents one of the largest sources of growth in the past twenty years, increasing from 23,700 in 1980 to 173,600 by 1990 and 319,600 in 1999. Increasing recognition of the value of treatment in responding to drug abuse has resulted in substantial expansion of treatment-based approaches to drug offenders in recent years, including the nearly 700 drug courts now in operation across the country. While it is too early to evaluate the impact of these sentencing options nationally, some state programs appear to be diverting drug offenders from incarceration. A 1999 study by the Arizona Supreme Court concluded that the state’s new policy of diverting drug addicts into treatment had resulted in 2,622 offenders being diverted from prison at an estimated cost savings of \$2.5 million in its first year of operation.

Implications for Public Policy

Conflicting trends suggest that a continued slowing of the rate of prison growth will be dependent on public policy decisions. These include:

Federal Sentencing Policy – The federal prison population continues to grow at a far more rapid rate than state prisons. With 57% of federal prisoners being incarcerated for drug offenses, this is largely due to the impact of federal mandatory minimum penalties. Projections by the Department of Justice in 2000 anticipated an increase of 50% in the total federal prison population by 2007 if current trends continue. Unless Congress reconsiders these policies, we can anticipate continued growth. The expansion of the federal prison population is also fueling the growth of the for-profit private prison industry, which houses more than one in ten federal prisoners.

State Sentencing Legislation – More than half the states have adopted “truth in sentencing” legislation in recent years, many in response to fiscal incentives in the 1994 federal crime bill. These policies require some or all offenders in a given state to serve 85% of their sentence. Since many of these laws have only been in effect for several years it is likely that their full contribution toward increasing average sentence length has not been seen yet and will continue to exert an upward pressure on prison populations.

Drug Treatment Initiatives – New initiatives such as California’s Proposition 36 hold the potential of diverting substantial numbers of non-violent drug offenders to court-supervised treatment programs. The California policy, which went into effect on July 1, 2001, is projected to result in a reduction of the need for 11,000 prison beds and an annual savings of \$200-250 million when fully implemented.

Prevention and Treatment Approaches – Half the growth in state prison populations during the decade of the 1990s was due to an increase in violent offenders in prison (although only 28% for women). One approach to slowing or reducing this trend is to invest resources into crime prevention and treatment programs. Of the violent offenders in state prison in 1997, half (51%) were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of their offense. These figures suggest that adopting more broad-based approaches to substance abuse could have alleviated some of the prison expansion of recent years.

Conclusion

While the slowing rate of growth represents a welcome trend, it nonetheless leaves the United States in the position of maintaining the world's highest prison population, both in absolute terms and per capita. Further, the rate of incarceration for African American males – one of every ten in their late twenties – can only be described as shocking and indicative of a massive failure of social policy. Unless these trends can be reversed the life prospects for the generation of black children growing up today will look very bleak.