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New Prison Statistics: Nation's Use of Incarceration On the Rise Again

Prison Growth Costing States, Deeply Damaging Communities

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New Prison Statistics: Nation's Use of Incarceration On the Rise Again

Prison Growth Costing States, Deeply Damaging Communities

Washington, DC – The latest prisoner survey to be released by the Justice Department on July 27, 2003 shows that after two years of slowing prison growth, the nation's incarcerated population rose at 3 times the rate of the previous year—an ominous message that even during budget strained times, policymakers are choosing to fund continued prison expansion.

Prisoners in 2002, to be released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics on Sunday, showed that between end of year 2001 and 2002, the prison and jail population grew by 3.7%, compared with 1.2% in 2000-2001. The 2002 increase was equal to an additional 700 prisoners being added every week during the year.

According to a report released July 23, 2003 by the National Conference of State Legislatures, the country's continued prison expansion comes at a time when it can least afford it: NCSL reports that 31 states are cutting spending due to state budget shortfalls. General fund spending for higher education is budgeted to decline by 2.3% from 2003, while corrections spending is expected to grow 1.1 percent.


"The prison population and budget figures—taken together—should be setting off alarm bells in state capitols," says Jason Ziedenberg, Director of Policy and Research for the Justice Policy Institute. "As legislators are struggling to fund education, health care, and stave off spending cuts, many are continuing to choose to pay for an expensive justice system that damages communities, and does not produce safe, healthy neighborhoods." [Phone: 415.693.0878]

Some states saw low or no prison growth because they enacted some kind of corrections reform, ranging from reform of their parole systems, to diversion of drug offenders from prison to treatment, or by engaging in sentencing reform. Texas, which recently passed historic legislation to divert drug offenders to treatment instead of prison, saw a growth rate of zero in 2001-2002. Ohio, which in the late 1990s revised sentencing and parole guidelines, and created new treatment programs and other alternatives to incarceration, closed a prison last year, and their prison growth rate this year was half that of the Midwest rate.

But other legislatures have not chosen to do the kind of comprehensive reforms that are needed to reduce prison populations. The federal system became the largest prison system in the country in 2002, and its growth was fueled largely by the imprisonment of 74,000 drug offenders, and by 338% increase in people imprisoned for immigration violations since 1995.

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"As Texas breaks new ground by diverting drug offender from prison to treatment programs, the President and other governors should look to and follow the lead of Republicans here," said Will Harrell, Executive Director of the Texas American Civil Liberties Union. "The nation needs to break the chains of our addiction to prison, and find less costly and more effective policies, like treatment. We need to break the cycle. Treatment works, incarceration, the more costly

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policy, destroys.”[Phone: 512.695.7519]

Since 2000, California has seen a decline in its prison population, as the state succeeded in diverting 10,000 drug offenders from prison to treatment programs since implementing drug reform in 2000. But last year, California saw its prison population rise once again—at a time when the budget crisis state is laying-off teachers and trimming essential services.

“Despite four separate statewide polls of likely voters all finding that Californians favor cuts to prison spending over any other area of the state budget, we have yet to see a budget proposal that reflects the will of California voters,” said Rose Braz, Director of Critical Resistance, a grassroots organization opposing prison expansion based in Oakland, California. “The way to reduce prison spending is to reduce the number of people in prison and the number of prisons, like some states across the country have done.” [Phone: 510.444.0484]

Prisoners in 2002 showed that the number of women prisoners increased 4.9%—double the rate of men, 2.4%—during 2002. When women are imprisoned, communities face a fiscal multiplier effect of that consequence, including the increased cost of imprisonment of women over men, and the large community impact of their children’s displacement, including costs to the child welfare system. “By devoting more resources to treatment, preventive education, and community corrections—which are far more cost effective than arrest and imprisonment—we can begin to reverse this trend and its devastating effects on children, families, and communities,” says Ann Jacobs, Executive Director of the Women’s Prisoner Association. [Phone: 718.637.6806]

The impact of prison is not borne equally by all communities, and has had a particularly harsh impact on communities of color. *Prisoners in 2002* shows that 10.4% of the African American population between 24 and 29 were imprisoned last year, and African American women were incarcerated 5.4 times the rate of White women. Latino men were imprisoned at 2.6 times the rate of White men, and Latinas were imprisoned at twice the rate of White women.

Former prisoners are often punished for life through a variety of consequences that affects the 13 million people who have felony convictions in this country. People once convicted of a felony can be subjected to bans on public assistance, and the ability to live in public housing. They are prohibited from receiving financial aid for college, and in many states, are prohibited from working in a wide spectrum of public sector jobs.

“There is a movement building among former prisoners, and their families, to end the suffering caused by prisons, and to address the real causes of crime, to repair our damaged communities,” says Michael Blain, director of Prisoner Justice Network, a national network of former prisoners and family member. [Phone: 202.276.1249]

The Justice Policy Institute is a Washington DC-based think tank dedicated to ending society’s reliance on incarceration and promoting effective and just solutions to social problems. For more information on the issues cited here, please contact the commentators listed above, or contact Laura Jones at (202.363.7847x308), or visit our website at www.justicepolicy.org

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