

NEW INMATE POPULATION FIGURES SHOW CONTINUED GROWTH, PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE IN POLICY UNCLEAR

New population figures for midyear 2001 released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that there were 1,965,495 inmates held in federal and state prisons and local jails as of June 30, 2001. The annual rate of growth – 1.6% for the most recent twelve-month period – is considerably below the annual average of 4% since 1995.

An examination of the new population figures reveals the following:

U.S. Still World Leader in Rate of Incarceration – The thirty-year rise in inmate populations in the U.S. has resulted in a rate of incarceration of 690 persons per 100,000 as of June 30, 2001. This places the U.S. ahead of Russia as the world leader in incarceration, both by rate and in absolute terms. Russian prisons held 977,700 inmates as of January 2001, yielding a rate of incarceration of 676 per 100,000. Most nations in western Europe incarcerate their citizens at a rate ranging from 60-130 per 100,000.

Federal Prison Growth Shows Few Signs of Change – In contrast to the slowing rate of growth for inmates under the jurisdiction of state prisons (0.4% for the twelve months ending June 2001), the federal prison system continues to expand at a rapid rate – 7.2% for the most recent twelve-month period. This reflects the ongoing impact of drug policies, mandatory sentencing, and the federal sentencing guidelines. Nearly 60% of federal inmates are incarcerated for a drug offense, up from 25% in 1980, with many subject to five and ten-year mandatory terms. On one particularly contentious drug policy issue, the crack/cocaine sentencing disparity, senior members of Congress and the U.S. Sentencing Commission have recommended a narrowing of the gap in sentencing for the two offenses, but the Bush administration has recently expressed its opposition to any change.

Sentencing Policies and Practices Likely to have Mixed Impact on Prison Populations – Although crime rates have declined for much of the past decade, existing sentencing and parole policies will play a significant role in determining future prison growth. In California, for example, the state's "three strikes and you're out" law currently sentences about 1,200 offenders each year to sentences of 25 years to Life. The Supreme Court has recently decided to review aspects of this law, but if remained unchanged, there will be an estimated 30,000 prisoners serving these sentences by 2026.

Policymaker action in a number of states has been designed to control future prison growth. During 2001, this has included: elimination of mandatory minimum sentences for non-violent offenses in Louisiana; repealing "truth in sentencing" laws mandating that inmates serve 85% of their sentence for certain non-violent offenders in Mississippi; and, repeal of mandatory sentencing for first-time drug offenders in North Dakota. In addition, policymakers in Washington state are considering comprehensive sentencing reform that would increase the use of community supervision for many drug and property offenders.

Black Male Incarceration Rates have Broad Impacts – The new inmate figures show that one of every eight African American males in the 25-34 age range is incarcerated in prison or jail on any given day; over the course of this ten-year period, the figures would be substantially higher. While the factors that contribute to these outcomes are complex, it is increasingly clear that unwarranted excessive incarceration has a widespread impact on individuals and communities. These include such lifetime impacts as the loss of voting rights in 12 states (with an estimated 13% of adult black males being unable to vote due to a current or previous felony), and restrictions on access to higher education loans, welfare, and public housing for anyone with a felony drug conviction. In addition, these dramatic rates of incarceration (and disproportionately for black women as well) have resulted in one of every fourteen black children having a parent who is incarcerated.