



SLOWING OF PRISON GROWTH LIKELY LINKED TO BOTH CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLICY

New figures reported by the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicate that the prison and jail population in the United States increased to 1,931,859 on June 30, 2000. The new figures constitute a record high, but the annual increase of 30,710 in the state and federal prison population represents a slowing of the rate of growth to 2.3% a year.

Highlights of new inmate analysis

- International Lead in Incarceration – The current rate of incarceration of 702 persons per 100,000 population advances the U.S. position as the world leader in imprisonment. The most recent estimates of the incarceration rate for second-place Russia are 675 per 100,000, representing a substantial decline from several years ago as a result of an amnesty of more than 120,000 prisoners in 2000.
- Most Significant Decline in State Prison Populations in Twenty Years – Eleven states reported a decline in their inmate populations from 1999 to 2000. This represents the most significant change in this area since 1979-80, when 17 states registered a decline.
- Federal Prison Population – The federal prison system continues to defy trends in state systems, rising by 9.3% during the last year, compared to 1.5% in the states. Part of this increase represents the absorption of Washington, D.C. inmates into the federal system, but much is due to the combined impact of the increased federal role in drug prosecutions since the early 1980s along with mandatory sentencing penalties. This has resulted in nearly 60% of federal inmates currently incarcerated for a drug offense.
- Record Rate of Incarceration for African American Males – The 791,600 black males in prison and jails represents a new high and is particularly striking in the 20-34 age group, where nearly one of every eight black males is incarcerated on any given day.

Analysis of Decline in Rate of Growth

The decline in the rate of growth appears to represent the mixed impact of changes in crime and criminal justice policy in the 1990s. These factors include:

- Crime rates – The continuing decline in crime is likely to have played a role, but is not sufficient in itself to explain the slowing of the rate of prison growth in the past year. Although crime has declined for each year since 1991 the inmate population has expanded considerably during this time, rising from 1.2 million in 1991 to 1.9 million by 2000.

- Arrest rates – Regardless of fluctuations in crime rates, arrest rates are more predictive of jail and prison populations since they result in cases being brought to court. Trends in this area in the 1990s are mixed. The number of arrests for violent crime declined by 12% from 1991 to 1999 and for property crimes by 27%, but the number of drug arrests rose by 52%. Since convictions for violent crimes are more likely to lead to a sentence of imprisonment, the decline in this area serves as a braking measure for the inmate population, although one likely offset to some degree by increased drug arrests.
- Sentencing policy and time served – Offsetting changes in crime and arrest rates has been the impact of changes in sentencing and release policy in the prison system. While the number of annual admissions to prison has stabilized in recent years, offenders on average are serving longer terms in prison. Offenders admitted to state prison in 1995 were expected to serve 43 months on average, an increase of 39% from the average of 31 months for offenders sentenced in 1985.
- Parole revocations – Revocations of parole, either for a new offense or a technical violation, have increased substantially as a proportion of prison admissions, rising from 18% in 1980 to 34% by 1997. There is some evidence that these trends may be slowing. In California, for example, where revocations constitute 38% of prison admissions, the number of revocations has been less than originally projected and there has been a slightly shorter time served in prison for those who are sent back. State analysts attribute this to the combined effect of an improved economy and the expansion of services for parolees to ease their transition to the community.

Implications for Public Policy

- Continued growth will maintain record rates of incarceration – The most conservative projections of BJS indicate that even with a slowing of growth the inmate population will continue to increase through 2005, leading to a level of more than 2.1 million. This would represent nearly seven times the number of prisoners in the U.S. in the early 1970s.
- Racial disparities portend long-term problems – The implications of the dramatic rate of incarceration for black males (and increasingly females) are striking in terms of their impact on family and community stability, future employment prospects, and prospects for the next generation of children. The most promising area of policy change is in the area of drug offenses, where racial and ethnic minorities currently constitute 79% of all state prison drug offenders (57% black and 22% Hispanic). Changes in arrest and sentencing policy accompanied by expansion of treatment options could have a significant impact on reducing these figures.
- Need to reconsider federal drug and sentencing policy – Projections by the Bureau of Prisons in 2000 indicate that if current policies do not change the federal prison population will increase by 50% by 2007. With a new administration and Congress in place, this is an appropriate time to reconsider federal sentencing and drug policies.
- Prison populations subject to policy decisions – The interplay between changes in crime rates and sentencing policy indicates that regardless of fluctuations in crime, decisions by policymakers can play a substantial role in the size of the inmate population.