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PRISONS

U.S. prison, jail populations hit record high

For first time in U.S. history, more than 1 in every 100 Americans is behind bars.

By N.C. Aizenman
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WASHINGTON — More than one in 100 adults in the United States is in jail or prison, an all-time high that is costing state governments nearly \$50 billion a year and the federal government \$5 billion more, according to a report released Thursday.

With more than 2.3 million people behind bars, the U.S. leads the world in both the number and percentage of residents it incarcerates, leaving far-more-populous China a distant second with 1.5 million people behind bars, said the study by the nonpartisan Pew Center on the States.

The growth in prison population is largely the result of tougher sentencing imposed since the mid-1980s. Minorities have been particularly affected: One in nine black men ages 20 to 34 is behind bars. Similarly, for black women ages 35 to 39, the figure is one in 100, compared with one in 355 for white women in the same age group.

The report analyzed data from several sources, including the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics and Bureau of Prisons and each state's department of corrections. The report did not include individuals detained for noncriminal immigration violations.

Although studies generally find that imprisoning more offenders reduces crime, the effect might be less influential than changes in the unemployment rate, wages, the ratio of police officers to residents and the proportion of young people in the population, said Adam Gelb, co-author of the report.

In addition, when it comes to preventing repeat offenses by nonviolent criminals — who make up about half of the incarcerated population — less-expensive punishments such as community supervision, electronic monitoring and mandatory drug counseling might prove as much or more effective than jail.

"There is no question that putting violent and chronic offenders behind bars lowers the crime rate and provides punishment that is well-deserved," said Gelb, who as director of the Center's Public Safety Performance Project that advises states on developing alternatives to incarceration. "On the other hand, there are large numbers of people behind bars who could be supervised in the community safely and effectively at a much lower cost — while also paying taxes, paying restitution to their victims and paying child support."

Sociologist James Wilson, who in the 1980s helped develop the "broken windows" theory that smaller crimes must be punished to deter more serious ones, agreed that sentences for some drug crimes were too long. However, Wilson disagreed that the rise in the U.S. prison population should be considered a cause for alarm: "The fact that we have a large prison population by itself is not a central problem because it has contributed to the extraordinary increase in public safety we have had in this country."

About 91 percent of incarcerated adults are under state or local jurisdiction. And the report also notes the tradeoffs that states have faced as they devote larger shares of their budgets on them. For instance, over the past two decades, state spending on corrections (adjusted for inflation) increased 127 percent; spending on higher education rose 21 percent.

About one in nine state government employees works in corrections, and some states are finding it hard to fill those jobs. California spent more than \$500 million on overtime in 2006.

The number of prisoners in California dropped by 4,000 last year, making Texas' prison system the nation's largest, at nearly 172,000.

More than 2,500 people were being held in the Travis County jail as of Thursday, about 500 people were in the Williamson County jail and about 307 in the Hays County jail.

The Texas Legislature last year approved broad changes to the state corrections system, including expansions of drug treatment programs and revisions of parole practices.

"Our violent offenders, we lock them up for a very long time — rapists, murderers, child molesters," said state Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, chairman of the Senate's Criminal Justice Committee. "The problem was that we weren't smart about nonviolent offenders."

Whitmire gave an example. "We have 5,500 DWI offenders in prison," he said, including people caught driving under the influence who hadn't been in an accident. "They're in the general population. As serious as drinking and driving is, we should segregate them and give them treatment."

Before the recent changes, Whitmire said, "we were recycling nonviolent offenders."

2,319,258

Incarcerated population in the United States


171,790

Inmate population in Texas

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