



U.S. Prison Population Hits All-Time High: 2.3 Million Incarcerated

DOJ Report Reveals Record Numbers in Prisons Last Year, With Huge Economic Impacts

By PIERRE THOMAS and JASON RYAN

June 6, 2008—

The Justice Department has released a new report showing the nation's prison and jail population reached a record 2.3 million people last year.

The report notes that in the 10 largest states, prison populations increased "during 2006 at more than three times (3.2 percent) the average annual rate of growth (0.9 percent) from 2000 through 2005."

The new report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that in the first half of 2007 the growth rate slowed, but prison admissions growth outpaced the number of prison releases. The report provides a breakdown, noting "of the 2.3 million inmates in custody, 2.1 million were men and 208,300 were women. Black males represented the largest percentage (35.4 percent) of inmates held in custody, followed by white males (32.9 percent) and Hispanic males (17.9 percent)."

The United States leads the industrialized world in incarceration. In fact, the U.S. rate of incarceration (762 per 100,000) is five to eight times that of other highly developed countries, according to The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice think tank.

Some of the key factors for the record imprisonment rate include:

Race: Black males continue to be incarcerated at an extraordinary rate. Black males make up 35.4 percent of the jail and prison population □ even though they make up less than 10 percent of the overall U.S population. Four percent of U.S. black males were in jail or prison last year, compared to 1.7 percent of Hispanic males and .7 percent of white males. In other words, black males were locked up at almost six times the rate of their white counterparts.

Immigration: Is it an emerging crime trend or is this the result of more local police and federal targeting of illegal immigrants? Non-U.S. citizens accounted for nearly 8 percent of the jail population at midyear 2007, the new Justice Department report noted. "From mid-year 2000 through midyear 2007, Hispanic men (120,000) represented the largest increase to the custody population," it said.

Locking up these prisoners comes with huge economic costs. The Sentencing Project estimates that cost to be \$60 billion per year for federal, state and local prison systems.

Many states, facing budget crises, are struggling to pay for their corrections systems. As a result, many state programs are being slashed, with some states looking to release certain convicts early.

No fewer than eight states have recently contemplated releasing prisoners early. Others are planning to push

some categories of newly convicted criminals into rehabilitation programs. Kentucky, California, Rhode Island, New Jersey, South Carolina and Vermont are among the states wrestling with these issues.

"The unrivaled growth of the United States' incarcerated population over 30 years casts a great burden on this nation," said Marc Mauer, executive director of The Sentencing Project. "The country's \$60 billion prison budget results in less money for education, health care and child services. Communities need the resources to prevent crime by investing in youth and families."

In California, the governor had considered a massive plan to release tens of thousands of prisoners, but recently decided against the proposal. Local jail officials continued to reduce the inmate population by approving early releases where appropriate.

In Kentucky, where they have been facing a billion-dollar deficit, corrections officials told ABC News they are looking at a variety of measures to reduce their state prison population, including early release of some non-violent offenders and expanding the home incarceration plan which allows inmates to be released for substance-abuse treatment and to seek employment.

In Michigan, it costs \$2 billion to run the corrections system. An increasing number of state leaders say they really can't afford to pay that kind of money.

"Our efforts to grow Michigan's economy and keep our state competitive are threatened by the rising costs in the Department of Corrections," Gov. Jennifer Granholm recently told The Detroit News. "We spend more on prisons than we do on higher education, and that has got to change."

According to the News, the Michigan Corrections Department already devours 20 cents of every tax dollar in the state's general fund and employs nearly one in every three state government workers, compared with 9 percent of the work force 25 years ago.

Copyright © 2008 ABC News Internet Ventures