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New Report Calls for Major Reforms to Reduce America's Soaring Prison Population

Leading criminologists recommend shorter length of stay in prison and elimination of prison time for technical parole and probation violations

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Burdened by the world's largest prison population, which has grown six-fold in the past 35 years, the United States should reform its criminal justice system by sending fewer people to prison and reducing the time they serve, a major new report concludes.

"Unlocking America: Why and How to Reduce America's Prison Population," is co-authored by nine leading criminology and penal experts from around the country and relies on a thorough review of recent research into crime and incarceration.

"The number of people incarcerated has skyrocketed over the past three decades and yet there is little if any scientific evidence of a causal relationship between crime rates and incarceration rates," said James Austin, president of the JFA Institute and report co-author. "A major reason for the rise in prison populations is longer prison terms. But there is no evidence that keeping people in prison longer makes us any safer. The report provides a practical roadmap for reducing prison populations and more effectively addressing crime by adopting sentencing policies that are now being used in a number of red and blue states."

The report finds that putting more people in prison is financially wasteful, disproportionately burdens the poor and minorities, and has limited impact on recidivism and crime rates. In response, it calls for reducing prison sentences and eliminating prison terms for people who violate the terms of their probation or parole without committing new crimes.

“People who break the law must be held accountable, but many of those currently incarcerated should receive alternative forms of punishment, and those who are sent to prison must spend a shorter period incarcerated before coming home to our communities,” the report says.

Released by the JFA Institute, a Washington-based nonprofit organization focused on research-based solutions to criminal justice issues, the report also calls for decriminalizing the possession and sale of recreational drugs. The researchers say that widespread incarceration of people involved in the drug market has only fueled more violence and has not reduced the demand for drugs.

“Unlocking America” also calls for improving prison conditions by reducing overcrowding and expanding access to health care, academic and vocational programs for incarcerated people to help them succeed in life after prison and increase public health and safety. A final recommendation calls on states to ease the transition from prison to free society by lifting barriers to employment and restoring voting rights so that people coming out of prison can be productive members of the workforce and society.

The report’s recommendations, if implemented nationally, would gradually and safely reduce the nation’s prison and jail populations by half and generate annual savings of \$20 billion, money that could be reinvested in more promising crime-prevention strategies.

The authors of the report are convinced that the United States needs a different strategy for justice reform.

Approximately 2.2 million people are now in jail or prison. The number serving sentences in state and federal prisons has grown from 196,000 in 1972 to more than 1.4 million today. An additional 750,000 people are in local jails awaiting trial or serving time for less-serious crimes. The number is growing and shows no signs of leveling off.

“Our criminal laws and criminal justice policies and practices exacerbate the crime problem, unnecessarily damage the lives of millions of people, and worsen living conditions in low-income neighborhoods of American cities,” the report states.

Under current sentencing policies, the state and federal prison populations will grow by another 192,000 prisoners over the next five years, according to the report. Such an increase will force the nation to spend an additional \$27.5 billion in prison construction and operation costs over the five-year period, in addition to the \$60 billion now spent annually on corrections.

This growth in imprisonment is largely due not to rising crime rates but to changes in sentencing policy that led to dramatic increases in the numbers of felony convictions. This resulted in more prison sentences and increasing the length of the prison stays themselves. The report cites extensive research suggesting there is little relationship between fluctuations in crime rates and incarceration rates. The study highlights that minorities are more likely to be imprisoned than whites, noting that incarceration rates for blacks and Latinos are six times higher than for whites. If incarceration rates were race neutral, prison populations would drop by half.

The report's authors are: James Austin, president, the JFA Institute; Todd Clear, professor, John Jay College of Criminal Justice; Troy Duster, professor, New York University; David F. Greenberg, professor, New York University; John Irwin, professor emeritus, San Francisco State University; Candace McCoy, professor, City University of New York; Alan Mobley, assistant professor, San Diego State University; Barbara Owen, professor, California State University, Fresno; and Joshua Page, assistant professor, University of Minnesota.

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