

Drug Policy and Prisoners: The Facts

The United States operates the largest prison system in the world. The overall U.S. incarceration rate is eight times that of similar democracies.¹

Nationwide, the prison population grew by 25,000 in 2007, bringing it to almost 1.6 million. Another 723,000 people were in local jails. The number of American adults is about 230 million, meaning that, right now, one in every 99.1 adults is behind bars. Incarceration rates are even higher for some groups. One in 36 Hispanic adults is now imprisoned, as is one in 15 black adults, and one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34.²

If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated one of every 15 Americans (6.6%) will serve time in a prison during their lifetime. For African-American men, that number is one in three. (32%).³

In 1985, our incarceration rate was 313 per 100,000 population. As of December 2006 it was 751 per 100,000. The largest single factor contributing to this imprisonment wave is a ten-fold rise in drug convictions.⁴

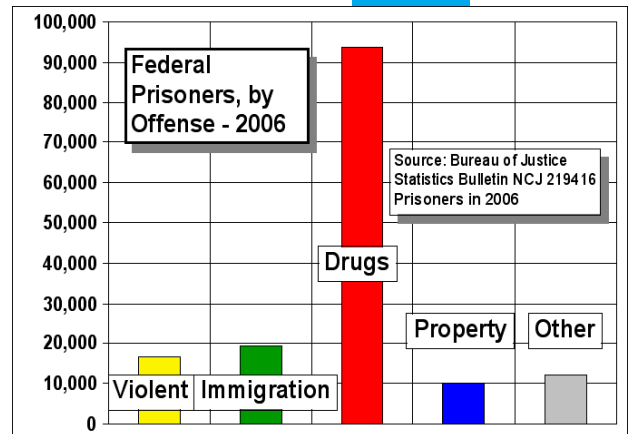
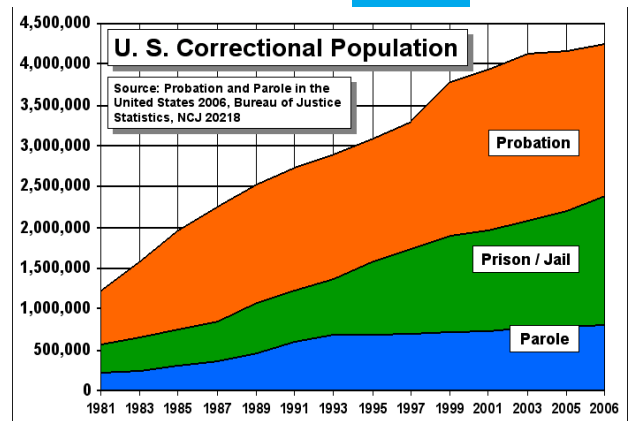
Drug arrests have more than tripled in the last 25 years, totaling a record 1.8 million arrests in 2005. Drug offenders in prisons and jails have increased 1100% since 1980. Nearly a half-million (493,800) persons are in state or federal prison or local jail for a drug offense, compared to an estimated 41,100 in 1980. Nearly 6 in 10 persons in prison for a drug offense have no history of violence or high-level drug selling activity.⁵



Footnotes:

1. Currie, E., *Crime and Punishment in America* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1998).
2. Report: One in 100 — Behind Bars in America 2008, from The Pew Center On The States, Pew Charitable Trusts, published March 2008.
3. US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin NCJ 197976: Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001, published August 2003.
4. US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin NCJ 219416: Prisoners in 2006, published January 2008.
5. Report: A 25-Year Quagmire: The "War On Drugs" and Its Impact on American Society; from The Sentencing Project, published September 2007.

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