

Reforming Prisons (Saving Billions) Creating Opportunity

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Sadly, “the land of the free” has become the land of the imprisoned for millions of Americans. The United States has by far the highest incarceration rate in the world. While we have just five percent of the world’s population, the United States holds 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. There are currently more than 2.3 million people locked up in U.S. prisons and jails, and the numbers continue to increase. The number of people in U.S. prisons has increased 275 percent over the last 25 years. It will take dramatic change in the way the U.S. reacts to crime and social problems in order to turn around our current state. We as a nation need to come to terms with our national impulse to try to solve our social problems with more and more iron bars.

There are a number of reasons for the dramatic increase in the number of people imprisoned over the last 25 years, but one area that cannot be convincingly attributed to growing prison populations is crime. Prison populations grow when crime is up, and they grow when crime is down. Bruce Western at Harvard University recently found that only 10 percent of the crime decline in the 1990s was due to increased use of incarceration. Some states lowered their incarceration rates and still experienced a drop in crime. New York, for example, lowered its incarceration rate by 15 percent while experiencing a 33 percent drop in crime. And Maryland’s crime rate fell 5 percent at a time when they lowered their incarceration rate by 24 percent. Such uneven results do not support continued over-reliance on incarceration.

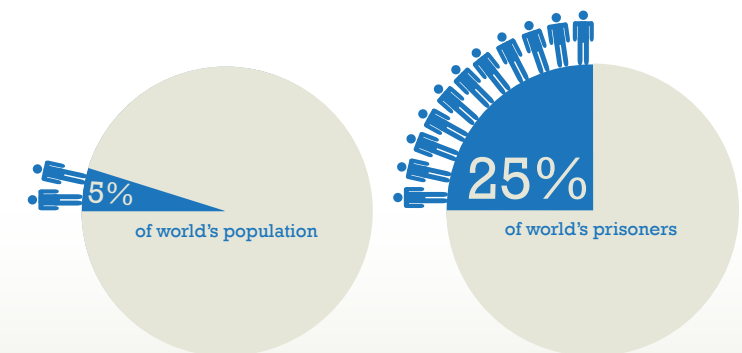
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The poor and communities of color are the most severely impacted by U.S. incarceration policies. And despite similar patterns of illegal behavior across races, African American adults are four times as likely as whites and nearly 2.5 times as likely as Hispanics to be under correctional control. One out of every nine young black men is currently behind bars. Disparate policing practices, treatment before the courts, and availability of drug treatment are some of the factors that contribute to this disproportion. Incarceration breaks up families and disrupts communities, creating a cycle of incarceration that is reinforced by an unequal allocation of resources that create meaningful employment and educational opportunities.

In addition to the lack of proportional public safety benefits from increased incarceration, this burgeoning correctional system costs Americans over \$68 billion per year. Some states, like California, are spending more on their corrections systems than they spend on higher education. California now spends over \$10 billion on its corrections system and provides only \$1.6 billion to its public university system. While there was a time when rehabilitation and services were part of the correctional system, many states have all but done away with these programs due to shifts in philosophy and budget cuts. Without these programs, fewer people

are able to be successful after serving time in prison: in fact, two in three people released from state prison will be re-arrested for a new offense within 3 years.

With 95 percent of the people in prison returning to the community someday, it is to the benefit of individuals, families and public safety to ensure that they make a successful transition.



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Providing treatment and services in the community can improve public safety

With the “war on drugs,” society has moved from a largely public health approach to substance use to one of law enforcement. Individuals with substance abuse problems have become a significant percentage of the prison population. Police have more resources to proactively seek out people involved with illegal substances. These factors have led to a dramatic increase in the prison population over the last 30 years. Now, more than a quarter of people are incarcerated for drug offenses alone.

Numerous studies have shown that providing substance abuse and mental health treatment, employment and education in the community is more effective at improving public safety and life outcomes for individuals than incarceration. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy estimates that for every dollar spent on drug treatment in the community, the state receives more than \$18 in benefits in terms of reduced crime—more than three times the benefits of providing treatment inside prison. Yet states continue to put the lion’s share of this type of funding into systems of corrections that have not been shown to be the most effective way to improve public safety.

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Reforming parole can improve safety and save money. There is an enormous benefit to allowing people to stay in a community, contribute to that community and participate in family life. However, fewer people now are being released to parole than are being admitted to prison. Increased utilization of parole for individuals who are no longer deemed a risk to public safety is a readily available way to reduce prison populations quickly and safely. However, as the current system operates, most parole systems are in the business of supervision, not providing services and resources necessary to help people succeed as they are leaving prison. For this reason, 27 percent of people released on parole will be returned to prison on a technical violation – that is, something that isn’t a new crime but violates their conditions of parole, such as not passing drug tests, missing appointments or not paying fees.

Ideally, parole should be seen as a way to provide resources and support for people who are returning from prison and trying to be productive members of their community. Reducing the number of people returned to prison on technical violations could save states millions of dollars annually. At an annual average cost of around \$23,000 per person, prison is a

costly endeavor compared to a maximum of around \$4,000 per year for people on parole. Reforming the agenda of parole systems to one of support and services could save states millions by keeping people in the community, while improving public safety and individual life outcomes.

Getting it Right in Maryland: One example of such reform is Maryland’s Proactive Community Supervision (PCS) program, a pilot program with quantifiable results that is being brought up to scale state-wide. With the PCS program, parole agents are in a more cooperative, service-oriented role, rather than merely a role of supervision. A case plan is developed for each person on parole, which identifies potential triggers for participation in illegal behavior. A risk assessment instrument is used to determine appropriate levels of supervision and support and helps identify ways in which to best support people who might be at higher risk of re-arrest. Visits with people on parole are based on the performance of the person on parole, rather than an arbitrary or preset level of supervision or number of visits. People on parole

who participated in this program were less likely to be arrested for a new offense (32 percent v. 41 percent) and less likely to violate their parole (20 percent v. 29 percent). The services that PCS provides decrease the chances that a person will return to prison, but also reconnect people during the often difficult transition back into the community.

Reducing the need for more prisons in Kansas: In 2007, Kansas approved criminal justice legislation with the potential to significantly reduce the projected need for additional prison beds. This legislation included the creation of a performance-based grant program for community corrections to reduce parole revocations by 20 percent and restore earned good-time credits for good behavior for individuals incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, so that more people will be released on parole. This change in the parole system is projected to save \$80 million over the next five years in reduced capital and operating expenses, about \$7 million of which will be reinvested in community corrections and substance abuse and vocational training programs.



Inmates attend a job-training presentation to help them prepare for a more successful transition into the job market upon release.

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Making an early investment can save money in the long term

Making smart investments in communities and social institutions is the most effective way of improving public safety and supporting communities. Research shows that states that spend more on education have lower crime rates than states that spend less. States with higher levels of education attainment, where the largest percentage of their population has at least a high school diploma, have the lowest violent crime rates. Minnesota and Utah have the highest percentages of high school graduates in the country, and have violent crime rates at nearly half of the U.S. average. In addition, states like Connecticut and Illinois, which increased their higher education spending by over 30



Susan Burton is the director of A New Way of Life Re-Entry project for formerly incarcerated women in South Los Angeles. A former inmate herself, she now helps other women break the cycle of incarceration, addiction, and homelessness.

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percent, saw dramatic reductions in their crime rates: a 15 percent drop in their violent crime rate over 5 years. The Alliance for Excellent Education reported that a 5 percent increase in male high school graduation rates would produce an annual savings of almost \$5 billion in crime-related expenses. With the money saved on prisons, states could put more money into education and employment skills, while also funding community-based services for both youth and adults that have been proven to be effective.

While there is no single answer for solving states' public safety challenges, it is clear that attempting to spend our way to public safety via more "cops, courts and corrections" is not the type of comprehensive strategy that is needed to protect public safety. This strategy will only

continue to bloat America's prisons and perpetuate the racial disparities now associated with the criminal justice system. We should instead seek effective alternative methods to dealing with social problems that promote public safety, strengthen communities through prevention and educational services, and improve the way we support people returning to the community. This more comprehensive strategy is good for people, good for communities, and good for the overall well-being and safety of our country.

For more information on how states can make smart investments in their communities, reduce the number of people in prisons and jails, and save money, please visit our website, www.justicepolicy.org

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