

The Rise of Mass Incarceration

a history of today's criminal justice system

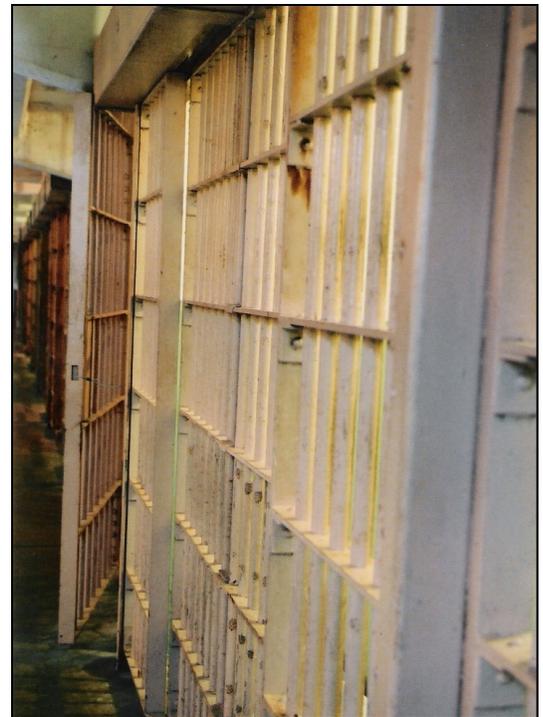
For most of the 20th Century, the U.S. prison population grew at a rate similar to many other Western countries. Then, in the 1960s, that trend began to shift. The newly-formed Civil Rights Movement, with its focus on civil disobedience, started to be viewed as a threat to 'law and order.' Before long, the phrase 'tough on crime' had joined the political rhetoric, with both parties competing to see who could create the most laws and the harshest penalties. In June of 1971, President Nixon first declared the War on Drugs, which focused on criminalizing drug use instead of treating it as a public health issue. Along the way, more crimes - particularly non-violent drug offenses - were being classified as felonies with mandatory minimum sentences. Suddenly, the decision of who needed to be in prison, and who might benefit more from rehabilitation or community service, was taken out of the hands of judges. Mandatory minimum sentences require that a person convicted of a certain crime serve the full sentence, no matter the circumstances. In just four decades - from the 1960s to the 2000s - the U.S. prison population skyrocketed from about 200,000 prisoners to more than 1.4 million. Today, the United States has the highest prison population in the world, incarcerating 716 out of every 100,000 people. That far exceeds the incarceration rates of countries like Rwanda (492/100,000), Russia (475), and China (121). While the U.S. holds just 5% of the world's population within its borders, it confines more than 25% of the world's prisoners.

Questions to Consider:

- What factors have contributed to the rise of mass incarceration in the U.S.?
- How have mandatory minimum sentences changed the way the criminal justice system works?
- What does the phrase "tough on crime" mean, and how has it shaped our society's views on crime and punishment?
- How do you believe we as a society should respond to non-violent offenses?
- What aspects of retributive vs. restorative justice do you see in the U.S. criminal justice system?

Statistics:

- The U.S. prison population has increased by more than 500% in the last 40 years.
- About 50 percent of all federal prisoners are incarcerated due to drug offenses. In 1980, that number was 21 percent.
- Since 1980, the number of people under the control of the U.S. correctional system has nearly quadrupled.



Resources:

- "Fact Sheet: Trends in U.S. Corrections," The Sentencing Project
- *Downsizing Prisons* by Michael Jacobson
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *The Punishment Imperative* by Todd R. Clear & Natasha A. Frost