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The Growth of Incarceration in the United States - Causes, Consequences, and Proposed Reforms

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For much of the last century, the United States locked up offenders at a moderate but stable rate – but after the 1960s, imprisonment shot up. By 2011, close to one of every hundred U.S. adults, some 2.2 million people, were confined in jail or prison. What drove this sharply increased reliance on imprisonment – unprecedented in U.S. history and far exceeding other Western democracies? And how has mass incarceration affected crime, prisoners and their families, and American society?

The National Academy of Sciences appointed a committee of experts in criminal justice and the social sciences to explore these issues and recommend appropriate policy reforms. In its April 2014 report, the committee calls for steps to reduce the incarceration rate through a series of changes in U.S. penal policy and social programs. Its recommendations are grounded in voluminous evidence showing that mass incarceration has not clearly reduced crime yet has likely damaged prisoners, families, and American society.

Crime and Massive Punishment

A steep upturn in the U.S. incarceration rate started in the 1970s, a period of rising crime, social unrest, and major transformations in race relations. State and federal governments chose to respond by imprisoning many more people, including those found guilty of drug offenses as well as violent crimes. Many states eliminated judges' discretion and mandated heavy sentences for violent crimes and repeat offenders. In the 1990s, many also passed "truth in sentencing" laws that required most offenders to complete 85% of their sentences.

Mass incarceration raises serious issues of social justice, because it has been heavily skewed toward poor minority men with less than high school educational attainments. African American male high school dropouts are one hundred times more likely to be sent to prison than college-educated white men. Remarkably, as of 2010, more than one-third of African American male high school dropouts aged 20 to 39 were in jails or state or federal prisons.

Congress and state legislatures sent so many offenders to prison in the hope that crime rates would be sharply reduced. But during the decades when prisons filled, crime rates fluctuated. Crime plummeted in the 1990s, but only ten percent of the decline was due to rising incarceration. Even as crime fell to its lowest level in decades, draconian penalties have remained in place – as U.S. prisons admit new convicts and continue to hold many aging offenders who could be supervised in the community at little cost to taxpayers or public safety.

Harmful Consequences

Many unintended harmful consequences have flowed from the prison boom.

- **Prisoners** have been crowded into facilities where health care is often poor and opportunities for work or education are scarce. Once released, former prisoners struggle to reenter society. Often they cannot land jobs and their earnings remain low. Many cannot find adequate housing, yet many states make former prisoners ineligible for public housing, as well as for other supports such as Food Stamps or student loans.

- **Family members suffer.** Researchers have documented clear-cut harms to the partners, children, and other family members of the incarcerated. Children of prisoners are more likely than other children of similar backgrounds to become homeless, impoverished, or unready for school. Disadvantages are reproduced across the generations, because the ranks of U.S. children with imprisoned parents exploded from 350,000 in 1980 to 2.1 million in 2000 – or three of every one hundred U.S. children.

- **Community damage** is only beginning to be studied, but it is clear that poor black and Hispanic communities undergo extra economic and social disruptions as so many of their adult members, especially men, cycle through prisons.

- **U.S. society and democracy** have been adversely affected. To pay for prisons, states divert revenue from health and education; and many deny the right to vote not only to inmates, but also to former prisoners who have completed parole. Nearly one-third of African American men are ineligible to serve on juries, worsening the racial skew in U.S. justice.

A Time for Reforms

Because mass incarceration has led to social harms without significantly improving public safety, Americans across the political spectrum are now calling for changes. Three sets of practical, common-sense steps can be taken very soon:

- **Reexamine sentencing policies.** Very long and mandatory sentences have little deterrent effect and should be re-examined. Drug penalties need revision, because imprisoning more drug offenders has not led to any reduction in drug use.

- **Improve conditions of confinement** to minimize damage to the physical and mental health of those incarcerated. Solitary confinement is especially damaging.

- **Deploy evidence-based and well-targeted community programs to prevent crime, support the children and families of prisoners, and help former prisoners build constructive lives.** Programs for employment, drug treatment, and housing are an urgent priority. Most of the incarcerated have already struggled at school and in the labor market. Ex-prisoners have an even harder time finding and keeping jobs and also need help to find secure housing. Community based treatment programs are vital, because prisoners suffer from high rates of addiction and mental illness. In addition, social service agencies should make greater efforts to support family members of prisoners, especially children and youths who are at extra risk of faltering at school and getting into trouble with the law. In short, as the United States cuts back on imprisonment, much remains to be done to prevent the perpetuation of many social harms already exacerbated by the recent prison boom.

Read more in "The Growth of Incarceration in the United States: Exploring Causes and Consequences," Report of the Committee on Law and Justice, National Research Council, April 2014.