



CRIME COSTS

Tough-on-crime laws impose a steep sentence on state budgets.

BY ALISON LAWRENCE

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in world. One in every 100 adults is in a prison or jail. The country even has more people in prison or jail than China, the world's most populous nation.

This startling figure follows several decades of rapid growth in state prison populations, and it is even more jarring in 2009, when state budgets are buckling under the weight of the nation's economic downturn.

Of the 2.3 million people in prison or jail in this country, young people of color have the highest incarceration rates, according to the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Center on the States. In 2006, one in nine black males between 20 and 34 years old was in prison or jail, while the average for all men in that age group was one in 30.

STATES' RATES VARY

Some states are seeing extraordinary prison population growth. Between 2000 and 2005, Idaho's prison population increased by a little more than 50 percent, the highest growth rate in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Jus-

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tice. North Dakota and New Mexico round out the top three with 42 percent and 39.3 percent growth, respectively.

During the same period, however, five states saw a decrease in the number of prisoners: Wyoming's population decreased by 35 percent, New York by 11.2 percent, and New Jersey, Massachusetts and Maryland all had single digit decreases.

Dramatic differences in state prison growth rates highlight the critical role played by state law and policy. Much of the prison boom over the past quarter century is the result of policies and practices that imprison more offenders and keep them behind bars for longer periods of time. Another source of the growth has been "technical violators," people on probation or parole who have been sent back to prison for breaking the rules of their community supervision.

BUDGET STRAIN


In fiscal year 2008, nearly one in every 18 state general fund dollars was spent on corrections, according to NCSL fiscal data. The annual cost to state general funds was nearly \$40 billion. The Public Safety Performance Project collected prison population projections from the states in 2008 and reported that, if nothing changed, prison expenditures would rise by a cumulative \$27.5 billion by 2011.

With the current ailing economy, state

budgets will find it even more difficult to accommodate such prison growth. Even before the onset of the recession in late 2007, several states had acted to better manage their prison populations and save money for other public priorities. Over the past few years, at least a dozen states have passed laws aimed at supervising more low-risk offenders in the community, saving costly prison space for more dangerous criminals.

State legislatures also have addressed probation and parole violators with laws aimed at helping them successfully complete community supervision sentences and stay out of prison. Improving re-entry planning for prisoners who are returning to the community has been an important theme in many state laws, as well.

In the past, rising prison costs may have seemed like simply the price of protecting the public. But many state leaders now are weighing the public safety benefits of certain policies against their costs. Approaches today often must meet the standard of both cutting crime and controlling spending.

 **CHECK OUT** more information on state laws affecting prison sentences; additional information about how states are handling parole and probation violations; a story on automated victim notification efforts; and read the full PEW report One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008 at www.ncsl.org/magazine.