

America's Gulag Just Keeps Growing

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The U.S. dwarfs the rest of the world when it comes to locking up its citizens, due in large part to madness of our incarceration policies. Tools

We're No. 1! We're No. 1! The New York Times' Adam Liptak wrote a disturbing front-page story on Wednesday about how the United States dwarfs the rest of the world when it comes to locking up its citizens. The United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population, but a quarter of the world's prisoners. There are now 2.3 million people behind bars in the United States. According to the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics' most recent report, the number of people incarcerated in U.S. prisons and jails jumped by more than 60,000 in the year ending June 30, 2006. That jump represents the largest increase since 2000.

The United States continues to rank first among all nations in both total prison/jail population and per capita incarceration rates. The United States has held first place for decades, followed by China (with more than four times our population) at 1.6 million and Russia at 885,670, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College in London.

America's prison population explosion is fed in good part by the failed drug war policies of the past 30-plus years. Back in 1980, around 50,000 people were incarcerated for drug law violations. The total is now roughly 500,000. And this number does not even include hundreds of thousands of parolees and probationers who are incarcerated for technical violations, such as a drug relapse, nor does it include nondrug offenses committed under the influence of drugs, or to support a drug habit, or crimes of violence committed by drug sellers.

The Liptak piece describes criminologists and legal scholars in other industrialized countries as being mystified and appalled by the number of Americans incarcerated and length of the prison sentences. "The U.S. pursues the war on drugs with an ignorant fanaticism," said Vivian Stern, a research fellow at the Centre for Prison Studies at King's College in London. In the past Europeans came to America to study the prison system, but now they look at U.S. policies to see what not to do.

Two powerful forces are at play today. On the one hand, public opinion strongly supports alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent and especially low-level drug law violators -- and state legislatures around the country are beginning to follow suit. The paramount example to date is Prop. 36, the Californian "treatment instead of incarceration" ballot initiative in 2000 that won with 61 percent of the vote notwithstanding the opposition of political and law enforcement officials. On the other hand, the prison-industrial complex has become a powerful force in American society, able to make the most of the political inertia that sustains knee-jerk, lock-'em-up policies. There are some prosecutors quoted in the Times story who try to spin the draconian sentences as the byproduct of democracy: that elected officials are just responding to their constituents' desire to lock up the bad guys and throw away the keys. There's no doubt some truth in this, but far more insidious is how many politicians exploit fears about drugs to make

themselves look "tough on crime."

Voters should be outraged that their tax money continues to be wasted on failed drug war policies. It's time for a change.

Despite hundreds of billions of dollars spent and millions of Americans incarcerated, illegal drugs remain cheap, potent and widely available in every community; and the harms associated with them -- addiction, overdose, and the spread of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis -- continue to mount. Meanwhile, the war on drugs has created new problems of its own, including rampant racial disparities in the criminal justice system, broken families, increased poverty, unchecked federal power and eroded civil liberties. Our elected officials need new metrics to determine whether progress is being made.

It's time for a new bottom line for U.S. drug policy -- one that focuses on reducing the cumulative death, disease, crime and suffering associated with both drug misuse and drug prohibition. A good start would be enacting short- and long-term national goals for reducing the problems associated with both drugs and the war on drugs. Such goals should include reducing social problems like drug addiction, overdose deaths, the spread of HIV/AIDS from injection drug use, racial disparities in the criminal justice system, and the enormous number of nonviolent offenders behind bars. Federal drug agencies should be judged -- and funded -- according to their ability to meet these goals.

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