



Out-of-Control Prison Growth

Promoting Fair & Effective Criminal Sentencing • Strengthening Families & Communities

Unparalleled Prison Growth

Over the last 20 years, the U.S. prison population has grown at a staggering rate. The engine driving this explosive growth has been the incarceration of nonviolent law offenders and mandatory minimum sentencing. The U.S. now has the largest prison population, numerically and per capita, in the world. More than 2.2 million people are incarcerated in the United States. One in one hundred adults in the U.S. is behind bars. The U.S. accounts for only five percent of the world's population, but we account for 25 percent of the world's prisoners.

New Jersey's prison growth has not only kept pace with this national trend—it has exceeded it. In 1987, the state passed the Comprehensive Drug Reform Act, considered one of the harshest laws of its kind in the country. Several of the provisions of the Act authorized mandatory minimum sentences. In the years since the Act, a constant stream of new and harsher penalties were enacted.

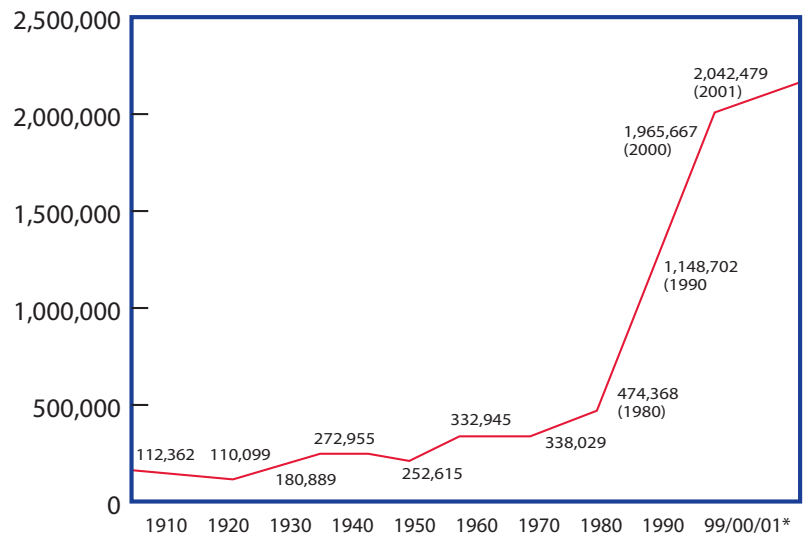
In 1986, when the Comprehensive Drug Reform Act was passed, the New Jersey Department of Corrections budget was \$289 million dollars. Twenty years later, the Corrections budget is a whopping \$1.33 billion. This budget growth far outstrips all other parts of the state's budget. From 1979 until 2006, the corrections budget grew by a factor of 13 while the overall budget grew only by a factor of six.

The result of these legislative changes has been profound, both in human and financial terms. In 1987, only 11 percent of the New Jersey prison population was incarcerated for drug offenses. Today, 32 percent of New Jersey inmates are incarcerated for drug offenses. New Jersey has the highest proportion of nonviolent drug offenders as a proportion of its overall prison population in the nation (36 percent). While the prison population rose from 7,990 in 1982 to 28,622 in 2001, the percentage of individuals serving mandatory minimum sentences rose from 11 percent to 61 percent.

Prison used to be reserved for the most dangerous and incorrigible individuals—today it has become the default option for a vast number of offenses such as nonviolent drug offenses that previously would have called for short prison sentences and/or community supervision such as probation or parole. The overuse of prison and draconian prison sentences for nonviolent drug offenses has resulted in the warehousing of thousands of nonviolent prisoners at enormous costs to taxpayers.

The time has come to put an end to this radical social experiment in mass incarceration and implement policies that will allow for fair and effective sentences and improve public safety.

Number of Prison and Jail Inmates, 1910 - 2000
The 1990s and the 1980s dwarf all other decades in prison growth



Source: Justice Policy Institute analysis of U.S. Department of Justice Data.
*1999, 2000, and 2001 are Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates of what could be the year end totals

U.S. out-of-control prison growth

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