

FACTSHEET

DOJ Report on Prisoners in 2008:

Prisons are still growing and racial disparities persist, despite availability of cost-effective alternatives

Background: The Department of Justice released its annual survey of prisons this week, reporting that more than 1.6 million people are currently incarcerated in a federal or state prison.¹ The report shows that although the growth in imprisonment is down, the number of people in prison is still increasing, up more than 12,000 people from last year. This number continues to grow even as crime goes down, and despite evidence of its ineffectiveness as a public safety strategy. As states continue to grapple with budget crises, it is time for policymakers to consider cost-effective alternatives to incarceration.

Twenty states reported a reduction in their prison population over 2007. The number of people in prison increased just 0.8 percent last year, an improvement over the 1.8 percent annual average growth since 2000. But the national prison population is still up 15.7 percent since 2000. In 2008, about one out of every 198 people in the U.S. was incarcerated in a federal or state prison.

Fewer people were admitted to prison in 2008 than previous years. The change in the prison growth rate can be attributed to a drop in the number of people admitted to prison—down 0.5 percent since 2007 to 739,132. Since 2000, the average annual increase in the number of people admitted to prison has been 2.5 percent. This drop was largely as a result of the decrease in new court commitments since 2006, while the number of people admitted for parole violations increased, though only slightly. Thirty states reported a decrease in the number of people admitted to prison in 2008.

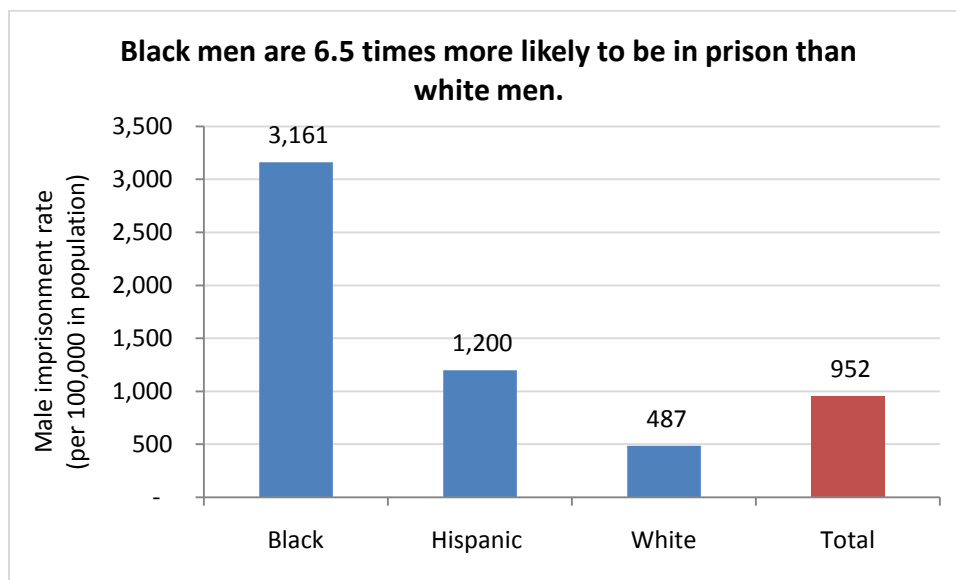
The number of people released is still less than the number of people admitted. Twenty-nine states and the federal system reported an increase in the number of people released from prison in 2008. The release rate is smaller in 2008 than previous years. More people are being released unconditionally, meaning without support mechanisms that might include parole or work release. Thirty percent of people leaving prison in 2008 were released unconditionally, while 70 percent were released under supervision. This may be an indication that states are relying less on parole as a mode of release from prison for people who are eligible, and instead releasing people at the end of their full sentence. It also likely reflects the growing impact of mandatory minimum sentences that were enacted over the past two decades.

	Number of People Admitted or Released from Prison in 2008	Percent Change		
		2007-2008	2000-2008	Annual Average 2000-2007
Admissions	739,132	-0.5%	18.2%	2.5%
Releases	735,454	2.0%	21.6%	2.5%

Source: William J. Sabol and others, *Prisoners in 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009) Appendix Table 12, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p08.pdf

¹ William J. Sabol and others, *Prisoners in 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009) www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p08.pdf

Decreases in the number of blacks and increases in the number of Hispanics in prison have little effect on the disproportionate impact of the criminal justice system on communities of color. The DOJ report notes that the number of blacks in prison fell by 18,400 since 2000. While this decrease is notable, it is only a small reduction in the disproportionality of imprisonment rates for communities of color. Black men are still 6.5 times more likely and Hispanic men 2.5 times more likely, to be in prison than white men.



Source: William J. Sabol and others, *Prisoners in 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009) Table 2, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/p08.pdf

The 3 percent decrease in the number of blacks in prison was not able to make a dent in the burgeoning prison population, as the number of whites and Hispanics who were incarcerated jumped from 2000 to 2008. Most notably, the number of Hispanics in prison rose by 96,200 to reach 313,100 during this time period, an increase of 45 percent since 2000.

Analysis: The continuing increase in the number of people incarcerated is out of step with other criminal justice data and the availability of more effective alternatives. Researchers have long noted the disconnect between use of incarceration, crime rates, and what is known to be effective from both the perspectives of protecting public safety and using taxpayer dollars. In particular:

Prisons continue to grow even as crime continues to fall. In both 2007 and 2008, the violent and property crime rates fell from the previous year. In 2008, the violent crime rate fell 2.8 percent.² Yet, the number of people in prison continues to grow, even if it is a slower pace. This year was the first year since 2001 that the imprisonment rate fell, albeit merely 0.4 percent (504 per 100,000 in 2008 v. 506 per

² FBI Uniform Crime Report, *Crime in the United States 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009) www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm

100,000 in 2007). Research shows that over the last 10 years, states that have increased their prison populations have not seen concurrent decreases in violent crime. At the same time, the states that have reduced their incarceration rates have seen some of the largest drops in violent crime.³

More needs to be done to address disproportionate minority contact with the criminal justice system.

Communities of color continue to be grossly over-represented in jails and prisons, as the multitude of systemic reasons for this disparity have not been adequately addressed. The disturbingly large increase in the number of Hispanics in prison should be examined to see the extent that racial profiling and immigration policies are targeting these communities.

Correctional agencies must address re-entry needs long before returning prisoners to the community.

While many parole agencies are working to improve their supervision practices, the growing number of people “maxing out” and serving their entire sentence rather than being released on parole means many won’t have the benefits of case management and other supportive parole services. Work release programs that allow people the chance to develop work and life skills, as well as wrap-around re-entry services (including mental health and substance abuse treatment), are essential to helping people successfully transition into the community, and are a good investment in public safety.

Investing in effective public safety strategies can provide long-term, cost-effective solutions.

At a time when states and localities are looking for ways to save money and cut expensive and ineffective programs and policies, implementing policies that reduce the number of people in prison can be an effective means of saving money and protecting community safety. Providing resources such as education and employment opportunities have been shown to make a positive long-term impact on communities.⁴ Research shows that states that spend more on education have lower crime rates than states that spend less.

In addition, there is ample research supporting the effectiveness of supporting community-based programs in improving public safety and saving money. A Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) study found that spending \$1 on drug treatment in prison yields nearly \$6 in savings in terms of increased public safety. In contrast, an investment of \$1 in community-based drug treatment yields over \$18 in savings.

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The Justice Policy Institute is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank dedicated to ending society’s reliance on incarceration and promoting effective and just solutions to social problems. For more information, visit our website at www.justicepolicy.org

³ Justice Policy Institute, *Factsheet: Percent Change in Incarceration and Crime Rates, 1998-2007* (Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute, 2008) www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/07-02_FAC_StatebyStateIncarceration_AC-PS.pdf

⁴ Justice Policy Institute, *Pruning Prisons: How Cutting Corrections Can Save Money and Protect Public Safety* (Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute, 2009) www.justicepolicy.org