

# Prison policy initiative evaluation



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## Introduction

In the United States, incarceration has become one of the main forms of punishment for many non-felony and felony offences. According to the 2013 U. S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report, 2, 220, 300 adults were incarcerated in US federal and state prisons, and county jails – about 0. 91% of adults (1 in 110) in the U. S. resident population (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Additionally, 4, 751, 400 adults in 2013 (1 in 51) were on probation or on parole. In total, 6, 899, 000 adults were under correctional supervision (probation, parole, jail, or prison) in 2013 – about 2. 8% of adults (1 in 35) in the U. S. resident population (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014). Despite this being staggering amount of people in prison, the U. S. Bureau of Justice Statistics predicts that between 2012 and 2103, the U. S. prison population will grow by 0. 3% (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014).

Just a few short years later, Peter Wagner and Wendy Sawyer, authors of *Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2018* (2018) found that, “ the American criminal justice system holds almost 2. 3 million people in 1, 719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1, 852 juvenile correctional facilities, 3, 163 local jails, and 80 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U. S. territories”. While this snapshot of the United States correctional system does not capture the enormous in and out of correctional facilities, it does provide a glimpse into the larger community of people whose lives are affected by the criminal justice system.

Looking at the big picture, we can see that something needs to change. Though the criminal justice system involves complicated decisions and relationships, one must ask, how and why are so many people incarcerated? What percentage of crimes are non-violent, and could other steps be taken to remediate the offense? What about the families left behind? What is the racial make-up of prisoners? To aide with finding the answers these and many more important questions, the Prison Policy Initiative was formed.

### Background and History of Organization

The Prison Policy Initiative is a non-partisan, non-profit, whose main goal is to utilizes research to expose the harm mass criminalization inflicts on many Americans, and to create a better society through advocacy campaigns. The Prison Policy Initiative documents and publicizes how excessive and unequal use of punishment and institutional control in the United States' harms individuals and undermines communities (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). The goals of Prison Policy Initiative focus on achieving real change by showing how mass incarceration is hurting specific communities and society in general, and to empower the national movement against mass incarceration by providing key but missing data (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Additionally, the Prison Policy Initiative empowers grassroots groups, journalists and policymakers to fully engage in and propel criminal justice reform, utilizing an expansive research clearinghouse - a database of 2,000+ criminal justice research articles, and powerful visual data (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Co-founded in 2001 by Peter Wagner to spark a national discussion about the negative impact of incarceration, Prison Policy Initiative has been the most reliable source for timely and actionable data about the United States criminal justice system. From their office in Western Massachusetts, co-founder Peter Wagner, who is an attorney and serves as the Executive Director, staff members, and volunteers, work to provide insightful data that is used to reshape debates around mass incarceration and over-criminalization (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). The staff of nine includes Aleks Kajstura, JD, a 2008 graduate of the Benjamin Cardozo School of Law, who has worked in various capacities since 2003, and played a pivotal role in building the Prison Policy Initiative's campaign against prison gerrymandering. As of 2009, Kajstura has served as the Prison Policy Initiative legal director (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). Jorge Renaud is a senior policy analyst, who earned a Master's degree in Social Work from University of Texas at Austin, published poetry and essays in *The Texas Observer* and *The Americas Review*, and was a contributing columnist for *Hispanic Link Weekly Report* during his 27 years of incarceration, continues the fight on criminal justice policy and those directly affected by it through writing and organizing (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

The Board of Director is comprised of seven members with backgrounds ranging from reporter to professor, and author to lawyer. The Advisory Board consists of 15 members, to provide unique knowledge and advice which supports the Board of Directors with effectively governing the organization. The members include Alex Friedmann of *Prison Legal News*, Rebecca Young an Attorney, and Janice Thompson of Midwest Democracy Network, to name

a few. In addition to undergraduate, graduate and law students, motivated citizens from all over the country volunteer countless hours by applying their specialized skills and experience to Prison Policy Initiative projects (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Social Issue (incl. strengths, weakness, results, & policy/legislative focus)

The Prison Policy Initiative has been pivotal in the movement against mass incarceration, by providing needed insight and data which helps the public understand that mass incarceration is both unprecedented and counterproductive. Providing data in an easy to read format consisting of interactive maps that offer one-click access to graphs and other research about incarceration in each state, the Prison Policy Initiative keeps the public well-informed on the social issue of mass incarceration. Since 2001, the Prison Policy Initiative accomplished many strides including, leading four states, Maryland, New York, California and Delaware, and 200+ local governments to reject the practice of prison gerrymandering, that gave extra representation to the legislators who had prisons in their districts and diluted the votes of everyone who did not live next to a prison (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018). In other words, prison gerrymandering allowed many state and local governments to count incarcerated individuals as residents of the areas where they are housed, skewing election district lines (Prison-Based Gerrymandering Reform, 2018). Thus, prison gerrymandering led to dramatic distortions at local and state levels, creating an inaccurate picture of the population, which led to distorted data being used for research and planning services. Since the Prison Policy Initiative's unveiling of prison gerrymandering, research and organizing has led hundreds of county and

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municipal governments across the country to reject the Census Bureau's prison counts and avoid prison-based gerrymandering. Additionally, Prison Policy Initiative led hundreds of civil rights, voting rights and criminal justice organizations and nearly 100, 000 individuals to ask the Census Bureau to end prison gerrymandering before the 2020 Census (Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Another accomplishment of the Prison Policy Initiative was connecting the link between incarceration and race. In a report from 2015, Peter Wagner and Daniel Kopf addressed the data behind racial and ethnic disparities in prisons and where they are built. The report shines a light on prison racial disparities by using the 2010 Census to compare the race and ethnicity of incarcerated people to that of the people in the surrounding county (The Racial Geography of Mass Incarceration, 2015). A key finding was the racial and ethnic make-up of the surrounding population was very different from the prison population. The analysis also proves that minorities, particularly Blacks and Latinos, are incarcerated at a rate about 5 times higher than whites, but prisons are disproportionately located in majority-white areas. It also showed the imbalance between the prisoners and the guards working in the prison. An analysis of large-sized prison locations in 161 counties across 31 states in 2010, found that the incarcerated Black population was more than the number of free Blacks, and Latinos are incarcerated 2 times higher than non-Latino whites. This combination has tremendous implications to hire diverse staff, and it highlights the problem of prison gerrymandering as a distinct form of racial discrimination (Wagner & Kopf, 2015).

Discussion (interconnectedness of gov't & NPO's to combat social issues)

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Segal (2017) states, “ the most powerful way to conduct policy practice is to participate in the political system”. In the United States, the government exists to provide order and rules for society, to prevent chaos. Policies and laws are in place to protect citizen’s rights against racism, sexism, and classism. Nonprofit organizations influence not only public opinion, but they also influence policy makers’ decisions. Nonprofit organizations aides in the development of programs, business models, and services affects communities served. Policymakers, government officials and nonprofit organizations, must work closely together to ensure the needs of society are met effectively and efficiently. By collaborating and forging cross-sector relationships, nonprofit organizations can work toward their goals by using their various strengths to establish community and government support of social issues. Through legislative advocacy, nonprofit organizations can take action by working with the government at the local, state, and national level, to improve organizational effectiveness and embrace new models of social change.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, policymakers, government officials and nonprofit organizations must collaborate to make actionable change to social issues. By challenging the over-criminalization and incarceration through research, organizing, and advocacy, the Prison Policy Initiative is a nonprofit organization at the forefront of the prison reform movement. The Prison Policy Initiative utilizes research to document and publicize the harm mass criminalization inflicts on many Americans. By publicizing data on mass incarceration and over-criminalization, the Prison Policy Initiative not only gains new support for this

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social issue, but they also allow average citizens and policymakers the opportunity to address changes, and forces governments to change policies and laws to end mass incarceration and over-criminalization in the United States.

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