

Is prison population increasing or decreasing crimes research paper examples

[Sociology](#), [Population](#)



Introduction

USA has the highest percentage of prison population than any other country in the world. Over the last 35 years, USA has seen a boom in the rate of incarceration by increasingly relying on its strategy of building and filling prisons for crime reduction. USA took about 160 years to gather its first 1 million inmates and another 1 million just took 12 years. It is estimated the prison population witnessed a 321% hike between the years 1980-2000 when the total number of prisoners went from 315, 956 to 1, 329, 367 (Kovandzic & Vieraitis, 2006). Statistics show that prison population has quadrupled in number since 1980 with 2. 4 million adult Americans behind bars as of August, 2013. The increasing number of prison population has been accompanied by equal increase in correctional expenditures. USA spends in excess of \$60 billion a year on corrections with about \$21, 000 costs per inmate in minimum-security federal prison and about \$33, 000 a year on per inmate in maximum-security federal prison (Klein & Soltas, 2013). The question that keeps intriguing us is whether or not the rate of crime has decreased or increased after all these humongous expenses on corrections and accommodation of prison population. This paper will discuss upon the issue at length touching upon the contribution of three strikes law in overcrowding of prisons and criminogenic effect of incarceration in attributing to an increase in criminal offenses.

Is Increased Prison Population Increasing or Decreasing Crime?

When in 2009, there was a drop in crime rates all across USA it was believed by the criminologists that growing number of incarceration has led to the decline in crimes. USA was caught in the throes of recession and crimes were supposed to be up in such critical time but going contrary to the expectations, there was a visible drop by 8.1 percent in the crime rates in all categories of crime including rape, murder, robbery and aggravated assault. Ted Kirkpatrick who is co-director of Justiceworks, a crime and justice research group at the University of New Hampshire in Durham attributed incarceration to the decline in crime rates, "By building more prisons and incarcerating more people, we've taken criminals off the street" (Haq, 2010). But the latest report on the rate of crimes as released by FBI on 3rd June 2013 shows a 1.2 percent increase in the number of violent crimes nationwide, compared to 2011, which brings us back to questioning the efficacy of increasing prison population in decreasing crime rates. Though it is undeniably true that the crime rates in USA has dropped, to some extent, ever since population in prison has increased, it cannot be denied either that increasing prison population too has contributed to an increasing number of crimes. It is worth taking into account that a small percentage of offenders commit larger percentage of crimes and they are frequently arrested and put into jails, but most of these offenders are lower-rate criminals. Studies show that three-strike law is one reason for the overcrowding of prisons. Though this law was originally brought into place to keep general public from the

violent offenders, it actually contributed to high rates of imprisonment for non-violent criminals.

Three Strikes Law

The moniker 'Three strikes law' aka “ Three Strikes and You’re Out” refers to the statutes that make imposition of harsher sentences mandatory on repeated offenders of serious or violent felonies. This law grants life sentences without any possibility of parole for minimum 25 years on the third strike of offense. The crimes listed under 'violent' include murder, rape, kidnapping, aggravated robbery, sexual abuse and violent physical assault. Under this statute, a criminal who has been convicted of serious crimes in two prior charges might receive a maximum sentencing on the third felony even if that is a minor felony such as shoplifting or stealing. However, several studies revealed that this law has allowed imprisonment of perpetrators of minor crimes to longer jail terms. Several offenders have been sentenced to life imprisonment for petty theft like shoplifting or attempts of burglary involving money under \$400, if they were earlier convicted of theft and burglary and had spent time in jail for the offense. Jerry Dewayne Williams, the pizza thief who had previous convictions for robbery and attempted robbery was sentenced to 25 years of life when he committed the third felony of stealing a slice of pizza from a group of children (Leonard, 2010). Not only Williams, many offenders were subjected to severe punishment under this law for minor felony like shoplifting a bottle of vitamins or stealing videotapes to buy heroin. Laws like three strikes laws have led to an overcrowding of prisons and prison is a breeding ground for

hardcore criminals. So the non-violent criminals who have been apprehended or given long-term sentencing under three strikes law might commit violent crimes after their release, due to the harsher criminogenic effect during imprisonment.

Criminogenic Effect of Imprisonment

There are several criminogenic effects incarceration leaves on the offenders and these effects are broadly categorized into three segments - effects that take place during incarceration period, post incarceration outcome and third party effects.

Criminogenic Effect during Incarceration

Prison is place in which low-risk offenders coming in contact with high-risk offenders learn about committing crimes without detection and this leads to the likelihood of the low-risk offenders to commit more serious crimes after they are out of prisons. Imprisonment also weakens the social bonds of offenders with their family and community and this increases their chances of recidivism. The Supreme Court of USA has even acknowledged that prisons are dangerous and the danger lurking in these institutions may lead a petty offender prone to more serious crimes. When the security guards in prisons inflict violence on inmates for no apparent reason, it crushes the sense of personhood of the inmates and they become more likely to commit crimes. Violence of one inmate on another could also harden a criminal making him desensitized and bond with other violent groups in order to protect himself. For instance, in 1977 Richard Gantz who was sentenced to imprisonment for robbery was allowed to go out on a day pass from the

Lincoln Correctional Facility in Manhattan, New York because he was left with few months on his sentence. On his way to attend classes at Kingsborough Community College, he kidnapped a 19 year old girl whom he repeatedly raped in a motel. Another convict of the Lincoln Correctional Facility, Harry Elmore killed a 45-years old Ethel Loney when he was out on a day pass (Travis, 2005). There are many such incidents like these ones where the offenders who have been imprisoned for petty crimes later committed more horrific crimes upon release and this proves the criminogenic effect of incarceration which instead of deterring offenders from committing crimes makes them more prone to violence.

Prison overcrowding results in less careful monitoring and regulation and consequently, younger inmates become subjected to sexual assault. Studies show that high population density in prison leads to poor regulation which contributes to higher rates of sexual assaults and rape. Studies have also shown a link between prison overcrowding and higher rate of recidivism (Pritikin, 2009). Further, overcrowding brings together a good many number of crime-prone people in one place and in the absence of enough work or productive activity to fill their time, they resort to violence inside prison to kill their boredom. Currently there is 39% above capacity prison population which is likely to swell to more than 45% by 2018 (McLaughlin, 2012).

Overcrowding results in an increased misconduct negatively impacting the security of inmates and security staff. The detrimental effect of overcrowding will ripple out outside prison after the convicts will be released as overcrowding leads to more number of inmates cramming in one space with no privacy and less access to educational programs or job trainings and

therefore, the prisoners are more likely to commit crimes again upon release.

Post incarceration Outcome

A person imprisoned for petty crimes gets labeled as bad or socially deviant and the stigma engulfs his personality, making him bond with other social deviants. Not only that the stigma of imprisonment prevents him from getting a decent job as many employers are averse to hiring a convicted felon. More and more employers these days are conducting background checks prior to hiring and mandating revelation of criminal records and all these minimalize the chances for the offenders to get employment upon release. Further, there are many kinds of jobs which bar ex-offenders from employment by law. For instance, the law which prevents offenders with criminal background from holding or possessing guns automatically bars them from seeking employment in position like security guard which requires handling guns. In 1992, a law passed by the Congress mandates all the states to suspend driver's licenses for convicted drug offenders or else a considerable portion of federal funding is withheld from the states for non-compliance (Pritikin, 2009). All these things put together have led to the difficulty for convicted ex-offenders to earn livelihood legitimately and consequently they revert to illegitimate ways to make a living.

Ex-offenders also are denied of several federal benefits including small loans, educational loans and other benefits. They are also denied of assistance from state programs such as food stamps offered by federal funds.

Depending on the nature of their crimes, these denials may be temporary or

indefinite. Resultantly, the difficulty in getting employment as well as denials of benefits put them into dire financial situations and they feel forced to revert to criminal activities.

Third Party Effects

According to many people, the increasing prison population has partially eroded the deterrent effect of the institution because criminals being exposed to prison life lose the fear of the unknown. As Professor Todd Clear has stated, " It is not the actual brutality of prison life that deters, it is imagining the prison experience" (Pritikin, 2009). When more and more criminals get the exposure of prison life and survive the imprisonment, they become confident of pulling it through and that is why they don't feel deterred from committing more horrendous crimes. In 2002, a study conducted by BJS on 272, 111 prisoners shows that 67. 5% of released offenders revert to recidivism upon release and were rearrested for a new offense at least once. The study also reveals that the released prisoners committed crimes more horrific in nature than they were earlier capable of and many were rearrested for more than one crime. Within three years of their release these prisoners were charged with gruesome crimes including homicides, kidnappings, rapes, other sexual assaults, armed robberies, burglaries, weapon offenses and so on (Travis, 2005).

Incarceration also leaves an impact on the families of the offenders, especially children who due to the absence of one or both of their parents start facing a lot of difficulties from an early life. Studies show that about one half of incarcerated juveniles have a parent who is or has been incarcerated

(Pritikin, 2009).

Increasing rate of imprisonment has led to disparate treatment of racial minorities especially African Americans who are imprisoned at nine times higher rate than that of whites. For example, due to the application of the three strikes law, African American men who comprise only 6.5% of the state's population constitute 31% of inmates in California prisons with 33% being second strikers and 44% being third strikers. In Florida, the chances of female offenders being sentenced under three strikes law are rare, but if the female offenders are African American then they are more likely to be sentenced by the same law.

Conclusion

USA has the highest percentage of prison population than any other country in the world and over the last 35 years USA has seen an explosion in the rate of incarceration. The increased rate of incarceration was a strategy to reduce crimes as the crimes rate skyrocketed during 1960s - 1970s. But the question that remains is whether the increased rate of prison population has led to a decline in the crimes rates. Though undeniably a noticeable drop in crime rates is visible in recent years, there is no doubt that the laws like three-strikes law and the criminogenic effect of incarceration have led to an increase in the number of violent crimes as petty criminals convicted of robbery or theft are subjected to harsher sentencing and during their serving of sentences in prisons, these petty criminals convert to hardened criminals capable of committing crimes more gruesome in nature. Further, the difficulty in getting employment and denial of federal benefits among others

has led the ex-offenders to recidivism. The overcrowding of prisons has led to frequent oversights in careful monitoring on the inmates and due to which several in-prison violent crimes take place leading to rapes, sexual assaults, fatal injury and even murder. Therefore, it is time for the government to take the criminogenic effects of incarceration seriously into account and reform existing policies and laws to help offenders integrate into the mainstream society as random imprisonment is not a solution to the problem.

References

Kovandzic, Tomislav V. and Vieraitis, Lynne M (2006). The Effect of County-Level Prison Population Growth on Crime Rates. University of Alabama.

Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Pritikin, Martin H (2009). Is Prison Increasing Crime? Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Klein, Ezra and Soltas, Evan (2013). Workbook: 11 Facts About America's Prison Population. The Washington Post. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Haq, Hasna (2010). US Crime Rate is Down: Six Key Reasons. The Christian Science Monitor. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

FBI Releases Preliminary Annual Crime Statistics for 2012. FBI. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Leonard, Jack (2010). 'Pizza Thief' Walks the Line. Los Angeles Times. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Three Strikes Laws: Five Years Later, prisonpolicy. org. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from

Travis, Jeremy (2005). But They All Come Back: Facing The Challenges Of Prisoner Reentry. Urban Inst Pr. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from
McLaughlin, Michael (2012). Overcrowding In Federal Prisons Harms Inmates, Guards: GAO Report. Huffington Post. Retrieved on 9th September 2013 from