

# Prison overcrowding: description

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Prison overcrowding in the United States of America is a raging issue in the current scenario of governmental, civic, and scholarly circles. If we review the present literature on the issue of prisons getting overcrowded, we will come across some very glaring facts about the situation. With the passage of time, as the prisons are filling up with more than required prisoners by the day, the problem is seen to be growing to alarming proportions that can create serious issues of management on the side of the government in the future. It is only recently that the scholars have started raising their voice about this issue because the situation is going worse by the day. D. Wes Rist, in this regard, informs us of the current situation of the U. S. prisons.

According to Rist, the U. S. A Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the incarceration rates of the U. S. prisons in the period of 2003-2004 reached to the highest proportion in the entire history of the United States of America. All the more surprising fact, put forth by Rist, is that this “ while crime is decreasing, the incarceration rate is far outstripping the release rate of US prisons” (jurist. law. pitt. edu).

In this very connection, for cross authentication another piece of evidence reported by the Information Office of China’s State Council (2007) is found. According to the report, “ About three percent of the U. S. adult population, or one in every 32 adults, were in the nation’s prisons and jails or on probation or parole. The federal prisons were operating at 34 percent over capacity” (english. people. com. cn).

If we critically review the problem in this context, we will have to admit that there are serious issues that need to be addressed when it comes to the

overcrowding of the U. S. prisons. In this paper, an investigation of this problem related to the overcrowding of the prisons will be undertaken. The present study also examines the solution of the problem in the current context.

### Description of Problem

When it comes to the problem and its description related to the issue of prison overcrowding, it is proper to have an in-depth investigation so that a thorough understanding can be born; so that a more solid policy platform can be provided by the study. As such, the problems existent in the overcrowding of the prisons are numerous; however, extensive examination of the literature and fact sheets informs that these, according to my own analysis, are three main problems:

- 1) Involvement of citizens in drugs
- 2) Prisons serving as caretaker houses for the mentally-ill
- 3) Private sectors involvement in the prison management

### Involvement of Citizens in Drugs

According to the available literature on the issue of overcrowding of U. S. prisons, the issue that it is mainly due to the people's getting rapid exposure to the drug-related crimes is much more evident. Marciniak (2002) tells us that:

“ The largest single group in local jails comprises those incarcerated, directly or indirectly, because of alcohol, crack cocaine, marijuana, or heroin use.

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This situation testifies to the reality that not only is our national campaign against drug abuse failing, but that, as the U. S. Department of Justice reports, seven out of ten inmates now in state or federal prisons are there for drug abuse and other nonviolent offenses” (p. 1).

He further pursues the roots of the same issue and comes up with the observation that since the time of 1990, the nationwide number of women in the U. S. A has reached to a more than double figure. Most of these women prisoners were convicted mainly for drug-related offenses.

The above chain of facts reveals that the U. S. Government is failing to address the root cause of the problem, that is to say, the immense exposure of the citizens outside the prisons to drugs like marijuana is the real devil. A point can be raised here: “ Can the innocent citizens stop doing drugs after they serve a horrible time in the overcrowded prisons when they have easy access to drugs outside?”

#### Prisons Serving as Caretaker Houses for the Mentally-ill

According to Marciniak (2002), another major problem for the prisons getting overcrowded it to fill them up with the people who are not drug offenders but are the mentally-ill who must have place outside the prisons like the mental care houses and the like. He makes a claim that “ We treat nonviolent drug offenders as criminals when they should be patients”. It is , according to him, because U. S. does not have such caretaking houses in the required quantity, the mentally-ill. The result is they have to be sent to the prisons for caretaking:

“ Because of the serious shortage of public and private living quarters for the mentally ill, city and county jails have become the local “ hospitals” and caretakers. Schizophrenics and persons with a bipolar disorder are more likely to be arrested for conduct related to their ailments. In dozens of U. S. cities, the largest institution for sheltering them is now the local jail”

Marciniak (2002, p. 1)

### Private Sectors Involvement in the Prison Management

Another major area of concern in the overcrowding of the U. S. prisons is the involvement of operation in the matters of managing the prisoners. Thus there is huge uproar at this issue. People like Colson (zmag. org, March 17, 2007) note that

“ Private prison companies operate in about three-quarters of U. S. states. According to a recent CorpWatch report by Deepa Fernandes, the Nashville-based Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), America's largest private-prison operator, announced that revenues had increased to almost \$300 million for the second quarter of 2005” (zmag. org, a).

Thus, According to Colson the prisoners serving time in the nation’s jail are being treated like they are some commodities and the jails have turn into “ human warehouses”. Taking an in-depth examination of the facts about the private sector’s administrative share in the running of the nation’s jails, it comes to our notice that

“ The private prison sector now administers more than 100 facilities in 27 states, holding more than 100, 000 inmates. Eighteen private firms run local

jails, private prisons, and immigration detention centers. Firms such as Goldman Sachs and Merrill Lynch are estimated to write between \$2-3 billion in prison construction bonds every year” (zmag. org, b).

According to this very source it is fairly noticeable that the cause for this much involvement in the matters of prison administration, U. S. largest employer after General Motors, is due to “ The desires of financial backers and lobbyists” which “ are so great [that] they now overwhelm whatever little sense might sometimes surface in the mind of an honest and caring politician” [emphasis added] (zmag. org, b).

#### Suggested Improvement and Implementation

Behind the study of the reasons and causes or both of the overcrowding of U. S. prisons, there are a great number of issues that are discussed by scholars. But the main points on which to work to solve the problems are:

1) Keeping the innocent citizens from accessing drugs like marijuana so that so many diseases, illnesses, and other disorders that create a law and order problem causing the overstuffing of the prison can be addressed. It is, then, to start from the grassroots level. This step is to be taken because “ Drug addiction is undeniably the nation’s foremost health problem [which] should be treated as such.” For this, the government will certainly have to “ repeal state laws that now mandate the incarceration of drug offenders” (Marciniak, 2002, p. 1).

2) Along with the above effort being implemented, the U. S. government must also seriously consider developing “ many more public and private

treatment centers to which nonviolent drug abusers can be referred” so that the use of jails and prisons to house the mentally-ill can be prevented.

3) Reduction of poverty has to be taken as another related solution to the problem because “ Reducing poverty has proven results in reducing crime, because people with something to lose are less likely to commit a crime” (prisonpolicy. org).

There are other problems that need to be dealt very carefully. For example, “ the poverty line in the U. S. for a family of three is \$13. 22 a day per person. That's supposed to pay for everything. By contrast, incarceration costs on average, \$55. 18 a day.” (prisonpolicy. org). Thus, the average incarceration costs need immediate consideration.

### Ongoing Evaluation

If we look at the ongoing evaluation of the change, it comes to our notice that recently several states (New York, Illinois, and California) have developed interactive channels through which only fewer nonviolent offenders were sent to prisons. Instead, they are being referred to mental care centers and hospitals so that their illness and not the crime of being mentally-ill can be treated. However, the “ progress is slow because most states have a serious shortage of needed mental hospitals and treatment centers” (Marciniak, 2002, p. 1). Not only this but the U. S. administration must start producing effective results in all the above noted problematic areas so that a better tomorrow awaits and welcomes our forthcoming generations.