

Analyzing U.S. Prison Growth

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The 1.46 million Americans locked up in state and federal prisons at the end of 2005 represents an increase of 1.15 million in the national prison population and more than a tripling in the rate of incarceration over the last quarter century. This massive drive toward imprisonment has affected every demographic group and made the prison population older, more drug involved, and to a lesser extent whiter and more female (**Table 1**, lefthand columns).

Race, and gender disparities in imprisonment have diminished significantly but still remain large:

- Compared to whites, blacks and Hispanics are respectively 6.2 times and 3.0 times more likely to be imprisoned today, compared to 9.5 and 3.6 times in 1979 (**Table 1**, righthand columns).
- Men were 14 times more likely than women to be locked up in 2005, down from 24 times in 1979.
- The gap between the rate of imprisonment for individuals younger than 25 and those older than 45 dropped to 2.1, down from 6.8 a quarter century ago, while the 25-44 age bracket overtook the 18-24 age bracket as the one most likely to be behind bars.
- These trends were driven by the skyrocketing imprisonment of drug offenders. In 1979, only 6% of prisoners were in for drug-related charges compared to almost 25% today.

Table 1. America's prisons increasingly cage aging drug offenders.

	Change			Prisoners/100,000 population		
	1979-2005	1990-2005	1979-1990	2005	1990	1979*
All	249%	58%	120%	717.1	452.9	205.5
Age <25	133%	38%	69%	692.3	501.9	297.0
25-44	288%	71%	127%	1,118.2	654.6	287.9
45+	644%	143%	206%	325.8	134.3	43.8
Female	478%	89%	206%	96.1	50.9	16.6
Male	235%	55%	115%	1,346.5	867.1	402.5
White	264%	66%	120%	379.3	229.1	104.1
Black	139%	13%	112%	2,358.7	2,094.1	987.9
Hispanic	206%	22%	152%	1,135.7	933.1	370.6
Violent	182%	72%	64%	352.7	205.5	125.1
Property	104%	25%	63%	144.5	115.5	70.9
Drug	1,341%	57%	818%	178.7	113.8	12.4
Other	691%	97%	301%	72.3	36.6	9.1
Total number of prisoners				1,461,100	773,800	314,500

What has overwhelmingly contributed to the larger number of aging prisoners is the increase in arrests for violent, property, and drug offenses compared to younger age groups. The tendency to imprison drug abusers and property offenders with drug problems has increased as well (**Table 2**). In turn, the greater number of drug arrests is related to a real and very large increase in the rate of drug-related deaths in older individuals, which has reached record peaks.

The aging pattern of offenders explains why prison populations are rising even as crime declines. Older arrestees are more likely to have long criminal records with more offenses, and they are more likely to engage in longer-term, habitual criminal behavior. This means that older arrestees have higher imprisonment odds than younger arrestees, who are more likely to be first-time offenders who can avoid serving prison time.

Table 2. Rising prison populations reflected in aging drug, crime trends.

	1979-2005	1990-2005	1979-1990	2005	1990	1979
Violent, property, drug arrests, change in rate:	<u>Arrests/100,000 population</u>					
All	22%	-12%	39%	2,405.1	2,743.0	1,970.3
<25	5%	-15%	24%	4,116.1	4,867.7	3,933.8
25-44	94%	-4%	101%	2,773.1	2,880.0	1,432.1
45+	122%	46%	52%	739.6	507.0	332.5
Female	66%	9%	52%	1,317.8	1,204.8	792.13
Male	8%	-18%	32%	4,106.6	4,997.3	3,794.5
Illicit drug deaths, change in rate:	<u>Drug deaths/100,000 pop.</u>					
All	190%	139%	21%	13.0	5.4	4.5
<25	112%	225%	-35%	4.7	1.4	2.2
25-44	190%	125%	29%	17.1	7.6	5.9
45+	177%	147%	12%	15.1	6.1	5.5
Female	131%	145%	-5%	10.7	4.4	4.6
Male	226%	136%	38%	18.5	7.8	5.7

Table 3 shows the dramatic changes in the extent to which the prison population mirrors the U.S. population. Compared to changes in America's population in the last 25 years, America's prison population is much older, somewhat whiter and more female, and less black and Hispanic today.

Table 3. Imprisonment trends show large changes.

	2005	1990	1979	Change, 1979-2000
Percent of prisoners vs. percent of general population:				
<25	0.93	1.06	1.37	- 32%
25-44	1.49	1.39	1.32	+ 13%
45+	0.44	0.28	0.20	+116%
Female	0.13	0.11	0.08	+ 68%
Male	1.80	1.84	1.85	- 3%
White	0.51	0.49	0.48	+ 6%
Black	3.15	4.44	4.54	- 31%
Hispanic	1.52	1.98	1.70	- 11%

While recent declines in crime among younger offenders have brought down crime rates, rising numbers of older offenders are cycling in and out of prison, boosting incarceration rates. The implications of this development are threefold:

- (1) An aging, drug-involved prison population incurs significantly higher costs per prisoner.

(2) The imprisonment of drug offenders speaks to society's failure to manage and treat the nation's drug addicts.

(3) Greater measures must be taken to prevent the cycle of recidivism that plagues older offenders. Unless urgent policy changes are made, rising drug abuse, which was formerly centered in older age groups in the last decade but which is now spreading to younger groups, threatens to fuel renewed growth in arrests, violence among drug gangs and sellers, and subsequent growth of the prison population.

References

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3. Center for Disease Control, Compressed Mortality tables. Available at: <http://wonder.cdc.gov/cmfi-icd10.html>.

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