

# Institute for Public Safety & Justice Fact Sheet

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*"No matter what the question has been in American Criminal justice over the last generation, prison has been the answer."* Franklin Zimring

## Prison Industrial Complex

By Terri Adams-Fuller

During the tail end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nation experienced records highs in its incarceration rates and prison construction. Since the early 1980s the prison industrial complex has grown by leaps and bounds. The prison industrial complex is a term used to describe the interlocking of policies, prison construction, prison labor, and the resulting economics of such efforts.

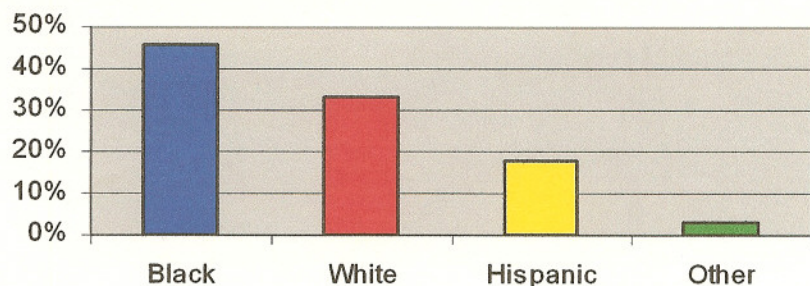
This exponential growth in the prison population has been appreciably noticeable during the last decade. Between 1990 and 1999 the nation's prison population grew an average of 6.5 percent each year. By 1999 more than 2 million Americans were locked behind bars (including local jails, state and federal prisons, United States Immigration and Naturalization services, military facilities,

American Indian County jails, and juvenile facilities).

This number breaks down to approximately 476 individuals incarcerated for every 100,000 United States citizens (BJS). About 1 in every 110 men is incarcerated and 1 in every 1,695 women is incarcerated.

African American males fare worst, as roughly 1 in every 11 young African American males is incarcerated. According to the Bureau of Justice Assistance, 46% of the United States Prison population is African American, 33% are white, 18% are Hispanic/Latino, and the remaining percentage is spread across other racial or ethnic groups.

Population of State Prisons by Race



Data from the Bureau of Justice Assistance



This growth in the prison population, particularly as it relates to African Americans, has been driven by a number of factors including: the war on drugs<sup>ii</sup>, mandatory minimum sentencing laws<sup>iii</sup>, truth in sentencing<sup>iv</sup>, and three strikes laws<sup>v</sup>.

Presented to the public as essential in stopping violent offenders, these sentencing practices have resulted in the increased incarceration of a significant number of non-violent offenders. The increased penalties on drug offenses have had a tremendous impact on incarceration rates in general and those of African American males specifically.

The growth of the prison population has been matched by the growth in the construction of new prison facilities. Over the last decade the building of correctional facilities has on average cost roughly \$7 billion dollars a year. In the year 1996 alone, around the country construction began on 26 federal and 96 state prisons (Parenti 1999).

Prisons are becoming an integral part of the United States economy as their construction and placement in rural towns of America play a significant role in refueling the economies of many small rural towns.

### **Key Advocacy Issues**

*Availability of prison education programs*

*Repeal of mandatory-minimum sentencing laws*

*Revision of "three strikes" laws to specifically apply to violent crime only*

*Revision of truth in sentencing laws to specifically apply to violent offenders only*

*Availability of Drug Treatment*

*Limit the continued privatization of correctional facilities*

### **Resource, or To Get Involved:**

*Lockdown America*, by Christian Parenti

*Race to Incarcerate* by Marc Mauer

### **Organizations include:**

- Peace Net  
[www.igc.org](http://www.igc.org)
- [www.theatlantic.com/issues/98dec/prisons](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98dec/prisons)
- Corporation Watch  
[www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)
- Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)  
1612 K Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006  
(202) 882-6700
- [www.famm.org](http://www.famm.org)
- [www.prisonactivist.org](http://www.prisonactivist.org)
- [www.spr.org](http://www.spr.org)
- [www.hr95.com](http://www.hr95.com)
- CURE National  
P.O. Box 2310  
Washington, DC 20013-2310  
(202) 789-2126  
[www.curenational.org](http://www.curenational.org)

### **Endnotes**

i *The Atlantic Journal Monthly*; December 1998. "The Prison Industrial Complex". Volume 282(6): 51-77.

ii The war on drugs is a term used to describe the policies and practices used by the government to increase efforts by the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the accompanying criminal justice policies. These efforts began during the Regan Era and continues with the increasing of punishments against drug users and drug dealers.

iii Mandatory-minimum sentencing laws require judges to sentence offenders to a predetermined sentence and prohibits judges from using discretion.

iv Truth in Sentencing requires that offenders sentenced for certain crimes complete at least 75 to 100 percent of their sentence before being eligible for parole.

v Three Strikes Laws require offenders to be sentenced to life in prison after the third offense.

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