

FACT SHEET

Research from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

US Rates of Incarceration: A Global Perspective

Christopher Hartney

In the past 30 years, the United States has come to rely on imprisonment as its response to all types of crime. Even minor violations of parole or probation often lead to a return to prison. This has created a prison system of unprecedented size in this country.

The US has less than 5% of the world's population but over 23% of the world's incarcerated people.

- **The US incarcerates the largest number of people in the world.**
- **The incarceration rate in the US is four times the world average.**
- **Some individual US states imprison up to six times as many people as do nations of comparable population.**
- **The US imprisons the most women in the world.**
- **Crime rates do not account for incarceration rates.**

Local and state facilities across the country are overcrowded, exacerbate prisoner health problems, risk the safety of both staff and prisoners, are in poor repair, and strain taxpayers. The nationwide bill for incarceration is conservatively estimated at \$42 billion annually (see AOUSC, May, 2004). Many prison and jail systems have been sued for failure to meet minimum requirements for health and safety. Prisoner rehabilitation and reentry services are inadequately funded.

This fact sheet makes simple side-by-side comparisons of the most reliable and current statistics from around the world to illuminate the extreme use of incarceration in the US. Explaining the reasons for this heavy reliance on imprisonment is outside the scope of this publication. Variations in legal definitions and statistical methods create limitations on the cross-national comparability of criminal justice data. Yet such comparisons remain powerful tools for gaining the perspective necessary to instigate review and reform. Wherever possible, incarceration data includes local, state, and national facilities, and includes sentenced, pre-trial, and remanded prisoners.

The US incarcerates the largest number of people in the world.

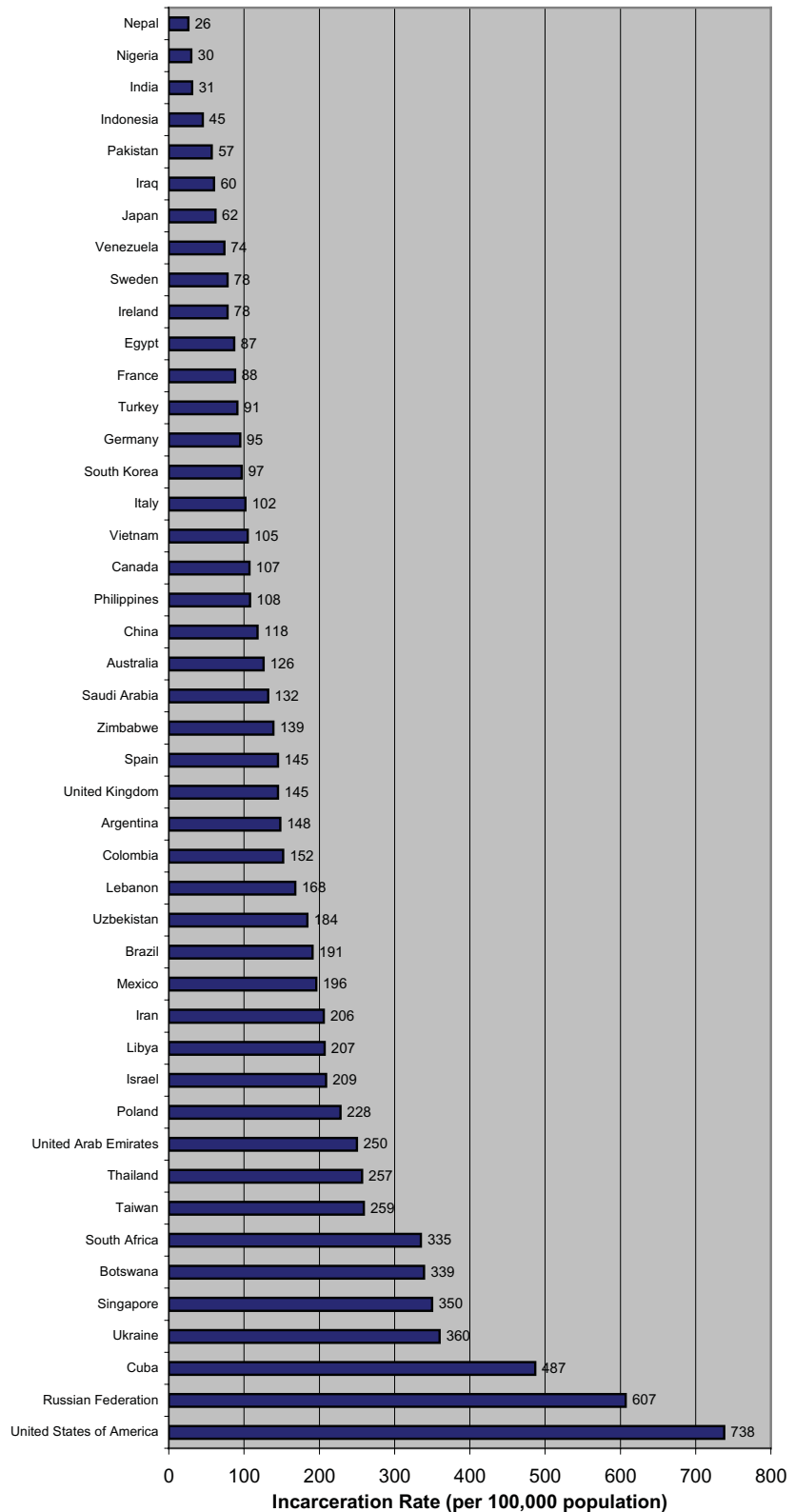
Comparative International Incarceration Rates

Compared to the world's other most populous countries, the 2.2 million people currently incarcerated in the US is 153% higher than Russia, 505% higher than Brazil, 550% higher than India, and over 2,000% higher than Indonesia, Bangladesh, or Nigeria (ICPS, 2006).

The US rate of incarceration is the highest in the world.

The US incarcerates at a rate 4 to 7 times higher than other western nations such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany and up to 32 times higher than nations with the lowest rates such as Nepal, Nigeria, and India.

Rates, as opposed to actual prison population, allow for comparisons across time as populations change or across nations with different populations. Rates are calculated by dividing the prison population by the general population and multiplying by 100,000.



*Incarceration rates in the US are four times the world average.**

The rate of incarceration of only sentenced prisoners in China is one-fourth the rate for sentenced prisoners in state or federal facilities in the US.

(Walmsley, 2005)

- 738 Rate in the United States.
- 166 Average rate worldwide.
- 135 Average rate among European Union member states.
- 96 Average rate of the Group of Seven: Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Canada (US excluded).
- 152 Rate in Rwanda, where nearly 80% (53,000) of the prison inmates are being held for crimes relating to the 1994 genocide.
- 133 Average rate in Iran and Iraq.
- 100 Average rate of incarceration among nations noted by Amnesty International as having some of the most urgent human rights abuse issues (Uzbekistan, Iraq, Myanmar, and Sudan) (Human Rights Watch, 2006).
- 823 Estimated rate in the feared GULAG of the Soviet Union in 1950 (Getty, Rittersporn, & Zemskov, 1993; Andreev, et al., 1993).

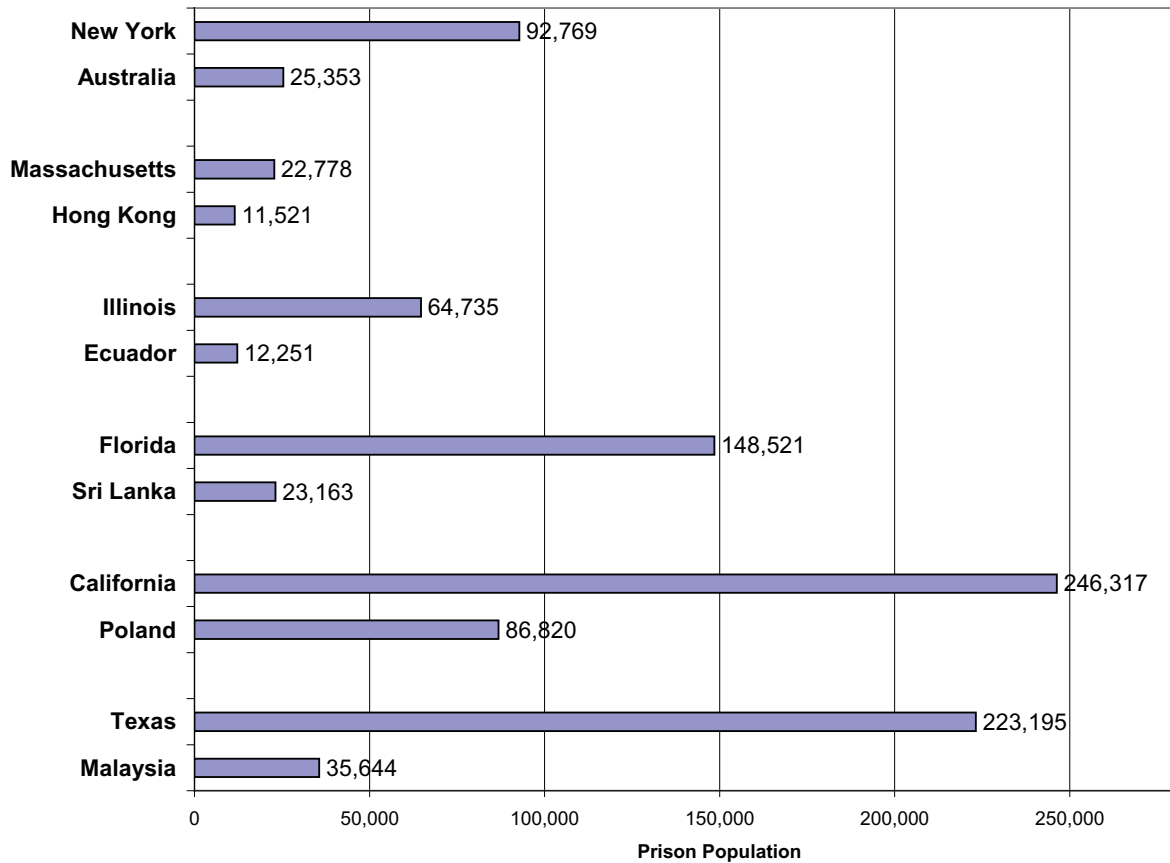
* (ICPS, 2006).

US rates are in large part driven by disproportionate minority incarceration.

In the US, African Americans are over six times as likely to be incarcerated as whites; Latinos over twice as likely. If the US enacted the reforms necessary to reduce its disproportionate minority confinement by just 50%, the incarceration rate would drop to approximately 491 and put the US fifth in the world instead of first (see Harrison & Beck, 2006 and US Census Bureau, 2006a).

Some US states imprison six times as many people as do nations of comparable population.

Current Prison Populations in Example States vs. Countries of Similar Size



Sources: US Census Bureau, 2005a; US Census Bureau, 2005b; Harrison and Beck, 2006; ICPS, 2006.

If the rest of the world followed the US lead on incarceration policies and practices, the total number incarcerated worldwide would increase fivefold from 9.2 million to 47.6 million.

The US imprisons the most women in the world.

The International Centre for Prison Studies has produced a report tabulating the number of women in prisons around the world (Walmsley, 2006). The following data is derived from that report and from international US Census figures with additional sources as noted (US Census Bureau, 2006b).

The US has 183,400 women in prison—at least 3 times more than any other nation. Apart from the US, the nations that incarcerate the most women are Russia (55,400), Thailand (28,450), India (13,350), Ukraine (11,830), and Brazil (11,000). In fact, the US incarcerates more women by over 60,000 than the rest of these nations combined.

The incarceration rate of women is higher in the US than other representative nations—123 per 100,000 of the US female population. Next is Thailand, 88; Russia, 73; England and Wales, 17; South Africa, 14; France, 6; and India, 3 (Office for National Statistics, 2006; Her Majesty's Prison Service, 2006).

Statistics available from China include only the number of sentenced prisoners (not pre-trial or otherwise detained prisoners) and are thus difficult to compare to other international statistics. In 2003, the latest year data is available for China, the number of women sentenced to prison in China was 71,280, while the number of women sentenced to a year or more in prison in the US was 92,785. The rate of imprisonment of women in China is approximately one-fifth that of the US.

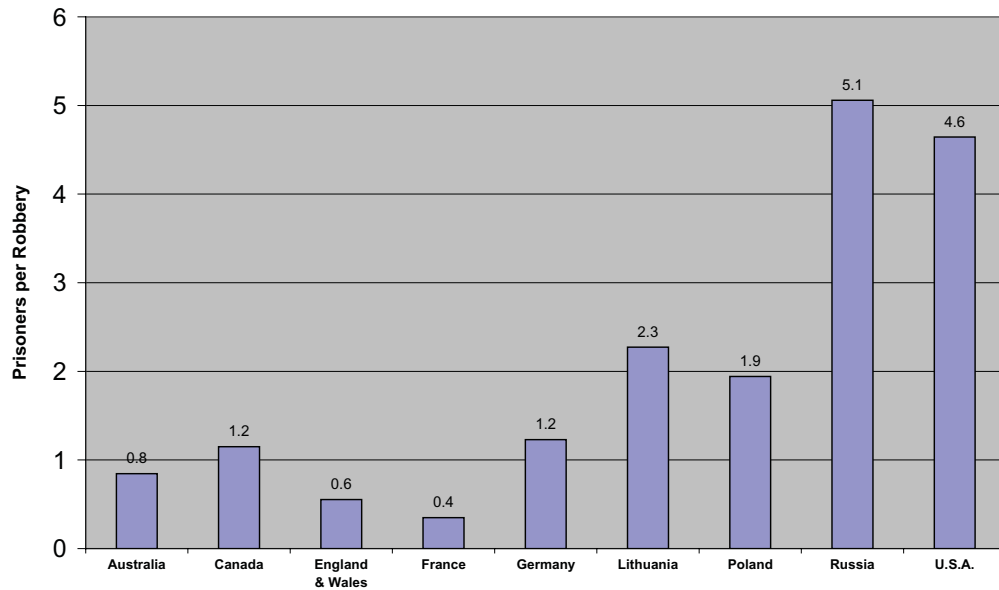
(Walmsley, 2006; Harrison & Beck, 2004).

Crime rates do not account for incarceration rates.

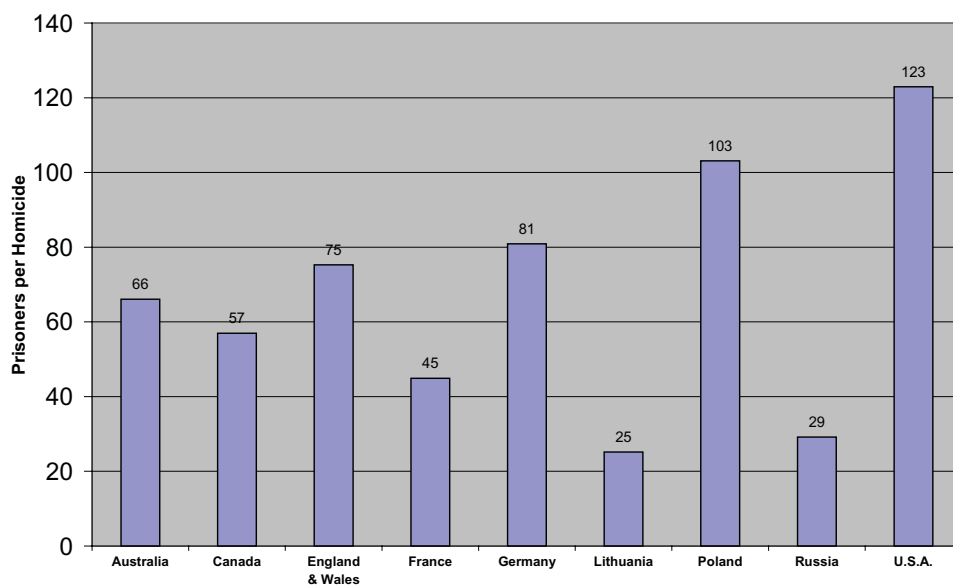
For some crimes, the US has higher crime rates than other countries, but not at levels that explain the high rates—and costs—of its current use of incarceration. Some might assume that high US incarceration rates follow this country's high crime rates. The following graphs illustrate that, even controlling for crime categories that are defined in the most consistent ways internationally, the US still locks up more people per incident than any other nation. The one exception is incarceration for robbery in Russia.

The robbery and homicide rates are used as a proxy of general crime rate. Unlike most crime, robbery and homicide are defined in similar ways by most nations and are therefore most accurate for comparisons.

Prisoners Per Robbery in Selected Nations, 2001



Prisoners Per Homicide in Selected Nations, 2001



Source: Barclay & Tavares, 2003.

“In the most sophisticated analysis of [rising US incarceration rates], criminologists Alfred Blumstein and Allen Beck examined the near-tripling of the prison population during the period 1980-1996 and concluded that changes in crime explained only 12% of the prison rise, while changes in sentencing policy accounted for 88% of the increase.”

(Mauer, 2003)

Summary

The causes for the overreliance on imprisonment in the US are multifold. Crime rates, occasional spikes in certain types of crime (both actual and perceived), media coverage of the worst cases, public perceptions, political opportunism, and misdirected laws, policies, and practices certainly play roles. The findings reported in this fact sheet suggest that it is time for a serious review of US incarceration policies and practices. Over a quarter of a century ago, NCCD president Milton Rector wrote, “The rate of imprisonment in the United States, which takes pride....in its protection of liberty and freedom, is considerably higher than the rate in any other industrialized nation. To ignore it is to condone the flagrant waste of money and lives and the crime-producing effects of needless imprisonment; to allow it to continue would be irresponsible support of....leaders....who perpetuate the myth that more imprisonment means better protection of the public.”

In addition to US government and other sources, this fact sheet reports statistics compiled in the most definitive report of international incarceration, produced by Roy Walmsley, MA, MPhil, at the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London, the World Prison Population List (Walmsley, 2005) and its online version, the World Prison Brief (ICPS, 2006), to whom we are indebted for their work. The ICPS list includes every nation for which incarceration statistics are available. The list is updated as new data becomes available; all figures reported here were recorded 10/6/2006 unless specified otherwise.

References

- Administrative Office of the US Courts (May, 2004). *Costs of Incarceration and Supervision*. The Third Branch: The Newsletter of the Federal Courts, 36(5). Washington, DC: Administrative Office of the US Courts, Office of Public Affairs. Accessed <http://www.uscourts.gov/ttb/may04ttb/costs/index.html>.
- Andreev, E.M., et al. (1993). *Naselineie Sovetskogo Souiza, 1922-1991*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Barclay, G., & Tavares, C. (2003). *International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics 2001*. London: Home Office, Research Development Statistics. Accessed 9/15/06 at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb1203.pdf>.
- Getty, J.A., Rittersporn, G.T., & Zemskov, V.N. (1993). *Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-war Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence*. *American Historical Review*, 98(4), 1048-49.
- Harrison, P.M., & Beck, A.J. (2004). *Prisoners in 2003*. Washington, DC: US DOJ, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Accessed 10/25/2006 at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/p03.htm>.
- Harrison, P.M., & Beck, A.J. (2006). *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2005*. Washington, DC: US DOJ, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- Her Majesty's Prison Service (2006). *Prison Population and Accommodation Briefing for 24th June 2005*. Accessed 10/25/2006 at <http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk>.
- Human Rights Watch (2006). *Urgent Situations: Joint Statement to the First Session of the Human Rights Council*. Accessed 10/03/06 at http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/06/26/global14098_txt.htm.
- International Centre for Prison Studies (2006). *World Prison Brief* (online version). London: University of London, King's College London, International Centre for Prison Studies. Accessed 10/06/2006 at <http://www.prisonstudies.org>.
- Mauer, M. (2003). *Comparative International Rates of Incarceration: An Examination of Causes and Trends*. Washington, DC: The Sentencing Project.
- Office for National Statistics (2006). *Mid-2005 Population Estimates: England and Wales*. Accessed 10/25/2006 at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>.
- US Census Bureau (2005a). *Annual Estimates of Population for US and States, and for Puerto Rico: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2005* (NST-EST2005-01). Population Division, US Census Bureau. December 22, 2005.
- US Census Bureau (2005b). *International Database: Countries Ranked by Population 2005*. Population Division, US Census Bureau. Accessed 8/18/2006 at <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbrank.pl>.
- US Census Bureau (2006a). *Annual Estimates of Population by Sex, Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin for the US: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2005* (NST-EST2005-03). Population Division, US Census Bureau. May 10, 2006.
- US Census Bureau (2006b). *International Database*. US Census Bureau, Population Division/International Programs Center. Accessed 10/25/2006 at <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbacc.html>.
- Walmsley, R. (2005). *World Prison Population List* (6th ed.). London: King's College London, School of Law, International Centre for Prison Studies. Accessed 9/14/2006 at <http://www.prisonstudies.org>.
- Walmsley, R. (2006). *World Female Imprisonment List*. London: King's College London, School of Law, International Centre for Prison Studies. Accessed 9/14/2006 at <http://www.prisonstudies.org>.