The Growth of Prisons and Economic Circumstances Surrounding Mass Incarceration in the United States
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War On Drugs Timeline

1970: Nixon enacts Controlled Substance Act, establishing the “five schedules” that outlined drugs by their medical application and potential for abuse. Schedule I Drugs are punished the worst because lawmakers consider them dangerous and highly addictive. This included marijuana, LSD, heroin, ecstasy, and other drugs.

1971: Richard Nixon publicly claims drugs are public enemy #1.

1973: The Drug Enforcement Administration is created by Nixon’s administration. It is the United States’ largest and most expensive law enforcement agency.


1980: Anti-Drug Abuse Act is passed by Congress. It enacted mandatory minimum sentences for drug crimes and established a 100:1 crack to cocaine disparity ratio. A person caught with 3 grams of crack received the same sentence as a person caught with 500 grams of cocaine.

1988: ADA act ends an amendment that made crack offenders receive mandatory minimum sentencing for first time offenses.

1994: Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act signed by Bill Clinton. It added 100,000 police officers to forces across the U.S. and $9.7 billion of funding for prisons. At the same time, it ran out of beds to house the continuing rush of inmates in the War on Drugs, so they turned to private facilities. These for-profit prisons tend to contract with cheap, low quality services and facility managers to cut their costs of operation. This worsens their facilities; there have even been numerous reports of prisoners getting sick from rotten, moldy food. The contracts that private prisons form with the government require occupancy clauses; they can be as high as 95 percent. If the occupancy level is not met, the government has to reimburse that company operating the prison based on how many beds below the occupancy level the prison is at.

The prison model the United States uses supports a “hands off” approach from the government for private, for-profit prisons. This model created many problems. For one, prison workers are paid extremely low wages and work long hours because their rights are in no way protected. The U.S. model for penal labor benefits large corporations who use these institutions to produce their products, but crowds out small businesses who cannot beat these institutions in pricing because they pay their workers fair wages and benefits.

Results

Through empirical research, I found evidence that was essential to the conclusions in this study. In various reports and recordings, it has been revealed that Richard Nixon targeted “black people and hippies” in his initiation of the War on Drugs because he felt they were his political enemies. The War on Drugs is directly related to the increase in the prison population; the prison population increased from 338,029 prisoners in 1970 to 2.3 million prisoners by 2010. Although blacks make up 12.7 percent of the population, black males make up about 37 percent of the population in jail (2015). One in three blacks will serve a prison sentence in their lifetime and at some points in this age of incarceration, black males saw a prison admittance nearly ten times higher than white males. Although crack is identical to cocaine in composition, crack was punished far more harshly. Studies also show that nearly 80 percent of crack offenders are African American. The Federal Sentencing Act of 2010 changed trend of incarceration noticeably in a matter of years. From 2010-2015, the United States experienced a drop in the crime rate and in 2015, the prison population experienced a decrease for the first time in nearly 40 years.

Incarceration is an exceedingly expensive burden on our government. In 2010, states spent a combined 38 billion dollars on prisons. That number increased to 43 billion by 2015. It costs nearly 30,000 dollars a year to house a federal prisoner. The annual cost to house state prisoners varies between states; ranging from 14,000 dollars a year in Alabama to 60,000 dollars in New York. In 2012, total spending to tax payers was 5.4 billion dollars more than the states’ aggregate corrections department spending. States consistently spend money outside of their budget to support these correctional institutions.

Private Prison Industry

Private prisons are a 70 billion dollar industry. The money to fund them comes from taxpayers, not from the private companies that run them. In the 1980s, the Department of Justice ran out of beds to house the continuing rush of inmates in the War on Drugs, so they turned to private facilities. These for-profit prisons tend to contract with cheap, low quality services and facility managers to cut their costs of operation. This worsens their facilities; there have even been numerous reports of prisoners getting sick from rotten, moldy food. The contracts that private prisons form with the government require occupancy clauses; they can be as high as 95 percent. If the occupancy level is not met, the government has to reimburse that company operating the prison based on how many beds below the occupancy level the prison is at.

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CONCLUSIONS

The government must increase their efforts to reduce imprisonment. Incarceration was used as a method of socioeconomic oppression towards minorities, fails to effectively reduce the number of drug crimes, fails to rehabilitate prisoners, and has become too expensive for the United States’ government to maintain. The government can make a difference by reforming laws enacted during the War on Drugs and focusing on rehabilitation rather than imprisonment.

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