

MCC WASHINGTON OFFICE GUIDE TO The Prison Industrial Complex



More than two million inmates are now in U.S. prisons and jails, nearly four times the 1980 count. Nearly five million persons are on parole or probation. How did we get to this circumstance? Since the 80s, the United States has waged a “war on drugs;” mandatory long term sentencing has steadily increased the prison population. There is a growing belief that our nation is addicted to prisons as solutions and to some degree their profit generation. The cost of corrections in the United States is now \$57 billion annually.

This prison industrial complex contributes to the dilemma of seeking the proper response to crime. Under this condition: There has been increased use of supermax prisons, control units or severe isolation. Impoverished rural areas are encouraged to build prisons; offenders from cities are shipped states away from families and communities. Some states can’t fill prison beds, yet others are trying to scrape together finances for more prison construction.

The 158 U.S. private prisons with more than 130,000 inmates are less than 5 percent of the “market;” yet some experts suggest the threat of a privatization boom.

Facts, Trends, Issues

U.S. World Leader in Rate of Incarceration

Taking into account a major prisoner amnesty in Russia, the United States is now the world leader in imprisonment. As of 2004, the U.S. rate of 726 prisoners per 100,000 population is now greater than the Russian rate of 532 per 100,000. The United States has roughly 5 percent of the world population and one quarter of its eight million prisoners. [Sources: Sentencing Project, using Bureau of Justice Statistics data; Justice Policy Institute.]

Gender, Race, and Youth

Since 1980, the number of women in prison has increased at nearly double the rate for men. There are now nearly eight times as many women in state and federal prisons as there were in 1980 (12,300). By mid-2004, there were about 190,000 female inmates in state and federal prisons and local jails, representing about 9 percent of the total inmate population.

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office is a Mennonite and Brethren in Christ presence on Capitol Hill that gives and encourages prophetic witness to the way of Christ on matters of U.S. public policy. For more information, other resources, or to order bulk copies of this item, contact: MCC Washington Office, 110 Maryland Ave NE #502, Washington, DC 20002; mccwash@mcc.org. Compiled by David Whettstone, May 2001; revisions June 2005.

DOES THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE OFFENSE?

Half of inmates in U.S. prisons are housed for nonviolent offenses. The population in state prisons is comprised of 49 percent violent offenders, 19 percent property offenders, 20 percent drug offenders, and 11 percent public order and other offenses. In federal prisons, the inmate breakdown consists of 11 percent violent offenders, 7 percent property offenders, 55 percent drug offenders, and 26 percent public order and other offenders. [Source: Sentencing Project, using U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics data.]

Of U.S. prison inmates in 2003, 44 percent were black and 19 percent were Hispanic. Given their proportion to the U.S. population, black males are six times more likely to be held in jails than white males. Children of color represent one-third of the U.S. youth population, yet they are two-thirds of those incarcerated.

Nearly 2 million children have an incarcerated parent. Guard shortages are causing some states to recruit and train officers as young as 19 years of age.

Prisoners Return to Society

It is estimated that more than about 650,000 people are released from prison annually. It is critical that these persons find assistance in such areas as housing and employment. Issues of literacy or substance abuse may affect close to 70 percent of all inmates. Some experts suggest that two-thirds of ex-offenders will be re-incarcerated within three years.

Sexual Abuse

In 1997 just under half of the women in correctional populations and one-tenth of the men indicated past physical or sexual abuse. Between 6 percent and 14 percent of male offenders and 23 to 37 percent of female offenders reported they had been physically or sexually abused before age 18. [U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, May 1999]

Prisoners' Rights

In 1996, Congress passed The Prison Litigation Reform Act, which greatly curtails prisoners' ability to file lawsuits or appeals and limits the power of federal courts.

An estimated 4.7 million Americans, or one in 43 adults, have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction. More than two million white Americans (Hispanic and non-Hispanic), 1.4 million African American men, and over a half million women are disenfranchised. [Source: Sentencing Project]

I Was in Prison and You Visited Me

Biblical and Theological Perspectives

What is the ultimate purpose of imprisonment? Of punishment? We are people of faith who struggle to be free from the imprisonment of violence and sin and the harm they entail. We wish to bless others with the same freedom. Even within ourselves, we try to refrain from violence and exercise creative responses. Within our community there is a commitment to work for restorative justice—to establish right and healthy relationships for all.

The inception of America's first penitentiary—the name conveying personal transformation—has religious roots. Quakers in 1790 established the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia as an alternative to cruel and brutal punishment. It was hoped that solitary confinement would lead to self-correction. Elements associated with the modern prison or criminal justice system—vengeance, retribution/retaliation, hard punishment, efficiency, and profit—do not jibe with remorse, rehabilitation, repair/restoration, healing, transformation, forgiveness, reconciliation, love, and peace. What encompasses modern prisons fits neither initial good intentions nor the biblical vision of justice.

Although God created a peaceable world, humanity chose the way of unrighteousness and violence. The spirit of revenge increased, and violence multiplied, yet the original vision of peace and justice did not die.

(CONFESSION OF FAITH IN A MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE)

Old Testament Themes: When crime occurs, what is God's vision of peace?

In the Old Testament there are stern penalties for wrongdoing, yet there is a steady pursuit of peace in the actions and instructions of God. Shalom, "peace," is a base word for this interpretation. It is a robust concept, as Howard Zehr in *Changing Lenses* and others point out, conveying a sense of "all rightness" involving "material or physical conditions or circumstances . . . social relationships . . . and the moral or ethical realm." Zehr writes, "[It] should be no surprise that the words for paying back (shillum) and for recompense (shillem) have the same root word as shalom."

The Old Testament contains stern judicial actions, yet it cannot be employed as a tough-on-crime handbook. When wrongdoings occur, considerations of circumstances and limitations on retaliation illuminate God's use of community actions and response to secure due process and fair treatment. In short, we find no direct support or description matching the present nature and management of incarceration.

Can our criminal justice system seek justice and mercy for all involved in it? We seek to heed Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance . . . but love your neighbor as yourself."

For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and visited me.

(MATTHEW 25:35, 36)

New Testament Themes: What does Jesus ask us to do regarding prisons and prisoners?

Jesus proclaims liberty to those who are in captivity and oppression (Luke 4:18). He experienced the full gamut of injustice from a "faulty" criminal justice system—false imprisonment, wrongful interrogation and judgement, and even the death penalty. Ironically, his circumstances lead to the pardon of the murderer Barabbas.

Jesus asks us to love [even] our enemies as we would love ourselves (Luke 6: 27, 31).

We should deeply acknowledge that violent crime does great harm to individuals and community. Love, forgiveness, and repair do not easily follow. Governing authorities do have a role in responding to wrongdoing (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2: 13,14). Anabaptists have traditionally viewed this responsibility within the notions of fairness and human decency, understanding that the duties of authorities are part of God's concern for order and safety.

It is often necessary to separate someone from others in order to protect persons from further violence. However, this is not a reason to: deny adequate diet, inflict poor living conditions, ignore prisoners' health, foster racial disparities and discrimination, expose youth to hardened criminals, cause suffering for prisoners' families (ex., charge families exorbitant fees for phone calls), deny due legal process, further extend extralegal penalties after time served, block opportunities for spiritual and personal transformation, or impose isolation and maltreatment causing grave social alienation and psychological trauma. All of these things are at issue regarding the present criminal justice and prison systems.

Often these abuses come as a result of our own projected fears, lack of accountability, and desires for quick solutions. They are correlated to our society's desire to scapegoat or even sacrifice others; at times applied to victims or offenders.

We must continue to pursue loving, creative actions that magnify overcoming evil with good (Romans 12: 21).

Faith that Reflects, Faith that Acts

1. *Participate in a prison ministry. Try to empower broad congregational response to the problems surrounding prison.* Visitation or regular contact with prisoners can prevent neglect, isolation and abuses. An ex-prisoner will also need many aspects of assistance to successfully reintegrate back into society.

Mennonites and others are involved in the following examples of prison visitation programs:

- **Arts in Prison**, 1444 Southwest Boulevard, Kansas City, KS 66103; 913-403-0229
- **Match Two, M-2** (part of Offender Victim Ministries), 900 North Poplar, Newton, KS 67114-1969; 316-283-2038, fax: 316-283-2039; E-mail: ovm@southwind.net
- **Prisoner Visitation and Support (PVS)**, a volunteer nationwide program to federal and military prisoners, who do not ordinarily receive visits from family and friends, want supportive human contact, are in solitary confinement, or are serving long sentences. PVS, 1501 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102; 215-241-7117, Fax: 215-241-7227; E-mail: PVS@afsc.org

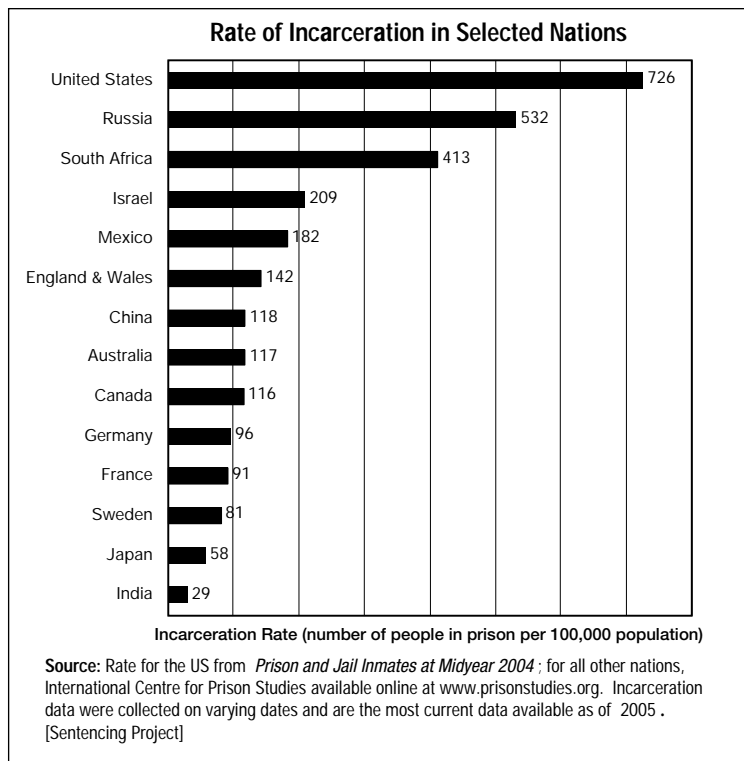
2. *Help create a “culture of resistance.” Media and politics often create false impressions and easy answers. Continue to seek and understand the bigger picture, including economics and politics.* Reflect these concerns in your actions—addressing the prison industrial complex’s abuses, greed, racial disparities, harmful or un-rehabilitative results, and misinformation. Give serious consideration to conducting public forums and advocating at various government and policy levels. Broad segments of the public and politicians are unfamiliar with alternatives.

3. *Tie in restorative justice concerns whenever possible, particularly attend to the victims of crime.* Much of our culture’s response to offenders/prisoners—retribution, scapegoating, and vengeance—is not readily admitted. Crime victims are often and sadly shortchanged by our criminal justice system. We can have a decisive role in assuaging fears and creating sensitive, safe community responses. Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs (VORPs) can be found through the MCC U.S. Office on Crime and Justice or the Mennonite Directory.

A Response From a Faith Community

There are certainly no easy answers to the quandary of the prison industrial complex. We must respond together to the challenges that face us. In 1977, the Central District Conference (GC) passed a resolution regarding “offender ministries.” It said:

“Mennonites . . . have an unprecedented opportunity to break new ground in their ministry to the criminal justice



system, including correctional institutions. The gospel urges that the Church offer meaningful ministries . . . to people in the criminal justice system who have been too long neglected, and sometimes abused.”

Quoting George Bernard Shaw, the resolution continues, “So long as the compulsion to make the offender suffer and remain ‘secure’ hangs over the penal system, no matter how high the ideals of administration, the actual process will be destructive. One sin becomes the basis for a long list of sins and crimes.”

The closing summary states: “The Church is to be aware of all persons: the poor, the offender, the victim of offense, the persons in places of power and authority and witness the love of Christ to each.

“[It] is to mediate the love and compassion of God as well as His wisdom, judgement and power into the practices of institutions, and hence into the lives of residents and/or clients they serve.

“The Church should play a major role in overcoming the offender’s problems of isolation and abandonment. It has [the] power to re-educate the public mind . . .

“[The Church’s conscience] factor reminds all concerned that ‘criminals’ are human beings, made in the image of God, and therefore must be treated with dignity; and that all the policies and practices of the institution and all its employees must submit to the judgement of God.”

Resources on the Prison Industrial Complex

Web Sites

U.S. Department of Justice—Bureau of Justice Statistics
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/>

The Atlantic Monthly: Prison Industrial Complex
<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98dec/prisons.htm>

Books

Race to Incarcerate. Marc Mauer and the Sentencing Project (NY: The New Press, 1999).

Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis. Christian Parenti (London/NY: Verso, 1999)

The Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How America Profits from Crime. Joel Dyer (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000)

Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice. Howard Zehr (Herald Press, 1990)

The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America. Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001)

The Fall of the Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition. Lee Griffith (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993)

Prison Madness: The Mental Health Crisis Behind Bars and What We Must Do About It. Terry Allen Kupers (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999). [Over a quarter million mentally ill persons are incarcerated in prisons or jails.]

With Liberty for Some: 500 Years of Imprisonment in America. Scott Christianson (Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1998)

No Equal Justice: Race and Class in the Criminal Justice System. David Cole (NY: The New Press, 1999)

Life in Prison. Stanley “Tookie” Williams with Barbara Cottman Becnel (NY: William Morrow, 1998). Former gang leader warns of the harsh realities of prison life; for grade four and up.

Organizations

CURE (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants)
P.O. Box 2310
Washington, D.C. 20013-2310
(202) 789-2126; www.curenational.org
CURE has chapters in many states; it seeks fair and humane treatment for prisoners.

Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)
1612 K Street, N.W., Suite 1400
Washington, D.C. 20006
(202) 822-6700; www.famm.org

FAMM is a national group working to repeal mandatory sentencing laws and to improve sentencing guidelines.

Justice Policy Institute

1003 K Street NW, Suite 565
Washington, DC 20001
202-558-7974; Fax: 202-558-7978; www.justicepolicy.org

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Office on Crime and Justice

P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500
717-859-3889; E-mail: ocj@mcc.org

The office can provide various materials including issues of victim-offender reconciliation.

Prison Fellowship Ministries

P.O. Box 17500
Washington, DC 20041-0500
703-478-0100; Fax: 703-478-0452; www.pfm.org
E-mail: correspondence@pfm.org

The Sentencing Project

514 10th Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20004
202-628-0871; Fax: 202-628-1091;
www.sentencingproject.org
E-mail: staff@sentencingproject.org

The Sentencing Project offers criminal justice policy analysis, data, and program information for the public and policymakers.

