

Money for Prisons, Not for Social Services

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Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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Many of those who have lost their jobs and homes in the United States due to the lingering economic recession are ending up in jail, according to a new study released by an independent think tank Thursday.

There is a strong link between poverty and incarceration in the United States, according to the report, "Money Well Spent: How positive social investments will reduce incarceration rates", by the Justice Policy Institute (JPI).

The report's findings on the relationship between poverty and the justice system suggests that more and more people from poor and low-income communities are being arrested and jailed, even though nationwide, crime rates have fallen.

"What we have seen in this research is that there is less focus on safety for the poor and more on policing and arrests," Tracy Velázquez, executive director of the Washington-based JPI, told IPS.

The report notes that as prison populations have grown, so too have racial disparities in the justice system.

"This is especially evident in arrest and incarceration patterns for drug offences," said Sarah Lyons, National Emerson Hunger Fellow and primary author of the report, who added that without adequate funding for social services, it is less likely that people will be able to succeed and avoid contact with the justice system.

Despite comparable usage of illicit drugs, in 2008, African Americans, who make up 12.2 percent of the general population, comprised 44 percent of those incarcerated for drug offences, according to the report.

Researchers say that disproportionate enforcement of drug laws in communities of colour destabilises families and communities and decreases the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and other family members left behind.

Due to the prolonged economic meltdown, many states are now making drastic cuts in funding for social services – such as health, education, and public housing – but not on policing and prison improvement and expansion.

There are nearly two million people behind bars in the U.S., most poor whites and people of colour, making the United States the number one country in the world in terms of the imprisonment rate.

The report notes that about 16 percent of incarcerated people also experienced homelessness before being arrested.

“Most of these people are significantly more likely to have both a mental illness and a substance addiction, which frequently go untreated,” said Nastassia Walsh of JPI. She said that states with higher high school graduation rates and college enrollment have lower crime rates than those with lower educational attainment levels.

The JPI study points out that the stress of living in poverty is a “risk factor” for experiencing mental health problems, and that many people who want treatment can’t afford it.

“More than 50 percent people in prisons are suffering from mental illness of some kind,” said Walsh, who holds that increased investment in mental health and substance abuse treatment can improve public safety and reduce criminal justice involvement.

According to the study’s findings, investments in job training and employment have been associated with heightened public safety. Youth who are employed are more likely to avoid justice involvement. In addition, people who are incarcerated are more likely to report having had extended periods of unemployment and lower wages than people in the general population.

“It’s time for our elected officials to realise that creating safe, healthy communities is a better investment in our country’s future than more prison beds,” stated Velázquez. “Low-income communities and people of colour are bearing the brunt of this recession, as well as of our policies that have led to mass incarceration.”

“By shifting our priorities, we can reduce these disproportionate impacts and make a real difference, especially for our country’s children and families,” she said.

More funding for affordable housing, education and employment could help turn around the lives of people struggling with homelessness, including children and youth, who are particularly affected by lack of housing, the report says.

“It’s a question of where we choose to spend our money,” said Velázquez. “Until we quit funneling tax dollars into prisons and policing practices that sweep large numbers of people into the system — many of whom pose little risk to public safety — we should not be surprised to see incarceration rates continue to climb.”

Last year, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed similar concerns about the lack of progress to end racial discrimination in the U.S. criminal justice system and urged Washington to take practical actions to end unjust police actions against the poor and minorities.

The international body documented a number of cases that showed that police officials in many cities were not only engaged in acts that violated the U.S. constitution, but also the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

The report’s authors urged the U.S. government to take actions to comply with that international human rights treaty.

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