

Crime Control and Common Sense Assumptions Underlying the Expansion of the Prison Population

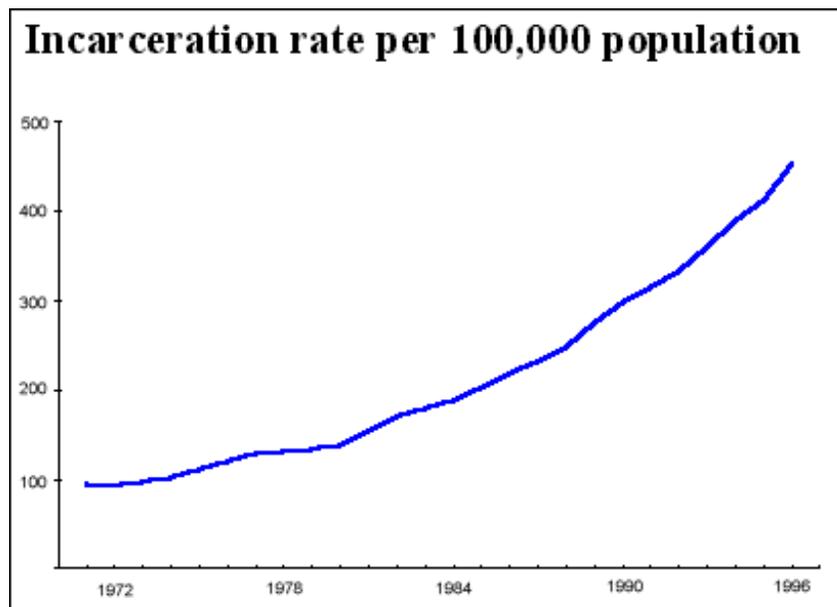
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Over the past 25 years, the rate of incarceration in the United States has increased dramatically. What are the major causes of this increase and what effect has putting more people behind bars had on the crime rate?

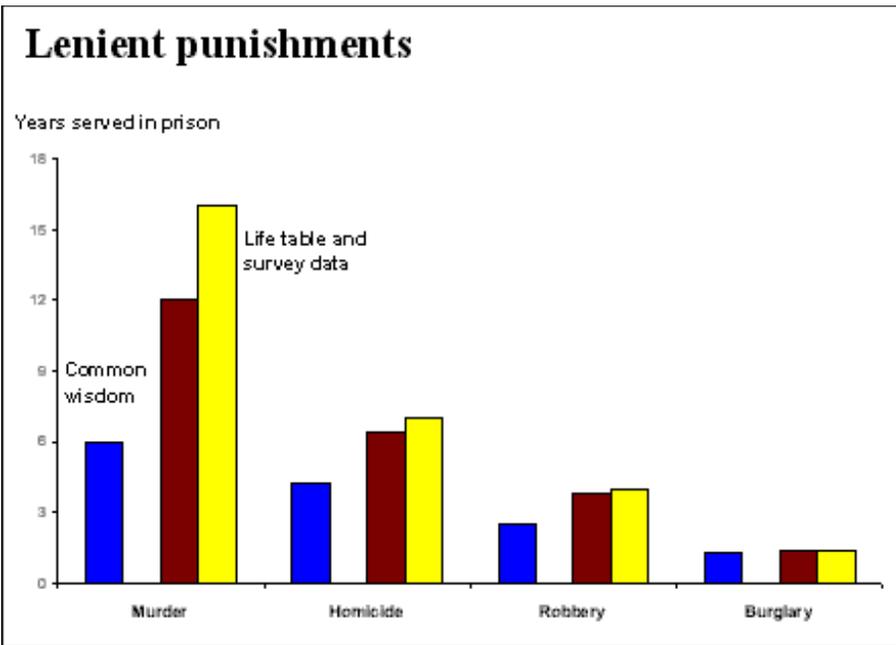


In 1972, the incarceration rate was approximately 100 people per 100,000 population. By 1996, more than 450 people per 100,000 were incarcerated. Much of this increase has occurred since the mid-1980s, when the introduction of sentencing reforms such as mandatory minimum sentences, determinate sentencing, and "truth in sentencing" led to increased penalties for specific crimes. These reforms were adopted because of a growing public perception that offenders were treated too leniently, that tougher and longer sentences would keep dangerous people off the streets, and that more punishment leads to less crime. There was also the belief that reforms would make sentencing more equitable.

Leniency of the Justice System

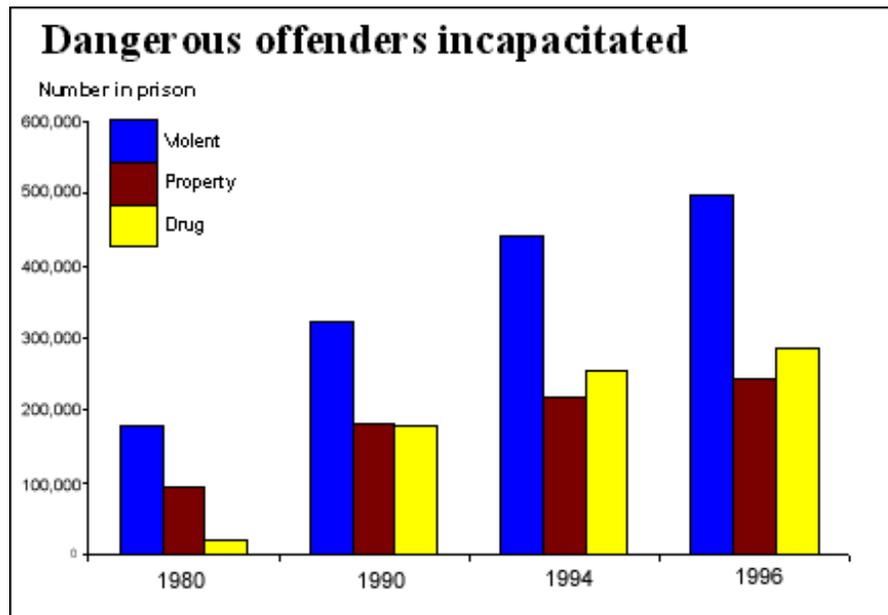
How accurate is the common perception that the justice system is too lenient? The data show that public opinion may be based on incomplete or misleading information.

For example, common perceptions of the amount of prison time served for various crimes differ significantly from time actually served by most prisoners. In the following chart, "common wisdom" reflects statistics often cited by the media or politicians to underscore leniency of the system, although these statistics reflect only time served by offenders already released from prison. Many experts contend, however, that a more accurate picture of time served is reflected by the "life table" methodology, which measures time served by looking at both the sentences served by released prisoners, who tend to serve less time, and sentences of offenders still in prison. These data show the system is not as lenient as is commonly perceived. Survey data from prisoners and corrections officials also show that prisoners serve more time than commonly believed.

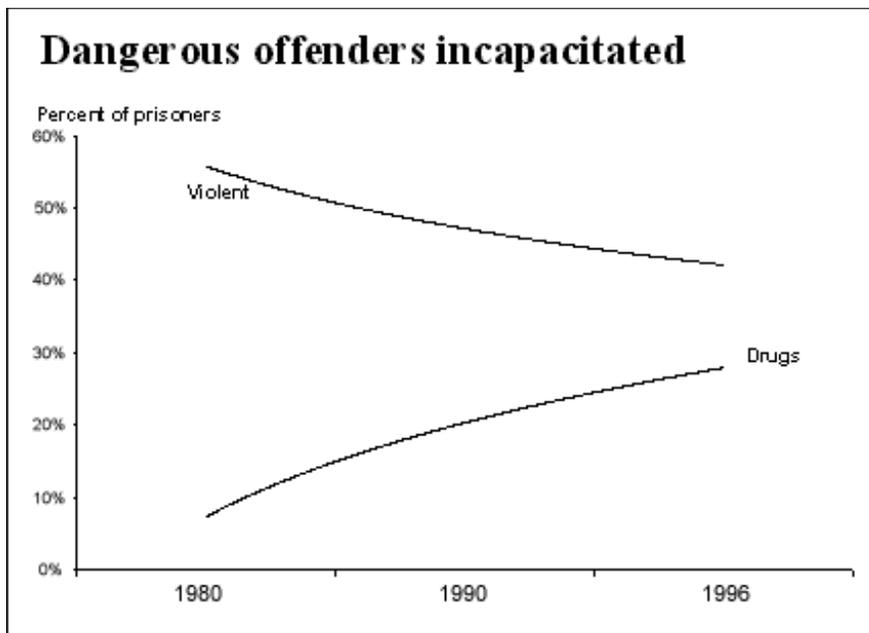
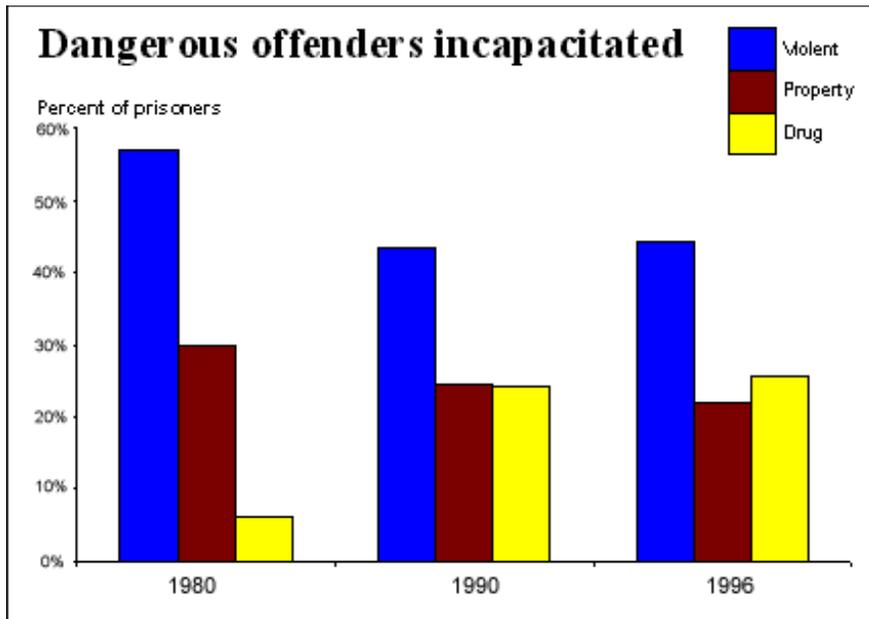


The Effects of Tougher Sentences on Violence

The common public perception was that tougher sentencing policy would lock up more violent and dangerous offenders, removing them from the street and thereby improving public safety. The following set of charts shows that tougher sentencing has had some success in getting more violent offenders off the streets. But tougher sentencing has also led to a far greater increase in the number of offenders incarcerated for drug offenses and to an increase in the number incarcerated for property and other nonviolent offenses.



In percentage terms, the result of tougher sentencing has been to increase the proportion of prisoners incarcerated for drug and property offenses and decrease the proportion locked up for violent acts.

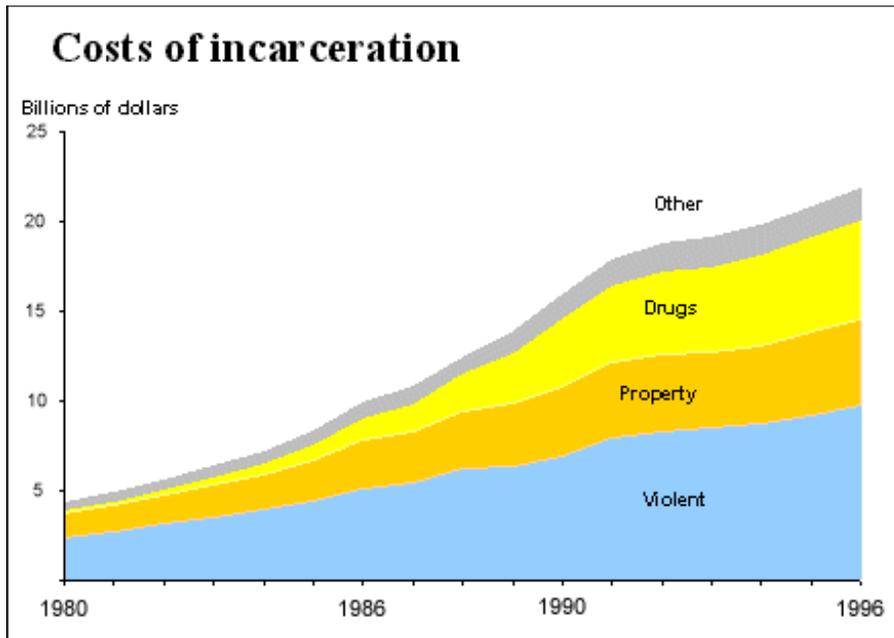


Locking Up Drug Offenders and Reducing Crime

Putting drug offenders in prison might help reduce violent crime if the offenders incarcerated were "drug kingpins." However, the characteristics of drug offenders in prison do not fit that image. Most incarcerated drug offenders are not violent offenders:

- 85 percent of drug offenders have no history of prior incarceration for violent crimes;
- One third of drug offenders are incarcerated for possession, use, or miscellaneous drug crimes;
- 40 percent of federal drug offenders have no current or prior violence on their records.

In fact, when we look at all persons in prison, we find that more than half (53 percent) committed a crime that involved neither harm nor threat of harm to a victim. As the next chart shows, more than half the cost of incarceration, which has increased dramatically since 1980, is a result of keeping non-violent offenders in prison.

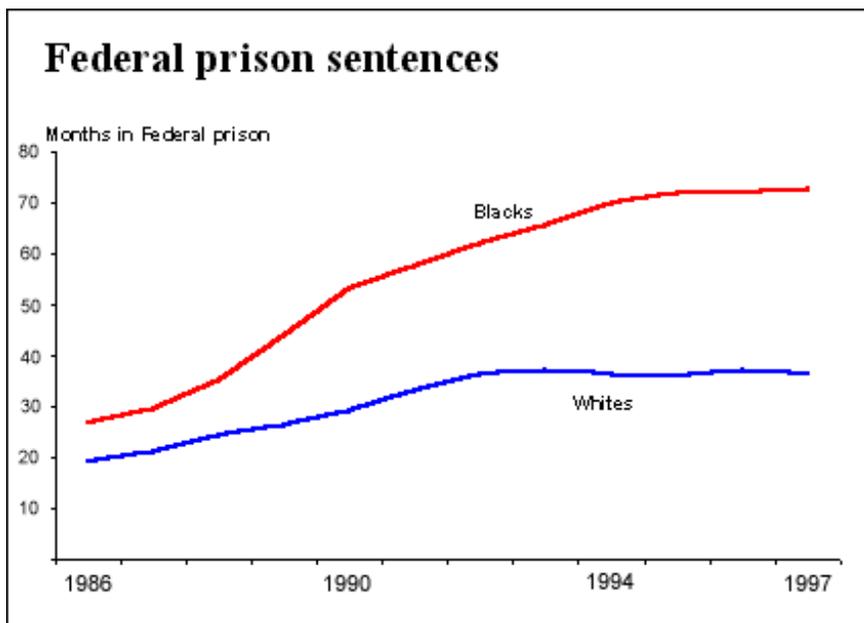


What has been the overall result of putting so many offenders in prison?

- The 200 percent increase in incarceration of violent offenders has been accompanied by an estimated 9 percent reduction in violent offenses.
- The substantial increase in the number of imprisoned drug offenders, however, has had little or no effect on drug dealing or use. Increasing the length of sentences for drug offenders is costing an additional \$1.5 billion a year nationwide, with no reduction in drug crimes.
- Mandatory sentencing has also led to greater racial disparity in treatment by the justice system.

Sentencing Reform and Racial Disparity

Mainly because tougher sentences have been handed down for drug crimes involving crack cocaine, compared to those sentences involving powder cocaine, African Americans are drawing longer prison sentences than whites, as shown in this chart:



Sentencing reforms have also led to more blacks than whites going to prison following arrest. Black men now have a 28 percent lifetime chance of incarceration, compared to the 7 percent chance for white men. The result is that sentencing reforms have had a far greater disruptive impact on black communities.

Researchers at the Urban Institute are working on a number of projects designed to get at the true effects of trends in sentencing, with a particular focus on the District of Columbia, and at the consequences of incarceration for communities.

Other Publications by the Authors

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The UK's large prison population is fuelled by a high level of recidivism – when criminals repeatedly relapse into crime. This project for a model prison tackles issues of architecture, management and funding in an enlightened attempt to achieve lasting rehabilitation. Project Any transformation of the penal system must start with the redesign of prison buildings. Prison architecture has a clearly discernible effect on behaviour, operational efficiency, interaction and morale. Each cell is paired with a neighbouring "buddy" cell linked by sliding doors controlled by individual prisoners to mitigate the risk of self-harm. The following four assumptions are essential to the application of the definition Crime Control and Common Sense Assumptions Underlying the Expansion of the Prison Population. Secondary tabs. Overview(active tab). Full Report. Crime Control and Common Sense Assumptions Underlying the Expansion of the Prison Population. William J. Sabol. May 1, 1999. In 1972, the incarceration rate was approximately 100 people per 100,000 population. By 1996, more than 450 people per 100,000 were incarcerated. Much of this increase has occurred since the mid-1980s, when the introduction of sentencing reforms such as mandatory minimum sentences, determinate sentencing, and "truth in sentencing" led to increased penalties for specific crimes. Research Area: Crime and Justice. How the criminal justice system deals with offenders determines the size of the prison population, which in turn has a significant impact on the way in which prisons are managed. The criminal justice system itself is on the other hand influenced by the government policies and political climate of the time - determined to a large extent by the public, which, in democratic countries, elect their governments. Where governments adopt a punitive approach to crime, failing to address the underlying factors that lead to criminal behaviour, prisons end up as places where members of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of society gather in large numbers, alongside a much smaller number of dangerous and violent offenders.