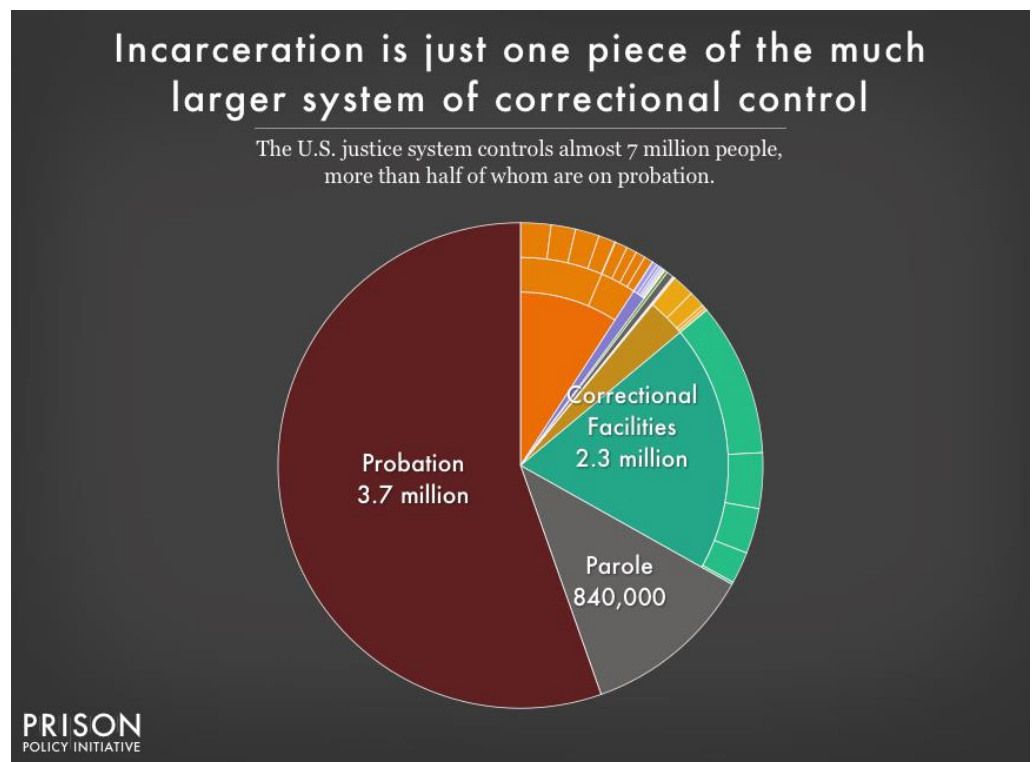


THE U.S. PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

SECTION ONE Prison Industry

Fueled by "get tough on crime" policies, incarceration rates in several developed countries have increased considerably in recent years. For instance, [Australia](#)'s incarceration rate increased from 89 per 100,000 persons in 1992 to 163 per 100,000 in 2004, while [Great Britain](#)'s incarceration rate grew from 90 per 100,000 in 1992 to 141 per 100,000 in 2004, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies at King's College London. The increase in incarceration rates has been most prominent in the [United States](#); as of mid-year 2005, there were 2,186,230 inmates behind bars, with two-thirds in federal or state prisons and one-third in local jails, as cited by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2006).

Approximately 60 percent of those incarcerated in local jails have not been convicted of any crime. The [United States](#) incarceration rate in 2005 was 730 per 100,000, a rate that is higher than even the [Russian Federation](#) (at 581 per 100,000). In fact, the [United States](#) imprisons approximately 500,000 more individuals than [China](#), which has a population five times greater than the United States. Furthermore, while the United States has 5 percent of the world's population, it holds 25 percent of the world's prison population. The United States diverts substantial economic resources to the criminal justice system. In 2003, the country spent \$185 billion for police protection, corrections, and judicial activities, representing a 418 percent increase since 1982 (U.S. Department of Justice 2006). In the same year, the justice system employed nearly 2.4 million individuals.

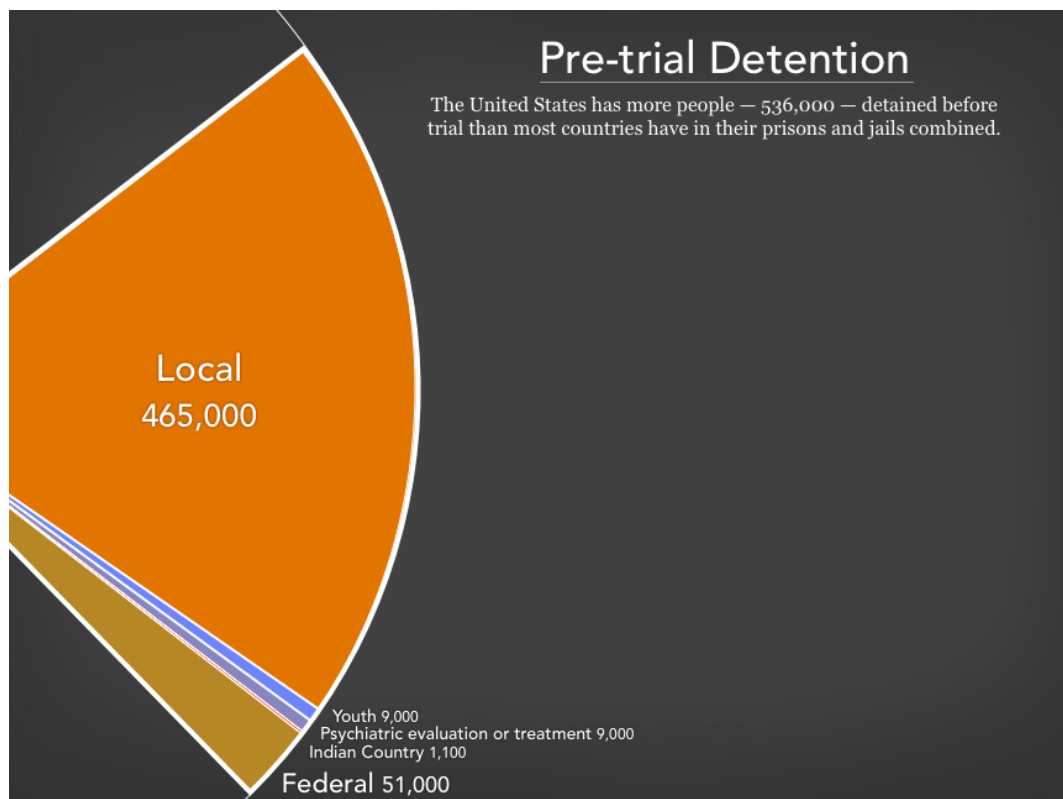


While some believe that the recent increases in incarceration rates are related to increases in crime, most scientific studies of this issue find no such relationship. Instead, fear of crime and the

demonization of criminals by the media and politicians have led to support for policies that result in more people being incarcerated, and for longer periods of time. These policies include mandatory minimum sentencing, “three strikes and you’re out” laws, truth-in-sentencing legislation (which requires inmates to serve 85 percent of their sentences), and the war on drugs.

Among the major drivers and beneficiaries of these policies and the resultant incarceration binge are constituents of the prison-industrial complex. These growing incarceration rates have created a powerful coalition of vested-interest groups with stakes in keeping prisons full and building more of them. These interests include private prison companies and individuals who lobby for them; financial institutions that underwrite loans and bond issues to finance prison construction; companies involved in the construction, operation, and maintenance of correctional facilities; corporations that use prisoners as a cheap source of labor; state and local politicians with prisons

in their districts, or who covet such facilities due to the presumed economic development they will stimulate; individuals employed in the criminal justice system, in particular those who serve as correctional officers in prisons; and companies that provide products and services such as food, medical, transportation, furniture, and telephone services to prisons. Under the laws of several states, prisoners can make only collect phone



calls, and this situation results in considerable profit for both states and major telephone companies, with the latter charging up to six times the regular rates plus an automatic “connect fee” of \$1.50 to \$3.00 per inmate call. AT&T estimates that nationally, inmates place \$1 billion per year in long-distance calls, and profits from contracts with MCI and GTE netted the state of [California](#) more than \$16 million in 1998, while the state of [New York](#) received \$21.2 million from phone-call commissions in 1997, according to Joseph T. Hallinan in his study *Going up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (2001). There is also a burgeoning specialty industry that sells fencing, handcuffs, drug detectors, protective vests, and other security devices to prisons.

Given the considerable profits enjoyed by corporations enriched by the booming prison industry, several communities have competed to host prisons on the assumption that prisons will generate local economic activity in the form of jobs and tax revenues. Recent research, however, casts doubt on this assumption. Prison towns often end up with a net decline in employment, notes Gregory Hooks et al. in *Social Science Quarterly* (2004). This suggests that the benefits are being reaped by distant corporations, not the local communities. This is largely because prisons hire relatively few local employees and because unpaid inmate work crews often compete with local residents for low-wage jobs.



Similar to the military-industrial complex, the prison-industrial complex has an internal logic that allows it to benefit and expand regardless of whether it is a success or failure. If the United States loses a war, it requires more spending to win the next war; if the United States wins a war, it requires more spending to ensure that it keeps on winning. In a similar fashion, if crime is increasing, we need more prisons to lower crime rates; if crime is decreasing, we need more prisons to ensure it continues to decrease (Donziger 1996).

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By Gregory Hooks and Clayton Mosher

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SECTION TWO

Private prisons are not the problem: Why mass incarceration is the real issue

**Yes, the "prison-industrial complex" is bad -- but the
real problem is that too many people are in prison**

The generally horrible state of the world entices people to blow small pieces of good news entirely out of proportion. Such was the case last week, when the Department of Justice announced that it would phase out the use of private prisons to hold federal inmates. Contrary to popular belief, however, private prisons play a very small role in American mass incarceration, as Vox's Dara Lind explained in a corrective tweet.

Most prisons aren't private. Most private prisons aren't federal. Most fed private prisons are run by DHS. New memo affects 13 prisons. — Dara Lind (@DLind) [August 18, 2016](#)

As of December 2015, [just 12 percent](#) of federal prisoners were in private facilities, [most of them](#) immigrants convicted of offenses like illegal reentry. What's more, immigrants detained in private facilities pending deportation are in Immigration and Customs Enforcement custody, and won't

be affected by the DOJ announcement. Those detention centers can be a deadly nightmare for the hundreds of thousands held in the [majority-private](#) system each year, according to a [July Human Rights Watch report](#).

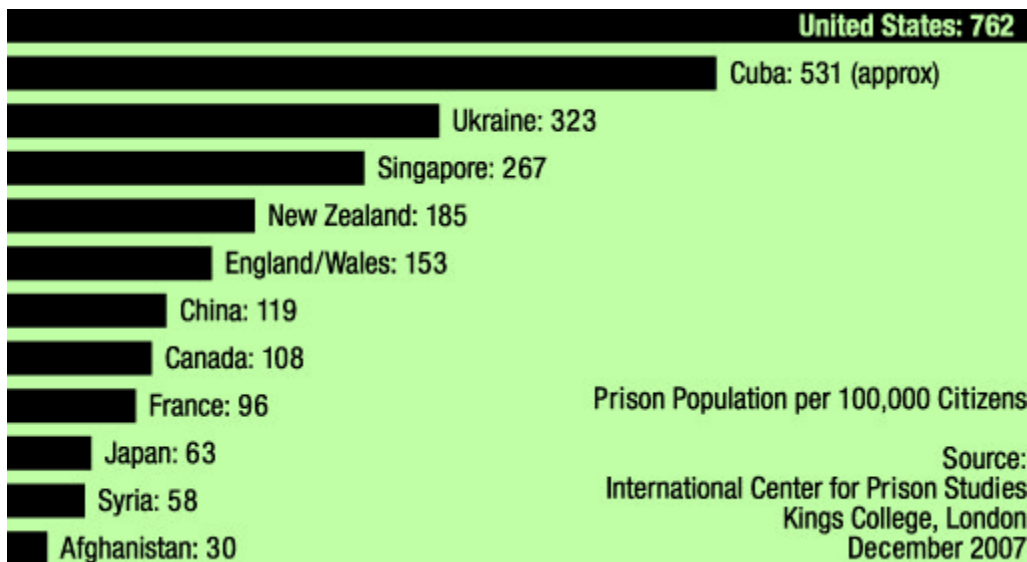
It would be a good thing if other federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security, under which ICE operates, followed Justice's lead, as [Human Rights Watch](#) and [The New York Times](#) have proposed. But even if they did, the core problem is that our society incarcerates too many

people, not the details of who incarcerates them or how. Roughly [193,299](#) people are still imprisoned in federal facilities (including [16,262](#) convicted of immigration crimes), the vast majority of which are public rather than private. Another [1.2-odd million](#) people are incarcerated in overwhelmingly public state prisons, plus hundreds of thousands more held in local jails.

As of the end of 2014, [just 8.4 percent](#) of federal and state prisoners were incarcerated in private prisons. It's revolting that private business turns a profit from mass incarceration. But the carceral state — meaning a government that in recent decades has been fundamentally organized to police and punish en masse — is a political problem, a disaster created and perpetuated by the state. Cutting private companies out of the deal won't make things that much better.

Libertarians certainly shouldn't gloat over this public-sector disaster: Economics has played a key role in the rise and persistence of mass incarceration, which is a problem not of too much government, but the wrong kind of government. As Marie Gottschalk notes in her book "Caught: The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics," "the prison boom created and empowered new political and economic interests that have a large stake in maintaining the carceral state," including "guards' unions, private prison companies, public bond dealers, and the suppliers of everything from telephone services to Taser stun guns."

More generally, mass incarceration arose to discipline and control a disproportionately black economic underclass largely excluded from the post-war economic boom and negatively affected by the transition to a post-industrial service economy that has followed. Mass incarceration took root because we have a government that invests in policing and prisons to deal with problems — economic marginalization, addiction, mental illness, domestic and gun



violence — instead of social services and decent jobs to prevent and ameliorate them. It's not just a budgetary tradeoff: the government's role in perpetuating inequality and segregation produces criminality and the criminals for the government to lock up.

The idea that mass incarceration is driven by a

conspiratorial pact between government and business, or a prison-industrial complex, is undeniably seductive. To borrow a seminal phrase from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, it is "good to think" with: the relationship between a rampantly exploitative private sector and a complicit state ruled by oligarchs makes sense of a carceral status quo that feeds off and enforces dispossession and exploitation. It also jibes with the ideology of leftists, who were willing to criticize policies of mass incarceration long before that became politically trendy. After all, so much wrong with our society, from worker exploitation to environmental degradation, derives in significant part from the insatiable corporate appetite for profits. It's not a bad hunch. Private prisons appear to be the apotheosis of a political and economic system that values certain human lives at almost nothing.

But emphasizing private malfeasance is also appealing because it pins the blame for mass incarceration on a diabolical force external to our body politic. It conceives of Americans as the victims of mass incarceration instead of its perpetrators. In reality, government actions can be plenty horrible without privatization. It is the federal Bureau of Prisons, after all, that runs a [supermax prison in Colorado](#) where inmates are kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours each day, an institution where one prisoner "cut off both earlobes, chewed off a finger, sliced through his Achilles tendon, pushed staples into his face and forehead, swallowed a toothbrush and then tried to cut open his abdomen to retrieve it and injected what he considered 'a pretty fair amount of bacteria-laden fluid' into his brain cavity after smashing a hole in his forehead."

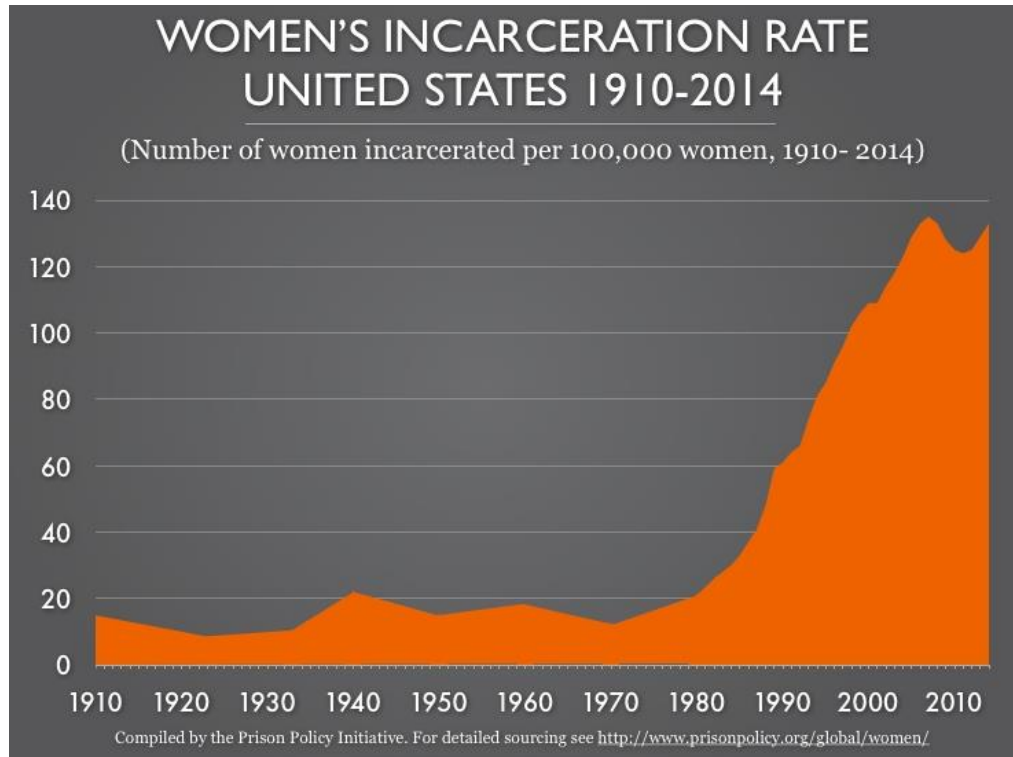
The roots of mass incarceration lie in a systematically corrupt system managed by a tangled web of opportunistic politicians, some of them sincere and some utterly cynical. Elected officials have used the prison system to mollify real public fears about crime — which can be considerably exaggerated, especially in an era when rates of violent crime have precipitously declined — and also to exploit racist paranoia and anti-civil rights backlash politics. Ending mass incarceration requires much more than rejecting shady contracts with private operators. It requires transforming a social contract that has never included poor people, especially those who are black.

Michelle Alexander, criticizing the notion that there is a quick technical fix to American policing, wrote that a real solution requires that we "get honest with ourselves about who our democracy

actually serves and protects." The same holds true for our bloated prison system, which is filled by police and [prosecutors](#) enforcing democratically approved criminal statutes as ordered by the [elected officials](#) who ultimately supervise them.

Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street and a broader youthful revolt against a status quo of mass immiseration have forced some progress. The rate at which people are being incarcerated has already [declined](#); it's just not declining fast enough, given the huge number of people serving

incredibly long sentences, to render this country's prison population less outrageous anytime soon.



The bad news is that the state made mass incarceration, and fighting privatization and profiteering aren't enough to undo it. The good news is that we live in a democracy, however flawed, and through the hard work of organizing a transformative political movement, critics can take the state over. It won't be easy. But the past few years of mass

mobilizations in the streets and at the ballot box suggest that it can be done.

By **Daniel Denvir**

SOURCE: <https://www.salon.com/2016/08/24/private-prisons-are-not-the-problem-why-mass-incarceration-is-the-real-issue/>

Images not in the original.