

Prisoners in the Free World – America's Astronomical Incarceration Rate

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The other day, I came across an article about [Jeff Smith](#), a former Missouri state senator who was recently released from a 1-year stint in federal prison. Years earlier during a failed congressional run, Smith's campaign violated election law by sending out anonymous postcards attacking his political opponent. When the violation surfaced years later, Smith was caught on tape conspiring to cover it up.

Not to make light of election law, but a year in prison for conspiracy to cover up postcards? Even if the punishment were fair to Smith and his family, is prison really the best use of tax dollars? Each federal inmate costs tax payers about [\\$29,000 a year](#). Wouldn't a suspension from elected office and a monetary fine have been a more suitable punishment?

It all got me to wondering about the U.S. incarceration system. It's well known that the U.S. locks up a larger share of its population than most other countries, but just how much more?

The U.S. prison population is 3x the size of all other developed countries combined

This map shows the prison populations in the world's 42 [advanced economies](#) (as defined by the C.I.A. World Factbook).

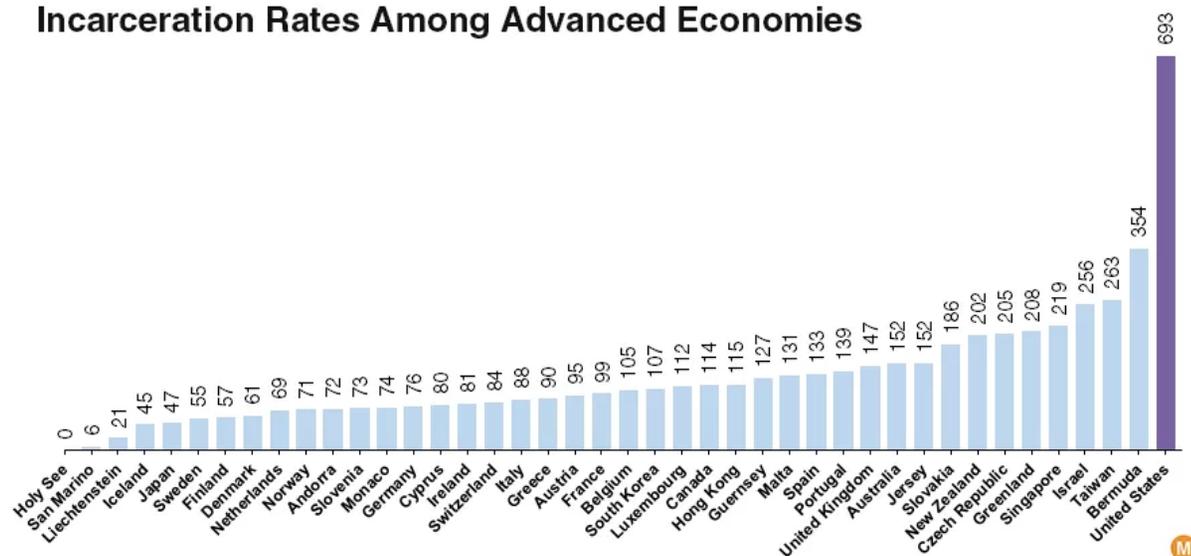
Prison Populations of Developed Countries



Click on the image to view the map in higher resolution

As the map above shows, the U.S. has over 3x as many prisoners as the rest of the world's advanced economies combined. And the picture looks even more extreme when you factor in population size.

Incarceration Rates Among Advanced Economies



The 42 countries shown in the map have a combined population of just over 1 billion, of which the U.S. makes up about one-third. That puts the United States' incarceration rate over **6x as high as the rest of the developed world**. No other advanced economy even comes close.

Prison populations and incarceration rates around the world

The U.S. has a much higher incarceration rate than other developed countries, but how does it stack up globally?

Worldwide, the United States' prison population of **2.2 million** is higher than any other country. China is a not-too-distant second with 1.6 million prisoners. After that, no other country is even in the ballpark.

The U.S. incarceration rate, **693 prisoners per 100,000 people**, is #2 in the world. The only country with a higher incarceration rate is the tiny island nation of Seychelles, population 89,000.

If you'd like go through the data yourself, click the link below to expand a table showing prison population figures for all countries, data courtesy of [World Prison Brief](#).

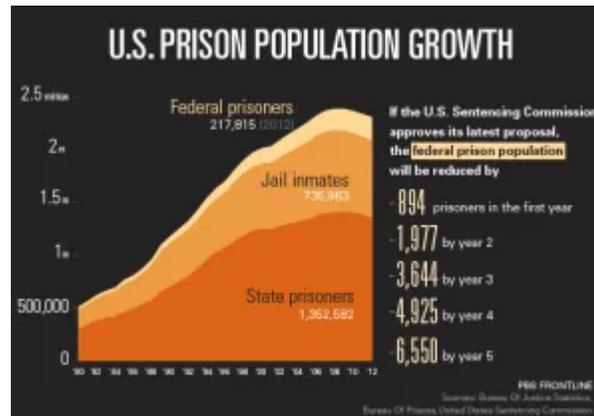
[Show prison population data...](#)

Does the United States' high incarceration reduce crime?

Not much, if at all.

That's the finding of a [report](#) released last year by the NYU Brennan Center.

The study concluded that in general, higher incarceration rates do reduce crime, but the effect is diminishing.



Growth of the U.S. prison population (Source: PBS)

In the 1990's, rising incarceration accounted for approximately 6 percent of the reduction in property crime during that period. In the 2000's, incarceration rates continued to rise, but their effect on crime had diminished, accounting for just one-fifth of one percent of the reduction in property crime seen that decade.

For violent crime, the report found that higher incarceration had no observable effect in the 1990's or in the 2000's.

How do these findings from the Brennan Center compare with the results of other studies?

The table below shows the results from 7 other studies on increased incarceration's impact on crime (including one from Steven Levitt of [Freakonomics](#) fame). At the high end of the estimates, only 4% of the reduction in violent crime and 2% of the reduction in property crime are attributed to increased incarceration.

Table 5: National Studies on Increased Incarceration's Impact on Crime

Study	Based on Data Through	Accounts for Diminishing Returns?	1990s Violent Crime	1990s Property Crime	2000s Violent Crime	2000s Property Crime
Marvell and Moody (1994)	1989	No	31%	33%	2%	2%
Becsi (1999)	1994	No	10%	18%	1%	1%
Raphael and Winter-Ebmer (2001)	1997	No	4%	27%	0%	2%
DeFina and Arvanites (2002)	1998	No	0%	21%	0%	1%
Levitt (2004)	1993	No	58%	41%	4%	2%
Western (2006)	2000	No	10%	10%	1%	1%
Liedka, Piehl, and Useem (2006)*	2000	Yes	-3%	-3%	-1%	-1%
Brennan Center (2015)	2013	Yes	0%	6%	0%	0.2%

* Negative numbers indicate a finding of an increase in crime.

Source: Brennan Center for Justice, "[What Caused the Crime Decline?](#)"

"Table 5 summarizes past findings of national empirical studies on incarceration's effect on crime along with the Brennan Center findings. Each study used data through the listed year to estimate the "elasticity" of crime with respect to incarceration (i.e.

the percentage crime changes when incarceration changes by one percent). Simply put, the elasticity measures how incarceration affects crime. The authors applied previous studies' elasticity estimates to updated crime and incarceration data through 2013 to impute incarceration's effect on the drop in crime in the 1990s and the 2000s. These estimates are useful to compare findings across studies."

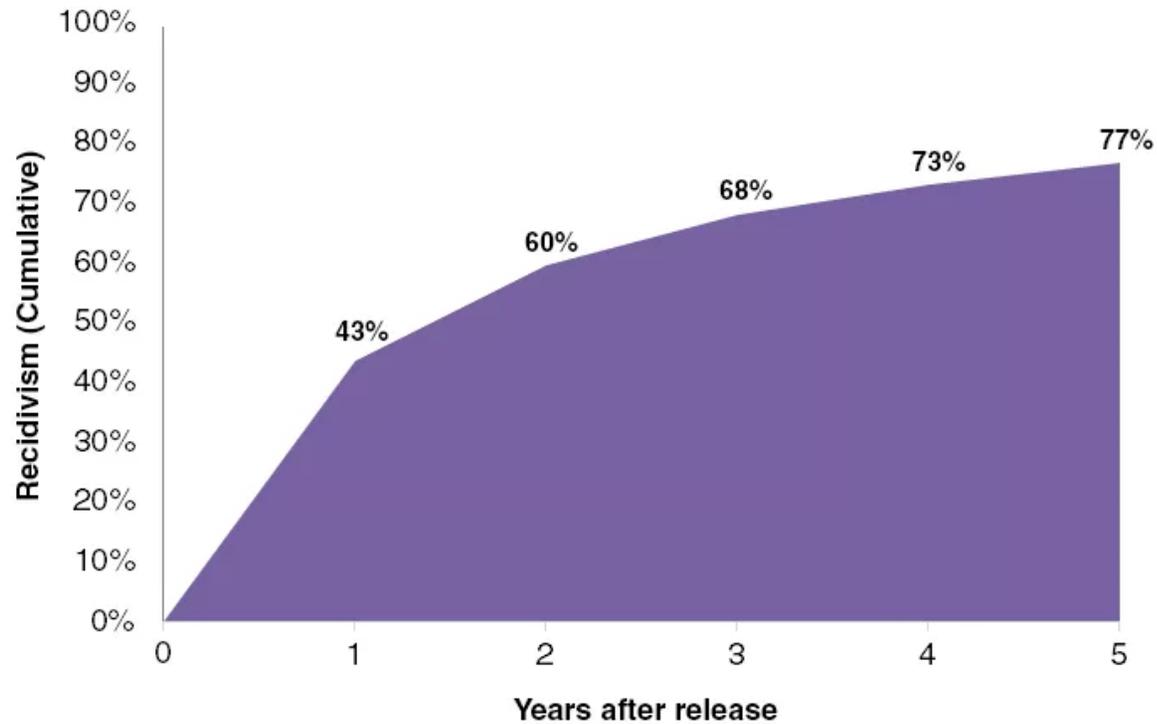
The findings are consistent. The rise in incarceration during the 2000's did little if anything to prevent crime.

However prison is not just about crime deterrence. It serves other purposes as well, such as rehabilitation.

Are U.S. prisons effective at rehabilitating prisoners?

Here are some [statistics on recidivism](#), relapse into criminal behavior, from the [Bureau of Justice](#).

Time from Release to First Arrest



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *“Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005: Patterns from 2005 to 2010”*

- 43% of former inmates are arrested within a year of release.
- By year three, 68% have been arrested at least once.
- Only 23% of released prisoners make it five years without being arrested.

Why do so many former prisoners return to crime?

One obvious contributor is the difficulty in finding a job for someone with a criminal record.

Often employers will ask about criminal history in a pre-employment screener, effectively