

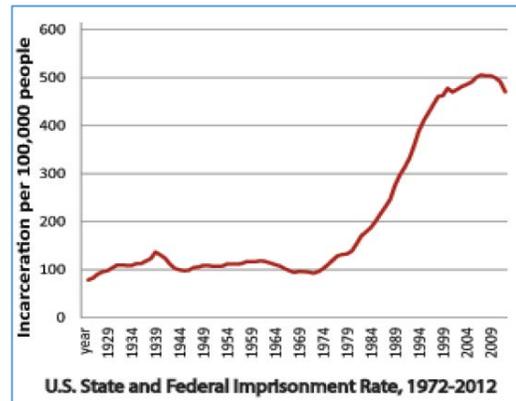
January is Poverty Awareness Month. In recognition, each January issue of Frederic's e-Gazette will contain a reflection on Poverty from one of the Society's Voice of the Poor Regional Leaders.

“DO NOT FEED” THE POVERTY BEAST – CHANGING OUR MASS INCARCERATION APPROACH TO CRIME

by
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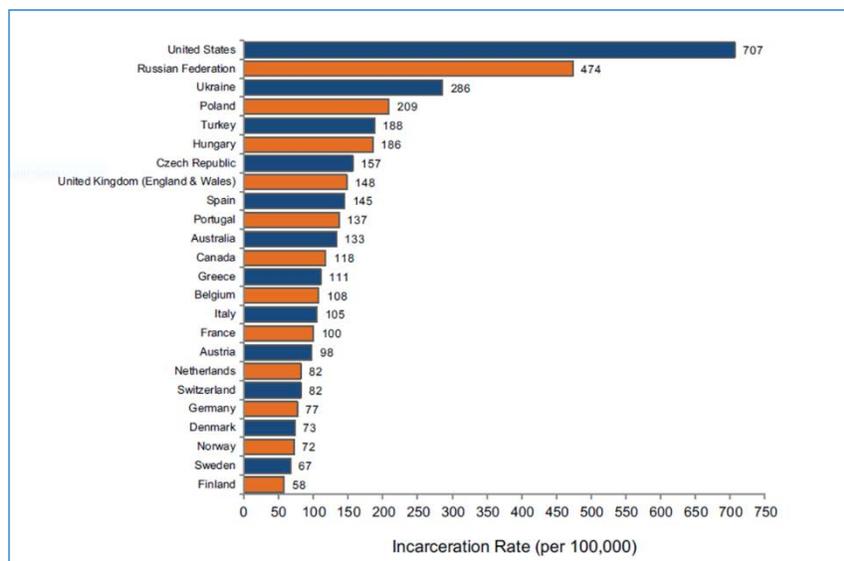
Of the approximately 47 million Americans living below the poverty level, it is estimated that 20% of these (or nearly 9.4 million) do so because of the effects of mass incarceration. Why such a large number and percentage? The United States prison population itself is estimated at about 2.2 million persons as of 2011. The balance of 7.2 million represents the family members (spouses, partners and children) of the incarcerated persons.

Primarily due to the War on Drugs, the number of persons incarcerated rose precipitously between 1980 and 2011, a period of time in which it was popularly believed that the solution to crime and rampant substance abuse was imprisonment on a large scale (see chart to the right). An appreciation of the societal and mental health factors impacting crime and substance abuse was absent then from our public policy deliberations, calculations, and actions. Fortunately, that is changing.



In 1980, there were only 500,000 persons in US prisons. Three decades later, that number has quadrupled to 2.2 million people, mostly low-income persons living slightly above or below the poverty level. In fact, today, the United States with only 5% of the world's population has 25% of its prison population, and imprisons far more persons per 100,000 people than any other country in the world (see chart below).

In 1980, 41,000 persons were in prison for drug offenses. Now, this number is over 500,000. Are low-income persons bigger users of drugs? NO! Studies show that low-income persons use drugs at a level about equal to middle- and high-income persons. But drug enforcement has focused their activities on poorer communities. The problem has been exacerbated by mandatory minimum



sentencing for non-violent drug offenses, harsher treatment of parole violations, and fees that must be paid by the already poor offender to the criminal justice system.

More food for the Poverty Beast has been added by two more recent developments. First, the appearance of for-profit, privately operated prisons creates a new demand. Typically, those prisons require a 90% occupancy rate for profitability. And most recently, many undocumented immigrants along the southern borders of the US have been arrested and detained in prisons.

While someone is in prison, they and their family suffer. They are not able to provide support to family members. Children do not get important caring and attention from a parent(s). For the work persons perform while in prison, they are paid little to no wages. This is allowed by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution, which abolished slavery in the US except as a punishment for crime. This situation can lead to further problems such as homelessness, food insecurity, etc. The National Research Council infographic at the end of this article provides a startling one page indictment of the way mass incarceration has negatively impacted on our society.

When a person returns from prison, there are significant barriers to reintegrating into society and providing for their family. Such barriers include the near-impossibility of obtaining a good job, or even any job, when employment applications require an applicant to report at the very outset of the process that he or she is a former criminal. There are other counter-productive impediments, too. Many housing developments do not rent to persons with criminal backgrounds. Persons with criminal backgrounds may not be eligible for public assistance such as Food Stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Some states make it exceedingly difficult for ex-offenders to have their drivers' license re-instated. Finally, many states do not allow persons with criminal backgrounds to vote.

The Society is beginning to make significant efforts to address barriers ex-offenders/returning citizens face. Through a grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) to the National SVdP office, the Vincentian Reentry Organizing Project (VROP) was born. In Ohio, a similar CCHD grant to the Diocesan SVdP Council of Columbus has resulted in the formation of the Vincentian Ohio Action Network (VOAN) that includes two chapters – the Newark Think Tank on Poverty (Newark) and Restored Citizens and Communities for Change (Columbus).

In other areas across the country, Vincentians have been working alongside returning citizens to advocate for “Banning the Box” on employment applications and on many other criminal justice reforms. Guiding the reform efforts are the restorative justice principles of Catholic Social Teaching, especially as they have been articulated in the [2000 Pastoral Statement of the Catholic Bishops of the United States entitled: “Responsibility, Rehabilitation and Restoration: a Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice.”](#)

At the national level, criminal justice reform legislation that conforms to the Bishops' Statement and Catholic Social Teaching is making substantial progress forward and may well be one of the few areas of domestic policy in 2016 where bi-partisan agreement can be reached and meaningful legislation passed. All sides now agree that our current system has failed, and that its failure has fed poverty and contributed to other significant social ills. The Society has been a leader in pushing Congress to reform the system, and has worked closely with the US

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Page 3 of 3

Conference of Bishops (USCCB) and Catholic Charities USA to that end (see the [joint testimony](#) of the Society, Catholic Charities and USCCB to House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, July 2015)

All these activities – from grass roots work in places like Ohio, Massachusetts, Louisiana, Florida and Wisconsin where Vincentian Re-entry Organizing Projects are active and flourishing to legislative reform efforts in various states and at the Federal level – are starting to yield concrete results for ending poverty through systemic change. Consider becoming involved in similar efforts in your area. We can stop feeding the Beast of Poverty!

January 2016

The Growth of **INCARCERATION** in the United States

1/100

In 2012, nearly 1 of every 100 American adults was in prison or jail.

4x

During the past 4 decades, the rate of incarceration in the U.S. more than quadrupled.

2.1 million

From 1980-2000, the number of children with incarcerated fathers grew from about 350,000 to 2.1 million – about 3% of all U.S. children.

What are some causes of the growth of incarceration?

State and federal policies drove the increase in incarceration, such as:

- mandatory minimum sentence laws
- long sentences for violent and repeat offenders
- intensified enforcement of drug-related laws

Are longer sentences effective as a crime control measure?

NO. Unless they target very high-rate or extremely dangerous offenders, long sentences are an inefficient way to control crime. In fact, the experience of incarceration may foster re-offending.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE GROWTH OF INCARCERATION?

On prisoners:

As prison populations have grown, inmates have had **fewer opportunities** for educational and vocational programs that could prepare them for release. Applicants with a criminal record are disproportionately denied jobs.

On children and families:

Fathers' incarceration is linked to **family hardship, housing insecurity, and developmental problems** in children.

On communities:

The effects of incarceration's rise have been most acute in minority communities that already face significant social, economic, and public health **disadvantages**.

On society:

Incarceration has contributed to the **political marginalization** of minority communities. From 1980-2009, state spending on corrections has increased by just over 400%, reducing the funds available for other public purposes.

What practical steps can we take to **change** this?

Reexamine long sentences, mandatory minimum sentences, and policies on enforcement of drug laws.

Prepare incarcerated men and women to re-enter society.

Reduce unnecessary harm to their futures, their families, and their communities.

