
Analysis of the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Fight against Drugs

The United States holds 22 percent of the world's prison population, while the total U.S. population makes up only around 4 percent of the world's population. The war on drugs is often cited to explain the disproportionate number of incarcerations in the U.S. prison system. The actual number of incarcerated non-violent drug offenders pales in comparison to the number of those in prison for violent crimes. While many non-violent drug offenders are still victimized by the draconian anti-drug enforcement policies, the total number of nonviolent drug offenders make up a relatively small percentage of the U.S. prison population.

It is estimated over \$1 trillion have been spent fighting the war on drugs in the United States. In 2012, 1,571,013 adults were incarcerated in U.S. prisons. The U.S. prison population comprises 22 percent of the world's prison population. A teenage kid getting busted with marijuana in his pocket and getting hauled off to prison is a common picture that pops into people's heads when thinking about the issue of mass incarceration. That scenario has undoubtedly occurred, but it hasn't happened quite as often as most people believe.

The bulk of prisoners in the United States are incarcerated for violent crimes. Violent crimes include murder, manslaughter, forcible rape, aggravated assault, and robbery. In 2012, in the state prison population, which makes up 86 percent of the total U.S. prison population, 54 percent were incarcerated for violent crimes and only 16 percent were nonviolent drug offenders. The common belief that the majority of prisoners are incarcerated for drug offenses likely comes from the federal prison data. In federal prisons, only 7 percent of prisoners were there for violent crimes, while a whopping 51 percent were incarcerated for drug offenses. It is important to note that the federal prison population only makes up 14 percent of the total U.S. prison population.

Prisoners that are incarcerated for nonviolent crimes are on the decline. Law reforms regarding nonviolent offenders have helped lower the number of prisoners in state prisons. In California, the percentage of nonviolent inmates has decreased to 11 percent in 2013, down from 25 percent in 2010. While the number of years served in prison for drug offenses have remained fairly static over the past few decades, mandatory minimum sentencing for drug offenses had a major impact on people's lives. Possessing an arbitrary amount of a particular drug could land an offender in prison for a minimum of 10 years.

The war on drugs has been an epic failure on many measures. It has resulted in the imprisonment of large numbers of nonviolent offenders, but the numbers have often been exaggerated in the discussion of mass incarceration in the United States. It is true that a large percentage of federal prisoners are incarcerated for drug offenses, but federal prisoners make up only 14 percent of the total U.S. prison population. Nonviolent drug offenders actually make up a small percentage of the total U.S. prison population.