

Effective Investments in Public Safety: Mass incarceration and longer sentences fail to make us safer

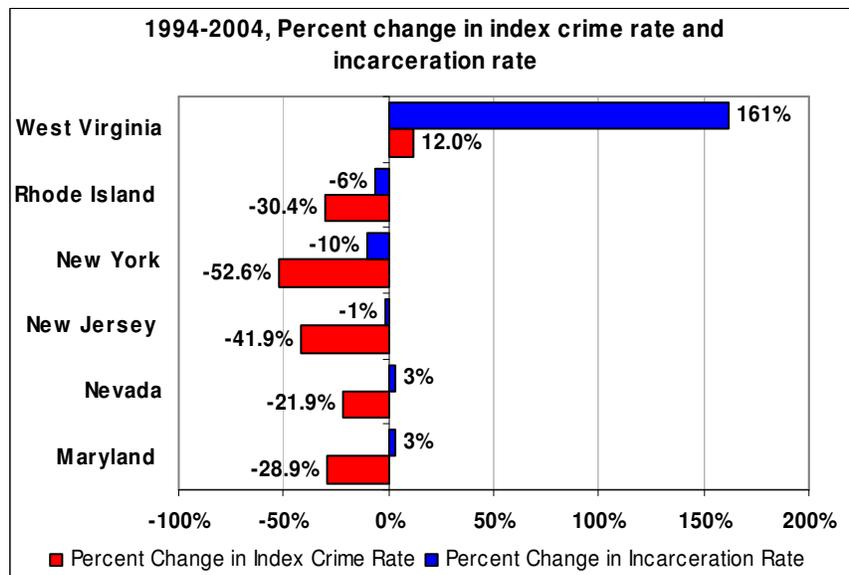
“Prison expansion is expensive in the costs it imposes on both those who serve time behind bars and in absorbing tax dollars. Policy discussion should be informed by the limitation of the fact that prison expansion, beyond a certain point, will no longer serve any reasonable purpose. It seems that that point has been reached.”¹

Places that did not increase their use of incarceration as much as others experienced bigger drops in crime.

Between 1993 and 2002, Maryland’s rate of incarceration grew by 14.9%, dwarfed by a 52.9% growth in neighboring Pennsylvania. However, Maryland experienced a 22.5% decrease in FBI index crimes compared to just a 13.3% decrease in Pennsylvania.²

California’s incarceration rate grew by 15.5% compared with only 3.4% growth in New York. However, New York’s index crime rate dropped 27.6% more than California’s. The overall prison population of New York has actually been declining in recent years, as has its crime rate.³

Texas’ incarceration rate grew four times faster than New Jersey’s (18.5% growth versus 4.2% growth), but New Jersey experienced a 90.4% greater reduction in crime (36.9% decrease versus 19.4% decrease).



Sources: Harrison, P.M. and Beck, A.J. (2005). “Prisoners in 2004.” Bureau of Justice Statistics. Beck, A.J. and Gilliard, D.K. (1995). “Prisoners in 1994,” Bureau of Justice Statistics; FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States, Table 5.

¹ Liedka, Raymond V, Anne Morrison Piehl, & Bert Useem. 2006. The Crime-Control Effect of Incarceration: Does Scale Matter? *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5 (2): 245-276.

² All of these figures come from the Bureau of Justice Statistics Probation and Parole series and the FBI Uniform Crime Reports, with data for 1993 and 2002. Note that incarceration in this case includes both prison and jail.

³ FBI Uniform Crime Reports, Crime in the United States. www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm

Studies have shown that there is not much of a relationship between increased incarceration and crime.

Numerous studies by criminologists have found no consistent relationship between incarceration rates and crime rates. For example, Michael Lynch reviewed national crime and incarceration rates from 1972 through 1993 and found no consistent relationship between the two.⁴

Another study by John Irwin and James Austin found that states that increased incarceration rates the least were just as likely to see a decline in crime rates as those states that increased them the most, and some areas that decreased their incarceration rates also witnessed a decrease in crime. Therefore, incarceration rates are not the strongest indicator for whether an area will experience a drop in crime.

Communities most impacted by high incarceration rates also continue to experience high crime rates

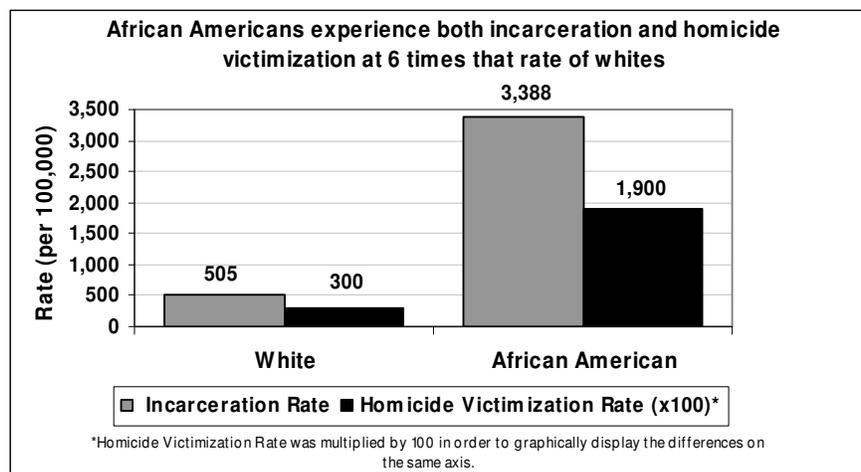
“High levels of incarceration concentrated in impoverished communities have a destabilizing effect on community life, so that the most basic underpinnings of informal social control are damaged. This, in turn, reproduces the very dynamics that sustain crime.” — Todd Clear, Professor of Criminal Justice, at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, in *Invisible Punishment* (2003).

Research from the University of Maryland found that some Maryland neighborhoods with high rates of criminal justice involvement also saw an increase in lethal violence.⁵ Removing integral members of a neighborhood may only cause more problems for the community.⁶

While the crime drop of the 1990s did impact all communities, regardless of race and income, African Americans are still victims of violent crime at a rate 30 percent higher than whites, constitute nearly half of all the homicide victims in the United States, and experience homicide at rates several times higher than whites.⁷

“Contemporary criminological scholarship suggests that excessive incarceration may decrease safety in communities and diminish the ability of residents to protect themselves. The concern is that removing so many people from a community can undermine the social cohesion that holds communities together and fortifies their own, internal capacity to maintain social order and fight crime.”⁸

Research by Todd Clear found that communities with higher levels of criminal justice involvement also experienced higher crime rates.⁹ Some of his reasons for this phenomenon were the displacement of children from their incarcerated parents, a lack of male role models for young boys, and a significant reduction in the “human capital” that every member brings to a community.



Sources: Harrison, P.M. and Beck, A.J. (2005). “Prisoners in 2004.” Bureau of Justice Statistics; and FBI, Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976-2004, from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/vracetab.htm>

⁴ Lynch, M. 1999. “Beating a dead horse: is there any basic empirical evidence of the deterrent effect of imprisonment,” *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 3 (4), 361.

⁵ Harries, Keith 2004. “Violence, Change, and Cohort Trajectories: Baltimore Neighborhoods, 1990-2000”. *Urban Geography*. Vol. 25.

⁶ Ziedenberg, J. and Lotke, E. 2005. “Tipping Point: Maryland’s overuse of incarceration and the impact on public safety.” Washington, D.C.: Justice Policy Institute.

⁷ *National Crime Victimization Survey, 2004*. (2005) U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. FBI, Supplemental Homicide Reports.

⁸ Ziedenberg and Lotke (2005).

⁹ Rose, D.R. and T. Clear 1998. “Incarceration, Social Capital, and Crime: Implications for Social Disorganization Theory,” *Criminology* 36(3)