

Prisons in the United States

U.S. prisons hold 25% of all incarcerated people worldwide which is the largest prison population in the world.¹ Interestingly, besides having federal and state prison systems, the U.S. has a great number of private prisons that have their own policies. Incarceration numbers in the U.S. have surged in recent years: new laws of the past 30 years increased sentence lengths and the number of life-long sentences.² Furthermore, the Rockefeller drug laws, which were established in 1978 as a response to the “crack epidemic,” created harsh sentences toward the possession of hard drugs and significantly increased incarceration numbers for non-violent offenses.

The Rockefeller drug laws were largely targeted at Black and Hispanic communities and therefore further increased the ongoing racial disparity within U.S. prisons. 97% of New York State’s prisoners who have been charged for drug offenses are Black or Hispanic³, but these incarceration numbers do not reflect drug use within the general population. In 2007, 72% of reported illegal drug abusers in New York were white.⁴ This great disparity lies especially within the unequal racial treatment during criminal justice processes —55% of the New York Police Department searches during 2006 involved Blacks, 30% Hispanic and only 11% whites and additionally, limited access to legal resources within communities of color further increases the disparity⁵.

American prisons have been specifically designed for men. For example, the current prison system fails to account for prisoners with history of surviving abuse, who might be pregnant or menstruating and the complications that may arise.⁶ Due to their lack of accessibility, tampons have become a luxury in U.S. prisons. For the longest time, the use of tampons or menstrual cups was forbidden for both inmates and visitors for safety reasons⁷. Moreover, “at least 13% of prisoners have been sexually assaulted” or repeatedly raped⁸ and only around 1% of responsible staff are convicted⁹. In addition, because 90% of the prison population is male, there are greater efforts put into programming for the male inmates, while women often have fewer options for educational programs and job trainings¹⁰.

In addition to the inhumane conditions in prisons for essentially all inmates, there is little evidence that the current criminal justice system is effective. Over 80% of released state prisoners, both male and female, return to prison within nine years of their release¹¹. The current criminal justice system cannot help prisoners to rehabilitate and reenter society, which costs taxpayers \$50 million a year in New York alone¹².

Independent journalism has a long history of holding institutions accountable. These journalists were able to create the greatest changes within the system in decades. For years, Texas State Prisons denied their inmates dentures.¹³ Guards would puree the food for those who could not chew their meals. Dental fixtures were only available if it was a medical need but chewing food did not qualify as one.¹⁴ In 2018, a state senator read articles in the Houston Chronicle regarding the inmates’ lack of dentures, and he fought to change the policies.¹⁵ Journalism is an essential information tool in the effort to bring awareness, educate the public and lead to positive change.

By Isa Mester '26, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager

¹ Rich, “Observations on the Nature and Extent of Injustice in the American Prison System” *American Journal of Bioethics*, 14(7), 1.

² *ibid*

³ ACLU of New York, “Rockefeller Drug Laws Cause Racial Disparities, Huge Taxpayer Burden”, 2008.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Rich, “Observations on the Nature and Extent of Injustice in the American Prison System” *American Journal of Bioethics*, 14(7), 2.

⁹ Blakinger, *Corrections in Ink*, 293.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Blakinger, “Can We Build a Better Women’s Prison?”, *The Best American Magazine Writing*, 2020, accessed September 2023.

¹² ACLU of New York, “Rockefeller Drug Laws Cause Racial Disparities, Huge Taxpayer Burden”, 2008.

¹³ Blakinger, *Corrections in Ink*, 301-302.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*