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## U.S. has the most people behind bars

**Florida and other states are spending larger chunks of their budgets on prisons.**

From Staff and Wire Reports

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For the first time in U.S. history, more than one in every 100 adults in America is in jail or prison, according to a new report.

That's more than any other nation.

Incarceration rates are even higher for some groups. One in 36 Hispanic adults is behind bars, based on Justice Department figures for 2006. One in 15 black adults is, too, as is one in nine black men between the ages of 20 and 34.

Florida ranks third in prison population, behind Texas and California, according to Thursday's report released by the Pew Center on the States.

The number of people in Florida prisons grew from 53,000 to more than 97,000 from 1993 to 2007 -- even as the state's crime rate declined. The study attributes the increase to changes in correctional policies and practices in Florida.

In 1995, the Florida Legislature abolished "good time" credits and required that all prisoners serve 85 percent of their sentences. The state then enacted a "zero tolerance" policy that made it easier to send released felons back to prison for probation violations.

At its current rate of increase, Florida's prison population is expected to peak at 125,000 by 2013, according to the Pew study. If that projection proves true, the prison system will exceed its capacity by 2009, the study said.

The steadily growing inmate population "is saddling cash-strapped states with soaring costs they can ill afford and failing to have a clear impact either on recidivism or overall crime," the report said.

In Florida, for example, the state spends 9.3 percent of its state revenue on prisons. That ties the state for second -- with Vermont -- in the percentage of general-fund dollars spent on corrections. Oregon is first, at 10.9 percent.

Susan Urahn, managing director of the Pew Center on the States, said budget woes are pressuring many states to consider new, cost-saving corrections policies that might have been shunned in the recent past for fear of appearing soft on crime.

"We're seeing more and more states being creative because of tight budgets," she said in an interview. "They want to be tough on crime. They want to be a law-and-order state. But they also want to save money, and they want to be effective."

The report cited Kansas and Texas as states that have acted decisively to slow the growth of their inmate population. They are making greater use of community supervision for low-risk offenders and employing sanctions other than reimprisonment for offenders who commit technical violations of parole and probation.

"The new approach, born of bipartisan leadership, is allowing the two states to ensure they have enough prison beds for violent offenders while helping less dangerous lawbreakers become productive, taxpaying citizens," the report said.

Researchers urge states to adopt such measures, which it says would curtail corrections spending.

While many state governments have shown bipartisan interest in curbing prison growth, there also are persistent calls to proceed cautiously.

"We need to be smarter," said David Muhlhausen, a criminal-justice expert with the conservative Heritage Foundation. "We're not incarcerating all the people who commit serious crimes. But we're also probably incarcerating people who don't need to be."

The report shows that 2.3 million Americans were in jail or prison at the start of 2008. Whether per capita or in raw numbers, it's more than any other nation.

The 50 states spent more than \$40 billion on corrections last year, up from less than \$11 billion 20 years earlier. The rate of increase for prison costs was six times greater than for higher-education spending.

The largest percentage increase -- 12 percent -- was in Kentucky, where Gov. Steve Beshear highlighted the cost of corrections in his budget speech last month. He noted that the state's crime rate had increased only about 3 percent in the past 30 years while the state's inmate population has increased by 600 percent.

"Getting tough on criminals has gotten tough on taxpayers," said the project's director, Adam Gelb.

According to the report, the average annual cost per prisoner was \$23,876, with Rhode Island spending the most (\$44,860) and Louisiana the least (\$13,009).

Four states -- Vermont, Michigan, Oregon and Connecticut -- now spend more on corrections than on higher education.

"These sad facts reflect a very distorted set of national priorities," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont, referring to the full report. "Perhaps, if we adequately invested in our children and in education, kids who now grow up to be criminals could become productive workers and taxpayers."

The report said prison growth and higher incarceration rates do not reflect an increase in the nation's overall population. Instead, it said, more people are behind bars mainly because of tough sentencing measures, such as "three-strikes" laws, that result in longer prison stays.

The report said the United States incarcerates more people than any other nation, far ahead of more populous China, which has 1.5 million people behind bars. It said the U.S. also is the leader in inmates per capita (750 per 100,000 people), ahead of Russia (628 per 100,000) and other former Soviet bloc nations that round out the top 10.

*Jeff Kunerth of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. Information from The Associated Press and The [New York Times](#) also was used.*

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