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The Overuse of Prisons

There are approximately twenty million Americans, who have been imprisoned in one way or the other. In the year 2013, there was one imprisoned person out of every ten American adults. The rate of imprisonment has reached a new high in the USA after being stable for around five decades. In the year 1972, the rate of imprisonment per 100000 people was 161 which rose to 707 in the year 2012 (Travis, Western, and Redburn). The rate of imprisonment in the USA has been much higher as compared to other countries in Western Europe and other democratic states (Travis, Western, and Redburn).

The racial differentiation plays an important role in the judicial system of the USA and it has also resulted in overuse of prisons. One of the major characteristics of imprisonment is biasedness based on race. In 2011, there were 60% of imprisoned people from minorities. Men belonging to the minorities group were mostly affected by an increase in imprisonment. In this case of it is more probable for these men to have got jailed rather than completing a four-year college degree. Similarly, the men from the minority who have not been able to complete their high school are more likely to be behind the bars now. A rise in imprisonment has changed the shape of the criminal justice system, relations between various races living in the US and the structure of poverty in the cities (Kaeble et.al).

Justice system has set poor and minority men as its priority across the country. Stephens has done much research on sources of imprisonments, the relationship between crime and imprisonments and their effect of an increase in imprisonment on society. There has been no comprehensive research conducted to record the causes of increased rates in imprisonment.

The number of persons imprisoned has increased drastically over the last 3 to 4 decades. In the past, the rate of imprisoned people had been stable at around 110 people per 100000 population. In the year 2012, there were 2.23 million people imprisoned which was seven times more than the figure in 1972 (Travis, Western, and Redburn). The Western European democracies have much lower imprisonment rates as compared to the USA. Current imprisonment rates in the US are higher from the historical as well as comparative standards (Pettit and Western).

This essay will take a look at the penal system of the USA in the first place and judge the development of the conviction system. An increase in the number of convicts will also be demonstrated under federal, state and local systems. In the end, there will be a brief description of the impact of an increase in several convicts on the various aspects of society.

The structure of the penal system also allows much more convictions than are genuinely required. The US penal system is composed of three major institutions namely state prisons, federal prisons, and local jails. State prisons are the ones in which criminals convicted to death or more than one year are kept (Frost, Natasha, and Carlos). These prisons are run by the state department of correction. Federal prisons are run by the US Bureau of prisons and keep those criminals who have done federal crimes. The people who are waiting for their trial or are serving short period trials are kept in the local jails. There are some variations in the penal system across different states. Some small states keep all convicted people in the same local jails which are managed by a single agency working for correction under the state. There are separate jails for the convicts who are less than 18 years in age and are managed by the juvenile justice agencies.

A major portion of convicts was placed in state prison which accounted for more than half of prisoners. Majority of criminals were held imprisoned for more than one year or those who didn't follow their parole terms and were put back in prison within the state prisons. The major categories of offenders were violent offenders, property offenders, and drug offenders. Violent crimes had the highest number of convicts in state prison. The number of people convicted of drug offenses has increased over some time under consideration (Alschuler).

There is a considerable difference in composition of convicts in federal prison as compared to state prison because convicts undertake federal crimes and those crimes have vast definitions. Robbery is one of the federal crimes that primarily entails bank robberies but also includes robberies in all kinds of companies and institutions. Drug offenses include any activity involving controlled substances. Immigration offenses include the people who try to enter a country using illegal means whether first time or multiple times. A major increase in imprisoned population has been seen in federal prison as compared to state prison and local jails. When population of state and local institution ceased to grow, there was a considerable increase in the people convicted under the federal system.

By the year 2012, people in local jails were one-thirds to the total population convicted. Jails are only paths through which the convicts are taken to imprisonment. People in these jails are those who have been arrested, awaiting trials or those who have been unable to pay the bales. These incumbents have very low socioeconomic status and are identified as social trash by some writers (Travis, Western, and Redburn).

There is a half number of people in jail as compared to the total of federal and state prisons. Admission and turnover are highest among jails among all three types of prisons. In the year 2010, there were thirteen million incumbents in jails.

Certain steps by policymakers have also contributed to an overuse of prisons. The policymakers increase usage of prison sentences as well as their severity over time. Both these things increase in people who are sentenced. Various factors are affecting an increase in convicts including changes in various policies by institutions. One of the most common change is a drug control policy that allows agencies to arrest street-level, drug dealers. Another aspect is stubbornness shown by offenders by repeating the same crime over and over again. This attitude of offenders has left no way for the authorities other than being harsh to them. The primary cause of an increase in imprisonments is increased time for which they are convicted (Frost, Natasha, and Carlos). The other aspect is a clear choice in terms of the policy to increase the use of imprisonment in response to crimes. In the 1980s and 1990s, the time spans for various offenses were increased and a greater number of people who were taken to jails were imprisoned. These steps were taken without foreseeing the consequences of increasing people barred in all types of prisons. Thus, the USA has been far apart in terms of several people in the prisons as compared to other countries.

The US policymakers have been concerned about the criminal justice system and the crime itself ever since the country came into being. Even from the past, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities have been associated with the crime. The development of the current system of justice has been morally and racially questioned. These concerns have resulted in a slower increase in the number of convicts in most recent past. A large number of policymakers and other people responded to the political turmoil of the country and increase in crime rate by increasing the penal capacity of the system. The issues of crime and disorder were seen differently in the context of political turmoil. This difference has been an important factor in the increase of several people convicted by the prison systems in the country. In the past, the upward wave in the crime rates was not covered by the increase in conviction through the justice system. These waves of crimes did not involve people from other fields like politics to comment on judges and crime experts. Some crime experts also gave an opinion that crimes can be controlled by adhering to causes of crimes and rehabilitation of convicts.

Overuse of prisons has also resulted out of ethnic system prevailing in the society. There have been serious problems with the minorities regarding criminal justice policies. Immediately after World War II, these minorities faced biased behavior from the police and other law enforcing forces. There were reported clashes between long-term residents in the country and these minorities. The whites in all parts of the country raised their voice about the increase in crimes during this period. A strict change in the system and policies was the only way to solve these problems in the eyes of many white people. The protests of blacks to integrate the society were seen by them as a cause of increased crime rate. The whites asked for a strict policy to counter the lawlessness of blacks.

President Jim Carter responded to this by invoking the need for more law and order. This was to be achieved by expanding the role of government in its general administration of criminal justice and law enforcement. There were a large number of bills presented to offer assistance to improve local and state police affairs. Although most of these bills did not get in action, they set up directions in which the law and order institutions will go in the future. Truman and his allies enacted a greater federal role in the state and local law systems. This increased role was also hoped to protect the minorities living in the country. When minorities would see the system as satisfactory, there will be fewer protests and political riots in the country. The decrease in protests will also satisfy the whites who deemed these protests as sources of crimes. The reforms were continued by Johnson administration who shifted the focus on poverty as the root cause of crime. This approach demanded that more resources are diverted to education, health, and other social benefit programs. There was no clear opinion placed by the liberals on the issue of crimes. Some liberals demanded that the procedures used to implement the law and order solutions should be neutralized towards all the races.

There had been an increase in the crime rates from 1961 to 1981. There was no clear policy to deter rising crimes or to assess causes thereof. The candidates and other officeholders benefitted from the lack of any clear policy even after crime rates began to fall. The political stance of officials on crime rates explains why policies regarding crime control became stricter over time. In the southern part of the country, the strategy to tackle the crime rate also included racial indiscrimination. There were certain changes taking place in the economic context of the cities that had a considerable impact on crime rate and thus overuse of prisons. In the years between 1970s & 1980s, various cities of the USA had social and economic decline. There was a decline in employment by industrial concerns which meant that more and more people were unemployed and economically distressed (Stephens).

One of the most prominent impacts of increased imprisonment is a decline in the physical and mental health of incumbents of prison. This is especially important because people who are spending their time in prison will come back to the community after some time. Certain factors affect the health of individuals other than personal behaviors and conditions. Unemployment can be considered as an example of a factor that affects the health of a person. This is because the unemployed person lacks the necessary health insurance benefits required for the proper treatment. Similarly, an unemployed person will lack the adequate housing leaving him with too much mental stress and more prone to health-related hazards. Prisoned people are more likely to be unemployed and poor. Thus, they will suffer from health issues more than the general US population. The health professionals can see the convicts as an opportunity to extend their services but jails are not the ideal places to provide adequate health facilities. A considerable percentage of convicts suffer from serious mental health issues. If we break the figures according to gender, around 15% were men and 31 % were women, who suffered from severe mental health concerns. The presence of mentally ill people in the jails has been reported in the study conducted by Travis, Western, and Redburn in their research. There were efforts to transfer those who are mentally ill to a more comfortable place but there were not enough funds available to implement these efforts. This also puts the mentally ill component of society at a greater risk of being convicted.

There are considerable economic effects of imprisonment on the people who are convicted. The majority of convicts were poor, black or Hispanics who worked in the labor markets to earn their livings. The ideal situation would have been that those who have been convicted will be released, receive some treatment and get back to their original jobs. The realities are bleak for the workers who have been convicted. Pettit and Western suggested in their research study that the convicts normally never get any job after at least one year of their release from the prison. There is no particular research on examining the effects of increased imprisonment rates so it cannot be concluded how the job outcomes of imprisoned would be affected. The prisoner population has been skewed towards males so most of this discussion will revolve around them. The imprisoned people lack the skills required to work for any position in the labor market because the majority of them had left schools at early ages (Pettit and Western). Thus, poor employability is a result of preexisting personal conditions on the part of an incumbent.

There are certain impacts of imprisonment on people that hinder their ability to get into the labor markets once they are released. Some of the incumbents take the positive impact of their stay at the prison by developing a certain set of skills and stabilizing their lifestyles. Other people are affected negatively during their stay at the prison due to drug abuse and similar other issues.

In summary, the overuse of prison requires an in-depth study of the causes of imprisonment and solution to problems found. The number of people imprisoned is not a policy variable but a consequence. The causes like unemployment, poverty and health issues should be studied in greater detail. These causes can also be studied in groups like economic aspects, medical aspects, and social aspects.

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