

Harvard or Lovelock: The High Cost of Incarceration

Synopsis: It costs less, for a year, to send a person to Harvard than it does to send the same person to Nevada's Lovelock Prison. Several studies review the high costs of incarceration and methodologies which could reduce the expense.

Calls for reforming the criminal justice system are mounting. America locks up a high level of people and today the population behind is four-and-a-half times greater than in 1980. Over 2 million persons are locked up, and activists are pushing against the high financial cost of maintaining the current levels.

According to "[Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price Tag of Youth Incarceration](#)" Nevada spends almost \$200,000 annually, per juvenile, on incarceration. The expenses don't stop with juvenile inmates or with the prison. The estimated overall costs linked to imprisonment and long-term consequences cost taxpayers \$15 billion annually, according to the report.

How Did America Get Here?

It all started in the 1970s when the U.S. started an exercise in volume imprisonment. Prompted by the so-called 'drug war', law enforcement strategies, financial innovations combined with changing racial politics. Anyone residing in any community now can see the experiment's effect. How significant is the problem?

One index looks at the range of the incarcerated population. [Soaring from 400,000 in the 1970s, to 2.3 million in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 942 juvenile correctional facilities and 3,283 local jails today.](#) The figures understate the consequence of criminalization. It doesn't include people adjudged of crimes and not locked up.

Research by Sarah Shannon, a theorist with UGA, estimated the amount of residents either presently serving time or stigmatized by a [felony conviction](#) increased 400% from 1980 through 2010. Add in imprisonment since 2010; it is reasonable to guess around 23 million Americans are targeted.

The immense practice of incarceration comes with astonishing inequalities. African-American males are more prone to be touched than other socio-economic group. Approximately 30% of black men have been detained by age 18 and 49% by age 23.

According to a [Bureau of Justice Statistics, CEA Calculations](#) statement, the individuals were edged out of the labor market — even before they were convicted. Estimates from various sources show as pre-incarceration (annual) earnings stretch between \$3000 and \$28,000. If inmates have something shared, it is they were poor before they went to prison.

Gigantic Machine

The irony is the gigantic machine which destroys life chances is expensive. A single bed in prisons runs between \$14,000 and \$60,000; varying by federal and state lockups. The cost to house one inmate in the higher-cost facilities equates to the annual salary of the cop who put them there. The American criminal justice system is disbursing more on inmates than it ever spent on them in the free world.

The result of this machine is noticeable. The gears grind literacy, job readiness and any hope of having a stable family and social life. Employers perform background reviews, and thousands of positions require permits or certification. Two affirmations from which felons are barred.

America's machinery of so-called 'law and order' is a machine to confirm and reinforce every aspect of inequality in American life and culture. More than just a problem of 'bad policy,' the entire system can be fixed if enough are committed to broad and ongoing structural change which ends racialized inequality.

Economic studies have reviewed the toll and gain of reducing racialized inequality. Cost-benefit studies frequently forget to consider the parallel consequences which make the current policies more expensive.

CEA reviewed three practices: spurring incarceration, funding law enforcement and boosting the minimum wage.

They found that a \$10 billion increase in incarceration spending would decrease crime and have a societal benefit of a MINUS \$8 billion. A 10 billion dollar investment in hiring more police would reduce crime by around 10% with a net socio economic gain of approximately \$20 billion. Increasing the minimum wage to \$12 by 2020 results in a 4% DECREASE in crime and a societal benefit between \$8 and \$17 billion.

Rationalizing the ways sentences are imposed along with reducing the sky-high rates of incarceration, will make the justice system fairer, smarter and cost-effective.