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## THE CRIME PROBLEM IN THE UNITED STATES

Have you ever been a victim of a crime? Do you know someone who has been a crime victim? Do you ever worry about your personal safety or about protecting your property? Even if you might have answered no to all these questions, you are presumably still interested in learning how crime can be reduced. This book, then, is intended for any readers who are concerned about crime, whether or not it has touched them personally.

When we think about crime in the United States, there is both good news and bad news. The good news is that crime has fallen dramatically since the early 1990s. The bad news is that the U.S. crime rate remains higher than the rate in many other democracies, with the homicide rate higher than any other democracy's. Compared with other democracies, then, the U.S. crime rate is hardly anything to cheer about despite its drop since the 1990s.

Along with its troublesome crime rate, the United States also leads the world's nations in its incarceration rate. This high rate reflects the so-called **get-tough approach** that has guided U.S. criminal justice policy since the 1970s. Under this approach, the United States has fought crime with increased law enforcement and, especially, longer and more certain prison sentences. As this approach took hold, the nation's prisons and jails filled up and many more prisons and jails were built. The consequence has been **mass incarceration**: the confinement of an incredibly large volume of people, more than 2 million on any given day, inside the nation's

### Chapter Outline

- The Amount and Cost of Crime
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- Unaffordable Justice: The Failure of Mass Incarceration
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  - Explaining the Prison Boom
  - The Limited Crime-Reduction Impact of Mass Incarceration
  - Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration
- Conclusion

### Learning Questions

1. Why is crime a continuing problem in the United States?
2. Why did the get-tough approach begin several decades ago?
3. How effective is mass incarceration in reducing crime?
4. What are the collateral consequences of mass incarceration?

prisons and jails. Many criminologists say mass incarceration does more harm than good while helping only a little to lower the crime rate, if that. They advocate many types of other strategies, some involving the criminal justice system and some involving other efforts, to achieve this goal. These wide-ranging policies, programs, and practices are the subject of this book on how to prevent crime. To set the stage for discussing these strategies, this opening chapter critically examines the U.S. crime problem and policy of mass incarceration.

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## **THE AMOUNT AND COST OF CRIME**

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The United States has a lot of crime, but how much crime does it have? And how costly is it to its victims and to society as a whole? Answers to these important questions will help us understand the nature and seriousness of crime in American society.

### **The Amount of Crime**

Our knowledge of the amount of crime comes primarily from two sources. The first is the **Uniform Crime Reports (UCR)** system of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Police districts around the country transmit crime information to the FBI monthly. Police acquire their crime information mostly from reports by individuals of crimes they have experienced or of crimes they have witnessed. The FBI then compiles all the numbers it receives and issues an annual document in the fall called *Crime in the United States* (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/ucr-publications>). This document focuses on so-called **Part I crimes**, which include violent crime (homicide, aggravated assault, and rape) and property crime (burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson). The FBI reports the number of these crimes; the number of arrests for these crimes; and the gender, race, and age of those arrested. *Crime in the United States* also reports the number of arrests for **Part II crimes**, which include fraud, embezzlement, vandalism, prostitution, drug abuse, disorderly conduct, and other offenses. According to the UCR, more than 1.2 million violent crimes and nearly 7.2 million property crimes occurred in 2018, or more than 8.9 million crimes overall (FBI 2019).

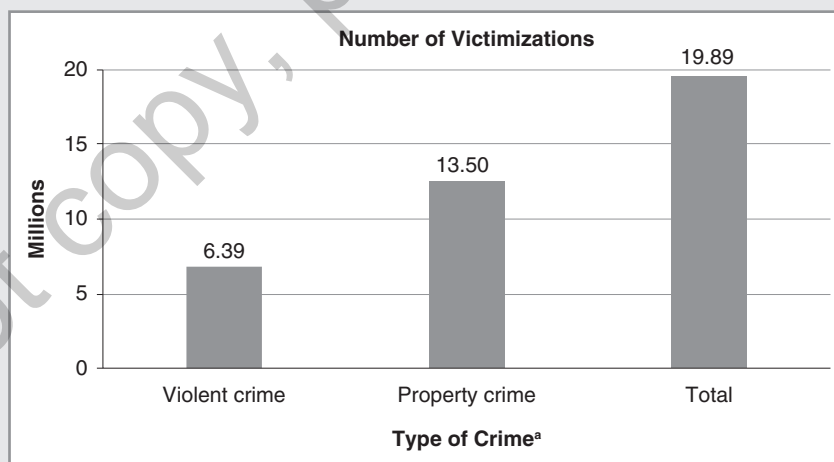
As high as it is, this figure underestimates the true number of crimes. A major reason for this is that almost 60% of all violent and property crime victims overall fail to report their crimes to the police. They may think the crime was a personal matter or that the police can do nothing to help them, they may feel their victimization was not very serious, or they may fear retaliation from an offender (Langton et al. 2012). These possible reasons aside, the bottom line is that much crime occurs that the police and thus the FBI never hear about. These unknown crimes are called **hidden crimes** or the **dark figure of crime**. Homicide data are fairly reliable, because almost all homicides do come to the attention of the police (from a witness report or discovery of a corpse), but other UCR crime data underestimate the actual number of offenses.

This problem leads criminologists to also consider data on the amount of crime from a second source of crime information, the **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)** of the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). The BJS surveys a random sample of people from tens of thousands of households nationwide every 6 months. Among other questions, these respondents are asked whether they have experienced various types of crimes within the past half year. These crimes include *violent crime* (aggravated and simple assault, rape and sexual assault, and robbery) and *property crime* (burglary, personal theft, and motor vehicle theft). The NCVS does not ask about commercial crime victimization such as shoplifting and store burglaries, and neither does it ask about homicide (because homicide victims lose their lives). Overall, though, the NCVS provides more accurate estimates than the UCR of the violent crime that individuals experience and the property crime that they or their households experience.

The NCVS reports that almost 20 million violent and property victimizations occurred in 2018 (see Figure 1.1). Most of these, some 13.3 million, were property offenses, while more than 5.6 million were violent offenses.

The NCVS also provides the **prevalence rate** for victimization, defined as the percentage of people 12 and older who experienced at least one victimization during the past year. For 2018, the prevalence rate for violent crime was 1.18%, meaning that 11.8 of every 1,000 people experienced at least one violent victimization. This rate translates to about 3.1 million people. Because most of these people were victims of simple assault,

**Figure 1.1** Number of Criminal Victimization, 2018



<sup>a</sup> Violent crime: rape/sexual assault, robbery, aggravated and simple assault; property crime: personal larceny, household burglary and larceny, motor vehicle theft

Source: Morgan and Oudekerk (2019).

the NCVS also reports the prevalence rate for serious violent crime (rape/sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault, but not simple assault). In 2018, this rate was 0.50% (or 50 of every 1,000 people), equal to more than 1.2 million victims of serious violent crime. Meanwhile, 7.27% of all households (equal to 9.1 million households) in 2018 experienced at least one property victimization.

Because many of these individuals and households experience more than one victimization annually, the total number of victimizations in 2018 reached almost 20 million, as reported in Figure 1.1. U.S. victimization rates for violent and property crime are higher than those in many of the world's democracies.

## The Cost of Crime

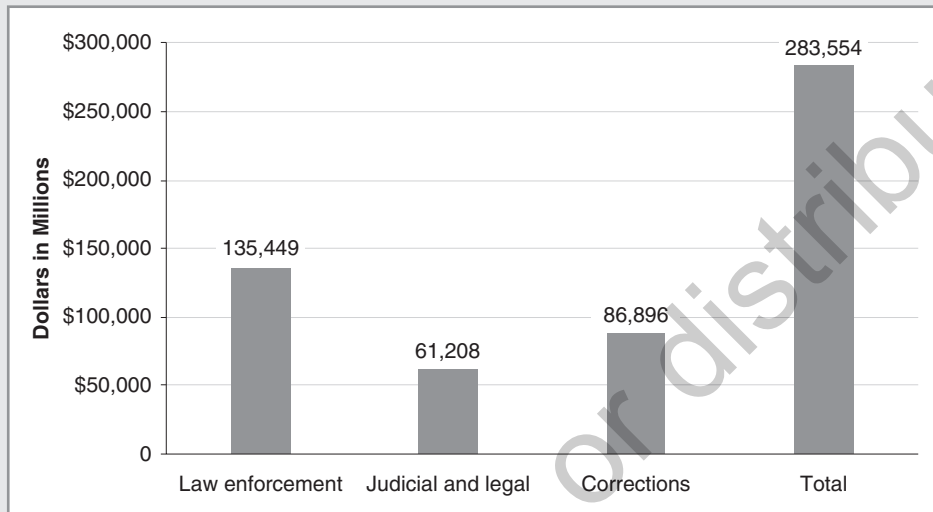
All these crimes are very costly for their victims. Here we should talk about three kinds of costs. The first cost involves *emotional health*. Crime victims often become fearful of additional victimization. Violent crime victims may limit their movements outside of home, and property crime victims may buy home security measures to reduce their chances of new victimization. Victims of rape, sexual assault, and other kinds of assault may experience many emotional effects, including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. The second cost involves *physical health*. Homicide victims lose their lives, and victims of nonfatal violent crime often suffer injuries, both serious and minor, that require them to seek medical care and to be hospitalized. Many books, studies, and reports describe in detail the emotional and physical harms that crime victims experience (Daigle 2018; Karmen 2016).

The third cost is *economic*. Violent crime victims may miss work because of their physical injuries or emotional trauma, and the families of homicide victims lose any earnings that the victim may have acquired had the homicide not occurred. Many violent crime victims also incur medical bills that are not totally covered by any medical insurance they may have. Property crime victims lose the value of whatever items are stolen from them; many do not have homeowner or rental insurance that covers all their losses. These tangible costs of criminal victimization are estimated at about \$100 billion annually (Wright and Vicneire 2010). Taking into account all these emotional, physical, and economic costs, it becomes very clear how costly crime is to Americans across the nation.

## The Cost of Criminal Justice

In addition to the cost of crime to victims, there is another huge cost, and that is the cost of the criminal justice system: police and other law enforcement, the criminal courts, and corrections (jails and prisons). The U.S. criminal justice system costs the federal, state, and local governments tens of billions of dollars annually. Using the latest figures available at the time of this writing, Figure 1.2 summarizes these costs for the three stages of the criminal justice system: *law enforcement*, *judicial and legal* (criminal courts), and *corrections* at all levels of government (federal, state, local) combined. These costs, more than \$283 billion annually, are staggering.

**Figure 1.2 The Economic Cost of the Criminal Justice System (2015 data)**



Source: Bronson (2018).

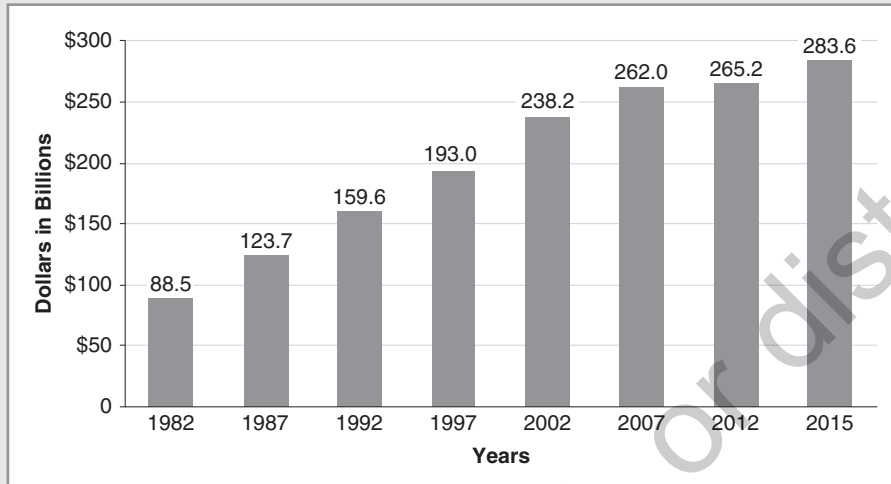
Note: Most recent data available at publication.

The increase in these costs is also staggering. Figure 1.3 shows how criminal justice expenditures have risen since the early 1980s, reflecting the nation's commitment to the get-tough approach. Adjusting for inflation, total expenditures in 2015 were 3 times greater than in 1982.

After the U.S. economy went into a deep recession in 2008, elected officials began taking a new look at the cost of criminal justice. In a rare moment of consensus, conservative and liberal politicians at the state and national levels began agreeing that too many Americans are behind bars (Keller 2015). Because incarceration is so expensive, many states began handing out sentences such as fines, probation, and community service to property offenders and other nonviolent offenders, such as people arrested for drug possession (Porter 2015). Texas, a state not known for being soft on crime, was the first state to implement such reforms on a large scale (Wilson 2014).

As Texas and the other sentencing-reform states recognize, public officials need to think beyond mass incarceration as they ponder how to reduce crime in the best ways possible. Fortunately, a wide body of social science research points to alternatives that would allow the nation to achieve greater “bang for the buck” in reducing crime as it spends its precious dollars. This body of research, of course, is the subject of this book.

**Figure 1.3 Criminal Justice Expenditures, 1982 to 2015 (billions of dollars; adjusted for inflation to 2015 real dollars)**



Source: Bronson (2018), Kyckelhahn (2011, 2015).

Note: Most recent data available at publication.

## **UNAFFORDABLE JUSTICE: THE FAILURE OF MASS INCARCERATION**

Because crime has dropped dramatically after peaking in the early 1990s, it is tempting to conclude that the get-tough approach produced the crime decline. If so, perhaps mass incarceration is working and the get-tough approach's huge costs are justified. Unfortunately, this cause-and-effect scenario is more myth than reality, for the get-tough approach has almost certainly *not* reduced crime beyond at most a small degree. If so, the huge costs of this approach are not very cost-effective. In fact, it makes more sense to consider them, as well as the get-tough approach underlying them, as very *cost-ineffective*.

This provocative conclusion reflects a large body of social science evidence pointing to the failure of the get-tough approach and mass incarceration to reduce crime significantly and cost-effectively. To quote the title of this section, this means that the United States currently has a situation of “unaffordable justice.” Mass incarceration and the get-tough approach are unaffordable not only for economic reasons but also because they have produced many types of social costs damaging the lives of millions of Americans, many of them people of color. Social science evidence again documents these social costs, which are termed **collateral consequences**.

To help reinforce why alternatives to mass incarceration are necessary, it will be useful to review two kinds of evidence: (1) the evidence on mass incarceration's failure to reduce crime significantly and cost-effectively and (2) the evidence on mass incarceration's collateral consequences. To provide a context for this review, we first discuss how and why the United States developed its get-tough approach and mass incarceration policy.

## The Growth of Incarceration

Once upon a time, the United States had incarceration rates that were about average for the world's democracies. This was before the early 1970s, which was when incarceration began exploding in the United States. Therein lies a tale that is worth recounting.

Before the 1970s, the U.S. prison incarceration rate (the number of prison inmates per 100,000 U.S. population) had been stable since the 1930s (Travis et al. 2014). The rate throughout this four-decade period hovered around 110 inmates per 100,000 population. As UCR-measured crime rates rose and fell somewhat at various times during this period, the incarceration rate chugged along, never changing by more than a very small amount from year to year. Even when the crime rate doubled during the 1960s, the incarceration rate did not rise. In fact, it did the opposite, falling from 117 at the beginning of that decade to 97 at the end of the decade.

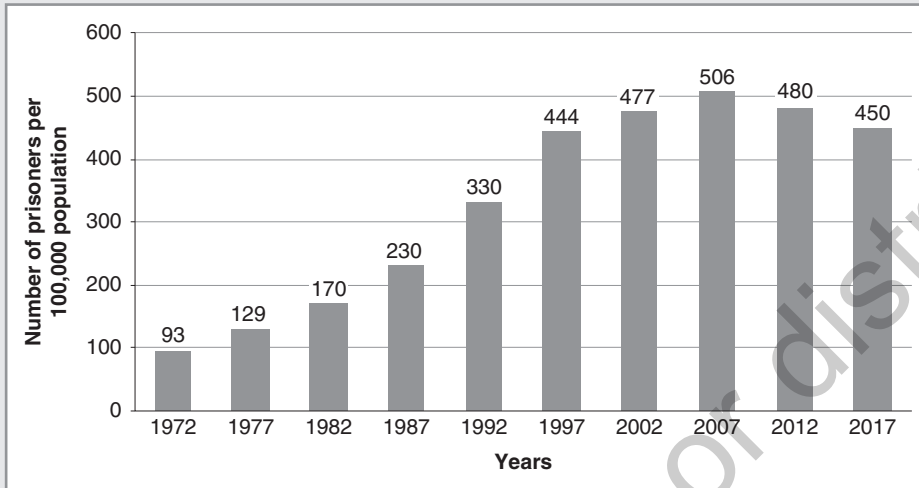
The U.S. incarceration rate of this early period was about average among the world's democracies: somewhat higher than many nations' rates but somewhat lower than other nations' rates. This was because the United States followed the same correctional policies as did the other democracies. These policies involved reasonable (i.e., not overly long) prison terms for the worst offenders and most dangerous criminals, along with the use of non-*carceral* (the adjective for *incarceration*) sentences whenever possible. In the area of correctional policy, the United States was not at all exceptional among the world's democracies.

This situation began to change during the 1970s. Although, as just noted, the incarceration rate declined somewhat during the 1960s even though crime doubled during the 1960s, incarceration rates began to climb after 1972 as crime continued to rise. As Figure 1.4 shows, the incarceration rate soared into the first decade of this century before declining a bit recently due to the prison reforms described earlier.

The United States had more than 2.2 million prison and jail inmates in 2017 (about 1.44 million state and federal prisoners and 745,200 jail inmates), compared with only 360,000 inmates in 1972 (Kaeble and Cowhig 2018). The current number translates to a rate of 698 inmates per 100,000 population and means that about 1% of American adults are now behind bars. Even with the recent slight decrease in incarceration, the current rate of 698 is still the highest of any nation in the world and almost 5 times higher than the rate for other Western democracies and 10 times higher than the rate for some democracies (see Figure 1.5).

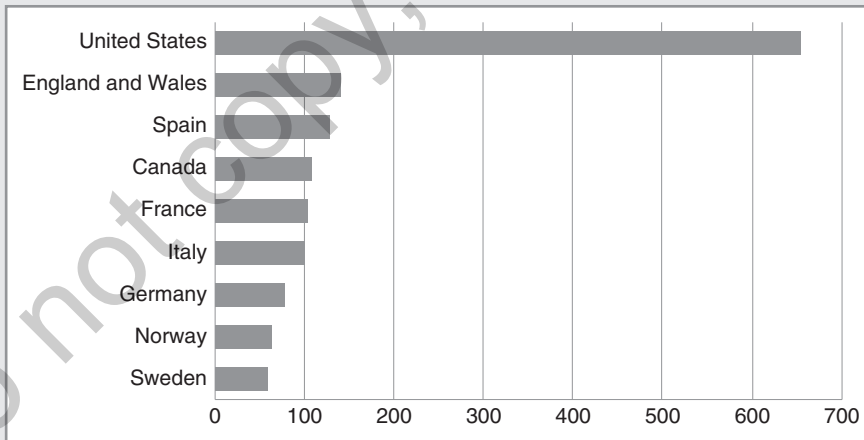
In fact, although the United States has only 5% of the world's population, it confines 25% of all the world's prisoners. This is true even though the U.S. crime rate is only

**Figure 1.4 Incarceration Rate, 1972 to 2016 (number of prisoners per 100,000 population)**



Source: Bronson and Carson (2019), Bureau of Justice Statistics (1982, 2018).

**Figure 1.5 Incarceration Rates for Selected Western Democracies (number of inmates per 100,000 population)**



Source: International Centre for Prison Studies (2019).



about average or perhaps slightly higher than average among democracies. A report by the National Research Council underscores the exceptional nature of the U.S. prison boom: “The growth in incarceration rates in the United States over the past 40 years is historically unprecedented and internationally unique” (Travis et al. 2014:2).

In addition to its 2.2 million prison and jail inmates, the United States has another 3.8 million American adults on probation and 870,000 on parole. The total number of adults under *correctional supervision*—in prison or jail or on probation or parole—exceeds 6.7 million (Kaeble and Cowhig 2018). This number equals about 3% of all adults, a percentage that is again far, far higher than any other nation.

## Explaining the Prison Boom

The terms **prison boom** and **incarceration boom** are commonly used to describe the huge increase in incarceration since the 1970s. Why did the prison boom occur? An immediate answer is that the prison boom resulted from rising crime during the 1970s. Because crime was rising, correctional policy became more punitive and the get-tough approach developed. This approach involved mandatory imprisonment and mandatory minimum prison sentences for a variety of crimes and, more generally, longer prison terms than were imposed previously (Pfaff 2017). It is fair to say that the 1970s’ rising crime rate created the impetus for this change in correctional policy and thus for the prison boom.

However, the situation is more complicated than this simple account suggests, because the get-tough approach and prison boom were *not* inevitable consequences of the rising crime rate. Historically speaking, rising crime sometimes produces rising incarceration, and sometimes it does *not* produce rising incarceration. In this regard, recall that U.S. incarceration decreased somewhat during the 1960s even though crime rose during the 1960s. During that decade, the United States chose to continue to follow the rehabilitation ideal guiding correctional policy. Since the 1970s, crime rates rose and fell at various times, and yet incarceration continued to rise steadily before its recent slight decline. These patterns suggest that there is no clear link between crime rates and incarceration rates (Raphael 2009). As the National Research Council report cited earlier explained, “Over the four decades when incarceration rates steadily rose, U.S. crime rates showed no clear trend: the rate of violent crime rose, then fell, rose again, then declined sharply. The best single proximate explanation of the rise in incarceration is not rising crime rates, but the policy choices made by legislators to greatly increase the use of imprisonment as a response to crime” (Travis et al. 2014:3). As this explanation suggests, the rising crime rate of the 1970s may have indeed led to the get-tough approach and prison boom, but this consequence was by no means inevitable.

Evidence for this conclusion comes from the experience of other democracies. Crime rate trends in most of these nations mirrored the U.S. trend: Crime rates rose from the 1960s into the mid-1990s. Even so, incarceration rates in these nations generally did not rise, and some nations’ rates even declined (Lappi-Seppälä 2008).

In the face of rising crime rates, then, the United States consciously chose to follow a more punitive correctional policy, while other democracies chose not to do so. This history led criminologist Michael Tonry (2007:3) to observe, “Any assumption or hypothesis, therefore, that there is a simple, common, or invariant relationship between crime patterns that befall a country and the number of people it confines is wrong. Faced with similar crime trends, different countries react in different ways.” Reflecting this argument, criminologist William Spelman (2009:73) says that “nothing was inevitable about the prison buildup in the United States” because crime could have been “dealt with through alternative means.”

Because the United States followed a different path than other democracies in dealing with rising crime after the 1960s, the key question then becomes *why* the United States made this choice. Criminologists’ answer to this question highlights the role played by racial prejudice (Gottschalk 2006; Hinton 2016; Simon 2007). According to this account, Richard Nixon and other Republican Party officials used racially coded, alarmist statements to paint African Americans as violent criminals in an effort to win votes from fearful whites (Travis et al. 2014). The news media covered these statements heavily and also carried many stories about violent crime committed by African Americans against whites. These developments aroused whites’ racial prejudices, heightened public concern about crime, and created an atmosphere that led to the get-tough approach and the prison boom. During the 1980s, politicians’ statements and news media coverage about crack cocaine similarly highlighted African American involvement. This racialized treatment provoked harsh sentencing of drug offenders, contributing further to mass incarceration (Alexander 2012; Mauer 2006; Provine 2007).

In sum, the growing crime rate of the 1960s and 1970s set the stage for the get-tough approach, prison boom, and mass incarceration in the United States, but this result was not inevitable, as other nations reacted to their own growing crime rates quite differently. Racial prejudice led the United States to adopt a more punitive reaction to its growing crime rate, and this reaction in turn led to the prison boom and mass incarceration.

Beyond this regrettable origin of the prison boom, mass incarceration has proven damaging in the ways mentioned earlier. To recall, these problems include the following:

- Mass incarceration has not reduced crime beyond at most a small degree.
- The small impact of mass incarceration on the crime rate has not been cost-effective.
- Mass incarceration has created collateral consequences affecting millions of Americans, with a disproportionate effect on African Americans and Latinos.

The next section discusses the limited crime-reduction impact of mass incarceration and this limited impact’s huge expense, the first two problems just listed. After discussing these problems, we then summarize the evidence on collateral consequences.

## The Limited Crime-Reduction Impact of Mass Incarceration

In assessing whether and to what degree mass incarceration has led to the crime decline of the past few decades, we first need to introduce two criminological concepts, *incapacitation* and *deterrence*. **Incapacitation** refers to any impact of mass incarceration (or imprisonment generally) on the crime rate because convicted offenders are behind bars and not able to commit crimes against the public. If mass incarceration has reduced the crime rate, then, it may be because mass incarceration prevents more than 2.2 million offenders every year from being free to victimize the public. If so, mass incarceration may have a significant *incapacitation effect*. Meanwhile, **deterrence** refers to any impact on the crime rate because potential offenders do not want to risk being arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. If deterrence works, longer and more certain prison terms should deter potential offenders from committing crime.

With so many people behind bars, it might make sense to think that mass incarceration must be having a strong incapacitation effect. Because almost no one wants to go to prison, it also might make sense to think that mass incarceration should have a strong deterrent effect. However, certain conceptual issues suggest that any incapacitation or deterrent effect of mass incarceration must be small at best. We discuss these issues for incapacitation here but reserve our discussion of deterrence issues for the next chapter's review of cognitive processes and criminal behavior.

### Conceptual Issues Regarding Incapacitation

Four issues point to only a small incapacitation effect, if that, of mass incarceration. A first issue is one of numbers, or rather two sets of numbers: the number of annual crimes and the number of people incarcerated for these crimes. Simply put, only a small fraction of all serious violent and property crimes leads to someone going to prison. This situation is called the **funnel effect** in criminal justice. Many crimes enter the top of the funnel, and only a few offenders enter prison at the bottom of the funnel (Walker 2015).

For example, in 2017 the United States experienced almost 15.4 million violent and property crime felonies according to the NCVS (rape/sexual assault, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, theft) and UCR (homicide) (FBI 2018; Morgan and Truman 2018). Yet only about 244,000 people entered state prisons that year for these felonies (Bronson and Carson 2019). Doing a little math, about 1.6% of all the felonies led to someone entering state prison, meaning that about 98.4% of the felonies did *not* result in imprisonment. Because each new prisoner has committed an estimated 20 felonies per year on average (Piquero and Blumstein 2007), the new state prisoners in 2017 may have accounted for about 30% to 32% of annual felonies. This new figure still implies that some 70% of felonies do *not* result in anyone going to prison. If at least 7 out of every 10 felonies do not lead to prison incarceration, the incapacitation effect of mass incarceration cannot be very high, as most offenders are still not behind bars and still committing new crimes.

A second issue concerns the fact that the worst, *chronic offenders* (also called *habitual offenders*) are already likely to be imprisoned, because they commit so many crimes that they eventually get arrested and incarcerated. As the prison boom locked up so many more criminals, lower-level intermittent offenders increasingly became the new people entering prison. This means that any incapacitation effect of mass incarceration became smaller over time because new prisoners were more likely to have committed fewer offenses. As criminologist Samuel Walker (2015:172) observes, “As we lock up more people, we quickly skim off the really high-rate offenders and begin incarcerating more of the less serious offenders. Because they average far fewer crimes per year, . . . we get progressively lower returns in crime reduction.”

A third issue involves the fact that groups of offenders commit much crime, particularly drug crimes. If one of these offenders is imprisoned, the remaining offenders are still free to continue committing their group crimes. They may even recruit a new person to replace their incarcerated colleague. This so-called *replacement effect* reduces any incapacitation effect for these group crimes. For this reason, incarceration may actually have no incapacitation effect for drug crimes (Piquero and Blumstein 2007).

The final issue involves the age of prisoners. Because the get-tough approach involved longer prison terms, the average age of prisoners is now much older than before mass incarceration developed. However, offenders tend to “age out” of crime. Criminal offending peaks when people are in their late teens and early 20s and then declines as they grow older (Goldstein 2015), with many inmates staying in prison far beyond the prime offending ages. These prisoners no longer pose a threat to society because they are simply too old to be committing new crimes. Criminologist Daniel Nagin (1998:364) calls these inmates “poor candidates for incarceration from an incapacitation perspective.”

All these issues mean that any incapacitation effect of mass incarceration should be modest at best. Research on the actual impact of mass incarceration on the crime rate confirms this pessimistic appraisal, as we will now discuss.

### **The Actual Impact of Mass Incarceration: Small and Expensive**

Many criminological studies assess the impact of mass incarceration on the crime rate. Much of this research focuses on the huge drop in U.S. crime beginning in the early 1990s and lasting for the next two decades. Because the incarceration rate was climbing during this period, many observers said that mass incarceration was playing a large role in the crime drop. However, several kinds of evidence suggest otherwise (Travis et al. 2014).

First, even though incarceration rates rose constantly after the 1970s through the end of the 2000s, crime did not constantly decline during this period. Instead, it rose in the 1970s, fell in the early 1980s, rose again in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and then began plummeting. These trends show that incarceration rates and crime rates do not always track in the way they should if rising incarceration is reducing crime. The fact that incarceration rates and crime rates finally began tracking in the way they “should” after the early 1990s thus does not prove that crime was falling because incarceration was rising.

Second, state incarceration rates and crime rates during the 1990s also did not track well. In fact, crime rates tended to decline *less* in the states where incarceration rates rose the most (Gainsborough and Mauer 2000). Conversely, the states with smaller increases

in their incarceration rates tended to have the largest crime declines. During the 2000s, incarceration and crime rates again did not track well. Three states—California, New Jersey, and New York—decreased their prison populations by about 25% and still saw their crime rates decline more than the national average (Mauer and Ghandnoosh 2014).

Third, Canada's crime rate also fell after the early 1990s, even though Canada did *not* increase its incarceration rate (Webster and Doob 2007). Canada's experience suggests that some other set of factors was leading to the crime drop in North America during the 1990s, and it even suggests that crime would have declined even if the United States had not been practicing mass incarceration (Zimring 2006).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, several highly technical studies find that mass incarceration has only a small impact on crime and that this impact is very expensive for the small amount of crime reduced. These studies find that a 10% increase in the national incarceration rate produces, because of deterrence or more likely incapacitation, a decrease in crime rate between only about 1% and 4% (Levitt 1996; Marvell and Moody 1994; Spelman 2006; Western 2006). Other studies conclude that rising incarceration actually has no effect on the crime rate (DeFina and Arvanites 2002; Kovandzic and Vieraitis 2006).

If a 10% increase in the incarceration rate produces at most a crime decline of between 1% and 4%, this conclusion can be used to construct a cost-benefit analysis of mass incarceration and crime rates. For example, there are now almost 1.5 million state and federal prisoners. If we increase this number by 10%, or nearly 150,000 inmates, we can reduce crime between 1% and 4%. Because each prisoner costs a national average of about \$31,300 for all prison-related expenses (Mai and Subramanian 2017), adding 160,000 inmates would cost the state and federal governments almost \$5 billion annually. Prison overcrowding would necessitate the building of new prisons to house these 150,000 inmates. If 150 new prisons with 1,000 beds were built at \$100 million each, construction costs would total \$15 billion (assuming simplistically that this could be done without construction loans and their interest charges). Thus, an expenditure of many billions of dollars would be needed to achieve a crime decline of at most 4% and perhaps as little as 1%. This is not a cost-effective impact.

Focusing on the 1990s, criminologists conclude that the rising incarceration of that decade accounted for at most one-fourth of the crime decline during that decade and perhaps as little as one-tenth (Rosenfeld 2006; Spelman 2006; Western 2006). This limited impact came at such a high economic cost that these criminologists call incarceration “an incredibly inefficient means of reducing crime” and say that mass incarceration takes dollars away from crime prevention measures involving education and employment opportunities and other areas that would reduce crime more effectively and cost-efficiently (Rosenfeld 2006; Spelman 2006:124). In this regard, one researcher calculated that mass incarceration prevented 100 homicides annually during the 1990s at an annual corrections cost of \$1 billion, or \$10 million for each prevented homicide. Commenting on this high cost, the researcher asked, “Would we be better off if the \$1 billion were spent on preschool programs, parent training, vocational training, drug treatment, and other promising prevention programs?” (Rosenfeld 2006:151).

Drawing on the kinds of evidence just presented and on its own new analysis of data since 2000, a report by the Brennan Center for Justice at the New York University

School of Law found that increasing incarceration actually “has had no effect on the drop in violent crime in the past 24 years” and has accounted for “*less than 1 percent* of the decline in property crime this century” (Roeder et al. 2015:15; emphasis in original). The report concluded that “incarceration in the U.S. has reached a level where it no longer provides a meaningful crime reduction benefit” (p. 15).

## **Collateral Consequences of Mass Incarceration**

We have seen that mass incarceration reduces crime by at most a very small amount, and perhaps not at all, and does so at an incredibly high economic cost. As noted earlier, mass incarceration also has social costs called *collateral consequences* (Kirk and Wakefield 2018). These consequences reinforce the need to develop alternatives to mass incarceration.

### **The Opportunity Cost of Mass Incarceration**

*Opportunity cost* is an economics term that refers to the loss of some potential gain or advantage when one alternative is pursued instead of other, more promising and cost-effective alternatives. Mass incarceration has a huge opportunity cost. The U.S. correctional system costs some \$87 billion annually and imprisons Americans at a rate almost 5 times higher than any other democracy and 10 times higher than some democracies (see Figure 1.5). Because the United States imprisons many hundreds of thousands of offenders more than it needs to imprison to ensure public safety, mass incarceration costs billions of dollars more annually than it needs to cost. These dollars could instead be spent far more wisely on the crime prevention policies, programs, and practices that are this book’s focus. Because incarceration reduces crime by at most a very small amount, every dollar spent on prevention strategies reduces crime by a much larger amount than every dollar spent on corrections (Greenwood 2006). In short, mass incarceration has diverted much money from efforts that would be more effective in preventing crime.

### **Families and Communities**

Mass incarceration harms families and communities (Kirk and Wakefield 2018). Recall that new prisoners today are more likely than those in the past to be lower-level intermittent offenders. These prisoners are more likely than their earlier counterparts to be suitable spouses, partners, and parents. The loved ones they leave behind when they enter prison or jail suffer from the loss of their companionship and influence. More than 1.5 million children have had a parent behind bars, and the experience of having a parent in prison affects these children tremendously. They are more likely to commit delinquency, to have problems in school, and to experience anxiety and other psychological problems.

Urban communities also suffer from the imprisonment of so many of their residents (mostly young males) and from the return to their streets of offenders from prison. Some 600,000 prisoners are released back to their communities every year (Carson and Golinelli 2014). They arrive home with few prospects for employment, mental health problems, and alcohol and/or other drug problems. Many have a history

of being physically and/or sexually abused. This wave of released prisoners adds to their communities' poverty and unemployment rates and weakens them in other ways. To quote the subtitle of a book on this subject, "Mass incarceration makes disadvantaged neighborhoods worse" (Clear 2007).

## Racial and Ethnic Inequality

More than 3% of African American males are currently in prison, a figure that rises to almost 7% of African American males in their early 30s (Carson and Anderson 2016). About 1% of Latino males of all ages are in prison. By contrast, only 0.5% of white males of all ages are in prison. African American males are thus 6 times more likely than white males to be incarcerated in prison, and Latino males are twice as likely to be incarcerated. Although women compose only about 7% of all prisoners, African American women are still 2.2 times more likely than white women to be incarcerated, and Latinas are 1.3 times more likely to be incarcerated. As these comparisons suggest, the get-tough approach and mass incarceration, and perhaps especially the legal war against drugs, have disproportionately affected African Americans and Latinos (Alexander 2012; Tonry and Melewski 2008). African Americans use illegal drugs at an overall rate equal to or lower than whites but are far more likely than whites to be arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for drug offenses.

In addition to subjecting so many African Americans and Latinos to the corrections system, mass incarceration has other racial/ethnic impacts. First, because so many African Americans and Latinos now have prison records, mass incarceration makes it more difficult for them to find employment and thus worsens their race-related economic inequality (Western 2006).

Second, almost every state prohibits convicted felons from voting while in prison, and many states prohibit them from voting even after release from prison. This problem is called **felony disenfranchisement** (Manza and Uggen 2008). Some 6.1 million Americans cannot vote for these reasons, compared with fewer than 1.2 million in 1980. This problem again has a disproportionate racial impact, as nearly 8% of African Americans (equal to 2.2 million people) cannot vote because of their criminal records. In a few states, more than one-fifth of African American adults cannot vote (Chung 2016). Because African Americans are very likely to vote for Democratic Party candidates, their felony disenfranchisement has probably affected the outcomes of several U.S. Senate elections and even the 2000 presidential election that Republican George W. Bush won by beating Democrat Al Gore in Florida by an extremely narrow margin. Because disenfranchisement marginalizes ex-convicts and contributes to their social isolation and alienation, it may also make them more likely to commit new crimes (Uggen and Manza 2004), a result that again disproportionately involves African American offenders.

In view of the high cost of mass incarceration, its low or null impact on the crime rate, and its many collateral consequences, a reasonable alternative to the get-tough approach is sorely needed. The public health model, discussed in the next chapter, offers such an alternative. This model holds great promise for achieving crime reduction more effectively and cost-efficiently than the get-tough approach and without collateral consequences.

## CONCLUSION

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Crime continues to be a significant problem in the United States despite a large crime drop since the early 1990s. The nation spends nearly \$300 billion annually dealing with crime. By following its get-tough approach, the United States has implemented a policy of mass incarceration that is unique in the democratic world. Mass incarceration is not cost-effective and has incurred many collateral consequences.

A final word is in order before moving on. As you probably realize, this book focuses on violent crime and property crime, as do most discussions of crime prevention. Along with certain other offenses such as illegal gun possession and illegal drug use and selling, violent and property crime are commonly called **street crime** (a term that includes violent and property crimes that do not literally occur on a street) or **conventional crime**. These terms distinguish these offenses from another type of crime, commonly called **white-collar crime**, that is committed by corporations; physicians, attorneys, and other professionals; and many other individuals in the course of their occupations.

Space limitations prevent a detailed discussion of white-collar crime, which is covered fully in other books (Payne 2017; Van Slyke et al. 2016). Still, the cost of white-collar crime to American society is considerable. Some estimates put the annual economic cost of white-collar crime at almost \$600 billion and the annual number of deaths from white-collar crime (e.g., from dangerous or unhealthy workplaces) at almost 100,000 (Barkan 2018). Recalling from our earlier discussion that the annual tangible cost of street crime is “only” \$100 billion, it becomes clear that white-collar crime is far more costly in economic terms than street crime. The annual number of estimated deaths from white-collar crime also far exceeds the number of homicides, which was 17,284 in 2017.

In both these respects, white-collar crime is far more costly to the nation than street crime. Because the nation is much more concerned about street crime than white-collar crime, though, most studies and discussions of crime prevention focus on street crime. Reflecting this focus, this book also concerns itself with the prevention of street crime, while acknowledging the need to also prevent and reduce white-collar crime.

### SUMMARY

1. The costs of crime and victimization continue to be considerable even though the crime rate is much lower than its peak in the early 1990s.
2. The United States spends nearly \$300 billion annually on the components of its criminal justice system: law enforcement, the judicial system, and corrections. Crime victims incur \$100 billion in tangible costs annually.
3. To fight crime, the United States has followed a get-tough approach since the 1970s involving longer and more certain prison sentences for violent and property crime and for drug offenses.



4. This approach has led to a rate of incarceration that is the highest in the world and at least 5 times higher than that of other democracies.
5. Mass incarceration has only a small impact on the crime rate, and this impact is not cost-effective.
6. Mass incarceration also has caused many types of collateral consequences involving negative impacts for families, children, and communities. These impacts have fallen disproportionately on African Americans and Latinos.

## KEY TERMS

collateral consequences 8	hidden crimes 4	Part II crimes 4
conventional crime 18	incapacitation 13	prevalence rate 5
dark figure of crime 4	incarceration boom 11	prison boom 11
deterrence 13	mass incarceration 3	street crime 18
felony disenfranchisement 17	National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) 5	Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) 4
funnel effect 13	Part I crimes 4	white-collar crime 18
get-tough approach 3		

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