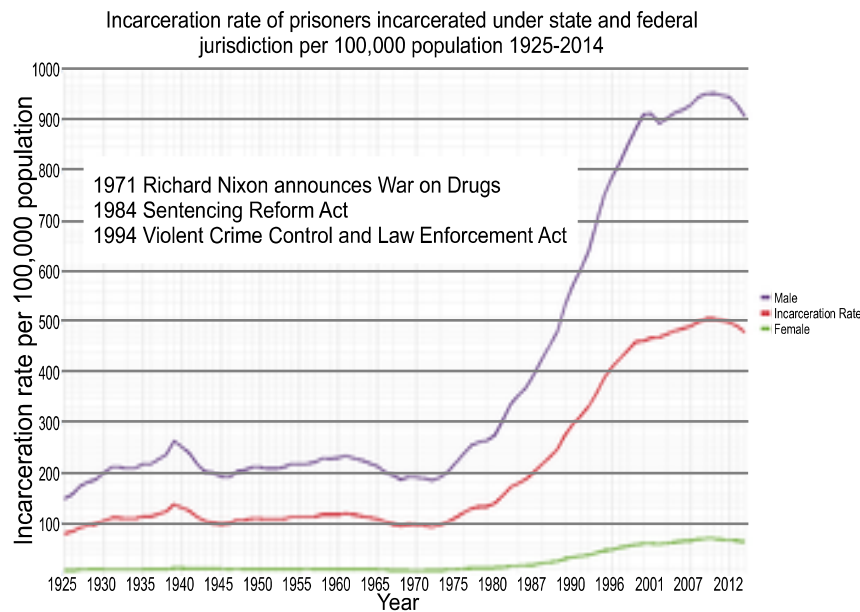


Getting serious about criminal justice

Social Studies/Reading Comprehension



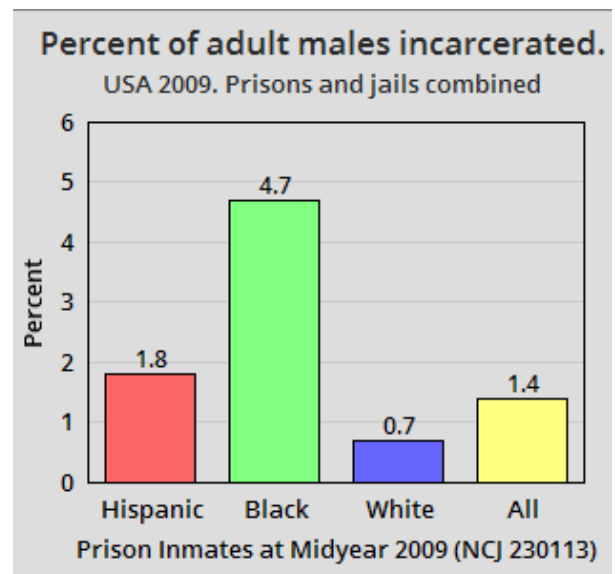
News Currents, April 11, 2016

On March 30th of this year, President Obama went out to dinner with former federal prisoners. During this dinner, the president asked these former prisoners how their lives had changed after having their sentences commuted. Earlier in the day, President Obama had commuted 61 federal sentences for non-violent drug offenders. This makes a total of 248 federal sentences that Obama has commuted during his seven years if office – more than the last six presidents combined. [By October 26, 2016, that number had risen to 872 commutations.]

These commutations are part of a nationwide movement against the artificially long sentences handed down under mandatory minimum sentencing laws. While some Republican politicians and pundits have complained about these commutations, many people across the political spectrum are tired of mandatory minimum sentences. In fact, a lot of people want change all across the U.S. criminal justice system.

Today, the U.S. incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. According to the Bureau of Prison Statistics, more than 1.5 million people are currently serving time in federal and state prisons. This works out to 471 out of every 100,000 citizens, as you can see on the graph above. Experts say this growth in incarceration was fueled almost entirely by one movement. President Richard Nixon first declared the War on Drugs, which led to stiffer penalties for illegal drug use, possession and sales. In the 1980s, the War on Drugs gained force as a national policy. The first mandatory minimum sentencing laws were passed in 1984 during the term of President Reagan. These laws led to higher imprisonment rates for African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, especially men. However, the sharpest rise in incarceration came about in the 1990s. Federal and state prison populations rose by more than 670,000 during Bill Clinton's eight years in office; especially after the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994.

According to experts, the major effect of the “War on Drugs” has been an exponential rise in the U.S. Prison population – without significantly impacting drug use,



and drug sales. According to some reports, 2/3 of arrests in the last 30 years have been of people with no history of violence, and are mostly for using or possessing drugs, not selling them. President Obama thinks incarceration rates have gotten out of control and wants this to change. Republican Senator Rand Paul has joined the president's efforts to end or amend minimum mandatory sentencing.

Last year, a bipartisan Senate committee met to talk about these important issues. The committee proposed a bill called the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2015. This bill calls for an end to mandatory minimum sentences, and increases funding for treatment facilities so that nonviolent drug users have more chance to avoid prison. But Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has not yet even said if he will bring this act up for voting – or even debate – this year.

Questions:

1) What does “federal” mean? _____

2) What does the word “commute” mean? _____

3) Why are all these commutations for federal rather than state crimes? _____

4) What do mandatory minimum sentencing laws say? _____

5) Why do the opponents of mandatory minimums think the laws are unfair? _____

6) From the graph, what was the rate in 1965? _____

7) What percent increase is this over 50 years? _____

8) What was growth in incarceration fueled almost entirely by? _____

9) Why do some advocates say the “War on Drugs” was discriminatory? _____

10) How might the difference in how groups use and sell drugs affect arrest rates? _____

11) What do you learn about the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994? _____

12) How is ending or amending minimum mandatory sentencing consistent with conservative ideals? _____