



# Speak Out Now

[speakoutsocialists.org](http://speakoutsocialists.org)   [bayarea@speakoutsocialists.org](mailto:bayarea@speakoutsocialists.org)   (510) 343-9105

## A Nation of Mass Incarceration

The US has the largest prison population in the world. With five percent of the world's population, it has 25 percent of the world's prisoners, half a million more than China, which has five times the population. There are about 2.3 million prisoners in the US and about seven million either locked up or on parole or probation. No other society in human history has imprisoned so many of its citizens.

Under capitalism, prison has always been used as a tool of the ruling class to both dominate and exploit the working class. In early British capitalism, as the factory owners needed more laborers, they created laws that punished people for being poor, sentencing them to work in factories in slave-like conditions, the earliest versions of modern-day prisons.

And in the US, soon after the Civil War, the former slave owners needed to get people back on their farms to be agricultural workers. Through violence and terror, they were able to pass "Jim Crow" laws all over the south, imposing restrictions on the black population. These laws were a form of terror on the former slaves, a way to deprive them of land and jobs, forcing them into two horrible paths – to go back to work on the farms of the former slave owners, or resist and be thrown into prison and do forced labor.

Today, the role of mass incarceration is a little different. The reason the US has such a high prison population has nothing to do with crime. US crime rates are about equal to most other European countries, which have much lower prison populations. For the US, prison is the dumping ground for the unemployed and the poor.

The massive increase in the prison population happened at the same time as record numbers of job losses and long-term poverty throughout the country. Since the 1970s, millions of workers lost their jobs or were forced to get paid less as factories closed across the country and many companies moved production to places with cheaper labor. Since then, workers have had to take on multiple jobs to get by. The wages were so low that most families needed both parents to be

working. But also the only way working families could survive was to take on huge debts.

But there remained millions of people in some of the worst conditions, unable to find work, living in extreme poverty. For this section of the working class, often the poorest and the least educated – there weren't many options. People could either join the military or try to make a living any way they could, turning to the streets, drugs, and crime.

Between 1972 to 2006, the prison population grew from 300,000 inmates to over 2.3 million. Today, about 30 percent of federal prisoners were unemployed during the time of their arrest, and over 70 percent had an income of less than \$24,000 per year. About 70 percent of all prisoners have not completed high school. The vast majority of these new prisoners were convicted for non-violent or drug-related crimes.

The growing mass incarceration is far worse for the black population. Black men are sentenced to prison seven times more than white men. More than half of all black men without a high school diploma go to prison at some point in their lives. One out of every three black men are expected to go to prison at some point in their lifetime. There are now more black men in prison, on probation or on parole than were enslaved in 1850, before the Civil War began.

The mass media and politicians paint a picture that incarceration is the result of an individual's bad decisions – ignoring the social conditions that push people down paths that lead to their incarceration. When corporations employ as few people as possible, and keep our wages low – they create a permanent mass of people unemployed and living in poverty. And mass incarceration is nothing more than the place to dump these sections of society that have been denied employment and any legal means of survival.

In order to make profits, capitalism needs poverty and unemployment. And so it will always have crimes of need and survival – and prison will always be the dumping ground of the poor and unemployed.