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SURVEILLANCE BEYOND THE PRISON SYSTEM

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Abstract

The modern prison industrial complex increasingly extends beyond the physical confines of correctional facilities, penetrating communities through supervision and surveillance technology. Justified historically as a means of economic development for low-income areas and as a low-cost alternative to incarceration. Mechanisms such as probation, parole, and electronic monitoring are used to reinforce socio-economic stratification. This paper, relying on national correctional data, examines how the criminal justice system generates profit from the supervision fees and fines while increasing surveillance.

Low-income individuals are funneled into perpetual cycles of court intervention and re-incarceration through state-level policy, systemic disinvestment in infrastructure, mass surveillance and punitive sentencing. Through analysis of state initiatives and private financial incentives, this paper showcases that modern supervision functions not as a true alternative, but as an expansion of the prison industry, further diminishing labor power and civil autonomy.

Keywords

Prison Industrial Complex, Mass Incarceration, Community Supervision, Electronic Monitoring, Surveillance

The prison industrial complex, like other similar concepts (military industrial complex), refers to an interconnected network of economic interests between the public sector, the government, and private sector actors like for profit prison systems, construction companies, and other companies that profit from incarceration or the existence of the prison system. Mark Jay defines mass incarceration as: "… been about containing, stigmatizing, and exploiting the poorest sectors of the working class." (Jay, 2019)[1] This has been the guiding principle behind the prison industrial complex, perhaps not out of necessary maliciousness but from economic expediency.

Historically increases in incarceration and crime prevention targeted minority communities. Whether by design or happenstance this targeting had reverberating effects, decreasing overall economic opportunities for people detained and for the communities they came from or lived in (usually one and the same). This is true in several ways. Jay (2019) covers some aspects including: the creation of jails and prisons is often detrimental to communities and does not provide the job opportunities promised prior to construction. The existence and unequal

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application of criminal justice also has the added effect of decreasing wages and labor power, when disruption of the status quo leads to economic loss and imprisonment, negotiating power is not in the hands of the worker.

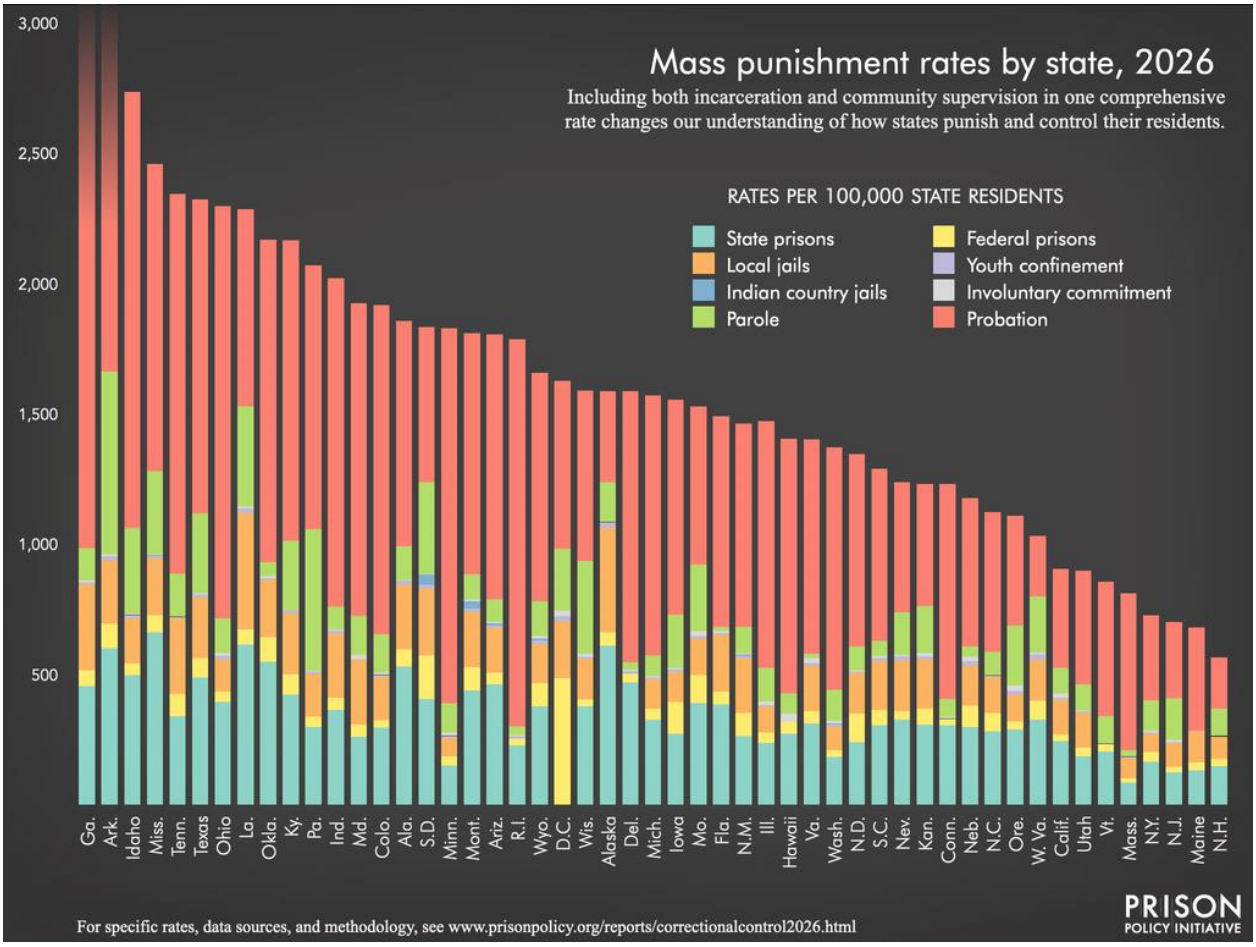


Figure 1. Mass punishment rates by state, 2026. Reprinted from *Punishment Beyond Prisons 2026: Incarceration and Supervision by State*, by L. Wang, 2026, Prison Policy Initiative (https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/correctionalcontrol2026.html). CC BY-NC 4.0.

According to state-by-state data compiled by Wang (2026), most imprisoned individuals are found in the South or largely rural areas like Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. A combination of the historical creation of the policing system in the south being derived from slave catching, and the fact that the prison system has been pitched as an economic boon to jobless communities. With manufacturing gone offshore and agriculture the domain of big agricultural companies, prisons always present themselves as job makers to the communities they build in.

As public perception regarding corrections and incarceration changed so too have the tools and methods used in the prison industrial complex. In addition to the money made from prison construction, private prison fees, and prison labor, there is now the more "humane option": community supervision. With technology allowing for the tracking and observing of nonincarcerated law breakers, companies now have a new stream of revenue. Mark Jay's example of the fees and fines associated with the privilege of not being imprisoned shows just how insidious the profit drive is in the prison system. "Electronic monitoring is widely marketed as an inexpensive alternative to incarceration, but less noted is that it is not inexpensive for the people often charged for their own shackles. These fees are often "cripplingly high; for example, one private, for-profit GPS monitoring company reportedly charges supervisees $300 per month, plus a $179.50 setup fee, for their court-ordered GPS monitoring. Supervisees who fail to pay the fees are sent back to jail." (Jay, 2019)

Federal funding for institutional care for the mentally ill being slashed in the '60s and '70s is widely acknowledged as the catalyst for the mass incarceration shift. As the so-called mentally unfit were left to live on the streets, these people often accounted for the detainees from the state level initiative we cover next. (Jay, 2019) Three strike laws and similar state level initiatives helped escalate the rate of incarceration across the nation (at the state level). Broken Glass Policies helped zero in on "bad" communities that needed closer observation to boot. We can observe this in the "State policy drives mass incarceration" graph (Wang, 2024).

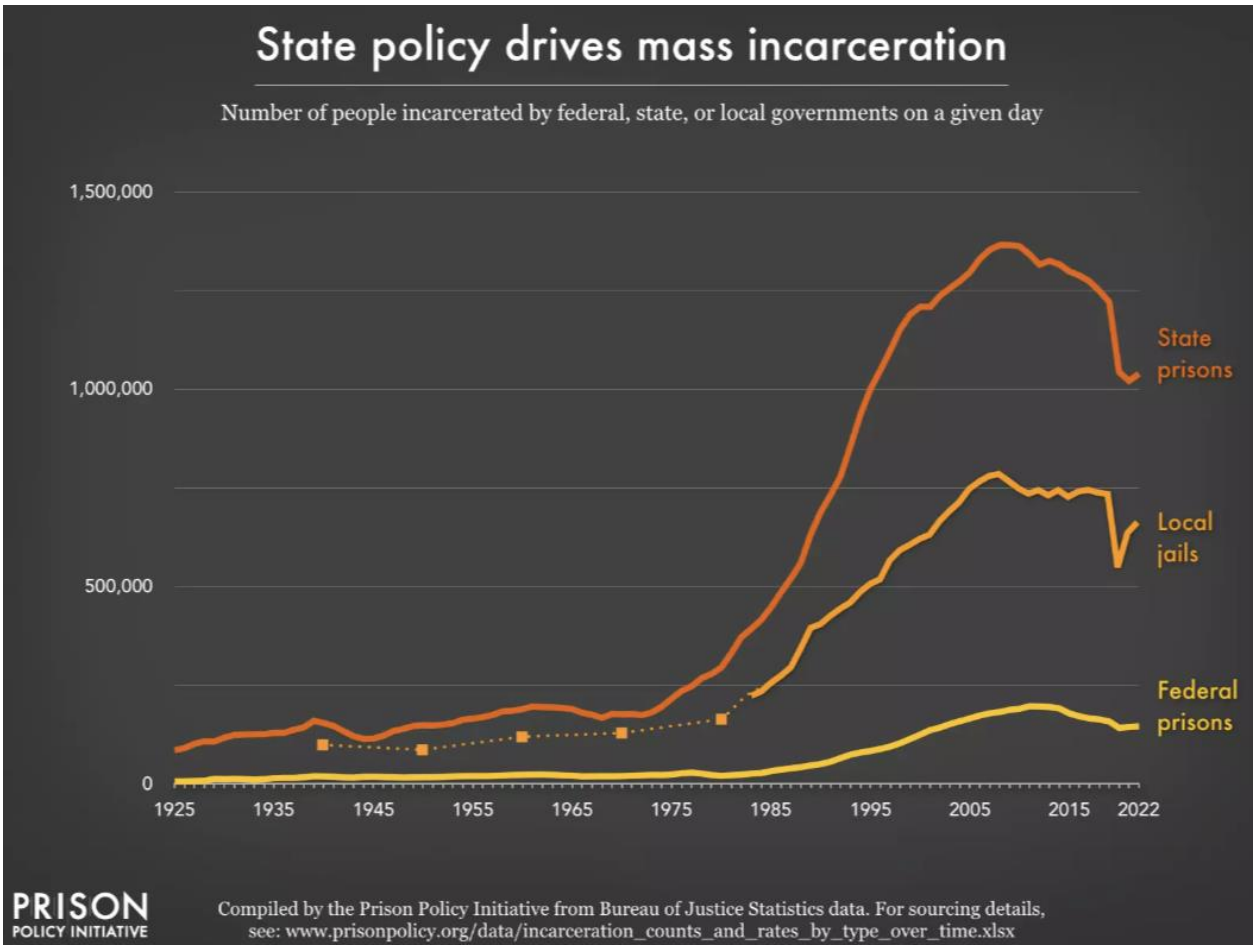


Figure 2. State policy drives mass incarceration. Reprinted from *Updated Charts Show the Magnitude of Prison and Jail Racial Disparities, Pretrial Populations, Correctional Control, and More*, by L. Wang, 2024, Prison Policy Initiative (Updated Charts Show the Magnitude of Prison and Jail Racial Disparities). CC BY-NC 4.0.

Government(s), private prisons, contractors, technology companies, etc. all benefit from the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration. As we covered, the prison system extends beyond imprisonment. Surveillance both after being detained and even prior to arrest have become normal parts of life. With these new advances we find ourselves even more stifled than ever before. Whether a part of the criminal justice system or not.

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