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**Intro to Sociology**

**“Despite Drop in Crime, an Increase in Inmates”**

***The New York Times* by FOX BUTTERFIELD** Published: November 8, 2004

The number of inmates in state and federal prisons rose 2.1 percent last year, even as violent crime and property crime fell, according to a study by the Justice Department released yesterday.

The continuing increase in the prison population, despite a drop or leveling off in the crime rate in the past few years, is a result of laws passed in the 1990's that led to more prison sentences and longer terms, said Allen J. Beck, chief of corrections statistics for the department's Bureau of Justice Statistics and an author of the report.

At the end of 2003, there were 1,470,045 men and women in state and federal prisons in the United States, the report found. In addition, counting those inmates in city and county jails and incarcerated juvenile offenders, the total number of Americans behind bars was 2,212,475 on Dec. 31 last year, the report said.

The report estimated that 44 percent of state and federal prisoners in 2003 were black, compared with 35 percent who were white, 19 percent who were Hispanic and 2 percent who were of other races. The numbers have changed little in the last decade.

Statistically, the number of women in prison is growing fast, rising 3.6 percent in 2003. But at a total of 101,179, they are just 6.9 percent of the prison population.

Alfred Blumstein, a criminologist at Carnegie Mellon University, said one of the most striking findings in the report was that almost 10 percent of all American black men ages 25 to 29 were in prison.

Such a high proportion of young black men behind bars not only has a strong impact on black families, Professor Blumstein said, but "in many ways is self-defeating." The criminal justice system is built on deterrence, with being sent to prison supposedly a stigma, he said. "But it's tough to convey a sense of stigma when so many of your friends and neighbors are similarly stigmatized."

In seeking to explain the paradox of a falling crime rate but a rising prison population, Mr. Beck pointed out that F.B.I. statistics showed that from 1994 to 2003 there was a 16 percent drop in arrests for violent crime, including a 36 percent decrease in arrests for murder and a 25 percent decrease in arrests for robbery.

But the tough new sentencing laws led to a growth in inmates being sent to prison, from 522,000 in 1995 to 615,400 in 2002, the report said.

Similarly, the report found that the average time served by prison inmates rose from 23 months in 1995 to 30 months in 2001.

Among the new measures were mandatory minimum sentencing laws, which required inmates to serve a specified proportion of their time behind bars; truth-in-sentencing laws, which required an inmate to actually serve the time he was sentenced to; and a variety of three-strikes laws increasing the penalties for repeat offenders.

In the three states with the biggest prison systems, California, Texas and Florida, the number of newly admitted inmates grew last year, but the number of those released either fell or remained stable, Mr. Beck said.

Several states with small prison systems had particularly large increases in new inmates, led by North Dakota, up 11.4 percent, and Minnesota, up 10.3 percent.

New York had a 2.8 percent decrease in new inmates, reflecting the continued sharp fall in crime in New York City, Mr. Beck said.

Over all, Mr. Beck said, the prison population is aging. Traditionally the great majority of inmates are men in their 20's and early 30's, but middle-aged inmates, those 40 to 54, account for about half of the increase in the prison population since 1995, he said.

This is a result both of the aging of the general American population and of the longer sentences, Mr. Beck said.

But the number of elderly inmates is still small, despite longer sentences and more life sentences. Those inmates 65 and older were still only 1 percent of the prison population in 2003.

***Please thoughtfully respond to the following questions. Be prepared to discuss your findings.***

**Why do you think about 10% of young African American men are in prison?**

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**Do you favor longer sentences as a way to discourage crime? Why or why not?**

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**Why do you think the share of prisoners who are women is increasing?**

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**Offer up and explain *three (3)* solutions to the problems presented by Butterfield in this article.**

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