
Book Reviews

Stopping the American incarceration race

by Marianna Wertz

Race to Incarcerate

by Marc Mauer, The Sentencing Project
New York: The New Press, 1999
208 pages, hardbound, \$22.95

Race to Incarcerate is a useful and comprehensive, though limited, study of the changes in American criminal justice policy over the past 40 years. The changes in policy which author Marc Mauer traces, have led us from being a postwar nation intent on making every American a productive citizen, to today's record-breaking prison state, where incarceration has become one of the greatest "growth industries," at a cost of \$40 billion a year, with 2 million men, women, and children currently incarcerated in America.

Mauer is the assistant director of the Washington, D.C.-based Sentencing Project, which has produced a few very important studies of criminal justice policy in America in recent years, which are reprised in *Race to Incarcerate*. One is its study of comparative international rates of incarceration, which in 1995 shocked many policymakers when it revealed that the United States is second only to Russia in the world, locking up 645 people per 100,000 population (or one in every 155 Americans). The Russian figure is 690 per 100,000, while the rest of the world is 300 or fewer per 100,000.

Mauer and the Sentencing Project also authored the important 1998 study, "Losing the Vote: The Impact of Felony Disenfranchisement Laws in the United States." This study, reprised in *Race to Incarcerate*, documented the fact that an estimated 3.9 million Americans, or 1 in 50 adults, is either currently or permanently disenfranchised as a result of a felony conviction. Of these, 1.4 million are African-American males, representing 13% of all black men, while in those states that impose permanent disenfranchisement on ex-felons, up to one-quarter of African-American men have lost the right to vote. This exposé has helped energize a growing movement to change these laws around the nation.

In *Race to Incarcerate*, Mauer recounts the history of the transformation of American criminal justice policy from

colonial days to the present, with a focus on the change from the "rehabilitative model," which predominated up through the 1960s, to today's "punitive model," which began to take over with the "law and order" Presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon, and became policy in the Reagan-Bush era.

While the account presents many important facts, particularly pertaining to the race-based inequities of American criminal justice, it unfortunately remains on the level of a liberal critique, rarely going to the root of the problem.

What the book doesn't say

For example, in his lengthy discussion of the problems inherent in the Reagan-Bush "War on Drugs," the result of which was the massive increase in incarceration of young African-Americans hooked on crack cocaine, he never once touches on the fact that it was the Contra drugs-for-guns policy under Reagan-Bush that flooded the nation's black ghettos with drugs!

Similarly, while correctly criticizing the huge costs inherent in the incarceration model—money which is coming out of education and similar budgets—nowhere does he address the driving economic force behind its expansion: the lure of a huge captive workforce of young men and women, available for virtual slave labor, producing everything from license plates to automobiles in the nation's prisons today. Indeed, bills now awaiting passage in the U.S. Congress would create the conditions in which the massive flight of jobs in search of cheap labor overseas could soon be redirected back to our prisons, their produce presumably to be labelled "Made in America's Prison-Industrial Complex."

Finally, though *Race to Incarcerate* warns against the spread of the American prison privatization model overseas, where it is beginning to take hold, especially in eastern Europe and the British Commonwealth countries, Mauer never discusses the fundamental danger involved in the privatization of prisons—that profit, rather than rehabilitation or even punishment, becomes increasingly the motive in corrections, leading to a self-feeding cycle of longer and longer sentences, more and more prisoners, and more abusive treatment. Nor does he indicate that it was precisely the Reagan-Bush operatives, who first created the incarceration model, who then moved aggressively into private prison companies, making their fortunes in the private sector off the policy they put in place while in government. Exemplary is J. Michael Quinlan, who headed Bush's Bureau of Prisons, and then, after Bush's defeat in 1992, headed up strategic research for Corrections Corporation of America, the country's largest private corrections firm.

That said, *Race to Incarcerate* is definitely worth reading, particularly for policymakers. It makes absolutely clear, with devastating documentation, that the United States must begin an about-face in its criminal justice policy now, or risk losing its precious heritage as the "land of the free."