



[Print](#) | [Close this window](#)

## Cost of locking up Americans too high: Pew study

---

Mon Mar 2, 2009 2:49pm EST

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - One in every 31 U.S. adults is in the corrections system, which includes jail, prison, probation and supervision, more than double the rate of a quarter century ago, according to a report released on Monday by the Pew Center on the States.

The study, which said the current rate compares to one in 77 in 1982, concluded that with declining resources, more emphasis should be put on community supervision, not jail or prison.

"Violent and career criminals need to be locked up, and for a long time. But our research shows that prisons are housing too many people who can be managed safely and held accountable in the community at far lower cost," said Adam Gelb, director of the Center's Public Safety Performance Project, which produced the report.

The United States has the highest incarceration rate and the biggest prison population of any country in the world, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Most of those in the U.S. corrections system -- one in 45 -- are already on probation or parole, with one in 100 in prison or jail, the Pew study found.

Those numbers are higher in certain areas of the country, and Georgia tops all states with one in 13 adults in the justice system. The other leading states are Idaho, where one in 18 are in corrections and Texas, where the rate is one in 22. In the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., nearly 5 percent of adults are in the city's penal system.

This was the first criminal justice study that took into account those on probation and parole as well as federal convicts, Pew said.

### 'STATES SPENDING TOO MUCH'

The numbers are also concentrated among groups, with a little more than 9 percent of black adults in prisons or jails or on probation or parole, as opposed to some 4 percent of Hispanics and 2 percent of whites.

Pew compiled the report as states consider cutting corrections spending during the recession. The research group said that by changing sentencing laws and probation programs states can lower incarceration rates and save money.

"Among the many programs that are competing for scarce taxpayer dollars, there is one area of the state budget that could use some trimming, and that area is corrections," said Susan Urahn, the center's managing director, in a call with reporters. "The bottom line is that states are spending too much."

Penitentiary systems have been the fastest-growing spending area for states after Medicaid, the healthcare program for those with low income. Over the last 20 years their spending on criminal justice has increased more than 300 percent, the study found.

During the last 25 years prison and jail populations have grown 274 percent to 2.3 million in 2008, according to the Pew research, while those under supervision grew 226 percent over the same span to 5.1 million.

It estimated states spent a record \$51.7 billion on corrections in fiscal year 2008 and incarcerating one inmate cost them, on average, \$29,000 a year. But the average annual cost of managing an offender through probation was \$1,250 and through parole \$2,750.

"The huge differences between states are mostly due not to crime trends, or social and economic forces," Gelb said. "The rates are different mostly because of choices that the states have made about how they respond to crime."

"New community supervision strategies and technologies need to be strengthened and expanded, not scaled back. Cutting them may appear to save a few dollars, but it doesn't," Gelb said.

Some states have begun experimenting with ankle bracelets, Global Positioning Systems, and even kiosks akin to cash machines in order to track those on probation for less, he said.

(Reporting by Lisa Lambert; Editing by Eric Walsh)

© Thomson Reuters 2008. All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only. Republication or redistribution of Thomson Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Thomson Reuters. Thomson Reuters and its logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of the Thomson Reuters group of companies around the world.

---

Thomson Reuters journalists are subject to an Editorial Handbook which requires fair presentation and disclosure of relevant interests.