

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

April 2, 2012

The United States Leads In Incarceration

11 X 15 Update

I was reading Fareed Zakaria's column in Time Magazine (April 2, 2012) about imprisonment in the United States. The statistics are shocking! The U.S. has 760 prisoners per 100,000 citizens - the highest rate in the world. Compare this to some other countries:

<u>Country</u>	<u>Rate per 100,000</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Rate per 100,000</u>
Japan	63	Germany	90
France	96	South Korea	97
Great Britain	153	Mexico	208
Brazil	242		

We have 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners.

The article went on to explain how this growth was fueled by a failed war on drugs. It is true that much of the prison growth was caused by tougher sentencing laws for drug crimes. But the elephant in the room nobody talks about is the increased amount of time prisoners convicted of other crimes are serving.

I commented on May 9, 2011 in this blog about the way lifers are being treated in Wisconsin. Even the lifers under the old law who became eligible for release after 11 years, 3 months are now facing the presumption of life without parole. In the mid-1980s, when I came to prison, the average time served was 13-15 years. Now I have over 27 years in prison with no end in sight. I'm not the only one stuck in this no-win situation. There are thousands of prisoners still serving sentences decades beyond what was expected at the time of sentencing. Yet there is no recourse, no relief in sight.

I had a chance to read a brochure put out by WISDOM, one of the organizations behind the 11 X 15 initiative. They want to reduce Wisconsin's prison population to 11,000 by 2015. A few of the facts they presented are:

1. The Department of Corrections budget is \$1.3 billion; in 1990 it was \$200 million.

2. A reduction to 11,000 prisoners would return Wisconsin to 1995 levels.

3. Even though Wisconsin and Minnesota are essentially the same in demographics, size, crime rate and population, Wisconsin incarcerates more than twice as many people and spends half a billion dollars more per year.

Many people are now coming to realize the insanity in running a police state and are stepping up to oppose it.

I also read an excerpt of an email by Rev. Hancock (a leader in the 11 X 15 movement) where he was quoting an article entitled Religion In Prison: A 50-state Survey of Prison Chaplains. It appears to be a "Pew Report." That survey found that 92% of prison chaplains favor not sending first-time non-violent offenders to prison. The same number also favor allowing inmates to earn early release based on good behavior and completion of rehabilitation programs.

For so long I've felt like a voice crying in the wilderness. I speak out constantly about the injustice of Wisconsin's correctional system but feel like nobody listens. Now there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people all speaking out. Maybe our collective voices will be heard.

Perhaps the 11 X 15 initiative will take hold and we will reduce our prison population to 11,000 prisoners by 2015.

We can only pray . . .

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