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## RESEARCH STUDIES LINK STATE REVENUES TO MASS INCARCERATION

***Research published in Criminology & Public Policy traces the current imprisonment binge—as well as spending on education, welfare, hospitals, and roads—to available state funds...not to public opinion, politics, or racism.***

TALLAHASSEE, Fla—The recent issue of *Criminology & Public Policy*, features a highly sophisticated analysis of state prison populations over the past three decades that debunks much of the conventional wisdom surrounding mass incarceration. The United States incarcerates more of its nonviolent citizens than any other nation in the world. Usually, the U.S. penchant for putting offenders behind bars is attributed to an increasingly threatened and punitive public, conservative politics, and historically rooted racial social control motives. The crime problem and sentencing enhancements also have been implicated. However, this research pinpoints the cause of mass incarceration to be due largely to the availability of state funds. With concerns over crime and prison overcrowding, the states continue to channel money into building new prisons, and then judges and juries fill them.

University of Texas criminologist William Spelman's shows that federal funding directed at programs and services that are alternatives to incarceration is the solution to overcrowded prisons and excessive funding being spent on building new prisons. He points to the overwhelming recycling of drug addicts and the mentally ill through our communities, jails, and prisons, and argues that it is more financially sustainable to spend state money on treatment rather than punishment for non-violent crime. "If the alternatives are available and well managed," Spelman explains, "the result could be a more cost-effective and sensible corrections system."

Economics professor Steven Raphael, of the University of California, Berkeley, and political scientist Marie Gottschalk, of the University of Pennsylvania responded to Spelman's findings and policy recommendations. Raphael directs attention to the role of changing sentencing policies in fueling mass incarceration. In short, arguing that recent legislation mandating longer sentences—such as mandatory minimums and 3-strikes laws—play a substantial role in driving the U.S. imprisonment binge. In addition to our ability to pay for incarceration, then, Raphael adds severe sentences. Gottschalk emphasizes the fact that more than half of prison inmates were convicted of minor crimes that would not result in incarceration in other industrialized nations. She dismisses calls for addressing historical structural conditions like poverty and unemployment as the way to reduce crime and the number of offenders under correctional system control. Instead, Gottschalk explains, "The real challenge is how to create the political will and political pressure at all levels of government—local, state, and federal—to pursue new sentencing policies and to create alternatives to incarceration that will end mass imprisonment in the United States sooner rather than later."

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