

# Promote Smart Decarceration Comparative Analysis between the US and Norway

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## Abstract

The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare has identified 13 different grand challenges to take this initiative towards social progress empowered by science. This is taking our nation's most difficult problems and finding a way to work together into solving them. One of these challenges is called "promote smart decarceration" where their innovation aims to stimulate applied policy and behavioral intervention research that will reduce the incarceration population in ways that are humane, socially just, and sustainable. Unfortunately, the United States is the world leader in incarceration and therefore, has led to big economic, social, and human costs for our society. On the other hand, Norway has one of the lowest rates of incarcerations and thus, the U.S. could acquire some knowledge about the successes from Norway. There are many reasons on why incarceration exists including mandatory minimum sentencing laws, three strikes law, the war on drugs, problematic probation and parole, lack of mental health services, longer sentences, more life sentences, private prisons, and profit motive. Mandatory minimum sentencing laws impose minimal sentencing to take away the power from judges to report for individual circumstances. Three strike laws require a sentence of 25 years to life after conviction for a third-degree felony. The war on drugs has us nearly 50 percent of incarcerated people in federal prisons on drug offenses and two-thirds of that population are people of color. There are strict regulations with probation and parole resulting in almost 24 percent of state prison entries being from probation violations. There are 1 in 9 people who are incarcerated today serving a life in prison while a third of those people serving a life without parole. These are just some reasons for the population and incarceration rates to be remarkably high.

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## The Evolution in the US

Policies regarding the mass incarceration was first initiated by President Nixon when he declared the "War on Drugs" and increased penal policies. President Reagan continued these policies and doubled the population of people in prison while in office. When he first took office in 1980, the prison population was 329,000 and when he left office in 1988, the prison population was 627,000. These policies were sustained by President Bush and when President Clinton took office, he magnified these policies with the 1994 Crime Bill which led to the unintended effect of increasing the incarceration rates in the 1990s. Money was given to the states to preserve policies to establish bigger prisons to keep up with the rise of incarceration.

## US Prisons

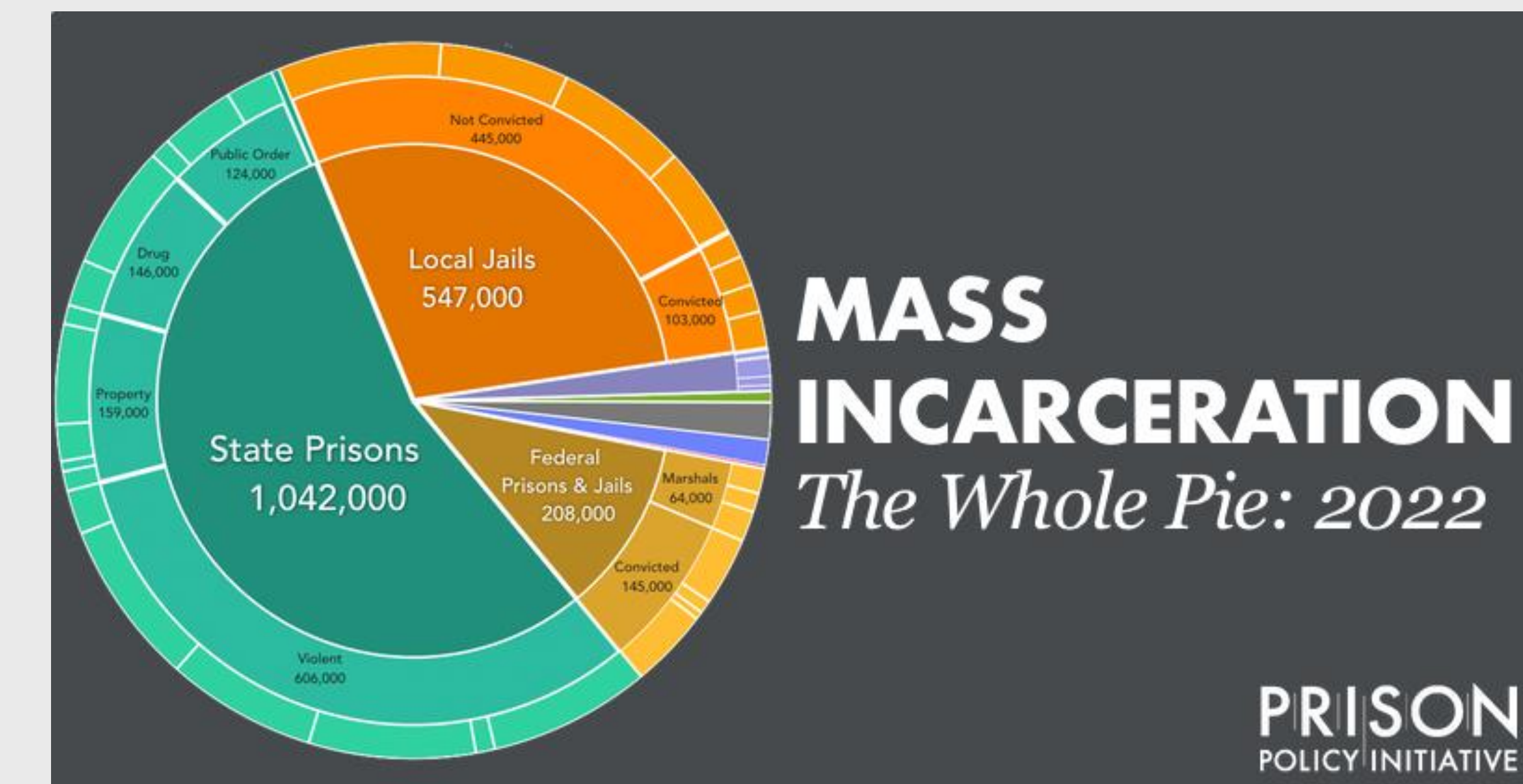
In the United States, the cells are extremely small where they are compared to the size of a parking spot. The ceilings are low enough for someone to touch the light fixture and the walls are made up steel painted white. The bed takes up the length of the room with no other furniture apart from a toilet, metal sink, and sometimes a desk. There is barely any light in the cell due to their only being one small window that is always sealed shut with bars on it. The prisoners may never know what time it is due to them not receiving a clock and not know where the sun is located to use a natural clock. Prisoners can be placed into solitary confinement when being punished or for a safety precaution and they would be held behind a solid steel door for up to 24 hours. Their prisons also have strict visitation policies making it difficult for prisoners to keep their relationships they had before.

## The Evolution in Norway

Norway in 1981, completely banned life sentences (their maximum sentence is 21 years) and later banned their capital punishment in 1902. In the early 1980s when Are Hoidal was beginning his career in the Norwegian Correctional Services, he stated that the prison system "was a masculine macho culture with a focus on guarding and security and the recidivism rate was around 60-70 percent, like in the US." Therefore, in the early 1990s, many reforms took place in the Norwegian Correctional Service to create a better concentrate on rehabilitation by adding workshops, educational programs, redesigning the cells, and transitioning the role of the correctional officers into mentors.

## Norway Prisons

In Norway, their prisons (specifically, the Halden prison) are built to give off a college campus feel by building in blueberry wood with impressive silver birch and pine trees. Each inmate has their own cell where they are equipped with their own toilet and shower as an on suit. Each room has a normal size window with no bars, a desk, television, and even a fridge. Their perspective in Norway is that when someone is sentenced to go to jail, their punishment is to take away their liberty, not their rights. Therefore, they still have the right to access education, health care, etc. Inmates have jobs they go to for 12 hours in the day. This way they keep their sense of normality and many times, they become qualified trained as something like a chef, carpenter, or even mechanic by the time they are released. The plan for their release begins the first day they arrive in prison. Training to become a prison officer takes 2-3 years and they are required to study criminology, English, ethics, law, reintegration, and social work. Family contact is also maintained throughout the inmate's time in prison.



## Systems Theory

The systems theory explains how one's surroundings plays a vital role in each person's life. It is emphasizing the relationships we have in our life which can include between individuals, groups, communities, and environmental factors. Prisons are a system, but they become the main system in an inmate's life and therefore should be the type of system to bring positive energy into a person's life rather than negative. It can be understandable that prisons are meant to be punishment for people; however, there should be a line between discipline and revenge. Prisons can also control what other types of systems are allowed to be in the inmate's life, including family system, school system, jobs, and even friendships. The most disheartening component about this is the fact the criminal justice system, especially in the US, can control what systems are in an offender's life after they have been released back into society. However, in Norway, they are highly focused on their prisoner's release plan that they even start planning for their release the day they enter their prison. They want their prisoners to understand their punishment, move on to be better, and then succeed after they leave.

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