

Prison population growth slowest in three decades

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of people in prison grew last year at the slowest rate in three decades, the Justice Department reported Wednesday.

The total population in all prisons and jails rose a bit more than 1 percent, nearing 2 million, according to the annual report. As of June 30, 2001, one of every 145 U.S. residents was behind bars.

Tougher anti-crime policies, more facilities and longer sen-

tences have caused the decades-long increase in the prison population. Most of the growth between 2000 and 2001 came in federal facilities. "It appears the state prison population has reached some stability," said Allen Beck, a statistician with the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Crime rates are down and parole violations have stabilized, while state legislatures in recent years have not enacted the kind of sweeping sentencing reforms that passed in the early 1990s.

Beck said the federal system could continue to grow at its current pace as U.S. district court caseloads swell. Much of that caseload is taken up by drug, immigration and weapons prosecutions.

The trend "depends on federal law enforcement and prosecutorial discretion," he said.

Overall, there were 1,965,495 people in custody in federal and state prisons and local jails in June 2001, up 1.6 percent from the previous year.

The population in U.S. and state prisons combined rose 1.1 percent, the slowest annual growth since 1972.

The bulk of the prison population is at the state level, which rose 0.4 percent. The number of federal prisoners rose 7.2 percent.

Prisons usually hold convict-

ed criminals sentenced to terms longer than one year. Jails generally keep inmates awaiting trial or serving shorter sentences.

Long-standing racial and ethnic disparities remained, particularly among younger black men. For instance, 13.4 percent of black males age 25 to 29 were in prison or jail, compared with 4.1 percent of Hispanic men and 1.8 percent of white males.

Marc Mauer, assistant director of The Sentencing Project, an advocacy group, gave a mixed review to the Justice report. The group pushes for alternatives to incarceration.

"Increasingly, policy-makers recognize that prisons are expensive," Mauer said about the trend on the state level. He suggested that the current atmosphere of tightening budgets may have legislators rethinking sentencing policies to avoid building new prisons.

"Money is less of an obstacle to Congress," Mauer added. "The federal system is where there has been a great reluctance in Congress to reconsider mandatory sentencing laws and drug policy."

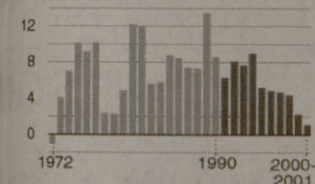
Beck added that some of the increase in the federal prison population came as the U.S. government continued to assume responsibility for District of Columbia prisons.

Prison population growth slows

Last year the growth rate of the prison population was the slowest since 1972. Federal prisons saw a greater increase even though most inmates are held at the state level.

Change in prison population

Percent change from previous year



NOTE: 1972 to 1990 are calendar years; beginning in 1991, years are from July 1 to June 30.

SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics AP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Retirement plans may get protection after Enron

WASHINGTON (AP) — Legislation to strengthen protections for workers' retirement plans is heading for debate on the House floor in the aftermath of the Enron collapse.

The bill, which largely contains President Bush's pension overhaul plan, follows a flurry of hearing and proposals on pensions, accounting standards and corporate disclosure after the December collapse of the energy company.

A final plan was being crafted Wednesday after an agreement was reached between Ways and Means Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Calif., and Workforce Chairman John Boehner, R-Ohio, on investment advice provisions and other differences in the bills that cleared their committees. Boehner's bill will serve as the framework of the plan.

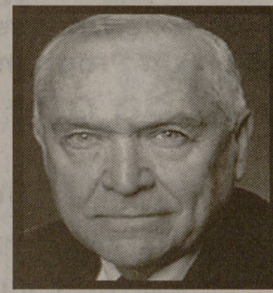
But House Democrats, who had not seen the final version, complained that neither bill "would prevent big corporations from taking advantage of their employees as Enron did," said Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri and Rep. Martin Frost, D-Texas, in a letter to Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.

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