Despite Fewer Lockups, NYC Has Seen Big Drop in Crime

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By Michael Powell
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Friday, November 24, 2006; A03

NEW YORK -- The correction commissioner walks down a long row of cells painted blue, his footsteps echoing inside the massive Rikers Island jail block.

Every cell is empty, and he couldn't be happier.

"What we've seen in New York is the fastest drop in crime in the nation, and we did it while locking up a lot less people," says Commissioner Martin F. Horn, who oversees the city lockups, including barbed-wire-ringed Rikers Island. "The only people using these cells now are the directors and actors from 'Law and Order.' "

It is one of the least-told stories in American crime-fighting. New York, the safest big city in the nation, achieved its now-legendary 70-percent drop in homicides even as it locked up fewer and fewer of its citizens during the past decade. The number of prisoners in the city has dropped from 21,449 in 1993 to 14,129 this past week. That runs counter to the national trend, in which prison admissions have jumped 72 percent during that time.

Nearly 2.2 million Americans now live behind bars, about eight times as many as in 1975 and the most per capita in the Western world. For three decades, Congress and dozens of legislatures have worked to write tougher anti-crime measures. Often the only controversy has centered on how to finance the construction of prison cells.

New York City officials, by contrast, are debating whether to turn some old cells in downtown Brooklyn into luxury shops.

"If you want to drive down crime, the experience of New York shows that it's ridiculous to spend your first dollar building more prison cells," said Michael Jacobson, who served as New York's correction commissioner for former mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (R) and now is president of the Vera Institute of Justice, which studies crime-fighting trends worldwide.

"I can't tell you exactly why violent crime in New York declined by twice the national rate," he said. "But I can tell you this: It wasn't because we locked up more people."

Perhaps as intriguing is the experience in states where officials spent billions of dollars to build prisons. From 1992 to 2002, Idaho's prison population grew by 174 percent. the largest percentage increase in the nation. Yet violent crime in that state rose by 14 percent. In West Virginia, the prison population increased by 171 percent, and violent crime rose 10 percent. In Texas, the prison population jumped by 168 percent, and crime dropped by 11 percent.

The debate about the degree to which the United States' record rate of imprisonment has driven down crime is more than a dance on the head of a statistical pin. FBI data released in September showed that violent crime -- rape, homicide and robbery -- edged up by 2.2 percent last year. That is far from the violent heights of the early 1990s, but Jacobson and other criminologists are concerned that a resurgence in crime could cast a shadow on an intriguing cultural moment.

In the past few years, legislators in such conservative states as Louisiana and Mississippi have passed sentencing reforms. Kansas and Nebraska are reconsidering prison expansion in favor of far less expensive drug treatment. The United States annually spends about $60 billion on prisons.

"Crime is down and people realize, sure, we can lock up more people, but that's why your kid's pre-K class has 35 kids -- all the money is going to prisons," Jacobson says. "There's a sense of urgency that for the first time in two decades, we can talk about whether it makes sense to lock up even more people."

No one, not even reformers, doubts that locking up enough people can drive down crime. Nor does anyone question that many felonious types belong behind bars. Alfred Blumenstein, a criminologist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, cites a study that found that the growth in imprisonment during the 1990s accounted for about 25 percent of the national decline in crime.

David Muhlhausen, an analyst with the Heritage Foundation -- which is an influential voice within the Bush administration -- goes further. He says prison is a fine crime-fighting method. "Putting citizens behind bars works because they can't commit crimes," he said. "It's one of the best tools we have against crime."

But there are powerful counter examples, criminologists say. The nation's prison population rose between 1985 and 1993 -- even as crime spiked sharply. New York was not the only city in which crime and imprisonment fell in tandem during the 1990s. From 1993 to 2001, homicides in San Diego declined by 62 percent while prison sentences dropped by 25 percent.

Casting an eye north of the border, Canada experienced a sharp drop in crime as its prison population fell. "There are several examples of crime crashing without imprisonment rising, but we treat these as outliers," says Franklin E. Zimring, author of "The Great American Crime Decline" and a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley. "For most of the nation, the 1990s were the era of 'throw away the key.' "

Such heavy reliance on prison, epidemiologists note, carries a considerable social price tag. Hundreds of thousands of released felons cannot vote, cannot obtain driver's licenses and have trouble finding jobs -- a toll that falls disproportionately on blacks, Latinos and poor whites.

Barry Campbell, who works at the Fortune Society, a prison reform organization in Manhattan, did 15 years behind bars on sundry charges. He attributes many of his troubles to a drug addiction that he has kicked. Ask him about New York's experience in driving down imprisonment and crime, and he is not surprised.

"Prison is a place where someone heading down a path of destruction is propelled at 90 miles an hour," he says.

Approximately 60 percent of U.S. convicts serve time for charges related to drug peddling and addiction. In California, 65,000 parolees fail drug tests each year and are recycled back to prison each year. They serve, on average, an additional four months, at a cost of $1 billion.

No public official set out to drive down New York's prison and jail population in the early 1990s. Quite the opposite; crack-fueled homicides had topped 2,000, the middle class was fleeing and Giuliani was elected on a crime-fighting platform.

"If I told Rudy we needed to lock up 40,000, 50,000 people, he would have said fine," Jacobson said. "Rudy can say now that he's a genius, but the drop in prison population was entirely unintentional."

William J. Bratton, Giuliani's police commissioner in the mid-1990s -- now chief of the Los Angeles Police Department -- directed his officers to make swarms of misdemeanor arrests for fare beating, pot smoking, gun possession and the like, charges that result in much shorter incarcerations. Felony arrests, by contrast, dropped sharply, which meant far fewer city residents were sent to the high-security Upstate prisons.

City and state prisons in New York also turned aggressively to drug treatment and mental health counseling. They did so as a matter of enlightened self-interest. The city prison system is the second-largest mental health provider in the nation; only the Los Angeles County system surpasses it.

Commissioner Horn got his start decades ago as a prison guard. Now he occupies the executive office at Rikers Island and is a national expert on what is recognized as an American specialty: mass incarceration.

"I leave it to the economists and the moralists to decide if we've paid too high a cost to imprison," Horn said as he walked out of a shadowed prison block. "But New York proves you can lock up a lot fewer people and get a pretty big impact."

Staff writer Robin Shulman contributed to this report.

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