

# What Are the Root Causes of Mass Incarceration?

Why does America lock up more people than any other country on Earth? This question drives much of today's prison reform work, including the advocacy of Iranian-American author [Hassan Nemazee](#), author of *Persia, Politics & Prison*, who experienced the system firsthand and now speaks out for change. Looking at the root causes helps us understand why more than 2 million Americans remain behind bars today.

The war on drugs helped create the modern prison crisis. Beginning in the 1980s, harsh sentences for drug crimes filled cells at record speed. Someone caught selling drugs could face decades, while people convicted of violent crimes often receive less time. This approach did not reduce drug use; it only created more prisoners.

Poverty also fuels incarceration. If you cannot afford a lawyer, you are given a public defender who is already juggling hundreds of cases. If you cannot post bail, you might spend months in jail before trial. An arrest can mean losing your job, and with a criminal record, finding new work is nearly impossible. Poverty becomes a trap that keeps people cycling through the system.

Mandatory minimums tied judges' hands. Even when a judge wanted to show leniency, the law often required a 10-year minimum sentence. Low-level, first-time offenders ended up serving time alongside hardened criminals, with little room for fairness or discretion.

Private prisons added another layer. Many signed contracts with states guaranteeing high occupancy rates, sometimes as high as 90%. This turned imprisonment into a business, where more inmates meant more profit. The incentive was clear: keep people locked up, not rehabilitated.

Mental health and addiction, too, are treated as crimes. Nearly 40% of inmates live with mental illness, yet few receive proper care. Police respond to crises, jails act as treatment centers, and long-term healing rarely happens. Addiction and untreated illness drive people back into the cycle.

Laws like "three strikes" made the problem worse. A third offense, even for something as minor as shoplifting, could mean life in prison. Many of these sentences left older, non-violent offenders behind bars for decades at taxpayer expense.

Finally, the system feeds itself through recidivism. Without job skills, housing, or support, many return to crime just to survive. The cycle continues, giving the illusion that mass incarceration is necessary.

Real change means tackling these root causes: treatment for addiction and mental illness, fairer sentencing, job programs, and ending the profit motive in prisons. To learn more, visit Hassan Nemazee's website and explore his memoir *Persia, Politics & Prison*, where he shares his personal journey and powerful insights on how to build a more just system.