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Alcohol has highest connection to violence  
By Gary Fields USA TODAY

WASHINGTON - Eighty percent of people behind bars were involved with alcohol or other drugs at the times of the crimes, a report says.

And, alcohol plays a role in a greater number of violent crimes than crack or powder cocaine, according to the report by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York.

The three-year study released Thursday found that 1.4 million of the 1.7 million people serving time in the nation's jails and prisons committed crimes while they were high, stole property to buy drugs, have a history of drug or alcohol abuse or are in jail for violating drug or alcohol laws.

The 281-page report concludes that criminal activity because of drugs and alcohol is the overwhelming reason the nation's prison population has risen nearly 239% since 1980, when 501,886 people were behind bars.

"People think prisons are full of James Cagney types and psychopaths, but they are actually full of alcoholics and drug addicts, and we can deal with that through treatment," says Joseph Califano Jr., president of the center and former secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

But few of the hundreds of thousands of people who could be turned into respectable taxpayers and parents are ever treated, Califano says. Instead, they are released back into the community as criminals.

"We're not protecting the public safety because we aren't treating the problem, and we're supporting the illegal drug market because we are just sending customers back."

Among the study's findings:

- Taxpayers spent \$38 billion in '96 to build and maintain the nation's 4,700 prisons.
- By 2000, one out of 20 U.S. residents will spend time in jail. That includes one out of 11 men and one out of four black men.
- By 2000, taxpayers will pay \$100 million a day to incarcerate criminals.
- Repeat offense rates are directly linked to drug use. Forty-one percent of first time offenders in state prisons used drugs regularly, while 81 % of the people with five or more convictions were habitual drug users.

One of the study's key findings is the prevalence of alcohol in violent crimes. Twentyone percent of the people serving time for violent crimes - including murder, rape, spousal and child abuse and assault - were under the influence of alcohol at the time the crime was committed. Only 3% of the violent offenders were under the influence of crack or powder cocaine.

Jack Levin, director of the Program for the Study of Violence and Social Conflict at Northeastern University in Boston, says the role of alcohol in violence is not surprising. Neither is the fact that most people ignore that role, he says.

It's easy to look at crack addicts as deviants and perverts prone to violence," he says. "It's much harder to see people at a cocktail party that way because that requires us to look at ourselves."

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