

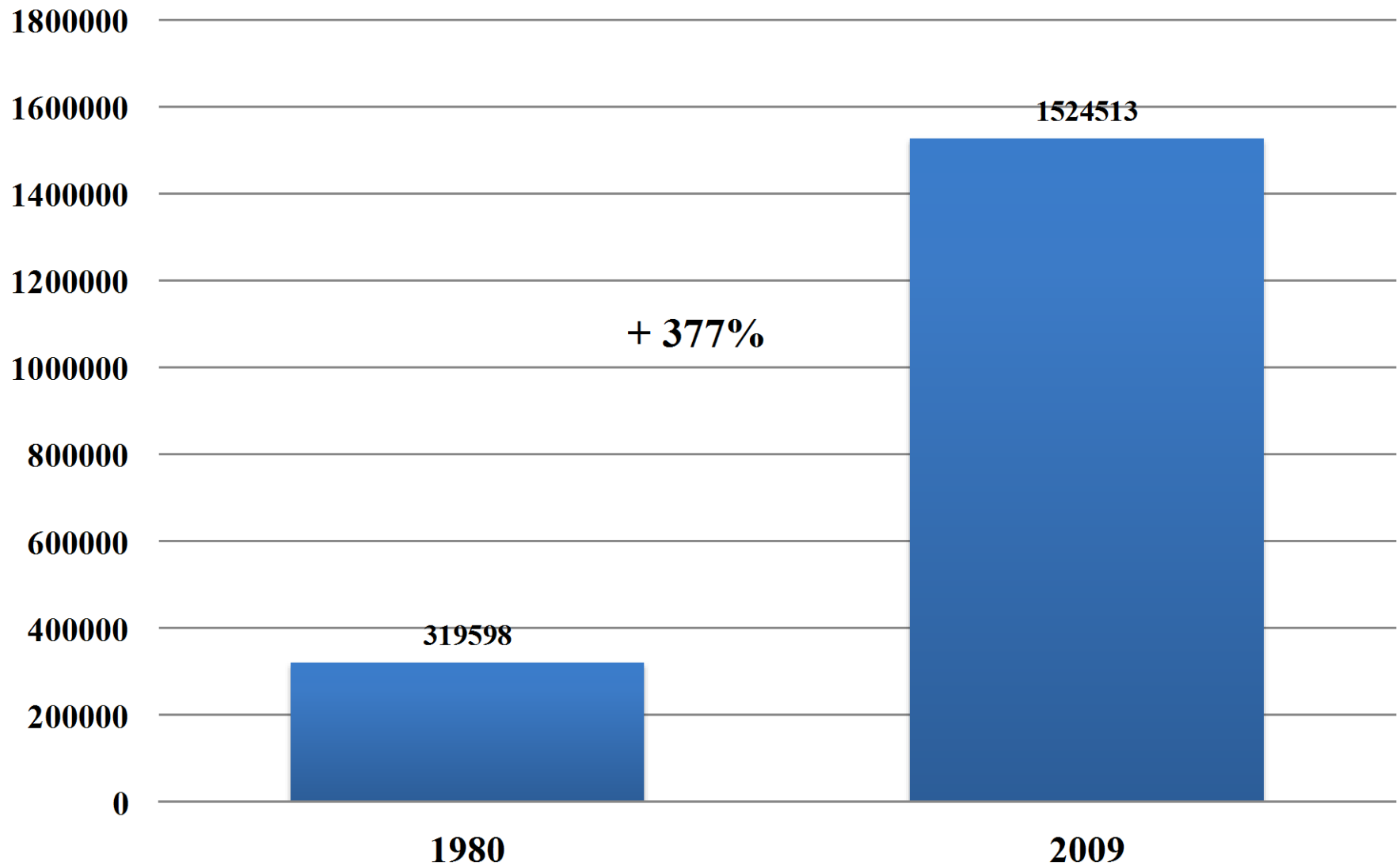
# Mass Imprisonment and Crime Trends

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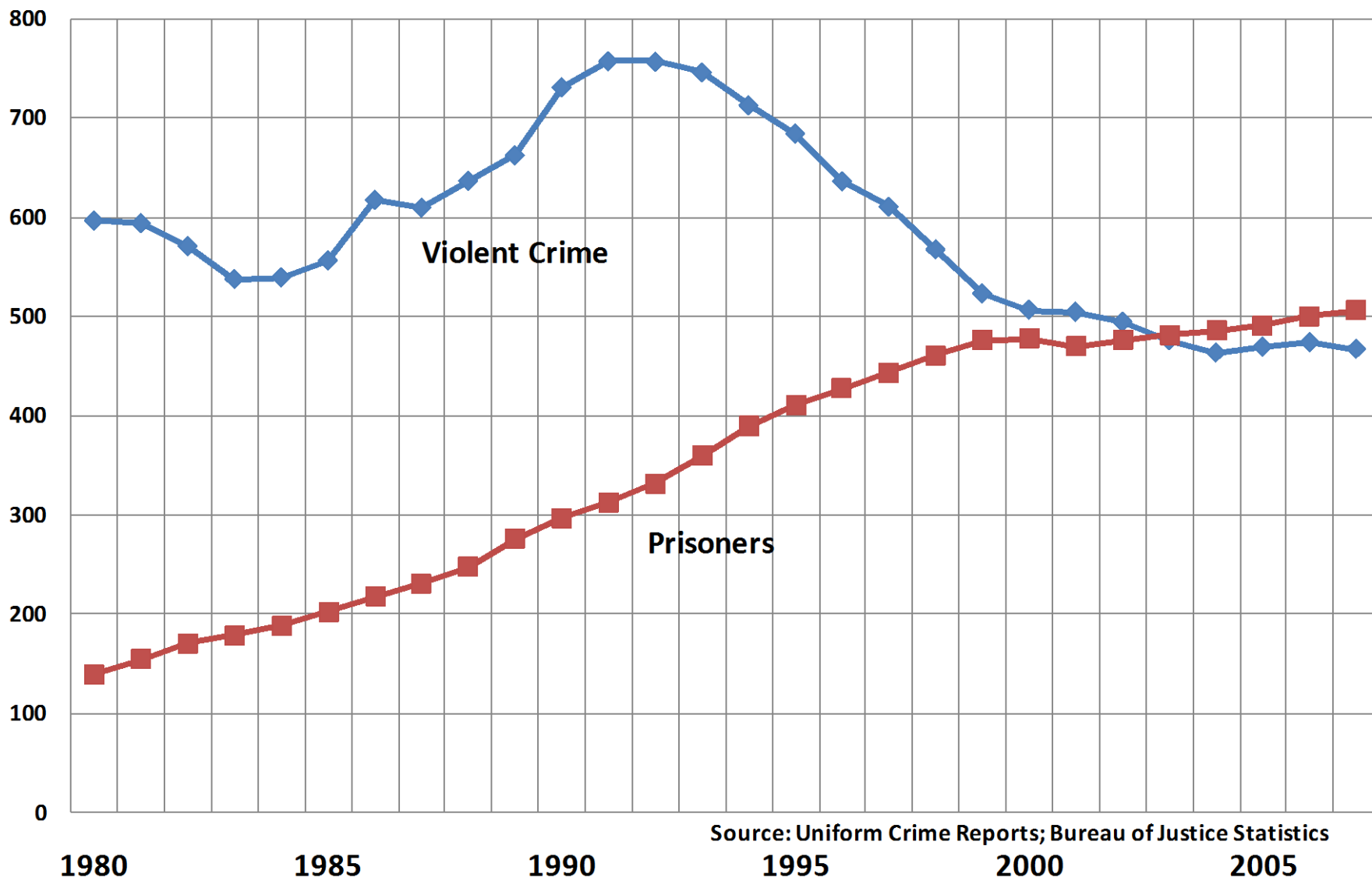
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## Growth in State Prisoners in the United States, 1980 - 2009



# State and Federal Prisoners and Violent Crimes per 100,000 US Population, 1980-2007



# Theoretical Expectations: Crime Reduction Effects of Imprisonment

- Imprisonment reduces crime by
  - Rehabilitating inmates
  - Deterring crime
    - Specific deterrence
    - General deterrence
  - Interrupting criminal careers
  - Incapacitating offenders

# Theoretical Expectations: Crime Enhancement Effects

- Imprisonment increases crime by
  - Strengthening criminal socialization
  - Reducing legitimate opportunities
  - Cementing criminal identities
  - Disrupting families and communities
  - Reducing punishment stigma

# Research Results

- Consistent result from state panel regressions: Growth in imprisonment decreases crime
- Prison admissions associated with crime reductions; prison releases associated with crime increases
- *But . . . .*

- Effects vary by state

DeFina, Robert H. and Thomas M. Arvanites. 2002. “The Weak Effect of Imprisonment on Crime: 1971-1992.” *Social Science Quarterly* 83: 635-653.

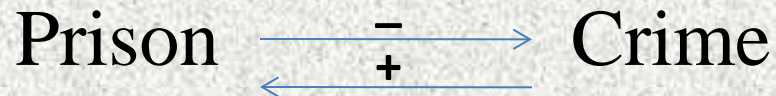
- Effects dissipate with increasing scale of imprisonment

Liedka, Raymond V., Anne Morrison Piehl, and Bert Useem. 2006. “The Crime Control Effect of Incarceration: Does Scale Matter?” *Criminology and Public Policy* 5: 245-276.



# Endogeneity

- Imprisonment reduces crime but crime increases imprisonment



- Failing to control for crime in the prison equation may bias the prison effect on crime downward

Spelman, William. 2008. "Specifying the Relationship Between Crime and Prisons." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 24:149-178.

- Imprisonment growth *not* the result of increasing crime (Blumstein and Beck)

# Has the Effect of Imprisonment on Crime Been Exaggerated?

- Western's critique of Levitt (1996)

Levitt, Steven F. 1996. "The Effect of Prison Population Size on Crime Rates: Evidence From Prison Overcrowding Litigation." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 111:319-351.

- How much of the 1990s crime drop is explained by imprisonment growth?

- Western (2006) ~10%

- Spelman (2006) ~25%

Spelman, William. 2006. "The Limited Importance of Prison Expansion." In Alfred Blumstein and Joel Wallman, eds. *The Crime Drop in America*. Revised edition. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Rosenfeld and Fornango (2007) 19% – 23%



# Joining Issues

- Imprisonment growth since 1980 associated with modest crime reduction (10% - 20% of 1990s crime drop)
  - Uncertainty regarding effect size
- Specific deterrence not responsible for crime-reduction effects
- Uncertainty regarding general deterrence vs. incapacitation effects
- Imprisonment growth *not* a policy variable
- The marginal effectiveness of imprisonment vs. community supervision not known
- Imprisonment costly; “front end” deterrence a better bet