

# The Four-Percent Solution: A Discussion of the Caveats of Catching Big Fish with Nets

## COP STOP



*Peter Moskos\**

Of the twenty-five worst shootings in the US since 1994 only one was committed by an African American. The vast majority of shootings, twenty-two of twenty-five, were committed by whites and Asians. And these are the two groups most *underrepresented* in our criminal justice system.

It's entirely conceivable that African-Americans are underrepresented in the annals of mass murders because of mass incarceration. If you're dangerous, emotionally disturbed, *and* a young black man, there's a very good chance you're already behind bars. Prisons are already the largest provider, albeit an extremely incompetent one, of mental health services in the US. More massive incarceration could prevent mass shootings because, well, if you cast a wide-enough net, you're bound to catch a fish or two.

President Obama recently said, "if we can save the life of even one child, then we have a responsibility to act." Indeed, so let us be bold and incarcerate five million white men.

All we would need to do is identify, through police and the courts, the poorest, most desperate, and most troubled four percent of white men — roughly the percentage of black men presently incarcerated — and lock them up. Thanks to drug prohibition, law breakers are not in short supply. It's just a matter of cracking down on whites like we've done to blacks.

The cost of keeping the rest of us safe, by housing five million prisoners, is but \$150 billion per year, or the equivalent of the budget of the US Navy. But spent wisely, by focusing incarceration on the jobless, as we do, overnight we could cut the unemployment rate in half!

Along with taking five million potential criminals off the streets, one million new correctional officers would be needed to guard so many white men. Think of the boost to poor, rural, prison-hungry communities. And this doesn't even count the additional jobs in court, police, and probation related fields.

Of course... even if it would reduce mass shootings and provide jobs, we won't and shouldn't lock up four percent of *any* population. The moral and financial devastation of such a gulag far outweighs any possible benefit. But, so why then do we lock up four percent of African-American men and have the largest prison system in the world?

Even without locking up one more person, we already have the largest incarceration system in the world. In rate and numbers, we lock up more people than any country in the world. Ever. We have more prisoners than China, and they have one billion more people.

Were we to expand our incarceration levels to, in effect, level the playing field for whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians, the incomprehensible failings of the status quo would be readily apparent.

Are Americans such an evil people that we need to lock up so many? Are so many prisons necessary for public safety? Of course not. We got into this mess after 1970, when we decided that the war on drugs and longer sentences were the answer. Historically our country has had its fair share of moral failings, often related to race. More than two million people behind bars reflects American society — all of America — no less than did slavery and segregation.

This is not about “them,” the prisoners; it is about us.

To bring our incarceration rate back not just to world standards but to where it was for most of American history, eighty percent of all prisoners would need to be freed. That won't be easy, but again, the norm in America was to lock up one person per 1,000, not, as we do, seven.

The good news is that prisons can be closed without increasing crime. Take New York City: Last year there were 414 murders in the city; in 1990, there were more than two thousand. Were all the potential murderers locked up? Quite the contrary. During these two

while the city's population increased by more than a million, the number of incarcerated New Yorkers actually substantially *decreased*.

Of course my four-percent proposal is a Swiftian ploy. Luckily the solution of fewer prisoners could also reduce shootings. More palatable options are, in fact, plentiful. We can provide mental health services for those in need. We can restrict gun possession while fully respecting Second Amendment rights. We can expand punishments that don't involve jail. We can establish a social safety net for all. If we want to stop violence and prison, these are exactly what we have to do. Anger, fear, and retribution only make the problem worse. They're also not in the best spirit of our exceptional national character.

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