

Report: Non-violent criminals getting life sentences

By Meredith Clark, MSNBC

Thousands of people convicted of non-violent crimes are serving life sentences, according to a report by the American Civil Liberties Union.

There are currently 3,278 people who have been sentenced to life without parole for crimes as small as selling less than \$10 worth of marijuana and shoplifting. The report also found that it will cost nearly \$2 billion to keep those inmates incarcerated until their deaths. At a time when state and local governments are desperately trying to reduce their populations of non-violent offenders in order to reduce strain on overcrowded facilities and cut spending, these prisoners are a reminder of the much harsher “tough on crime” era of the 1980s and 1990s.

As is the case throughout the country and within the federal prison system – the home of two-thirds of those prisoners serving life sentences without parole – black prisoners far outnumber white prisoners. A black person is about 20 times more likely than a white person to be sentenced to life without parole in the federal system, the study found. In Louisiana, 91.4 percent of those serving life without parole for nonviolent crimes are black.

Life sentences without the possibility of parole are given out for a variety of reasons, but the ACLU’s analysis points to a combination of mandatory minimums and three- and four-strike rules for crimes regardless of their severity that even judges and corrections officers involved in some of the cases highlighted found too harsh.

Read the whole story