

of the law-abiding majority. But compared with many countries, its prisons look more like hotels: comfortable rooms, TVs, computers, bright and cheerful communal spaces, conjugal visits and a strong focus on rehabilitation. There are also relatively few of them. The Danish prison population is just under 4,000 people, or around 60 for every 100,000 of the population at large. In Britain the rate is double that (and many of the rioters in 2011 faced long custodial sentences). In America it is massively higher still. The total number of people in jail in the United States is more than 2.2 million; in addition, another 4 million are either on probation or on parole. The rate of those in jail per 100,000 of the American population is close to 800, or 15 times the rate in Denmark. For black prisoners it is nearly 4,500 per 100,000, or 1 in every 22 people. In parts of the United States young black men are significantly more likely to be in prison than in employment. In these respects, the United States and Denmark are worlds apart. Seen through the prism of its penal system, the US looks more like Syria.

For a stable democracy, the United States remains a strikingly violent place, though there is evidence that the overall level of violence is in steady decline. (Crime rates have fallen precipitously in many American cities, as they have across the Western world.) Europeans are still shocked by the readiness with which some American citizens reach for their guns and the vehemence with which they defend their right to use them. Also shocking for many outsiders is the continuing resort to the death penalty. The United States executed 39 prisoners in 2013. The only countries to make more

extensive use of capital punishment were Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia and China, which executes thousands every year. So America is a punitive as well as a comparatively violent society. It is also riven by deep social and cultural disagreements about these very practices. Texas has executed more than 500 people since the death penalty was restored in 1976 (a third of whom have been black, though black Texans make up less than 12 per cent of the total population of the state). In many other states, including Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont, not a single person has been executed over the same period. (Today just 2 per cent of American counties account for the majority of all executions.) For every American committed to gun ownership there is someone else who wants guns controlled: polls split roughly 50:50 on the question of whether the right to bear arms is more important than the right of government to regulate it.