But one recent attempt by Hollywood activists who wanted to put the country's prison population in perspective went too far.

Following on protests stemming from the shooting of Michael Brown, director-writer Matthew Cooke and producer-actor Adrian Grenier co-wrote a Huffington Post column that called on Americans to support three groups focused on criminal justice reform. Many of the claims in the column were supported by links from outside sources, but one that wasn't caught the eye of a reader, who asked us if it is true.

"Behind the front lines we've systematically corralled masses of Americans into the largest prison system on the planet. We have more of our people in prison than Russia, China, and North Korea combined," the column said. "And most are non-violent, so what is this colossal net we've cast over so many people? What's it really doing? And who are the 2.3 million Americans we've dragged into cages?"

We can only evaluate statements on the Truth-O-Meter from one person at a time, so we'll focus on Cooke since we spoke to him for our story.

About that interview: After we presented some of our initial findings to Cooke via email, he quickly wrote back that he used the wrong countries in his statistic.

He meant to include Iran, he said, which has about 220,000 prisoners, and not Russia. He said he would seek a correction for that line, but the overarching point that there are more people locked up in the United States than other countries holds up.

Here's what we found.

Nailing down how many Americans are behind bars is complex. We saw recent estimates from 2.24 million people, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, to more than 2.4 million, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts think tank that advocates for reducing the American prison population.
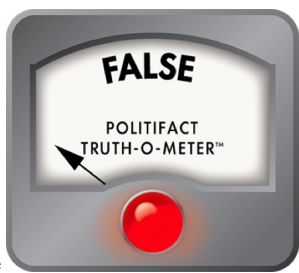
It's hard to calculate a tally of inmates because the scope of incarceration facilities is so wide. There are state prisons, local jails, federal prisons, military prisons, juvenile correctional centers, immigration detention facilities and others for American Indian territories and overseas territories.

State prisons house the biggest chunk of inmates by far at an estimated 1.36 million people, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, which detailed population snapshots for nine population facilities in a pie chart earlier in 2014.

Combined with the massive turnover of old inmates leaving and new ones coming in, it makes pinning down an exact number very difficult.

For the sake of fleshing out Cooke's initial comparison with China, Russia and North Korea, we delved into a global report from the International Centre for Prison Studies, which is widely reported and recently partnered with the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at Birkbeck, University of London.

Featured Fact-check

true

By Ciara O'Rourke • September 15, 2022

The group's China estimate is 1.64 million sentenced prisoners, though it does not factor in citizens who are in pre-trial detention or "administrative detention," which could be around a half-million people.

For Russia, the prison population was estimated at 681,600 in January 2013, down from earlier years after leaders granted political amnesty to prisoners, and tuberculosis swept detention facilities.

The center does not have a reliable estimate for North Korea, notorious for its secretive government and political prison camps, though it loosely references an estimate of 150,000 prisoners. A United Nations report showed satellite images of prisons holding around 120,000 people.

Regardless, using the conservative estimates for just China and Russia produces a sum (2.321 million) that is either more or less than the estimated U.S. prison population depending on the source. Adding in rough estimates for part of North Korea's population obviously pushes up the total.

Peter Wagner, executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative, said we should set the raw numbers aside because they are not as useful as comparing each country's incarceration rate, which factors in population size.

The U.S. prison population rate is highest in the world, at 716 per 100,000 of the national population, according to the International Centre for Prison Studies.

Russia's is 475 prisoners per 100,000 of the national population, and China's is 121 per 100,000 population, which is below the world's median rate. Wagner pointed out. More than

At the bottom are Northeastern states like Maine and Vermont (rates of 277 and 257, respectively), which still put more people behind bars than any of the United States' close allies, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Canada.

Our ruling

Cooke (and Grenier) tried to make a striking point about the size of the U.S. prison population when they wrote, "We have more of our people in prison than Russia, China, and North Korea combined."

When we contacted Cooke, he acknowledged that the comparison is questionable, as respected (and conservative) estimates for China and Russia alone exceed the low-end count of American prisoners. Cooke said he would change the line in the column to be more accurate, and it now says, "We have more of our people in prison than anyone else -- more than Iran, more than North Korea, more than Russia or even China." (Kudos to him for acknowledging the error.)

Still, experts say the preferred measure of comparison, a country's incarceration rate, shows the United States far ahead of other countries, which supports the underlying point.

We rate the claim Mostly False.

Our Sources

Huffington Post column, 3 Things You Can Do to End Police Killings and Fix the Criminal Justice System, Dec. 10, 2014

Prison Policy Initiative, http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie.html

Interview with Peter Wagner, Prison Policy Initiative executive director, Dec. 15, 2014

Email interview with Matthew Cooke, screenwriter, producer and director, Dec. 15, 2014

The Economist, "Who, what, where and why," March 13, 2014

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