CCE-071 | What Do Human Rights Problems in the United States Mean?

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Abstract:

The United States does have serious human rights problems; that is not in dispute. The United Nations Human Rights Committee's 2023 concluding observations, the U.S. Department of Justice's own investigative reports, and data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics all document these problems. What truly needs discussion is the next step: what do these facts "mean"? This article breaks the question into three common interpretations: first, that no country is exempt from human rights standards; second, that the United States

therefore has no right to criticize other countries, or that criticism of the United States by other countries cannot be a “double standard”; and third, that the U.S. system has failed and another model is superior. The article’s judgment is that the first interpretation is valid; the second must be divided in two, because whether an allegation is true and whether the person making it is credible are separate questions; and the third requires comparative data measured on the same basis, which a report presenting only one side’s list cannot provide. The article examines, item by item, the August 2025 report by the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (Mainland China), U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics figures, United Nations documents, and the United States’ 2025 absence from the UN Universal Periodic Review, explaining the scope and limitations of each figure.

1. First, Distinguish Two Questions

Discussions of “human rights problems in the United States” often conflate two questions. The first is factual: What human rights problems does the United States have, how extensive are they, and is there reliable data to support the claims? The second is inferential: What conclusions can be drawn from these facts? The factual question can be checked; the inferential question depends on whether the reasoning is sound. We will examine the facts first, then consider the inferences.

2. The Original Statements: Who Said What?

The position of the government of the PRC (Mainland China) comes from the State Council Information Office. On August 17, 2025, the Office published the Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2024, and Xinhua News Agency published a summary the same day [1]. The report consists of a preface, six sections, and a conclusion. The six sections cover, in order: American-style democracy (money politics, gerrymandering, restrictions on voting, and political violence); people’s well-being (poverty, homelessness, drugs, health care, gun violence, police violence, and prisons); racism; women and children; undocumented immigrants; and U.S. foreign policy [1]. The report’s central judgment appears in its conclusion: in a collusion between power

and capital, human rights have become props in a political “show” [1]. This is an official report issued by a Mainland Chinese government agency under the Chinese Communist Party. It has a clear point of view; this article treats it as “one side’s formal account,” not as a neutral statistical compilation.

The latest statement from the U.S. government is its decision not to participate in a UN review. On August 27, 2025, the Chargé d’Affaires of the U.S. Mission in Geneva wrote to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, notifying the Office that the United States would not participate in the Universal Periodic Review scheduled for November 7, 2025. The letter said that, under the President’s February 4, 2025 executive order, the United States had stopped participating in the Human Rights Council, and that taking part in the review “would signify an endorsement of the Council’s mission and activities” [7].

3. Checking Several Sets of Figures

(1) Deaths caused by police. The report states that “more than 1,300 people died from police violence and law-enforcement abuses,” citing a rolling figure of 1,361 shown on the Mapping Police Violence website during 2024 [1]. The project is a database maintained by the U.S. civil-society organization Campaign Zero. Its 2024 statistics, published on February 27, 2025, counted at least 1,365 people and described 2024 as the deadliest year since records began in 2013 [4]. Its 2025 year-end report, published in February 2026, said that at least 1,314 people were killed by police in 2025, the first decline in six years—a drop of 5% [4]. So the order of magnitude is right, while the trend depends on the year: 2024 was a peak, and 2025 saw a slight decline. (The totals above are current as of the 2025 year-end report published in February 2026; the database is a rolling count and may be revised in later updates.)

There is, however, a question of definition. The database counts “people killed by police”; it does not determine whether each death was unlawful. The report directly calls the number deaths from “police violence and law-enforcement abuses,” equating a death with “abuse.” The data themselves do not support that equation. The database’s own methodology also acknowledges that it relies on media reports and public records and may omit cases [4].

(2) Incarceration and racial disparities. The figures from the Bureau of Justice Statistics come from the U.S. government itself. At the end of 2023, 360 people per 100,000 of the total population were sentenced to more than one year and held in state or federal prisons. That rate was down 25% from 479 in 2013, but slightly higher than the 2022 rate of 355 [2]. By race, the imprisonment rate for Black adults in 2023 was 1,218 per 100,000, about five times the rate for White adults (231) [2]. At the local jail level, the midyear 2024 detention rate for Black people was 566 per 100,000, about four times the rate for White people (149) [3].

The report says that “one in every 176 people” in the United States is incarcerated, or about 1.9 million people [1]. That figure comes from the World Prison Brief. Using the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ figures for a rough addition—360 for prisons plus about 198 for local jails (midyear 2023)—gives a combined rate of about 558 per 100,000, or about one in every 179 people [2][3]. This is the article’s own rough calculation. The two figures refer to different dates, so they can only show that the report’s estimate is of the same order of magnitude as the official data and is not inflated by an entirely different order of magnitude. This is a fact worth noting: this particular figure in the report withstands checking.

(3) Where the report’s materials come from. A review of the report’s footnotes shows that materials about domestic U.S. issues come mostly from within the United States: Department of Justice investigative reports on police departments in Lexington, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee; U.S. Supreme Court rulings and Justice Elena Kagan’s dissents; investigative reporting by U.S. media; and data from U.S. research institutions [1]. The observation in this article is that these problems could be assembled into a long list precisely because U.S. government agencies, courts, media, and civil-society organizations continuously disclose them. This does not prove that the United States “has no problems,” nor does it prove that “the same problems do not exist elsewhere.” It only shows that the diversity of information sources is itself an institutional feature worth comparing.

The quality of the footnotes is not uniform, however. For example, the claim that “African Americans are three times as likely as White people to be shot and killed by police” cites a 2023 *Washington Post* database page reproduced on a church website [1]. The civil-society

database’s own website says that, measured by population, Black people are killed by police at a rate close to three times that of White people [4]. The direction is consistent, but the report does not cite the original page. The data may be usable, but the citation is not properly sourced; these are two separate points.

4. What Does the UN Mechanism Say?

The UN Human Rights Committee oversees implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It reviewed the United States’ fifth periodic report on October 17–18, 2023, adopted its concluding observations on October 30, and issued the document on November 3 [5]. This document is not another country’s political statement; it is the outcome of a review accepted by a state party to the Covenant itself.

The document first acknowledges some progress, such as the Respect for Marriage Act, passed in 2022 [5]. It then identifies major concerns, including: “profound concern” about police brutality and excessive use of lethal force, which disproportionately affect African Americans, Indigenous people, Latinos, migrants, and asylum seekers, with most cases lacking accountability (paragraph 36); the continued use of the death penalty and racial disparities in its application (paragraph 30); the disproportionate imposition of life-without-parole sentences on African Americans (paragraph 46); some people held at Guantanamo Bay for more than 20 years without trial or charge, with a call to accelerate the facility’s closure (paragraphs 48–49); and a request that the United States reconsider its reservations, declarations, and understandings concerning the Covenant with a view to withdrawing them (paragraph 5) [5].

The second matter is the absence in November 2025. On November 7, the Human Rights Council adopted a decision expressing “regret” that the United States had not participated in the review, calling on it to resume cooperation, and rescheduling the review of the United States for 2026 (the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights page gives the date as November 10, 2026) [6]. Human Rights Watch notes that since the mechanism was established in 2006, no member state had skipped its own review [8]; UN News described this as the first time the United States had refused to participate in its own review [8]. The United States had previously

undergone three reviews, the first in 2010 [6]. This timeline itself shows that the U.S. human rights record is not being discussed only by its critics: the United States itself is avoiding a peer review.

5. What Do These Facts "Mean"?: Three Interpretations

Interpretation 1: Human rights standards have no exemptions. This interpretation is valid and has a textual basis. The 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action states that all human rights are universal and indivisible, and that the promotion and protection of human rights is an obligation of all states, regardless of their political, economic, and cultural systems [9]. The 2021 white paper by the State Council Information Office also acknowledges democracy as a common value of humanity, while emphasizing that it can take diverse forms [10]. If these are common standards, the United States has no exemption: the UN review observations in Section 4 apply to it. The same standards apply to the PRC (Mainland China) as well.

Interpretation 2: Therefore, the United States has no right to criticize other countries, or such criticism is a "double standard." This interpretation needs to be divided in two.

The first part is that whether an allegation is true does not depend on the record of the person making it. If someone says that a particular detention in a country took place without trial, whether that statement is true must be checked by looking at that detention, not by examining the speaker. Responding to an allegation by pointing out the accuser's own problems is a "tu quoque" response —"you do it too." It shifts the issue without answering it.

The second part is that an accuser's consistency does affect the accuser's credibility. In that context, "double standard" is a reasonable question and can be examined case by case. Examples supported by evidence include the fact that some people at Guantanamo have been held for more than 20 years without trial, and the UN Committee explicitly called on the United States to close the facility [5]; and the United States' refusal to participate in a peer review in 2025, despite the mechanism's design principle that all countries are reviewed equally [6]. An allegation without evidence cannot be established simply by saying "the United States has

problems too.” The test is whether the accuser applies the same standard to conduct of the same kind. This must be assessed case by case, not concluded from a general impression.

Interpretation 3: Therefore, the U.S. model has failed and another model is superior. This interpretation takes a logical leap. A list of one side’s problems contains no control group: it provides no data for other countries on the same indicators and does not show which system performs better on which indicator. Comparing systems requires at least three things: indicators defined on the same basis, comparable availability of information, and an assessment of whether problems can be disclosed and corrected. Section 3 notes that most of the problems in the report were disclosed by U.S. institutions themselves. For the PRC (Mainland China), whether comparable data—such as the number of people killed by police, the number of people detained, and their racial or ethnic composition—can be independently obtained and checked is a question that must be answered before making a comparison. This article does not reach a conclusion on that matter; it only notes that this is a prerequisite for comparison.

6. Counterarguments: The Strongest Form of the Mainland Chinese Position

In its strongest form, the position of the PRC (Mainland China) is not “the United States has problems too, so we have no problems.” It consists of three points. First, human rights begin with the rights to subsistence and development; a country’s human rights situation should be assessed by looking at people’s actual lives, not only at political rights such as elections and freedom of speech. Second, Western countries, especially the United States, use human rights language selectively in service of geopolitics. Third, a country’s human rights situation should be judged by its own people; externally imposed models are inapplicable [1][10].

Part of these three points is valid. The United States’ refusal to participate in a peer review in 2025 and its long-term detention of people at Guantanamo do weaken its claim to be a “beacon” of human rights; subsistence and development are indeed components of human rights, and the Vienna Declaration does not exclude them [5][9]. But the valid parts do not establish the conclusion that is

being sought. First, the Vienna Declaration also emphasizes that all rights are interdependent and indivisible, and that one category of rights cannot replace another [9]. Second, the PRC (Mainland China) has not ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it signed on October 5, 1998 [11]. This means it has not accepted periodic review of that Covenant by the Human Rights Committee and therefore has no document corresponding to the concluding observations discussed above. The PRC (Mainland China) participates in other treaty mechanisms and the Universal Periodic Review, which this article has not checked one by one. Here, the comparison is limited to this Covenant: there is a UN document available on the United States under this Covenant; there is not one for the PRC (Mainland China). Third, “judged by its own people” requires that people have channels through which to express their judgments. This is precisely what other articles in this series—on elections, speech, and the judiciary—examine one issue at a time.

7. Limitations of This Article

First, this article did not check all of the report’s more than 100 footnotes one by one. It checked only several figures on police killings, incarceration, and racial disparities that could be compared with official data. The remaining topics (poverty, health care, immigration, and foreign policy) are relayed from the report without independent verification. Second, allegations about U.S. conduct abroad (Gaza, sanctions, and overseas military deployments) involve disputed assessments under international law, which this article does not address. Third, the figures on police killings and incarceration refer to different years. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ 2023 figures cannot be directly compared with the civil-society database’s figures for 2024 and 2025. Fourth, the UN Human Rights Committee’s concluding observations are from 2023; they do not cover developments within the United States after 2025. Fifth, the information above about the U.S. absence from the review comes from UN Human Rights Office press releases and media reports. The August 2025 U.S. letter was available to the author only in excerpt form, and should be checked against the full text. Sixth, this article does not evaluate the human rights situation in the PRC (Mainland China); that is the task of other articles in this

series.

8. Conclusion

Human rights problems in the United States mean three things. First, human rights standards apply to every country, including the United States. UN reviews, U.S. Department of Justice investigations, and Bureau of Justice Statistics figures all document these problems. Second, criticism of the United States, like criticism of any other country, should be checked allegation by allegation, while also examining whether the critic applies consistent standards. Third, the quality of the U.S. record cannot substitute for examining the records of other countries.

They do not mean two things. First, “the United States has problems too” does not answer whether a particular practice in a particular country meets the relevant standard. Second, a one-sided list cannot prove which system is superior.

Three questions can help readers assess a claim: What is the definition and scope of the figure, and where does it come from? Are data on the same indicators available and checkable for other countries? After a problem is disclosed, is there a channel through which it can be corrected?

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