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Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Prisons and Prisoners

January 1982

80697
Inmates of State prisons are predominantly poor young adult males with less than a high school education. Prison is not a new experience for them; they have been incarcerated before, many first as juveniles. The offense that brought them to prison was a violent crime or a burglary. On the average, they have already served 1 1/2 years on a maximum sentence of 8 1/2 years. Along with a criminal history, they have a history of drug abuse and are also likely to have a history of alcohol abuse. They are typically housed in a maximum or medium security prison where they are likely to be sharing their living space with at least one other person.

1979 prison census and inmate survey

80697
This sketch of State prison inmates is drawn from information collected during a census of each of the 791 correctional facilities operated by the 50 States and the District of Columbia and a sample survey conducted by a personal interview with more than 12,000 State prison inmates across the country. The Census of State Correctional Facilities and the Survey of Inmates were both conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in late 1979. These studies, in general, confirm the findings of similar studies conducted 5 years earlier, while at the same time identifying certain changes in the characteristics of prison populations that have taken place in the intervening years.

The basic consistency in the findings for 1974 and 1979 suggest that these data represent a reasonably accurate portrait of State prisoners in 1982. The picture of confinement and crowding is a less accurate portrayal of the situation in early 1982. State prison populations have risen 18% since

This bulletin is the second to be issued by the Bureau of Justice Statistics based on the November 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities and its companion Census of State Correctional Facilities. Topics covered by these two data sources include demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of inmates, criminal histories, adjudication histories for current offenses, drug and alcohol histories, veteran's status, conditions of confinement, physical conditions of prison facilities, degree of prison security,

prison capacities, overcrowding, prison staff, health care, and inmate programs.

To permit maximum use of these data, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has placed public-use data tapes in the criminal justice data archive of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. For information on acquiring machine-readable data files, call the archive staff at 313/763-5010.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director

the 1979 study was conducted without a commensurate increase in prison space. Consequently, space shortages in State prisons are considerably more acute than the 1979 data indicate.

Prisoner characteristics not typical of general population

The racial composition of State prison populations in 1979 had not changed significantly from that recorded 5 years earlier. Blacks, who made up 12% of the total U.S. population, accounted for 48% of the prison population; whites accounted for 50%; other racial groups, 2%. The number of Hispanic prisoners, however, doubled during the 5 years and in 1979 they represented 9% of all State prisoners. The rate of growth for females was substantially higher than for males, yet females represented only 4% of the prisoners, about the same as in 1974.

The largest group of the inmates,

young people from 18 to 29 years of age, accounted for 63% of the population. Less than 1% of the inmates were under 18; only 4% were over 50. In 1979 as in 1974, the median age of inmates was 27.

Education and income low

The 1979 inmates were somewhat better educated than their 1974 counterparts, but nearly 3 out of every 5 had not completed high school. As a group, they averaged 11.2 years of schooling. The lack of a high school diploma undoubtedly contributed to their employment problems and low income during the year prior to the arrest that led to incarceration. Only 60% had been working full time. Among the 30% who had no job, full- or part-time, half were not looking for work. Among inmates admitted to prison after November 1977, one-fifth had no income in the 12 months prior to arrest and another fifth had earned less

than \$3,000.¹ For this group as a whole, the median annual income for the year prior to arrest was \$6,660, far lower than the 1979 national median for males, \$10,972.

Most offenders violent

In 1979, 57% of the of State prisoners had been convicted of violent crimes compared with 52% 5 years earlier. Among the violent offenders, 30% had committed murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter and 45%, robbery. Roughly a third of all inmates were convicted of property crimes; more than half of these were burglars. Three-fourths of the State prison inmates had used drugs, but 7% were in prison because of a drug offense, compared with 10% in 1974. This slight drop may be attributable to decriminalization of certain marijuana offenses by some jurisdictions as well as to increased prosecutorial attention to violent crime cases.

Reflecting the more serious nature of their crimes, prisoners in 1979 were serving somewhat longer sentences than those in 1974. In 1979, 54% of those reporting sentence length had received a maximum sentence of 10 years or more compared to 50% in 1974. Ten percent of the 1979 inmates were serving life sentences. Only 1 inmate in 3 had not served time previously. Of those with a record of prior incarceration, half began that record while still legally a juvenile and over a third had prior incarcerations as both juveniles and adults. The proportion of inmates who were recidivists was the same in 1979 as in 1974, specifically 64%.

Drug and alcohol abuse common

More than half of the State inmates had been regular users sometime in their lives. Among drug users 40% had been heroin addicts; most of the others had been habitual users of marijuana. Among prisoners who said they had used drugs only occasionally (23%), most were marijuana users, but 8% of all inmates said they had used heroin occasionally. About half the inmates drank daily or almost daily in the year before their arrest. Most had done so heavily, consuming the equivalent of 8 cans of beer, 7 glasses of wine, or 10 ounces of hard liquor. Another 26% drank weekly. Some 18% said they did not drink at all. About half of all inmates admitted to drinking, most of

¹Income data were restricted to persons admitted to prison after November 1977 in order to minimize the extent to which inflation distorts the comparability of incomes earned in different years.

Characteristic	Number	%	Characteristic	Number	%
Total	274,564	100.0	Maximum sentence length		
Age at survey			Less than 5 years	56,517	20.6
Under 30	173,093	63.0	5 to 9 years	63,775	23.2
30 and over	101,471	37.0	10 to 14 years	39,062	14.2
Median	27.3	NA	15 to 19 years	24,211	8.8
Sex			20 to 24 years	48,015	16.8
Male	263,484	96.0	25 years or more	2,143	0.8
Female	11,080	4.0	Median	103.6	NA
Race			Life	27,740	10.1
White	136,296	49.6	Death	1,270	0.5
Black	131,329	47.8	Not available	13,832	5.0
Other	6,939	2.5	Time served on current offense		
Ethnicity			Less than 1 year	95,634	34.8
Hispanic	25,816	9.4	1 to 1.9 years	63,595	23.2
Non-Hispanic	248,748	90.6	2 to 2.9 years	40,133	14.6
Prior incarceration record			3 to 3.9 years	24,273	8.8
With prior incarceration	175,473	63.9	4 to 4.9 years	16,338	6.0
Juvenile only	21,666	7.9	5 to 9.9 years	27,344	10.0
Adult only	79,652	29.0	10 years or more	6,057	2.2
Both	62,476	22.8	Median (in months)	18.0	NA
Not available	11,690	4.3	Not available	1,191	0.4
Without prior incarceration	97,866	35.6	Education		
Not available	1,225	0.4	Less than 12 years	159,340	58.0
Current offense			12 years or more	115,224	42.0
Violent	157,742	57.5	Median	11.2	NA
Murder & attempted murder	37,352	13.6	Prearrest employment status		
Manslaughter	10,941	4.0	Employed	192,800	70.2
Sexual assault	17,053	6.2	Full-time	165,577	60.3
Robbery	68,324	24.9	Part-time	27,223	9.9
Assault	17,554	6.4	Not employed	81,005	29.5
Other	6,517	2.4	Looking for work	38,230	13.9
Property	85,562	31.1	Not looking for work	42,433	15.5
Burglary	49,687	18.1	Not available	342	0.1
Larceny	13,018	4.7	Not available	759	0.3
Auto theft	5,138	1.9	Prearrest annual income		
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	11,894	4.3	Total	25,940	100.0
Other	5,825	2.1	With income	20,172	77.8
Drug	19,420	7.1	Less than \$3,000	4,982	19.2
Public order	10,982	4.0	\$3,000-\$9,999	7,834	30.2
Unspecified	859	0.3	\$10,000 or more	6,457	24.9
			Don't know	899	3.5
			Median	\$6,660	NA
			Without income	5,768	22.2

NOTE: Detail may not add to totals shown because of rounding.
NA Not applicable.

¹Includes only persons admitted after November, 1977.

them heavily, just prior to the offense that brought them to prison.

Most held in secure prisons

Almost all the inmates were held in traditional, secure-confinement institutions; only 4% were in relatively open facilities providing access to community resources.² Of the total 223 community-based facilities in the United States, Florida accounted for more than twice as many (38) as any other State. In some States, however,

²In the 1979 census, a correctional facility was considered a community-based residence rather than a confinement institution if at least half the residents were regularly permitted (or eligible) to depart unaccompanied for the daily use of community resources, such as schools or treatment programs, or for seeking or holding employment.

such residences may be operated through agencies other than the Department of Corrections. Of the Nation's 568 confinement facilities, the largest single group (73) was in North Carolina; on the average, however, that State's facilities had a lower capacity than those in most other jurisdictions.³ Texas held the largest number of inmates (26,290), followed by California (22,745) and Florida (19,554).

Confinement conditions vary

The largest group of inmates in confinement institutions (42%) was held under maximum security conditions; 37% under medium security; 19% under

³Details on facility capacity will be presented in a subsequent report.

Region and State	All facilities		Confinement facilities							Community-based facilities	
	Facilities	Inmates	Facilities	Total	Maximum	Medium	Minimum	Not classified	Other	Facilities	Inmates
United States	791	274,563	568	263,553	109,738	98,189	51,193	3,616	817	223	11,010
Northeast	115	41,620	85	40,700	19,630	14,933	4,869	1,040	228	30	920
Maine	5	684	3	637	382	168	87	0	0	2	47
New Hampshire	3	299	1	281	20	233	28	0	0	2	18
Vermont	6	376	6	376	95	132	113	36	0	0	0
Massachusetts	19	2,712	13	2,453	798	1,209	386	13	47	6	259
Rhode Island	6	741	5	673	285	108	123	119	38	1	68
Connecticut	10	3,831	10	3,831	1,065	2,664	102	0	0	0	0
New York	33	19,426	30	19,199	10,233	7,589	1,377	0	0	3	227
New Jersey	9	5,919	8	5,890	3,594	2,39	1,369	778	0	1	29
Pennsylvania	24	7,632	9	7,360	3,248	2,591	1,284	94	143	15	272
North Central	157	61,682	101	59,399	23,080	23,787	11,340	1,183	9	56	2,283
Ohio	13	13,362	10	13,278	3,119	7,935	1,531	693	0	3	84
Indiana	16	5,672	10	5,431	2,947	1,645	736	103	0	6	241
Illinois	21	11,627	12	11,219	3,565	5,158	2,128	368	0	9	408
Michigan	40	14,018	25	13,347	6,022	3,550	3,775	0	0	15	671
Wisconsin	16	3,353	10	3,168	1,402	1,168	588	1	9	6	185
Minnesota	7	2,030	5	1,987	1,016	827	144	0	0	2	43
Iowa	15	2,202	8	1,950	828	936	196	0	0	7	242
Missouri	9	5,189	7	5,012	2,342	1,427	1,232	11	0	2	177
North Dakota	2	235	2	235	186	40	9	0	0	0	0
South Dakota	2	587	2	587	411	175	1	0	0	0	0
Nebraska	8	1,193	4	1,029	352	255	415	7	0	4	164
Kansas	8	2,214	6	2,145	890	671	585	0	0	2	68
South	405	128,753	292	121,708	54,711	42,049	23,642	728	578	113	7,045
Delaware	6	1,370	5	1,325	193	794	143	187	8	1	45
Maryland	18	7,961	13	7,429	2,086	3,913	1,427	0	3	5	532
District of Columbia	8	2,245	5	2,070	809	1,089	167	0	5	3	175
Virginia	42	8,296	38	8,050	2,609	3,976	1,454	11	0	4	246
West Virginia	7	1,263	4	1,211	144	907	124	36	0	3	52
North Carolina	84	14,732	73	13,931	1,304	6,664	5,866	97	0	11	801
South Carolina	32	7,061	23	6,220	1,383	2,117	2,573	147	0	9	841
Georgia	25	9,451	18	9,033	4,153	3,263	979	77	561	7	418
Florida	77	19,554	39	17,681	8,516	5,234	3,866	64	1	38	1,873
Kentucky	10	3,680	10	3,680	780	2,133	767	0	0	0	0
Tennessee	13	6,522	8	6,024	1,346	3,936	736	6	0	5	498
Alabama	21	3,832	9	3,215	426	1,825	958	6	0	12	617
Mississippi	10	2,389	7	2,310	1,278	0	1,032	0	0	3	79
Arkansas	7	3,015	5	2,805	2,445	265	95	0	0	2	210
Louisiana	7	6,611	7	6,611	1,129	3,213	2,172	97	0	0	0
Oklahoma	21	4,481	11	3,823	1,331	1,668	824	0	0	10	658
Texas	17	26,290	17	26,290	24,779	1,052	459	0	0	0	0
West	114	42,508	90	41,746	12,317	17,420	11,342	665	2	24	762
Montana	2	703	2	703	335	187	138	43	0	0	0
Idaho	3	801	3	801	407	201	193	0	0	0	0
Wyoming	3	482	3	482	33	309	140	0	0	0	0
Colorado	9	2,241	7	2,189	1,129	442	496	122	0	2	52
New Mexico	5	1,511	2	1,299	164	898	237	0	0	3	212
Arizona	9	3,277	5	3,197	1,413	758	1,026	0	0	4	80
Utah	5	993	2	917	169	224	490	34	0	3	76
Nevada	6	1,547	5	1,522	305	929	298	0	0	1	15
Washington	12	3,884	9	3,781	2,204	632	945	0	0	3	103
Oregon	10	2,975	6	2,879	2,143	57	679	0	0	4	96
California	32	22,745	30	22,645	3,654	12,315	6,465	211	0	2	100
Alaska	9	592	9	592	256	200	130	5	1	0	0
Hawaii	9	757	7	729	105	268	105	250	1	2	28

minimum security; and 2% either not classified or categorized in a different manner. The proportion of inmates held in maximum security facilities, which have extremely high operating cost, ranged from 94% in Texas to less than 10% in New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Wyoming. In 14 States more than half of all prisoners were

confined in maximum security institutions.

If 60 square feet per person is used as a standard, then 58% of all one-person cells, 90% of all two-person cells, and 20% of all larger living units in traditional prisons were overcrowded. No State avoided placing at least some of

its inmates into space that was less than 60 square feet per person. The 39 States with community-based facilities generally did not have as severe a problem with overcrowding in these facilities as they did among their secure institutions.

The most common confinement unit

in each State was the one-person cell. Overcrowding occurs in these units when the cell contains less than 60 square feet or more than one person. Two States, Arkansas and South Dakota, had no overcrowded one-person cells, but at least 97% of the one-person cells were overcrowded in Mississippi, North Dakota, Texas, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Slightly more than 97,000 persons were employed in State correctional facilities in 1979; more than 97% of them were employed full time. The total number of correctional personnel increased by some 60% during 1974-79, with a resultant decline from 3.2 to 2.9 in the number of inmates per full-time

Bureau of Justice Statistics bulletins are prepared principally by the staff of the Bureau. Carol B. Kalish, chief of policy analysis, edits the bulletins; Marilyn Marbrook, head of the Bureau publications unit, administers their publication, assisted by Julie A. Ferguson. This bulletin is based on material developed by Mimi Cantwell of the Bureau of the Census.

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staff member. Among traditional confinement units, there were 58,700

full-time employees with direct responsibility for inmate supervision. On the average, each of these employees was responsible for 4.5 inmates, but the number ranged from 2.1 in Rhode Island to 13.7 in Texas.

Further reading

The first release of data from the November 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities and its companion Census of State Correctional Facilities was the Veterans in Prison bulletin, October 1981, NCJ-79232. The most recent prison population data was released in the Prisoners at Midyear 1981 bulletin, September 1981, NCJ-78756.

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