

An estimated 181,500 U.S. veterans were incarcerated in prison and jail across the country in 2011–12. This was a 9% decrease from 2004. While veterans once made up more than 24% of the inmate population, they now account for about 8% of all inmates. From 1980 to 2008, the total number of veteran inmates increased along with the growth in the overall prison population. However, the proportion of incarcerated veterans has declined. In 2012, veterans were incarcerated at significantly lower rates than nonveterans.

Demographic profile

In 2011–12, incarcerated veterans were more likely than nonveterans to be white, older, more educated, and to have been married. There were more white veterans in prison (50%) and jail (44%) than white nonveterans in prison (27%) and jail (31%). There were also fewer black and Hispanic veteran inmates than nonveteran inmates. Veterans in prison were an average 12 years older than nonveterans in prison and those in jail were an average, 11 years older than nonveterans in jail.

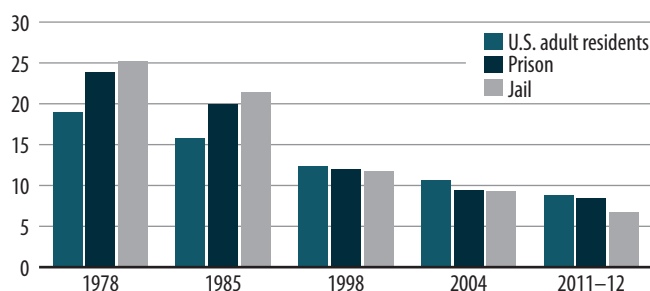
Military service

About two-thirds of incarcerated veterans were discharged from military service between 1974 and 2000. The majority (55%) of incarcerated veterans served in the U.S. Army, followed by the U.S. Navy (20%), U.S. Marine Corps (18%), U.S. Air Force (9%) and U.S. Coast Guard (2%). Most veterans in prison (75%) and jail (69%) reported that they did not experience combat while serving. Almost half of veterans in prison (48%) and jail (44%) served in the U.S. military for less than 3 years. About a quarter of veterans in prison (24%) and jail (27%) served for 5 years or more. More than three-quarters (77%) of veterans in prison and jail received an honorable discharge or a general discharge under honorable conditions. Five percent of prison inmates and 6% of jail inmates received dishonorable or bad conduct discharges.

Prior arrests, current offense, and sentencing

Veterans in prison in 2011–12 reported fewer prior arrests than nonveterans. An estimated 43% of veterans in prison had four or more prior arrests compared to 55% of nonveteran prisoners. Meanwhile, 22% of veterans had just one prior arrest compared to 16% of nonveteran inmates.

Estimated percent of veterans in the U.S. resident population and in prison and jail, 1978, 1985, 1998, 2004, and 2011–12
Percent



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics data collections on prison and jail inmates and U.S. Census Bureau population data collections.

About a third of veterans and a quarter of nonveterans in jail had not been previously incarcerated.

A higher percentage of veterans in prison (35%) and in jail (12%) were incarcerated for a violent sexual offense than nonveterans in prison (23%) and jail (7%). Veterans were less likely to be in prison (14%) and jail (18%) for a drug crime than nonveterans in prison (19%) and jail (23%).

Veteran sentences tended to be longer than nonveteran sentences. More veterans (16%) were serving life sentences in prison than nonveterans (14%), and fewer veterans (17%) were serving sentences of 4 or less than nonveterans (21%).

Mental health problems

A higher percentage of veterans (55%) than nonveterans (43%) in jail reported that a mental health professional told them they had a mental health disorder at some point in their lives. Slightly less than half of the veterans in prison (48%) reported that they had previously been told they had a mental health disorder. About 36% of nonveterans in prison reported such a condition. Veterans in prison and jail were more than twice as likely to report having been told they had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than nonveterans. An estimated 23% of veterans in prison reported that a mental health professional told them they had PTSD compared to 11% of nonveterans. The percentage of veterans in jail (31%) who were ever told they had PTSD was also twice as high as nonveterans (15%).

The full report (*Veterans in Prison and Jail, 2011–12*, NCJ 249144), related documents, and additional information about the Bureau of Justice Statistics can be found on the BJS website at www.bjs.gov.

