



Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Prisoners 1925 - 81

The number of persons sentenced to State and Federal correctional institutions has been recorded annually since 1925. It is therefore possible to view the rapid growth of prison population over the past 9 years against the background provided by nearly 50 years of earlier data. In general, the trend in prison population over the entire period has been one of upward growth, about half of which reflects the growth in the general population during that time (table 1 and figure 1).

The average annual growth rate for the prison population during 1925-81 was 2.4 percent; for the residential population of the United States it was 1.2 percent. The more rapid growth of the prison population is also reflected in the incarceration rate (the number of sentenced prisoners for each 100,000 residents in the United States), which rose from 79 per 100,000 to 153 per 100,000 (figure 2).

Although the long-range trend in prison population has been upward, it has not been without interruptions, the two

This bulletin presents the reader with 57 years of data on prison populations from the statistical series, "Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions." Along with the series, we have included a discussion of its trends and of the development and expansion of the series. With our continuing publication of end-of-year

and midyear data on prison populations, there has been new interest in the statistical series from which these data are derived. We intend the historical series to be especially useful to those engaged in analyzing recent trends.

December 1982
Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director

longest and deepest occurring during World War II and the Vietnam era.

Between 1925 and 1939 the number of sentenced prisoners grew by 88,000, an average annual rate of 5 percent, substantially higher than for the entire 1925-81 period even though there was virtually no growth during the depth of the depression, 1932-34. By 1939 the incarceration rate had reached 137 per 100,000, a level it was not to reach again for 41 years.

During World War II, the prison population declined by nearly 50,000 in 5 years as most of the pool of potential offenders was drafted. By 1946 the incarceration rate had dropped to 99 per 100,000. From 1944 to 1961 the prison population increased in every year but one, although the annual gains were uneven, and in 1961 the incarceration rate peaked at 119 per 100,000.

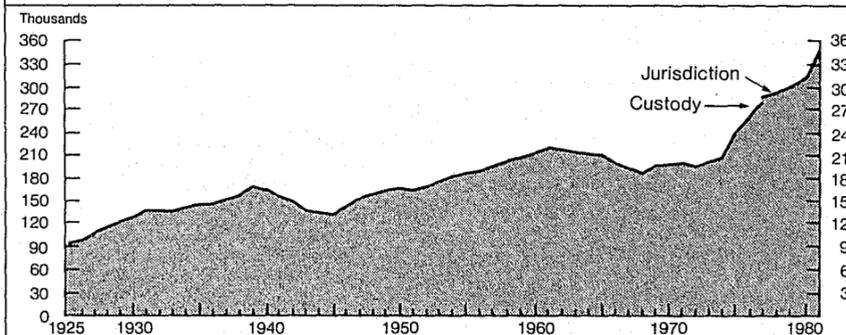
During the Vietnam era, the prison population declined by 30,000 between 1961 and 1968. The 1968 prison population was 188,000 and the incarceration rate the lowest since the late 1920's.

From this low the prison population and the incarceration rate grew rather slowly for 5 years, but in 1974 began a dramatic rise that added nearly 150,000 sentenced inmates to the national prison population in 8 years. The average annual increase during this period was 7.1 percent compared to 2.4 percent for the entire 1925-81 period. At the end of 1981 the incarceration rate was 153 per 100,000, the highest ever recorded. The first 9 months of 1982 further accelerated this trend, bringing the incarceration rate to 169 on September 30.

Historical data

The first attempt to count all of the prisoners in the United States was made in the decennial population census of 1850. Counts of prisoners were included in each

Number of sentenced State and Federal prisoners, yearend 1925-81



Note: Prior to 1977, NPS reports were based on the custody population. Beginning in 1977, focus is on the jurisdiction population. Both figures are shown for 1977 to facilitate year-to-year comparison.

Figure 1

Table 1. Sentenced prisoners in State and Federal institutions: Number and incarceration rates, 1925-81¹

	Total	Rate	Males	Rate	Females	Rate	Total	Rate	Males	Rate	Females	Rate	
1925 ²	91,669	79	88,231	149	3,438	6	1955	185,780	112	178,655	217	7,125	8
1926	97,991	83	94,287	157	3,704	6	1956	189,565	112	182,190	218	7,375	9
1927	109,983	91	104,983	173	4,363	7	1957	195,414	113	188,113	221	7,301	8
1928	116,390	96	111,836	182	4,554	8	1958	205,643	117	198,208	229	7,435	8
1929	120,496	98	115,876	187	4,620	8	1959	208,105	117	200,469	228	7,636	8
1930	129,453	104	124,785	200	4,668	8	1960	212,953	117	205,265	230	7,688	8
1931	137,082	110	132,638	211	4,444	7	1961	220,149	119	212,268	234	7,881	8
1932	137,997	110	133,573	211	4,424	7	1962	218,830	117	210,823	229	8,007	8
1933	136,810	109	132,520	209	4,290	7	1963	217,283	114	209,538	225	7,745	8
1934	138,316	109	133,769	209	4,547	7	1964	214,336	111	206,632	219	7,704	8
1935	144,180	113	139,278	217	4,902	8	1965	210,895	108	203,327	213	7,568	8
1936	145,038	113	139,990	217	5,048	8	1966	199,654	102	192,702	201	6,951	7
1937	152,741	118	147,375	227	5,366	8	1967	194,896	98	188,661	195	6,235	6
1938	160,285	123	154,826	236	5,459	8	1968	187,914	94	182,102	187	5,812	6
1939	179,818	137	173,143	263	6,675	10	1969	196,007	97	189,413	192	6,594	6
1940 ³	173,706	131	167,345	252	6,361	10	1970	196,429	96	190,794	191	5,635	5
1941	165,439	124	159,228	239	6,211	9	1971 ⁴	198,061	95	191,732	189	6,329	6
1942	150,384	112	144,167	217	6,217	9	1972	196,092	93	189,823	185	6,269	6
1943	137,220	103	131,054	202	6,166	9	1973	204,211	96	197,523	191	6,004	6
1944	132,456	100	126,350	200	6,106	9	1974	218,466	102	211,077	202	7,389	7
1945	133,649	98	127,609	193	6,040	9	1975	240,593	111	231,918	220	8,675	8
1946	140,079	99	134,075	191	6,004	8	1976	262,833	120	252,794	238	10,039	9
1947	151,304	105	144,961	202	6,343	9	1977 ⁵	278,141	126	267,097	249	11,044	10
1948	155,977	106	149,739	205	6,238	8	1977	285,456	129	274,244	255	11,212	10
1949	163,749	109	157,663	211	6,086	8	1978	294,396	132	282,813	261	11,583	10
1950	166,123	109	160,309	211	5,814	8	1979	301,470	133	289,465	264	12,005	10
1951	165,680	107	159,610	208	6,070	8	1980	315,974	138	303,643	274	12,331	11
1952	168,233	107	161,994	208	6,239	8	1981	353,167	153	338,940	302	14,227	12
1953	173,579	108	166,909	211	6,670	8							
1954	182,901	112	175,907	218	6,994	8							

¹The incarceration rate is the number of prisoners per 100,000 residential population.
²Data for 1925 through 1939 include sentenced prison in State and Federal prisons and reformatories whether committed for felonies or misdemeanors.
³Data for 1940 through 1970 include all adult

felons serving sentences in State and Federal institutions.
⁴Data for 1971 to present include all adults or youthful offenders sentenced to State or Federal correctional institutions whose maximum sentence was over a year.
⁵Before 1977 only prisoners in the custody of

State and Federal correctional systems were counted. After 1977 all prisoners under the jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. Figures for both custody and jurisdiction are shown in for 1977 to facilitate comparisons.

subsequent decennial census through 1990. In the years 1904, 1910, and 1923 special separate enumerations of the prison population were made. Then in 1926 under a mandate from Congress the National Prisoner Statistics program began to collect statistics on prisoners on an annual basis.¹ Since its inception, the program has depended entirely on the voluntary participation of State departments of corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The complete National Prisoner Statistics program consists of a count of the number of State and Federal prisoners on December 31 of each year; a count of the number of persons admitted to and released from prison each year (by type of admission and release); the number of persons executed annually (beginning in 1930); the year-end population of death row (beginning in 1953); and, for selected years prior to 1974 and annually thereafter, the characteristics of persons admitted to and released from prison. This discussion

¹The NPS program was begun by the Census Bureau. It was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons in 1950 and to the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service (now the Bureau of Justice Statistics) of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in 1971. Since that time the Census Bureau has served as the data collection agent for the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

focuses entirely on the statistics for the yearend prison population.

The difficulty in collecting prison statistics, or indeed most criminal justice statistics, for the United States as a whole arises not only from differences in record-keeping and statistics-gathering in each State but also, and more important, from the different criminal justice practices in each State. Therefore, since the beginning of the prison population series, special and continuing attention has been directed at making the population counts for the individual States as comparable as possible, given the range of sentencing laws and practices among the States. Nevertheless, each annual report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics contains an appendix specifying the ways in which data reported for each State deviate from the standard definitions. In recent years, these deviations generally have been minor. In the earlier years of the series this was not always the case. Early publications often warned the reader to use caution in making direct comparisons between the statistics for one State and another.

Definitional changes

From the beginning, the National Prisoner Statistics program has attempted

to count persons imprisoned for serious crimes. The original definition included adult prisoners sentenced to and confined in State and Federal prisons and reformatories. Consequently, the data included persons convicted for misdemeanors as well as those convicted for felonies. There was not at that time, and there still is not, a standard definition of "felony" and "misdemeanor" that is applicable in all States. In general, felonies are more serious crimes than misdemeanors. For example, all major crimes—such as murder, rape, and robbery—are always felonies. All minor crimes still serious enough to have incarceration as a possible sentence—such as drunkenness, loitering, and disturbing the peace—are misdemeanors. It is for the crimes that fall in between that the distinction is often blurred. Because the aim of the sentenced prisoner series was to collect data on serious offenders, the series excluded inmates of city and county jails (who are mostly sentenced misdemeanants or persons awaiting trial). Nevertheless, some misdemeanants were included in the series, especially in the few States that operated combined jail-prison systems.

In 1940 the definition of sentenced prisoners was changed to eliminate more inmates serving time for minor offenses. It was assumed, not entirely accurately,

that felons always served sentences lasting more than 6 months. They almost always do, but so do some misdemeanants. Nevertheless, the series was redefined as adult felons serving time in State or Federal institutions, with a felon presumed to be someone serving a maximum sentence of 6 months or more. This did eliminate misdemeanants serving sentences of less than 6 months and thereby focused the series more sharply on the serious offender.

In 1971, to further restrict the series, the term "felon" was discarded and the States were asked to report only on prisoners with maximum sentences of more than a year. This not only eliminated additional misdemeanants from the count, it also established uniformity across States around the most widely accepted definition of a felon, someone with a maximum sentence of more than a year.

The definition also was expanded to encompass persons sentenced as youthful offenders as well as those sentenced as adults. The Federal system and several States have youthful offender statutes. Youthful offenders are above the legal maximum age of juveniles (which varies from State to State) and are usually below the age of 25. They are frequently assigned to separate sections of adult correctional facilities or to completely separate facilities. Persons in this age group may be tried and sentenced as adults, however, just as they are in States without youthful offender statutes.

The definition of sentenced prisoners adopted in 1971 is currently in use. Although two definitional changes have been made since the series began, each change was designed to sharpen the original concept of the series, that is, to

Table 2. Prisoners in State and Federal institutions: Total and prisoners with short sentences or no sentences, 1974-81

	Total prisoners	Short-sentence and unsentenced prisoners ¹		
		Total	Male	Female
1974	229,721	11,516	10,749	767
1975	253,816	11,066	10,249	817
1976	278,000	15,167	14,036	1,131
1977 ²	291,667	13,526	12,529	997
1977	300,024	14,568	13,501	1,067
1978	307,276	12,880	11,717	1,163
1979	314,457	12,987	11,997	990
1980	329,821	13,847	12,758	1,089
1981	368,772	15,605	14,395	1,210

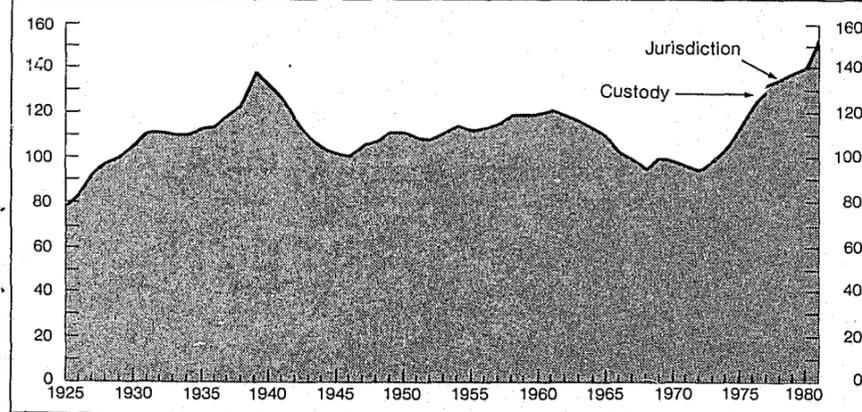
¹Prisoners with short sentences are defined as those whose maximum sentence is a year or less.
²Before 1977 only prisoners in the custody of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. After 1977 all prisoners under the jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. Figures for both custody and jurisdiction are shown for 1977 to facilitate comparisons.

measure the number of serious offenders sentenced to prison.

In 1974, the prison population series was expanded to include persons with short sentences, that is, with maximum sentences of a year or less, and persons without sentences (table 2). This group, when added to the "sentenced" group, produces the total number of persons in State and Federal correctional institutions.

Most prisoners with short sentences and without sentences can be found in jurisdictions that operate combined jail-prison systems—Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware, Alaska, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. In these

Number of sentenced State and Federal prisoners per 100,000 U.S. population, 1925-81



Note: Prior to 1977, NPS reports were based on the custody population; beginning in 1977, focus is on the jurisdiction population. Both figures are shown for 1977 to facilitate year-to-year comparison.

Figure 2

jurisdictions, most of the unsentenced prisoners are awaiting trial and the short-sentence prisoners are serving time for lesser offenses. In States where jail and prison systems are not combined, short-sentence and unsentenced prisoners may be held in State facilities for safekeeping, for presentencing evaluation, for medical care, or for a variety of other reasons. In the summer of 1972 some 2,000 unsentenced aliens were held by the Federal Bureau of Prisons for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

By including a count of the total number of persons in prison while preserving the distinction between "sentenced" (more than a year), "short-sentenced" (a year or less), and "unsentenced," the prison population data present a more complete picture of the physical and fiscal pressures the prison population exerts on the Nation's correctional facilities.²

Custody and jurisdiction

In 1977 another change was made to the prison population statistics. Instead of reporting prisoners within their custody, the States were asked to report on prisoners under their jurisdiction. At the time of the change an increase of some 7,000 inmates occurred.

The concept of custody is simply that of physical possession of the prisoner. The concept of jurisdiction focuses on ultimate responsibility for the prisoner. It is common for States to house prisoners from other States or from the Federal system, as well as for the Federal system to house prisoners for the States. This may occur when one State houses the overflow population of another State, although extra bed space in any system has been rare in recent years. Prisoners may also be moved for personal safety or as a temporary response to an emergency. For example, after the 1980 prison riot that severely damaged the New Mexico State Prison, correctional authorities of adjacent States and the Federal Bureau of Prisons accepted New Mexico prisoners for temporary holding. In each of these examples, however, there would be no difference between the number of prisoners measured under the custody concept and number measured under the jurisdiction concept. One prisoner in custody in one State merely becomes one prisoner under the jurisdiction of another State.

The increase of more than 7,000 that occurred in 1977 can be attributed to several sources. The most common was State prisoners housed in local jails, usually due to overcrowding in the State prison system. Other factors included

²Although short-sentenced and unsentenced prisoners are combined in Table 2, they are shown separately in the annual report, *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions*.

inmates in hospitals (including mental hospitals) outside the correctional system; inmates on work release or furlough, and Federal prisoners housed in private contract sites.³ Since the definition was changed in 1977, separate statistics on custody populations have continued to be collected yearly and published in a separate table in the annual report.

Race and ethnicity

Beginning in 1978 prison population statistics were collected by race and ethnicity (table 3). The statistics by race have been reliably reported by all of the States; in 1981 race was not known for less than 2 percent of the inmate population. Ethnicity was more difficult to report. In 1981, eight States could not identify any of their Hispanic inmates and the ethnicity of 20 percent of all inmates could not be determined.

Each of the States is given the opportunity to revise its yearend prison population statistics one year later. Most States make such revisions, so that final statistics for a given year are not available until the preliminary statistics for the subsequent year are published. Yearend population statistics are revised

³For a more detailed discussion of custody and jurisdiction, see Appendix III, *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1978*.

Table 3. Total prison population by race and sex, 1978-81¹

	Total			Male			Female			Not known
	White	Black	Other ²	White	Black	Other ²	White	Black	Other ²	
1978	157,208	143,376	3,283	151,534	136,893	3,090	5,674	6,483	193	2,735
1979	161,642	145,383	3,677	155,803	138,776	3,468	5,839	6,607	209	3,304
1980	169,274	150,249	3,853	163,083	143,700	3,677	6,191	6,549	176	5,319
1981	190,503	168,129	4,477	183,202	160,442	4,240	7,301	7,687	237	5,663

¹The numbers in this table add to totals different from those shown in table 2 because preliminary statistics on race are not subsequently revised.
²American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders.

by sentence length, sex, jurisdiction, and custody; they are not revised by race or ethnicity.

This discussion of historical prison population statistics has focused almost exclusively at the National level. It has not dealt with the changes and irregularities that occurred within the 1925-81 statistics for the individual States. These are documented and can be obtained along with the statistical series for each State from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Further reading

To obtain other National Prisoner Statistics reports or to be added to the bulletin and/or corrections mailing lists, write to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, (301/251-5500), User Services Dept. 2, Box 6000, Rockville, Md.

20850. Other NPS bulletins include—
- Prisoners at Midyear 1982, 10-11/82, NCJ-84875
 - Death-row Prisoners 1981, 7/82, NCJ-83191
 - Prisons and Prisoners, 1/82, NCJ-80697
 - Veterans in Prison, 10/81, NCJ-79232.

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