



STATISTICAL BRIEF

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Survey of Prison Inmates

Work Assignments Reported by Prisoners, 2016

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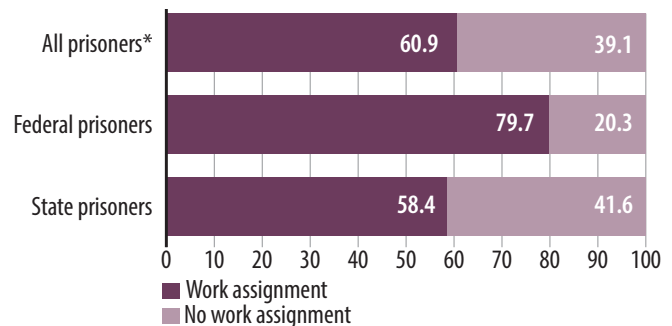
About 61% of all U.S. prisoners in 2016 reported that they had a current work assignment (figure 1). Eight in 10 federal prisoners and 6 in 10 state prisoners reported that they currently had a work assignment. In this report, a work assignment in prison includes those inside the prison facility, on facility grounds, or off facility grounds. Findings in this report are based on self-reported data collected through the Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI), which was most recently fielded in 2016. The SPI represents a key source of national data on prisoner characteristics and is collected through face-to-face interviews with a national sample of federal and state prisoners age 18 or older.

Almost three-quarters (73%) of U.S. prisoners who had a work assignment when interviewed in 2016 said they were required to have a work assignment (figure 2). Most federal (83%) and state (71%) prisoners who had a work assignment reported that they were required to have one.

In 2016, the most common type of work assignment reported by all prisoners in the United States was janitorial duties (18%), followed by food preparation or related duties (12%) (table 1). These patterns were consistent among both federal and state prisoners.

Among U.S. prisoners in 2016 who had a work assignment that was not a requirement, 7 in 10 (70%) reported that learning new job skills was a very important reason in their decision to work while in prison (figure 3). Federal and state prisoners who chose to have a work assignment reported similar reasons for their decision. Learning new job skills (71% of federal and 70% of state prisoners) and earning spending money (63% of federal and 54% of state prisoners) were commonly reported as a very important factor in their decision to work. In contrast, spending time with friends or making new friends was most likely to be rated by federal (67%) or state (63%) prisoners as an unimportant reason for taking a work assignment.

FIGURE 1
Percent of prisoners in the United States, by work assignment status and prison population, 2016

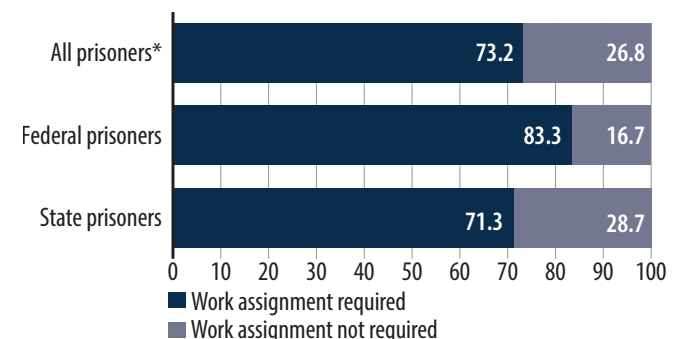


Note: Percentages exclude missing data and are based on the total number of prisoners for each prison population. See table 1 for percentages and the estimated number of prisoners for each prison population and appendix table 1 for standard errors.

*Includes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

FIGURE 2
Percent of prisoners in the United States with a work assignment, by requirement status and prison population, 2016



Note: Percentages exclude missing data and are based on the number of respondents who had a prison work assignment. See appendix table 2 for percentages, the estimated number of prisoners who had a work assignment for each prison population, and standard errors.

*Includes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

TABLE 1**Percent of prisoners in the United States, by type of work assignment and prison population, 2016**

Type of work assignment	All prisoners ^a	Federal prisoners	State prisoners
Total	100%	100%	100%
Had a work assignment			
No	39.1%	20.3%	41.6%
Yes	60.9	79.7	58.4
Janitorial duties	18.1	28.2	16.7
Grounds/road maintenance	5.7	7.1	5.6
Food preparation/related duties	11.9	14.2	11.6
Laundry	2.6	2.1	2.7
Medical services	1.5	0.9	1.6
Farming/forestry/ranching	1.6	0.4	1.7
Goods production/industries ^b	3.9	6.7	3.5
Library/stockroom/store services ^c	7.9	12.1	7.3
Maintenance or repair/construction	4.6	6.9	4.3
Other	4.6	3.2	4.8
Estimated number of prisoners	1,421,700	173,400	1,248,300

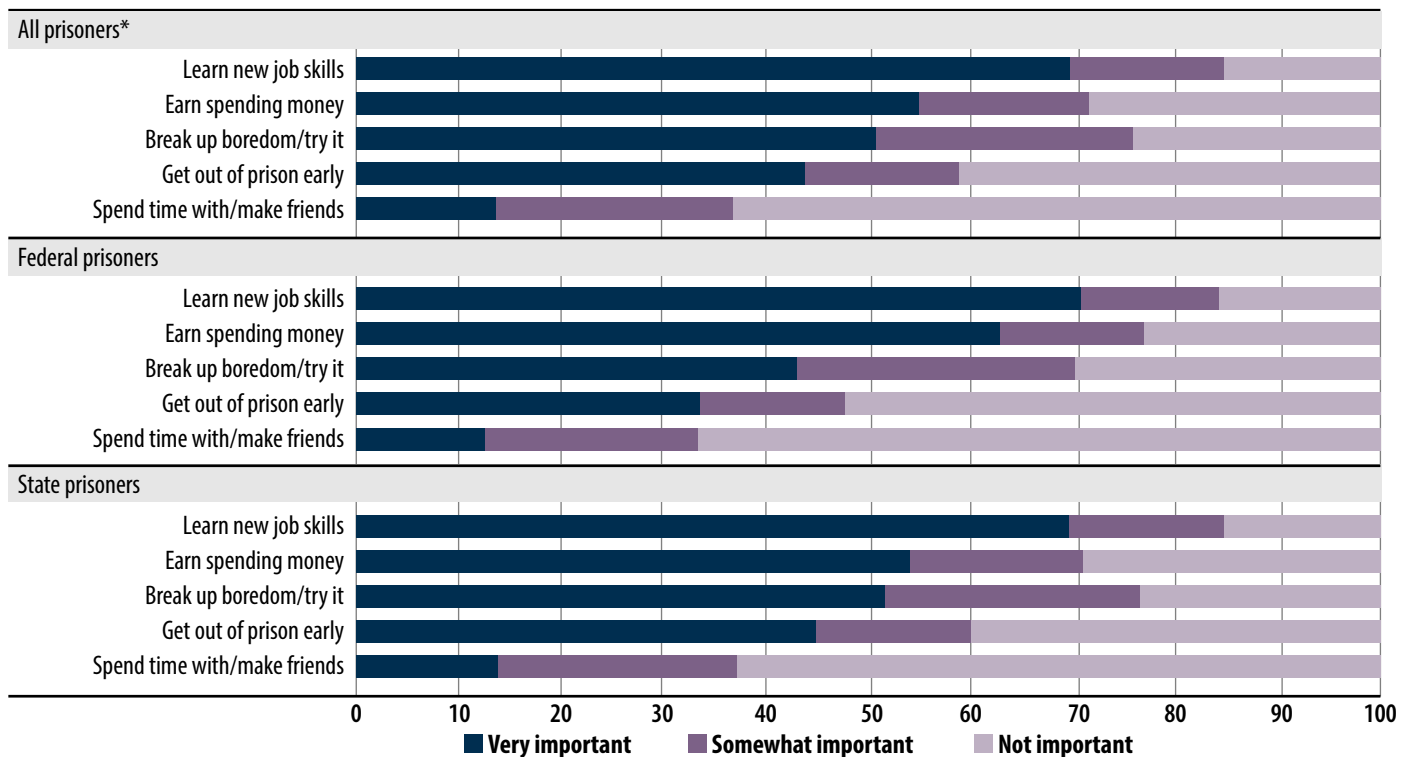
Note: Percentages exclude missing data. Counts are rounded to the nearest 100. Details may not sum to the totals because respondents could report more than one type of prison work assignment. See *Questions on prison work assignments in the Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* for more information on the questions asked to measure work assignments in prison. See appendix table 1 for standard errors.

^aIncludes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

^bIncludes contract services such as telemarketing, the tag shop, or the print shop.

^cIncludes services such as office help, recreation, sew shop, or barber or beauty shop.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

FIGURE 3**Reasons prisoners in the United States chose to have a work assignment that was not a requirement, by importance of reason and prison population, 2016**

Note: Percentages exclude missing data and are based on the number of respondents who had a prison work assignment that was not a requirement. See *Questions on prison work assignments in the Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* for more information on the questions asked to measure work assignments in prison. See appendix table 3 for percentages, the estimated number of prisoners for each prison population, and standard errors.

*Includes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

Questions on prison work assignments in the Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016

Respondents to the Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016 (SPI) were asked whether they currently had a work assignment inside the prison facility, on facility grounds, or off facility grounds. (See figure 1 and table 1.) Those respondents who reported that they had a prison work assignment at the time of their interview were asked about the types of work assignments they had. (See table 1.) Respondents could report more than one type of prison work assignment. Their responses were coded by interviewers based on a predetermined list of prison work assignments:

- general janitorial duties such as cleaning, sweeping, or mopping
- grounds or road maintenance
- food preparation or related duties in the kitchen, bakery, butchery, etc.
- laundry
- medical services such as in the hospital, infirmary, or other medical services
- farming, forestry, or ranching
- goods production, industries, or contract services such as telemarketing, in the tag shop, in the print shop, etc.
- library, stockroom, or store services such as office help, recreation, sew shop, barber or beauty shop, etc.

- maintenance, repair, or construction
- other.

All respondents who reported having a current work assignment were also asked whether they were required to have one. (See figure 2.) Respondents could be required to have a prison work assignment based on the conditions of their sentence, by the state department of corrections (for state prisoners), by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (for federal prisoners), or by the specific facility where they were incarcerated.

The 2016 SPI also asked respondents who had a work assignment that was not a requirement about their motivation to work while incarcerated, including reasons why they worked and how important those reasons were in their decision to work. (See figure 3.)

For more information on the questions asked in the 2016 SPI, the survey documentation and data are archived at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR; study number 37692). The 2016 questionnaire is also available on the BJS website at https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/survey/spi16q_2.pdf.

Methodology

Findings in this report are based on self-reported data collected from a national sample of state and federal prisoners in the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI). The data were collected through face-to-face interviews with respondents using computer-assisted personal interviewing.

The target population for the 2016 SPI was sentenced (99%) or unsentenced (1%) state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners age 18 or older in the United States during 2016. The primary objective of the SPI was to produce national statistics of the state and sentenced federal prison populations across a variety of domains.

Item nonresponse

All percentages in this report are based on nonmissing data, as explained in the figure and table notes. The item nonresponse rates for all characteristics presented are less than 1.0% for all prisoners and for state prisoners. Among federal prisoners, the item nonresponse rates are less than 1.5% for all characteristics presented.

Standard errors

When national estimates are derived from a sample, as with the SPI, caution must be used when comparing one estimate to another or when comparing estimates between years. Although one estimate may be larger than another, estimates based on a sample rather than a complete enumeration of the population have some degree of sampling error. The sampling error of an estimate depends on several factors, including the size of the estimate, the number of completed interviews, and the intracluster correlation of the outcome within prisons. When the sampling error around an estimate is taken into account, estimates that appear different may not be statistically different.

One measure of the sampling error associated with an estimate is the standard error. The standard error may vary from one estimate to the next. Generally, an estimate with a smaller standard error provides a more reliable approximation of the true value than an estimate with a larger standard error. Estimates with relatively large standard errors have less precision and reliability and should be interpreted with caution.

For complex sample designs, there are several methods that can be used to generate standard errors around a point estimate (e.g., percentage or count). In this report,

Taylor Series Linearization (TSL) methods were used to estimate the standard errors for percentages and counts. The TSL method directly estimates variances through a linearized function by combining variance estimates from stratum and primary sampling units (PSU) used to sample respondents. In the SPI, the design parameters used for computing TSL variances are V1571 (geography stratum), V1572 (sex stratum), and V1573 (PSU).

Readers should note that, for purposes of confidentiality and disclosure protection, these design parameters appear on the 2016 SPI restricted-use file only. The file is archived at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR; study number 37692).

Readers may use the estimates and standard errors of the estimates provided in this report to generate a 95% confidence interval around the estimates as a measure of the margin of error. Typically, multiplying the standard error by 1.96 and then adding or subtracting the result from the estimate produces the confidence interval.* This interval expresses the range of values with which the true population parameter is expected to fall 95% of the time if the same sampling method is used to select different samples.

For small samples and estimates close to 0%, the use of the standard error to construct the 95% confidence interval may not be reliable. Therefore, caution should be used when interpreting the estimates. Caution should also be used if constructing a 95% confidence interval, which would include zero in these cases, because the estimate may not be distinguishable from zero.

This report focuses on describing the rates and patterns of work assignments within the state prison population and separately within the federal prison population. It does not include any significance testing to compare estimates of state and federal prisoners on work assignments. Direct comparisons are not advised due to differences in the operations of state and federal facilities that pertain to the availability, timing, assignment, and management of prison work assignments.

Additional resources

For more information on the 2016 SPI methodology, see *Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019) and *Methodology in Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 255037, BJS, December 2021).

*The most accurate way to compute confidence intervals, especially for complex sample designs such as the 2016 SPI, is to account for the final SPI weight (V1585) and all design parameters as described above.

APPENDIX TABLE 1**Standard errors for figure 1: Percent of prisoners in the United States, by work assignment status and prison population, 2016 and table 1: Percent of prisoners in the United States, by type of work assignment and prison population, 2016**

Type of work assignment	All prisoners	Federal prisoners	State prisoners
Total	:	:	:
Had a work assignment			
No	1.20%	2.58%	1.33%
Yes	1.20	2.58	1.33
Janitorial duties	0.61	1.68	0.65
Grounds/road maintenance	0.54	0.87	0.60
Food preparation/related duties	0.34	0.77	0.37
Laundry	0.17	0.29	0.19
Medical services	0.13	0.21	0.15
Farming/forestry/ranching	0.21	0.17	0.24
Goods production/industries	0.32	1.25	0.32
Library/stockroom/store services	0.26	0.75	0.28
Maintenance or repair/construction	0.38	0.76	0.42
Other	0.32	0.34	0.36
Estimated number of prisoners	32,500	8,500	31,300

Note: Standard errors of counts are rounded to the nearest 100.

:Not calculated.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

APPENDIX TABLE 2**Percentages and standard errors for figure 2: Percent of prisoners in the United States with a work assignment, by requirement status and prison population, 2016**

Required to have a work assignment	All prisoners*		Federal prisoners		State prisoners	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Yes	73.2%	1.37%	83.3%	2.70%	71.3%	1.55%
No	26.8	1.37	16.7	2.70	28.7	1.55
Estimated number of prisoners who had a work assignment	859,300	27,000	136,400	7,100	722,900	26,000

Note: Percentages exclude missing data and are based on the number of respondents who had a prison work assignment. Counts and standard errors of counts are rounded to the nearest 100.

*Includes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

APPENDIX TABLE 3

Percentages and standard errors for figure 3: Reasons prisoners in the United States chose to have a work assignment that was not a requirement, by importance of reason and prison population, 2016

Importance of reason	Reason for choosing to have a work assignment									
	Learn new job skills		Earn spending money		Break up boredom/try it		Get out of prison early		Spend time with/make friends	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
All prisoners*	100%	:	100%	:	100%	:	100%	:	100%	:
Very important	69.7	1.11%	54.9	1.69%	50.7	1.21%	43.8	1.46%	13.6	0.76%
Somewhat important	15.0	0.77	16.6	0.76	25.1	1.07	15.0	0.87	23.2	0.88
Not important	15.3	0.84	28.5	1.61	24.2	0.97	41.2	1.68	63.2	1.14
Estimated number of all prisoners	229,000	11,900	229,000	11,900	229,000	11,900	229,000	11,900	229,000	11,900
Federal prisoners										
Very important	70.7%	3.45%	62.8%	2.87%	43.0%	2.27%	33.5%	2.78%	12.5%	2.09%
Somewhat important	13.5	2.10	14.1	1.58	27.2	2.28	14.2	2.07	20.8	2.61
Not important	15.8	2.20	23.0	2.38	29.8	2.76	52.3	3.28	66.7	3.77
Estimated number of federal prisoners	22,600	3,400	22,600	3,400	22,600	3,400	22,600	3,400	22,600	3,400
State prisoners										
Very important	69.6%	1.17%	54.0%	1.84%	51.6%	1.30%	44.9%	1.58%	13.8%	0.81%
Somewhat important	15.1	0.82	16.9	0.82	24.9	1.17	15.1	0.94	23.4	0.92
Not important	15.3	0.90	29.1	1.77	23.5	1.02	40.0	1.81	62.8	1.18
Estimated number of state prisoners	206,500	11,400	206,500	11,400	206,500	11,400	206,500	11,400	206,500	11,400

Note: Percentages exclude missing data and are based on the number of respondents who had a prison work assignment that was not a requirement. The estimated number of prisoners reflects the number of respondents who had a prison work assignment that was not a requirement. Counts and standard errors of counts are rounded to the nearest 100. See *Questions on prison work assignments in the Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* for more information on the questions asked to measure work assignments in prison.

:Not calculated.

*Includes state prisoners and sentenced federal prisoners.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

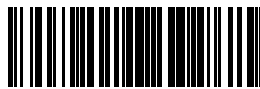


The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice is the principal federal agency responsible for measuring crime, criminal victimization, criminal offenders, victims of crime, correlates of crime, and the operation of criminal and civil justice systems at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. BJS collects, analyzes, and disseminates reliable statistics on crime and justice systems in the United States, supports improvements to state and local criminal justice information systems, and participates with national and international organizations to develop and recommend national standards for justice statistics. Alexis R. Piquero, PhD, is the director.

This report was written by Lauren G. Beatty and Tracy L. Snell. Lauren G. Beatty conducted statistical analysis, and Tracy L. Snell verified it. Stephanie Mueller and Emily D. Buehler verified the report.

Eric Hendrixson edited the report. Jeffrey Link produced the report.

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