

Employment of State and Federal Prisoners Prior to Incarceration, 2016

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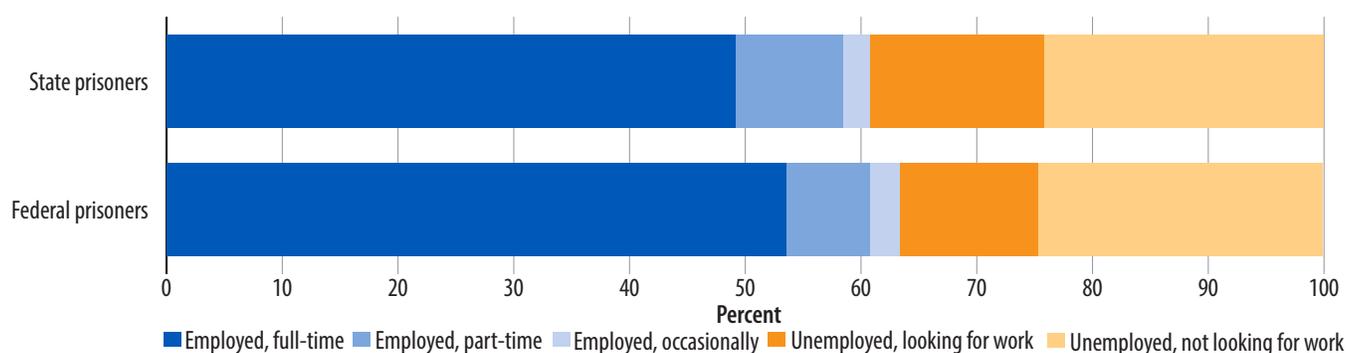
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The Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts face-to-face interviews with a national sample of persons in state and federal prisons to generate statistics on specific topics, including employment prior to incarceration. The most recent Survey of Prison Inmates was fielded in 2016 and is a key source of national data on prisoner characteristics.

Key Findings

- More than 6 in 10 state (61%) and federal (63%) prisoners were employed in the 30 days prior to arrest for the offense for which they were incarcerated, with about half (49% state and 54% federal) having a full-time job ([figure 1](#)).
- About a quarter of persons in state (24%) and federal (25%) prison were unemployed and not looking for work in the 30 days prior to arrest.
- Females in state (47%) and federal (55%) prison were less likely to be employed than males in state (62%) and federal (64%) prison ([table 1](#)).
- Among state prisoners, whites and Hispanics (66% each) were more likely than blacks (54%) to be employed in the 30 days prior to arrest. Among persons sentenced to serve time in federal prison, whites (64%) were more likely than blacks (54%) and American Indians or Alaska Natives (52%) and less likely than Hispanics (71%) and Asians, Native Hawaiians, or other Pacific Islanders (77%) to be employed in the 30 days prior to arrest.
- Non-U.S. citizens in state (81%) and federal (78%) prison were more likely than U.S. citizens in state (60%) and federal (58%) prison to be employed in the 30 days prior to arrest.
- Almost two-thirds of persons in state prison being held for violent (63%) offenses were employed in the 30 days prior to arrest, compared to more than half of those being held for property (57%) or drug (53%) offenses. Among persons in federal prison, 80% of those serving time for property, 67% for public-order, 60% for drug, and 58% for violent offenses were employed in the 30 days prior to arrest.
- Persons in state and federal prison (59% in each) with one or more prior incarcerations were less likely to be employed than those in state (69%) and federal (73%) prison with no prior incarcerations. More than half of state (54%) and federal (51%) prisoners whose age at first arrest was younger than 18 were employed in the 30 days prior to arrest, compared to more than two-thirds of those in state (69%) and federal (72%) prison whose age at first arrest was 18 or older.

FIGURE 1
Employment status in the 30 days prior to arrest among state and federal prisoners, 2016



Note: See appendix table 1 for percentages and standard errors.
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

Employment status measure

Employment status from the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI) is based on prisoner self-reported employment, excluding illegal activities, in the 30 days prior to the arrest for the offense for which they were incarcerated. Full-time employment includes those who reported holding at least one full-time job, part-time employment includes those who reported holding at least one part-time job and no full-time job, and occasional employment includes those who reported having only occasional employment in the 30 days prior to arrest. For details on employment questions, see [2016 Survey of Prison Inmates \(SPI\) Questionnaire](#). For additional information, see [Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016](#) (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019).

TABLE 1
Percentage of state and federal prisoners employed in the 30 days prior to arrest, by selected characteristics, 2016

Characteristic	All prisoners		State prisoners		Federal prisoners	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Total	61.1%	0.58%	60.8%	0.61%	63.4%	1.74%
Sex						
Male*	62.1%	0.61%	61.9%	0.65%	63.9%	1.84%
Female	47.5 †	1.13	46.6 †	1.23	55.1 †	2.10
Age at time of arrest for current offense						
17 or younger	31.2% †	1.93%	31.3% †	1.94%	19.4% †	10.66%
18-24	53.5 †	0.84	54.0 †	0.88	47.7 †	2.58
25-34*	63.4	0.80	64.0	0.89	59.8	1.69
35-44	70.0 †	0.97	69.5 †	1.09	73.1 †	2.03
45 or older	64.5	1.15	63.1	1.26	73.2 †	2.08
Race/ethnicity						
White ^a *	65.4%	0.77%	65.5%	0.82%	64.4%	2.15%
Black ^a	54.1 †	0.84	54.2 †	0.91	53.6 †	2.06
Hispanic	67.3	0.99	66.3	1.09	71.2 †	2.08
American Indian/Alaska Native ^a	59.1	4.07	60.3	4.56	51.5 †	5.97
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islanders ^a	64.0	4.37	61.1	5.26	77.0 †	4.33
Two or more races ^a	58.1 †	1.25	57.8 †	1.31	61.6	3.84
Educational attainment^b						
Less than high school*	56.2%	0.66%	55.9%	0.68%	58.5%	2.31%
High school graduate	65.5 †	0.94	65.7 †	1.04	64.2	1.96
Some college	71.9 †	1.04	71.8 †	1.13	72.3 †	2.59
College degree or more	77.8 †	1.73	77.2 †	2.06	79.7 †	2.80
Citizenship						
U.S. citizen*	59.7%	0.59%	59.9%	0.62%	58.4%	1.80%
Non-U.S. citizen	79.6 †	1.08	80.6 †	1.67	78.3 †	1.24
Controlling offense^b						
Violent*	63.2%	0.74%	63.3%	0.76%	58.1%	2.43%
Property	58.0 †	1.15	56.5 †	1.17	80.0 †	2.24
Drug	55.1 †	1.06	53.0 †	1.16	59.7	2.16
Public order	63.8	1.12	62.9	1.31	66.6 †	2.17
Prior incarceration^b						
None*	69.6%	0.81%	68.9%	0.91%	73.2%	1.67%
1 or more	59.0 †	0.62	58.9 †	0.66	59.3 †	1.89
Age at first arrest						
Younger than 18*	53.9%	0.68%	54.2%	0.72%	51.4%	1.68%
18 or older	69.5 †	0.66	69.1 †	0.73	71.9 †	1.38

Note: See Employment status measure text box.

*Comparison group.

†Difference with comparison group is significant at the 95% confidence level.

^aExcludes persons of Hispanic origin (e.g., “white” refers to non-Hispanic whites and “black” refers to non-Hispanic blacks).

^bSee [Profile of Prison Inmates, 2016](#) (NCJ 255037, BJS, December 2021) for detail on measurement.

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

APPENDIX TABLE 1

Estimates and standard errors for figure 1: Employment status in the 30 days prior to arrest among state and federal prisoners, 2016

Employment status	State prisoners		Federal prisoners	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Employed	60.8%	0.61%	63.4%	1.74%
Full-time	49.1	0.68	53.5	1.75
Part-time	9.3	0.28	7.3	0.51
Occasional	2.4	0.13	2.5	0.31
Unemployed	39.2%	0.61%	36.6%	1.74%
Looking for work	15.0	0.40	12.0	0.72
Not looking for work	24.2	0.46	24.6	1.40

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



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This report was written by Laura M. Maruschak and Tracy L. Snell. Laura M. Maruschak conducted the statistical analysis, and Tracy L. Snell verified it. Stephanie Mueller and Todd D. Minton verified the report. Lauren G. Beatty, the BJS project manager for the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates, provided statistical and methodological review.

Brigit Baron edited the report. Tina Dorsey produced the report.

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