

U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics



Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

Prisoners in 1981

During 1981, the Nation's prison population grew by almost 40,000—by far the largest increase in a single year since data became available in 1925. This huge 12.1 percent influx pushed the number of Federal and State prisoners up to 369,009 and surpassed the record 10.5 percent annual growth rate set in 1975. Between 1980 and 1981 the incarceration rate of sentenced prisoners rose from 139 to 154 per 100,000 U.S. resident population.

The sharp increase can be attributed in part to sentencing laws enacted by many States during the past 5 years, notably mandatory imprisonment for certain crimes, usually those of a violent nature, and determinate sentencing, which, in general, precludes the possibility of parole.

During 1981, the number of States under court orders to reduce over-

May 1982

The statistics in this report are from the National Prisoner Statistics program, which is among the oldest in the criminal justice statistical series. These data are collected annually for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the U.S. Census Bureau from the departments of corrections in the 50 States and the District of Columbia. The cooperation of State officials, whose generous assistance and unflinching patience make the NPS program possible, is gratefully acknowledged.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director

crowding rose from 28 to 31, while the number involved in litigation about overall prison conditions increased from

32 to 37. Moreover, dependence on local jails for substitute housing grew substantially.

The 1981 prison population increase affected both Federal and State correctional systems, as well as both sentenced and unsentenced prison inmates. The number of prisoners under Federal jurisdiction grew by nearly 3,800, or 16 percent, reversing a 3-year decline begun in 1978 that had reduced the Federal prison population by one-fourth. Federal authorities linked the 1981 growth to increased attention to bank robbery and drug offenses.

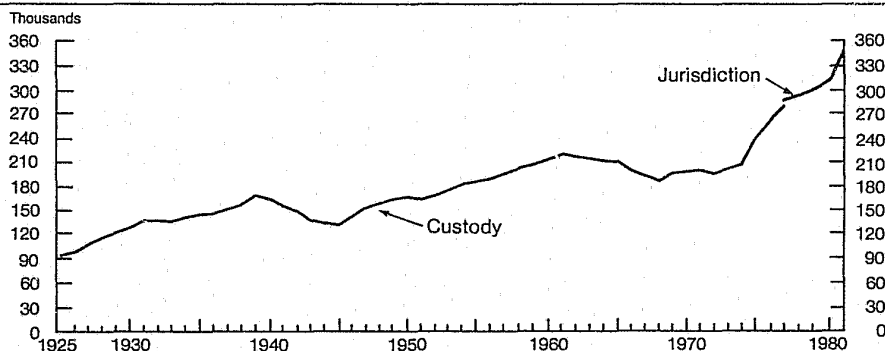
The bulk of the increase in prisoners occurred in State institutions, which held an additional 36,000 inmates at yearend. Behind this growth were measures reflecting a sterner public attitude toward crime and criminals. During the past 5 years 37 States have passed mandatory sentencing laws and 11 States have passed determinate sentencing laws, both of which frequently result in a longer average time served than indeterminate sentences. Many States have adopted more stringent regulations on the use of parole, and four States have abolished it altogether.

During 1981, prison populations increased in 49 States and the District of Columbia. Only Michigan, which released prisoners under its new emergency "rollback" law, reported a decline (1 percent). Increases of less than 5 percent occurred in only seven States (Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, West Virginia, and Wyoming).

Nearly half the growth in the number of State prisoners occurred in the seven States that added more than 1,600

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



Note: Prior to 1978, NPS reports were based on the custody population. Beginning in 1978, focus is on the jurisdiction population. Both figures are shown for 1977 to facilitate year-to-year comparison.

Figure 1

Table 1. Prisoners under jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional authorities, by region and State, yearend 1980 and 1981.

Region and State	Total			Sentenced to a year or less or unsentenced			Number of sentenced prisoners per 100,000 population 12/31/81 ^a
	1981	1980	Percent change	1981	1980	Percent change	
United States	369,009	329,207	12.1	16,533	14,497	14.0	154
Male	353,482	315,838	11.9	15,314	13,378	14.5	303
Female	15,527	13,369	16.1	1,219	1,119	8.9	12
Federal institutions	28,133 ^b	24,363	15.5	5,964 ^b	3,752	59.0	10
State institutions	340,876	304,844	11.8	10,569	10,745	-1.6	144
Northeast	53,145	45,842	15.9	2,661	3,281	-18.9	102
Maine	866	829	4.5	132	143	-7.7	65
New Hampshire	384	326	17.8	0	0	..	41
Vermont ^c	534	480	11.2	138	138	0	77
Massachusetts	3,779	3,191	18.4	d	35	..	65
Rhode Island ^c	962	813	18.3	274	202	35.6	72
Connecticut ^c	4,647	4,308	7.9	1,652	2,192	-24.6	96
New York	25,658	21,829	17.5	118	176	-33.0	145
New Jersey ^e	6,958	5,884	18.3	267	320	-16.6	90
Pennsylvania	9,357	8,182	14.4	80 ^f	75	6.7	78
North Central	72,228	66,041	9.4	1,111	1,717	-35.3	121
Ohio	14,968	13,489	11.0	0	0	..	139
Indiana	8,054	6,683	20.5	495	402	23.1	138
Illinois	13,499	11,899	13.4	405	1,175	-65.5	114
Michigan	14,992 ^g	15,124	-9	0	0	..	163
Wisconsin	4,378 ^g	3,980	10.0	0	0	..	92
Minnesota	2,024	2,001	1.1	0	0	..	49
Iowa	2,713	2,513	8.0	3	2	50.0	94
Missouri	6,154	5,524	11.4	0	0	..	125
North Dakota	308	253	21.7	66	68	-2.9	37
South Dakota	693	635	9.1	31	26	19.2	97
Nebraska	1,633	1,446	12.9	111	44	152.3	97
Kansas	2,812	2,494	12.8	0	0	..	118
South	160,259	145,711	10.0	4,621	3,708	24.6	202
Delaware ^c	1,716	1,474	16.4	434	387	12.1	214
Maryland	9,335	7,731	20.7	423 ^f	0	..	209
District of Columbia ^c	3,543	3,145	12.7	611	426	43.4	461
Virginia	9,388	8,920	5.2	375	339	10.6	166
West Virginia	1,312	1,257	4.4	0	0	..	67
North Carolina	15,791	15,382	2.7	937	1,057	-11.4	250
South Carolina	8,527	7,862	8.5	529	435	21.6	253
Georgia	14,030	12,210	14.9	337	256	31.6	246
Florida	23,238	20,735	12.1	672	524	28.2	222
Kentucky	3,993	3,608	10.7	0	0	..	109
Tennessee	7,883	7,022	12.3	0	0	..	171
Alabama	7,441	5,961	24.8	141	175	-19.4	186
Mississippi	4,624	3,902	18.5	130	109	19.3	178
Arkansas	3,283	2,925	12.2	32	0	..	142
Louisiana	9,405	8,889	5.8	0	0	..	218
Oklahoma	5,248	4,796	9.4	0	0	..	169
Texas ^h	31,502	29,892	5.4	0	0	..	214
West	55,244	47,250	16.9	2,176	2,039	6.7	120
Montana	798	738	8.1	0	1	-100.0	101
Idaho	994 ⁱ	817	21.7	0	0	..	104
Wyoming	558	534	4.5	0	0	..	113
Colorado	2,772	2,629	5.4	2	20	-90.0	93
New Mexico	1,524	1,461 ^j	4.3	101	80	26.2	107
Arizona	5,211 ^f	4,372	19.2	5	12	-58.3	186
Utah	1,140	932	22.3	14	4	250.0	74
Nevada	2,141	1,839	16.4	0	0	..	253
Washington	5,336	4,382 ^e	21.8	0	0	..	127
Oregon	3,282	3,170	3.5	3	5	-40.0	124
California ^k	29,267	24,569	19.1	1,290	1,305	-1.1	116
Alaska ^c	1,019	822	24.0	311	251	23.9	172
Hawaii ^c	1,202	985	22.0	450	361	24.7	77

NOTE: Yearend 1980 prisoner counts may differ from those in Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1980, because reporting officials are given the opportunity to update NPS records. Similarly, yearend 1981 data are preliminary and subject to revision.

^aUnpublished Bureau of the Census estimates for the resident population on July 1, 1981, were used to calculate sentenced prisoners per 100,000 persons for both the States and the Nation as a whole. Sentenced prisoners are defined as persons serving sentences longer than a year.

^bFigure includes 1,921 persons held under jurisdiction of the Immigration and Naturalization Service rather than the Bureau of Prisons.

^cFigures include both jail and prison inmates; jails and Prisons are combined into one system.

^dNot available.

^eOfficial prison population counts exclude State prisoners held in local jails.

^fEstimate.

^gFigure is for November 30, 1981.

^hFigure for inmates under State jurisdiction but not in State custody are not available.

ⁱFigure includes 7 escapees.

^jFigure may be understated due to a recordkeeping backlog.

^kFigures exclude adult inmates under the jurisdiction of the California Youth Authority.

inmates each during the year. Almost a third of the nationwide growth occurred in the three largest State prison systems, California, New York, and Florida, which experienced gains of 4,698, 3,829, and 2,503 respectively. California officials attributed their 19 percent increase to legislation enacted in 1980 requiring mandatory imprisonment of violent offenders, as well as to a rise in reported crime and a "get tough" attitude among law enforcement personnel. New York officials attributed their large increase to legislation requiring mandatory sentencing for violent offenders and the allocation of greater resources to the prosecution of felonies. Florida's 12 percent growth was linked by officials there to a larger number of convictions and high unemployment. The other States with gains of more than 1,600 each were Georgia, Texas, Maryland, and Illinois. Reasons variously cited for increases in these States were longer sentences, increased admissions, and the opening of new facilities.

Along with growth in the absolute number of prisoners were unprecedented percentage increases. Nine States recorded increases of 20 percent or more, including five States under court order to reduce overcrowding. Alabama, whose inmate population grew by 25 percent, attributes its increase to a sharp rise in the crime rate, curtailed use of probation, and the exclusion of certain types of felony offenders from the opportunity to earn good-time credits. Washington, with a 22 percent rise, links its growth to increased admissions, longer sentences, and the mandatory imprisonment of violent offenders, mainly those using a weapon. Correctional officials in Indiana attribute that State's 21 percent population rise to an increase in the amount of crime committed, the elimination of parole, and the incarceration of more short-term offenders.

Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, North Dakota,

Table 2. States with prison population increases of 20 percent or more during 1981.

State	12/31/81	12/31/80	Percent change
Alabama	7,441	5,961	24.8
Alaska	1,019	822	24.0
Utah	1,140	932	22.3
Hawaii	1,202	985	22.0
Washington	5,336	4,382	21.8
Idaho	994	817	21.7
North Dakota	308	253	21.7
Maryland	9,335	7,731	20.7
Indiana	8,054	6,683	20.5

Table 3. State prisoners held in local jails because of overcrowding.

	1981	1980
Total	8,576	7,130
Alabama	1,485	1,410
Florida	288	285
Georgia	1,729	770
Kentucky	104	94
Louisiana	793	1,267
Maine	23	6
Maryland	71	277
Massachusetts	-	125
Michigan	162	75
Mississippi	1,172	1,243
Montana	1	1
New Hampshire	19	-
New Jersey	945 ^a	200 ^a
New Mexico	18	13
New York	39	-
Oklahoma	72	124
South Carolina	544	609
Tennessee	212	178
Utah	29	-
Virginia	846 ^b	368
Washington	24	85 ^a

^aNot included in this State's official prison count.
^bIncludes some persons held for reasons other than overcrowding.

and Utah, all States with relatively small prison populations, also recorded increases of 20 percent or more. Chief among explanations advanced for growth in these States were mandatory sentencing, increase in crime, and a rise in public demand for the incarceration of offenders.

To cope with growing inmate populations, States have used various forms of early release, commutation, and extended furlough to make room for new admissions. Usually, such releases are granted to nonviolent offenders and those inmates with good conduct records. During 1981, Michigan and Iowa passed laws that define the point at which crowding becomes an emergency and that establish procedures for early release. When the population of institutions exceeds rated capacity for a specified time—30 days in Michigan and 45 days in Iowa—certain prisoners due to leave within 90 days, preferably nonviolent offenders, become eligible for early release. This "rollback" procedure remains in effect until the confined population has been reduced to rated capacity. In Minnesota, sentencing is used to assure that the number of inmates remains 5 percent below rated capacity.

Measures taken to control the size of incarcerated populations through increased use of probation and early release have had a relatively small impact on the overall problem of overcrowding. Various States have employed emergency confinement

Table 4. States holding prisoners in local jails because of overcrowding.

	Number of States	Number of prisoners
1981	20	8,576
1980	18	7,130
1979	15	6,497
1978	12	6,774
1977	10	7,048
1976	10	7,725

facilities such as trailers, tents, prison hospitals, prefabricated buildings, and military stockades. Many have assigned two or even three inmates to cells designed for only one. In some institutions inmates sleep in hallways or on floors. Although data on recent prison construction are incomplete, new or expanded facilities are known to have opened in Arkansas, Maryland, New Mexico, Ohio, and Washington during 1981.

Throughout the year, correctional authorities continued to rely on local jail facilities to house excess State prisoners. In all, 20 States had prisoners backlogged in local jails, up from 18 in 1980 and twice as many as in 1976, when such data were first collected. At yearend, 8,600 State inmates were confined in local jails, 1,446 more than a year earlier. During the year, this method of housing State prisoners met increasing resistance from local authorities.

Unsentenced prisoners and prisoners sentenced to a year or less comprised 4 percent of the inmate population in 1981. Generally, these inmates were disproportionately female and disproportionately under Federal rather than State jurisdiction. More than half of all such inmates were confined in 9 jurisdictions—California and North Carolina plus the seven with combined jail/prison systems (Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont). Those in California were for the most part confined under civil narcotics statutes. In North Carolina, persons sentenced to a maximum of 181 days serve their time in State facilities. Five other States with more than 400 such prisoners each—Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, South Carolina, and Florida—accounted for another quarter. Federal authorities were holding nearly 6,000 inmates with no sentences or short sentences at yearend. Of these nearly a third were Cuban and Haitian refugees detained by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), awaiting immigration proceedings to determine whether they should be deported. Most INS detainees

are confined outside the Federal prison system, however, and are not included in the total prisoner count.

The large rate of increase for female prisoners may represent the acceleration of a trend that spans a decade. Between 1971 and 1981 the number of women sentenced to more than a year increased by over 100 percent; the number of men, by 75 percent. In both cases, the increase in the inmate population substantially exceeded the increase in persons arrested for violent crimes and serious property crimes combined—47 percent for men and 68 percent for women between 1971 and 1980.

The number of women in prison rose by 16.1 percent in 1981, more than the increase for males and much more than the increase for women a year earlier. Despite their large increase, women still account for only 4.2 percent of the prison population, a proportion that has not changed substantially over the past 5 years.

The large gain in female prisoners was distributed widely across the United States. Only six States—Arkansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Wyoming—showed decreases in female inmates, and these tended to be quite small.

The prison population also grew substantially faster than the general population during the 1971–81 decade. In 1971, 96 persons were imprisoned for more than a year for every 100,000 persons in the general population. Ten years later the incarceration rate had

Number of sentenced female State and Federal prisoners, yearend 1925–81

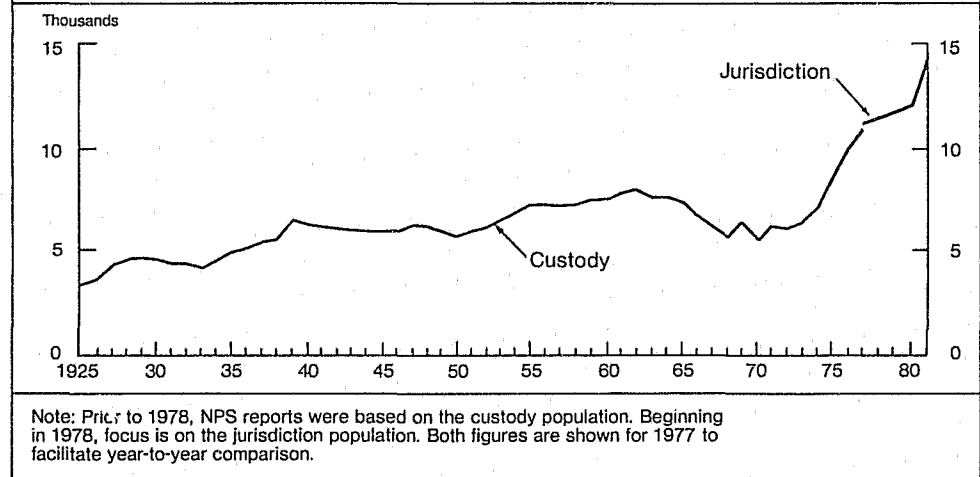


Figure 2

risen to 154 inmates per 100,000 population. States with incarceration rates above 200 were all located in the South except for Nevada. States with the lowest incarceration rates were located primarily in the Northeast. Incarceration rates for men and women were 303 and 12, respectively.

Further reading

Data in this report are preliminary and subject to revision. A final report on the prison population in 1981 will be published later under the title, Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1981. To obtain reports for the years 1971 through 1980 or to be added to the bulletin mailing list, write

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