State Prison System
Prisoners in the United States may be held in county jails, state prisons, or federal facilities. County jails are used primarily to hold defendants during court proceedings and those who have been sentenced to a period of less than a year. State prisons usually house people who have been found guilty of state felonies and are sentenced to prison to serve a year or more. Federal prisons incarcerate persons found guilty of violating federal or military law. State prisons are also sometimes referred to as “penitentiaries,” “correctional institutions,” “reformatories,” “detention centers,” or “work camps.”

HISTORY
In 1790, the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia provided the first separate housing of long-term prisoners in a cellblock called the “penitentiary house.” The Pennsylvania legislature then authorized two new prisons: the Eastern State Penitentiary (also called Cherry Hill) in Philadelphia and the Western Penitentiary in Pittsburgh. Western opened in 1826, while Eastern began accepting prisoners in 1829. In the Pennsylvania system, prisoners entered and exited the prison wearing hoods to conceal their identities. They were isolated in large “outside” cells where they worked, ate, and slept alone, doing penance for their crimes. The prisons had interior corridors or gangways with the cells on the outside walls, each with a door to a small exercise area.

The state of New York developed the “Auburn” or “congregate” system with the opening of Auburn Penitentiary in 1817. In contrast to the segregation of prisoners in the Pennsylvania system, the Auburn system housed prisoners in small “inside” cells arranged on tiers with corridors along the outside walls. The convicts were marched every day to the mess hall for meals and to work sites. Auburn was infamous for enforcing strict and harsh discipline. The prisoners wore striped uniforms and were required to walk in lockstep, with each man holding the shoulder of the convict in front of him while maintaining absolute silence. Convicts were disciplined with flogging, beatings, and confinement in “the hole”—in solitary confinement.

The Auburn system was widely adopted across the country because of the economic efficiency it provided to house more prisoners in less space. Large penitentiaries were built in which hundreds of prisoners were concentrated in huge cellblocks. This allowed for prisons to develop vocational and industrial work programs at which the convicts would spend their day hours and then return to their cells.

States developed specialized prisons to incarcerate different populations. The first reformatory for young men was Elmira Reformatory, opened in 1876 in New York. The idea of separating young from older men spread, as 17 more states opened reformatories between 1876 and 1913. At the same time, many states opened separate prisons for women.

Following the Civil War, Southern states did not build Pennsylvanian or Auburn-style penitentiaries. Instead they developed a brutal convict lease system in which former slaves were imprisoned and then rented back to plantation owners. Convicts were also kept on large prison farms (e.g., Angola in Louisiana) and used as labor in mines and on chain gangs to drain swamps and build roads.

In the 20th century, Northern states built large industrial prisons where convicts worked in factories. During the Great Depression (1929–1940), federal and state government passed legislation prohibiting state prisons
from producing merchandise that competed with free labor. The Federal Bureau of Prisons retained an exception whereby prisoners could produce items for government use. Federal prisoners manufactured and assembled goods for the military during World War I and II.

Today, states operate prisons of various design and security level. Over the years many of these prisons have been the scenes of riots and uprisings, for example, California's Folsom Penitentiary (1927 and 2002), New York's Attica Correctional Facility, (1971), Michigan's Jackson Penitentiary (1953 and 1983), the West Virginia Penitentiary (1986), the New Mexico Penitentiary (1993), and the Lucasville, Southern Ohio Correctional Facility (1993). Despite the new designs and correctional philosophies, the violence continues unabated.

POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS
At year-end 2003 there were more than 1,500 state prisons in operation across the country, with more than 1.2 million prisoners confined within them. A closer examination of prison statistics shows that the likelihood of being confined is not distributed evenly among the population. Thus, 12% of African American males in the United States are incarcerated, compared to 4% of Hispanic males and 1.7% of white males. These percentages mean that there are approximately 5,000 African American prisoners per 100,000 in the community, compared to 1,700 Hispanics per 100,000 and 700 whites per 100,000. For men age 30, the rate of incarceration for African Americans is nearly nine times that of European Americans.

State prisons vary greatly, ranging from “big house” or “mainline” penitentiaries that incarcerate several thousand convicts to minimum-security camps with a few hundred men or women. California and Texas operate the largest state prison systems, together making up nearly 25% of the national state prison population. As of 2003, for example, the California Department of Corrections had more than 180,000 persons in prison. This included 32 state prisons ranging from maximum to minimum custody, 37 camps, 12 community correctional facilities, and 5 prisoner mother facilities. The prisoner population is 94% male, 6% female; 29% white, 29% black, 36% Hispanic, and 6% “other.” One year earlier, in 2002, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice incarcerated more than 130,000 prisoners. The state of Texas operates or funds more than 100 prisons, state jails, private, and psychiatric facilities. Nine of these institutions are reserved for women, while the state jails may hold both males and females.

WOMEN IN PRISON
Women are the fastest growing segment of the prison population. At present, they comprise approximately 6% of the state prison population. A number of states, including Connecticut, have only one penal facility for women. These establishments hold all females under sentence and awaiting trial. Other states with large populations may have many different types of penal facilities. California has five prisons for convicted female felons, and Texas has nine prisons for women. Whereas in the past all women's facilities were small, a number of new penal institutions now have populations of more than 3,000 women.

Wherever they are located, the experiences of female prisoners are often very different from those of male prisoners. For example, most women are incarcerated in prisons that include minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security classifications. The majority of women in these facilities live in dormitories, a smaller number in cellblocks, with a few in solitary confinement or on death row. Security level is usually decided by institutional behavior rather than criminal offense or length of sentence. For example, younger prisoners may be assigned higher security classifications, regardless of sentence. Older women, even those with violent offenses, may be in minimum-security dormitories.

California, Texas, and New York have some women's prisons with separate security classifications. For example, California has new mediumsecurity prisons for women with security features identical to those in men's prisons. New York has long operated a maximum-security prison for women at Bedford Hills. Though studies suggest women are less violent than men while in prison, this may change. As more female prisoners
serve longer sentences, and larger and more secure **prisons** are constructed, their conditions of confinement,
including levels of stress and violence, may come to resemble those experienced by male prisoners.

Depending upon the state, female prisoners generally have less access than males to **prison** rehabilitation
programs, since states have been less inclined to fund programs for females. Traditionally, women have had
only highly gendered programming, such as family, clerical, and domestic servant vocational programs. Today,
a number of facilities have expanded programs to include construction trades and factory work.

**PRISON CELLS, SECURITY, AND CONSTRUCTION FEATURES**

Most state correctional systems are overcrowded. As a result, their **prisons** currently hold more men or women
than their legal population capacities allow. In such institutions, **prisons** officials often double-bunk cells, move
four prisoners into twoperson rooms, or install beds or simply mattresses on the floor along cellblock corridors
or hallways. They also turn recreational and program space into ad hoc dormitories, with beds placed in
gymnasiums and classrooms. In some **prisons**, with the hallways lined with beds, there may be no space for
prisoners to exercise indoors or participate in education, vocational training, counseling, or prerelease
programs.

Depending on the level of overcrowding, prisoners may be confined in cells alone or with one or more cellmates.
In maximum- (e.g., San Quentin State **Prison** in California) and medium-security **prisons** (e.g., Racine
Correctional Institution in Wisconsin), the cells may range from approximately 40 to 80 square feet. Each cell
may have beds, a combination toilet and sink, foot lockers for personal possessions, and a small desk or table
and chair. Cells are constructed of cement and steel. They may be rooms with concrete walls and steel doors, or
cages with bars. In minimum-security **prisons**, prisoners may live in dormitory-style rooms with one or many
prisoners. Some dormitories are constructed of concrete blocks with steel security doors, with hundreds of
prisoners sleeping on bunk beds. The prisoners use communal showers and are locked in at night.

The dramatic increase in the numbers of people incarcerated in the United States has created a boom in **prison**
construction. Hundreds of new **prisons** have and are being built. These correctional facilities, both urban and
rural, range from minimum to supermaximum security. Traditionally, “minimum security” refers to camps with
no fences. In comparison, medium-security facilities have heavy razor wire fences, and maximum-security
facilities feature both fences and a wall.

Today, even people who have been convicted of nonviolent offenses have been sentenced to longer sentences.
Many of these prisoners, some of them serving their first **prison** sentence, begin serving 1- to 10-year
sentences in minimum-security facilities. As **prison** sentences lengthen, many camps have been fenced in to
stem the increasing problem with escapes, called “walk-aways.” Convicts who violate minimum-security
regulations are transferred to medium security.

Medium-security **prisons**, traditionally known as “reformatories” (e.g., Kentucky State Reformatory) for young
adult prisoners, and as “gladiator schools” by prisoners, have added security features including double fences,
gun towers, and internal control architecture that resembles higher-security institutions. The old reformatories,
built in the early 1900s, were built to be “junior penitentiaries” with cellblocks of cages, industrial workshops,
and some vocational and educational programs.

There are two styles of new construction mediumsecurity institutions. The first style (e.g., Green River
Correctional Complex in Kentucky) is built of steel and concrete, with a yard and separate buildings for
administrative offices, factories, recreation and programs, and housing convicts. The housing units are separate
buildings, with individual “pods” that house a few hundred prisoners each and are usually one or two floors tall.
These units organize prisoners into disciplinary steps, with each building representing a different level of
privilege. For example, there may be a building for reception and departure (R&D), a unit for new prisoners, and
additional units for ascending levels of good behavior. In addition, each **prison** may have special cellblocks,
called “administrative segregation” or “special housing units” (SHU) for disciplinary violators (“the hole”), protective custody (PC), medical prisoners, gang isolation, or drug therapy. Prisoners are moved from one unit to another as they are evaluated, disciplined, or isolated as decided by the prison administration.

The second style is a cheaper version built with minimal consideration for the daily needs of prisoners. Many states are attempting to save on construction costs by building new medium-security prisons of fabricated steel and concrete, with little stone or brick. The buildings may resemble large farm sheds or large metal pole barns with few windows on a concrete foundation. These penal facilities act as human warehouses, consisting of little more than security perimeters and housing units. The institution may have no recreational yard or gym, factories, or programs. The prisoners live in vast dormitory-style housing units with hundreds of men sleeping on bunk beds stacked two high and arranged a few feet apart. Prisoners refer to these hastily constructed institutions as “bus stops,” “pig pens,” or “dog kennels,” because of the chaotic confusion of living for years in huge open dormitories. Many medium-security prisoners are transferred to maximum-security institutions for disciplinary infractions.

Maximum-security prisons can be divided into three separate categories: the old “big house” penitentiaries (e.g., Kentucky State Penitentiary), New Generation facilities (e.g., California State Prison, Corcoran), and supermaximum institutions (e.g., Wisconsin Secure Program Facility). The big house penitentiaries (e.g., Attica in New York, Jackson in Michigan, Joliet and Statesville in Illinois, Waupun Correctional Institution in Wisconsin), many of them built in the late 19th or early 20th century, are fortress-like structures, enclosed by walls 30 to 50 feet high, with buildings made of stone, brick, concrete, and steel, containing massive cellblocks, some five tiers high. These ancient prisons are still operating, even as they are supplemented by the construction of modern penitentiaries.

The New Generation penitentiaries may appear, from a distance, like factories, except they are enclosed by heavy security fences and gun towers. There are no tall walls. The double or triple chainlink perimeter fence is layered with rolls of razor wire that may carry an electric current and includes remote sensors and video cameras to alert the guards of attempted escapes. Inside, these correctional institutions may have a dining hall and “yard,” and limited space designated for convict employment, recreation, or education. The housing units, like the first style of medium-security prisons, are “pod” construction, which is expensive and requires separate structures, each with its own staff offices. Some of these pods may have separate rooms for one or two convicts, each with a metal door, half-bath, and communal showers at the end of each tier. Trustee prisoners may have keys to their rooms. In comparison, disciplinary prisoners may be locked in their rooms and fed meals through the door slot (wicket). Unit construction of concrete block walls and cement floors is generally considered by prisoners to be an improvement over traditional cellblocks of multiple iron cages.

In addition, medium and maximum-security prisons may have special cellblocks, units, or dormitories for prisoners with chronic or acute problems, for example, the elderly, medical or mentally disabled, or sexually deviant. Some prison systems have separate hospital prisons (e.g., California Medical Facility) for elderly or ill convicts. Some prisons have entire cellblocks occupied by prisoners who have HIV or AIDS, are mentally retarded or mentally ill, or are homosexual. Nationally, there appears to be a trend to incarcerate homeless and vulnerable populations that local governments no longer want to provide with community medical or mental health services.

Virtually every secure facility has an isolation unit or disciplinary cellblock in which disruptive, difficult to manage, aggressive, or escape-risk prisoners are kept, sometimes for months or years. Many of these convicts are men who have served many years in prison. Typically, this population, many of them prisoners serving long sentences, represents less than 1% of the total population but can have a major impact on the prison system in general. Within this population is a small subset of prisoners who are the most violent and difficult to manage, even in the confines of a secure segregation unit. The management of this relatively small number of prisoners has consumed a tremendous amount of resources and effort due to the serious potential
threat they pose to staff and other prisoners.

States have recently turned to “supermax” units or institutions (e.g., Pelican Bay State Prison in California) to control the most disruptive or potentially troublesome prisoners. The conditions of confinement in these prisons are more restrictive than death row. Supermax prisons have no educational or vocational programs, with prisoners provided only limited visiting time with family, phone communication, and access to the law library and confined for the duration of their stay in austere 60–80-square-foot cells. These are lockdown facilities, with no convict movement; prisoners are kept locked in their cells 23 to 24 hours a day. Inside these correctional dungeons, prisoners are kept as “isolated animals,” subject to severe sensory deprivation. The convicts are expected to deteriorate over time, be systematically broken, and in the end, surrender what secrets they may know to prosecutors, become informers, moderate their resistance to imprisonment, or have mental breakdowns.

LENGTH OF SENTENCES

In all state prison classification systems, the time to be served, not the crime committed, is the most important factor for deciding where a person will be housed: maximum, medium, or minimum security. The first lesson a new prisoner learns is that he or she must do distinct stretches of time differently. Depending upon the length of sentence and the security level, the prisoner must modify his or her demeanor and daily behavior and adapt to the specific cultural requirement of each institution. As they are moved from one security level to another, prisoners experience dramatic changes in administrative rules, regulations, attitudes toward prisoners, and operational procedures. The convict code, culture, and prisoner attitude toward prison administrators changes according.

JOBS

Prisoners do not have a choice in determining what jobs they will do or whether they will work at all. Recent reports suggest that one-quarter of the entire prison population is idle and is not participating in any meaningful work or education programs. Typically, those who are employed work at menial labor for little or no “prison pay.” Some of the jobs include kitchen work, barbering, working as dorm or cellblock orderlies, maintenance, laundry, or prison industries. The bulk of prisoners are occupied doing field, cafeteria, maintenance, or factory labor. Some prisons have hog or dairy farms, canneries, furniture shops, computer repair shops, or factories that manufacture prison apparel.

Most state prisons reserve clerical jobs for trustee prisoners with at least some college education. Generally, they are at least expected to know how to type, file, write correspondence, and keep records. Convicts may work as clerks in prison administrative, medical, or educational, vocational, or industrial offices. These “inmate clerks” may also manage laundry, commissary, or kitchen services.

In some southern states, prisoners labor in large agricultural and road repair operations. Other convict work crews are used to pick fruit, cotton, or sugarcane on farms or clean highway rest areas. They may be guarded by correctional officers on horses or in pick-up trucks. If prisoners try to flee, officers have permission to use deadly force. Some states still use chain gangs, where prisoners are chained together, wear striped suits, and are forced to perform hard labor.

EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Prisoners may participate in the few programs designed to assist or enhance their ability to succeed upon release, such as education, vocational training, prison industry, substance abuse treatment, or counseling programs. All state prisons provide limited educational programs to prisoners, including adult basic education (8th grade) and general equivalency diploma/GED (12th grade) programs. Since the abolition of Pell grants for prisoners in 1994, very few prisons offer college courses. Vocational training is usually closely related to work
performed for the **prisons**, for example, car repair, welding, carpentry, brick masonry, painting, electrical, or plumbing. Only a few convicts in each **prison** are assigned to these maintenance and training programs.

**SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

Some **prisons** allow convicts to organize service clubs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Toastmasters, Kiwanis, Ice Breakers, or Lifers. These clubs may serve noble purposes and allow prisoners to feel that they are contributing something positive to the outside world. Individuals in these organizations may raise money for charity, purchase gifts for orphans, and contribute free labor to church construction and repair. State **prisons** may also have religious organizations that enable prisoners to participate occasionally in community and service activities.

**RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS**

All state **prisons** offer various religious services for prisoners. No **prison** is allowed to discriminate against an established religious affiliation. **Prisons** usually have a chapel where services are held on different days. Some **prisons** may have a “no pork” or kosher food menu available for Muslim or Jewish prisoners. Local religious groups may provide volunteers who enter the **prison** to attend services and visit with prisoners.

**RETURNING HOME**

People leaving **prison** are usually released emptyhanded, with little or no “gate money.” They attempt reentry to the free world with few prospects for success. As ex-convicts, they may have difficulty finding employment. Many return to communities that are blighted by high rates of crime and unemployment. A large percentage of released prisoners will violate technical parole rules and be returned to **prison** during the first three years on the street. Some number of former state prisoners who served long sentences or multiple stretches behind bars will become derelicts who live in homeless shelters, cheap hotels, or under bridges and suffer from alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness. A smaller number who may receive support from families or friends will serve out their parole successfully and never return to **prison**.

**CONCLUSION**

State **prisons** now incarcerate more than 1.2 million men and women. Life inside these penal institutions is generally harsh, brutal, and dull. Many states devote few resources to rehabilitation or reformation of prisoners while in **prison**, or reintegration of ex-felons when they return home to the community. Given that approximately 97% of those currently incarcerated will one day be released, the problems within the nation's state correctional facilities are destined to be passed onto the broader community.

—Tracy Andrus

—Stephen C. Richards

**Further Reading**


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