JUST THE FACTS

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CALIFORNIA'S CHANGING PRISON POPULATION

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- **California has reduced its prison population to the court-ordered level, at least for now.**

  California's prison population has been on the decline for several years, since a 2006 peak of 163,000 inmates. In 2009, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered California to reduce its prison population to 137.5% of institutional design capacity. A mixture of reforms, inmate transfers, and new construction brought the population below the mandated threshold. As of March 2015, it stood at 112,300, or 135.8% of capacity.

- **Recent prison population changes are the result of three key policy initiatives.**

  California's corrections system has been reshaped by a series of important reforms. These reforms employ a range of strategies that reserve prison for the most serious offenders and make substantial reductions in the number of offenders churning into and out of prison. Most far-reaching has been a policy known as public safety realignment, which transferred authority for many non-serious, non-violent, and non-sexual offenders from the state to the counties and prevented counties from returning parole violators to prison. Earlier legislation encouraged counties to reduce the number of felony probationers who are sent back to state prison. Proposition 47, passed in November 2014, reclassifies some drug and property offenses as misdemeanors instead of felonies.

- **A vast majority of prisoners have committed violent or serious offenses.**

  At midyear 2013, 90% of inmates had a current or prior violent or serious felony conviction, and 16% were registered sex offenders. A large percentage of inmates have long-term sentences: 26% are serving a "second strike" sentence, and 19% are lifers with the possibility of parole. Smaller proportions are serving a "third strike" sentence (6%) or are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole (3%).

- **African American men are dramatically more likely to be imprisoned than are other groups.**

  Less than two thirds of California's adult male population is nonwhite or Latino (60%), but these groups make up three of every four men in prison: Latinos are 42%, African Americans are 29%, and other races are 6%. Among adult men in 2013, African Americans were incarcerated at a rate of 4,367 per 100,000, compared to 922 for Latinos, 488 for non-Latino whites, and 34 for Asians.

- **The prison population is aging.**

  Between 1990 and 2013, the share of prisoners age 50 and older grew from 4% to 21%. At the same time, the percentage of prisoners age 25 and younger fell from 20% to 13%. Given that aging offenders tend to have greater health care needs, these trends present a particular challenge with respect to providing constitutionally mandated adequate health care and controlling prison health care costs.

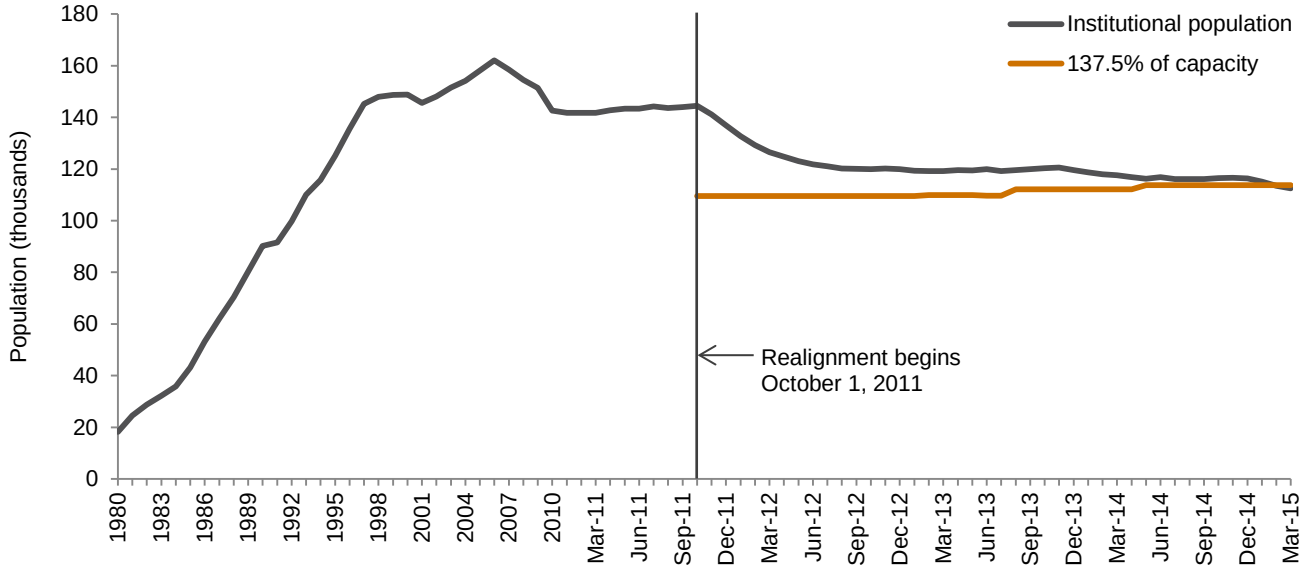
- **California continues to rely on out-of-state facilities to house inmates.**

  Since a state of emergency declaration in 2006, which identified overcrowding as the source of unhealthy and unsafe prison conditions, California has housed inmates in private prisons in other states. Currently, 8,800 California prisoners are housed in Arizona, Oklahoma, and Mississippi. The state of emergency was rescinded in January 2013, raising the issue of when and how these inmates must be returned.

- **Commitments for "second strikers" are on the rise.**

  Between 2004 and 2010, the number of offenders committed to state prison for a second strike declined from 8,063 to 7,491. Since public safety realignment began in 2011, second striker commitments have increased from 8,992 to 10,267.

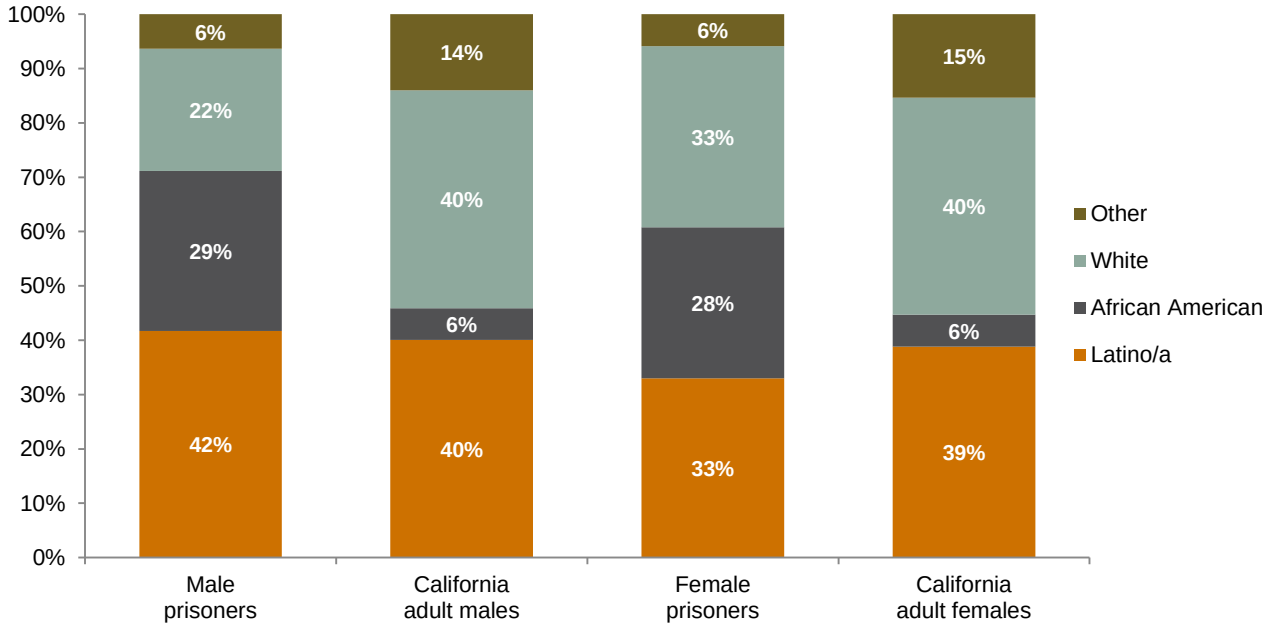
California's prison population has reached the court-imposed threshold



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation data, 1980–2015.

Note: The two largest capacity increases shown are the opening of California Health Care Facilities in Stockton (in July 2013, adding 1,818 beds) and the Dewitt Annex (in April 2014, adding 1,133 beds).

Three out of four male prisoners are nonwhite or Latino



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation data, 2013; Census Bureau population estimates, 2013.

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