

California's Changing Prison Population

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➤ **After decreasing dramatically, California's prison population has stabilized.**

California's prison population peaked at nearly 163,000 in 2006; public safety realignment in 2011 and subsequent reforms accelerated its decline to a low of about 111,000 in 2015. After a slight uptick, the institutional population recently stabilized at approximately 115,000 offenders—this is below the Supreme Court–mandated target of 137.5% of rated capacity. The state reduced the number of offenders housed in other states from more than 10,000 in 2011 to about 4,300 at the end of 2017. The number and proportion of female prison inmates has also declined, from 11,800 (6.8% of California's prison population) in 2006 to 5,800 (4.6%) at the end of 2017.

➤ **Multiple reforms have increased the proportion of violent offenders in state prisons.**

Between 2009 and 2016, California passed SB 678, AB 109, Proposition 47, and Proposition 57. Among other changes, these reforms directed many offenders from state to county supervision, cut the number of offenders sent to prison for specified drug and property crimes, and reduced the sentences associated with some nonviolent crimes. One result is that the vast majority of offenders in state prison are serving terms for—or have previously been convicted of—violent, serious, or sex-related offenses. Between 2008 and 2016, the proportion of prisoners convicted of a violent, serious, or sexual offense rose from 71% to 91%. Currently, 26% of offenders are incarcerated for second-strike offenses, 5% are “third strikers,” and 25% are serving life sentences.

➤ **Inland counties are sending offenders to state prison at high rates.**

Realignment dramatically lowered the number of offenders committed to state prison, and the rate of commitment has dropped for nearly every county. But differences persist: generally speaking, counties in the Central Valley and Northern Sacramento Valley had higher rates of commitment in 2016, while rates tended to be lower in coastal and mountain regions.

➤ **African American men remain overrepresented in the prison population.**

At the end of 2016, 29% of the male prisoners in state prisons were African American, while only 6% of the state's male residents are African American. The incarceration rate for African American men is 4,180 per 100,000. White men are imprisoned at a rate of 420 per 100,000, and imprisonment rates for Latino men and men of other races are 1,028 and 335, respectively.

➤ **Foreign-born Californians are less likely to be imprisoned.**

Eighty-one percent of prisoners were born in the United States; 9% were born in Mexico, 5% in other countries, and 5% are of unknown national origin. By contrast, 65% of all adults in California were US born, while 14% were born in Mexico and 20% were born in other countries.

➤ **The prison population continues to age.**

Between 1990 and 2016, the share of prisoners 50 or older grew from 4% to 23%. During the same time period, the proportion of prisoners younger than 25 fell from 20% to 11%, leaving the average age of all prisoners at 39.4 years. Given that aging offenders tend to have greater health care needs, state prisons may find it difficult to control future prison spending while continuing to provide its offenders constitutionally adequate health care.

➤ **The mental health needs of the prison population are extensive and varied.**

In 2016, nearly 38,000 prisoners—roughly 30% of the prison population—were designated as needing mental health services, up from 15% in 2001. Most of these prisoners (77%) are served by the Correctional Clinical Case Management System (CCCMS), which was designed for those with moderate mental health needs. Between 2014 and 2016, the state expanded the Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP), which provides more intensive care to offenders with acute mental disorders. During that time, the EOP caseload grew from 14% to 18% of the prisoners in need of mental health services.



Coastal and Sierra Nevada counties tend to have lower commitment rates



Source: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2016; California Department of Finance, 2016.

Three out of four male prisoners are nonwhite

California adult male population



California adult male prison population



■ White
■ Latino
■ African American
■ Other

Sources: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, 2016; American Community Survey, 2015.

Notes: Each square represents 1% of the population. Incarceration rates are “raw”—not age-adjusted to account for differing demographic profiles across races/ethnicities—because of data unavailability. In previous years, raw incarceration rates have been on the order of 12% higher than age-adjusted rates for Latino men, about 7% lower for white men, and within 5% for other racial/ethnic designations.

Sources: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation: Monthly Total Population Reports, Statewide Prison Census, and Offender Data Points; California Department of Finance: County Population Projections; American Community Survey.

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