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PRESS RELEASE

24% fewer persons were in federal prison for drug offenses in 2018 than in 2013

WASHINGTON – The number of people held in Federal Bureau of Prisons’ facilities on a drug offense fell 24% from fiscal yearend 2013 (94,613) to fiscal yearend 2018 (71,555), according to *Sentencing Decisions for Persons in Federal Prison for Drug Offenses, 2013–2018*, a new report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. These persons accounted for 51% of the federal prison population in 2013 and 47% in 2018.

“Although the number of people in federal prison for drug offenses decreased over this 5-year span, they still accounted for a large share—almost half—of the people in BOP custody in 2018,” said Dr. Alexis Piquero, Director of BJS. “At the same time, we saw differences by the type of drug involved, with more people incarcerated for heroin and methamphetamines and fewer for marijuana and cocaine.”

Between 2013 and 2018, there were large decreases in persons serving time in federal prison for marijuana (down 61%), crack cocaine (down 45%) and powder cocaine (down 35%), with a smaller (4%) decline in persons imprisoned for opioids. These reductions were partly offset by growth in the number of persons serving time for heroin (up 13%) and methamphetamine (up 12%).

During the 5-year period, there was also a 33% decrease in the number of people in federal prison who, because of the type and amount of drugs involved in their offense, faced the possibility of mandatory minimum penalties at sentencing. A similar decline trend was observed in the number who ultimately received penalties (down 26%) and received relief from penalties (down 52%).

About 60% of all people in BOP custody for drug offenses at fiscal yearend 2018 had received mandatory minimum penalties: 22% for methamphetamine, 15% for powder cocaine, 14% for crack cocaine, 5% for heroin, 4% for marijuana and less than 1% for opioids. When the federal prison population was analyzed by persons who could have received penalties for their drug offense, those serving time for crack cocaine were more likely to receive penalties (94%) than those held for marijuana (82%), powder cocaine (81%), heroin (80%), methamphetamine (79%) or opioids (70%).

Average sentence lengths varied by penalty outcome. Persons who received penalties had been sentenced to 184 months on average, while those who received relief from penalties had an average sentence of 76 months and those not subject to penalties had an average sentence of 89 months.

“Additionally, and regardless of any penalties they received, 6 in 10 people in BOP custody in 2018 were serving long drug sentences of 10 years or more,” Dr. Piquero said. “As for those sentenced to at least 20 years, more than half of the males were black and over 40% of the females were white.”

[Sentencing Decisions for Persons in Federal Prison for Drug Offenses, 2013–2018](#), written by Mari McGilton, MA, William Adams, MPP, Julie Samuels, MPP, and Jessica Kelly, BA, of the Urban Institute and BJS Statistician Mark Motivans, PhD; related documents; and additional information about BJS’s statistical publications and programs are available on the BJS website at [bjs.ojp.gov](https://www.bjs.ojp.gov).

About the Bureau of Justice Statistics

The Bureau of Justice Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, is the principal federal agency responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating reliable statistics on crime and criminal justice in the United States. Alexis R. Piquero, PhD, is the director. More information about BJS and criminal justice statistics can be found at bjs.ojp.gov.

About the Office of Justice Programs

The Office of Justice Programs provides federal leadership, grants, training, technical assistance and other resources to improve the nation's capacity to prevent and reduce crime, advance racial equity in the administration of justice, assist victims and enhance the rule of law.

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