



Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016

Veterans in Prison

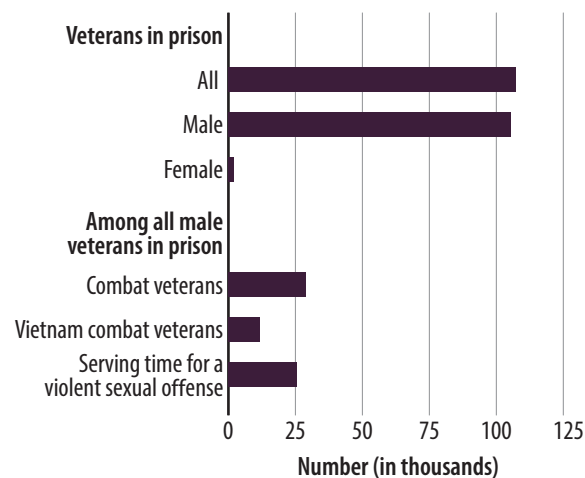
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An estimated 107,400 veterans were serving time in state or federal prison in 2016 (figure 1, table 1). Statistics in this report are based on self-reported data collected through face-to-face interviews with a national sample of state and federal prisoners age 18 or older in the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI). (See *Methodology*.) Because the majority of veterans in state or federal prison were male (98% each), estimates in this report are based solely on males.

An estimated 28,900 male veterans in state or federal prison were combat veterans, 11,800 of whom served in the Vietnam War. About a quarter (25,400) of all male veterans in prison were serving time for a violent sexual offense.

FIGURE 1
Estimated number of all veterans in state or federal prison and number of all male veterans, by selected characteristics, 2016



Note: See table 1 for counts and standard errors.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

Highlights

- An estimated 96,300 males in state prison and 9,100 in federal prison were veterans.
- In both state and federal prisons, half of male veterans were white (50% in state and federal prisons), about a quarter were black (23% in state and 24% in federal), and a tenth were Hispanic (10% in state and 12% in federal).
- The average age of a male veteran in prison was 52 in state prison (14 years older than non-veteran state prisoners) and 51 in federal prison (11 years older than non-veteran federal prisoners).
- Male veterans in state prison (26%) were twice as likely as male non-veterans in state prison (12%) to be serving time for a violent sexual offense.
- The majority of male veterans in state (56%) and federal (53%) prison served in the Army.
- About 1 in 4 male veterans in state (28%) and 1 in 5 in federal (21%) prison were combat veterans.
- About 2 in 5 male combat veterans in state (41%) and federal (36%) prison served in Vietnam.
- An estimated 74% of male veterans in state prison and 77% of those in federal prison received an honorable discharge or a general discharge under honorable conditions.

Other key findings

- Forty-eight percent of male veterans in state prison and 41% in federal prison were age 55 or older, compared to 10% of non-veterans in state prison and 9% in federal prison (**table 2**).
- Among federal prisoners, 7% of male veterans and 1% of male non-veterans were serving time for a violent sexual offense (**table 3**).
- In state prison, male veterans (9% each) were less likely to be serving time for a property or drug offense than male non-veterans (15% each).
- In federal prison, male veterans (30%) were less likely than male non-veterans (49%) to be serving time for a drug offense, but male veterans (13%) were more likely than male non-veterans (6%) to be serving time for a property offense.
- In state prison, male veterans had an average sentence length of about 22 years, compared to about 15 years for male non-veterans.
- Among male federal prisoners, veterans had an average sentence length of about 14 years and non-veterans had an average sentence of about 12 years.
- In state prison, male veterans (24%) were almost twice as likely as male non-veterans (13%) to have a life or death sentence.
- Male veterans in state (23%) or federal (30%) prison were more likely to have had only one arrest than male non-veterans in state (11%) or federal (19%) prison.
- Male veterans in state (35%) or federal (44%) prison were more likely to have no prior incarcerations than male non-veterans in state (19%) or federal (28%) prison.
- Among male state prisoners, veterans had an average of three prior incarcerations, two fewer than non-veterans.
- Among male federal prisoners, 2% of veterans had 10 or more prior incarcerations, compared to 6% of non-veterans.
- Less than a quarter of male veterans in state (20%) or federal (24%) prison served in the Navy (**table 4**).
- In both state and federal prison, 15% of male veterans served in the Marine Corps and 11% served in the Air Force.
- Twenty-eight percent of male combat veterans in state prison served in Iraq, 19% served in the Persian Gulf, and 16% served in Afghanistan.
- Among male combat veterans in federal prison, 27% served in the Persian Gulf, 22% served in Iraq, and 21% served in Afghanistan.
- Six percent of male veterans in state prison and 5% of those in federal prison received a dishonorable or bad conduct discharge.
- Thirty-eight percent of male veterans in state prison and 31% of those in federal prison served less than 3 years in the military.

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TABLE 1**Estimated number of all veterans in state or federal prison and number of all male veterans, by selected characteristics, 2016**

Characteristic	Number	Standard error
All veterans in prison	107,400	4,300
Male	105,400	4,300
Female	2,000	300
Among all male veterans in prison		
Combat veterans	28,900	1,900
Vietnam combat veterans	11,800	1,200
Serving time for a violent sexual offense	25,400	2,300

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding. See appendix table 1 for prisoner estimates.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

TABLE 2**Demographic characteristics of state and federal prisoners, by veteran status, 2016**

Characteristic	State prisoners				Federal prisoners			
	Veterans		Non-veterans*		Veterans		Non-veterans*	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
All prisoners	7.9%	0.33%	92.1%	0.33%	5.3%	0.69%	94.7%	0.69%
Sex								
Male	98.2% †	0.32%	92.4%	0.44%	97.9% †	0.46%	93.6%	0.80%
Female	1.8 †	0.32	7.6	0.44	2.1 †	0.46	6.4	0.80
Male prisoners only								
Race/ethnicity								
White ^a	50.1% †	1.84%	28.9%	1.04%	50.1% †	4.30%	18.5%	2.09%
Black ^a	22.7 †	1.64	36.0	1.28	23.9 †	4.04	33.5	3.32
Hispanic	10.1 †	0.99	22.0	0.99	12.1 †	2.50	38.8	4.59
American Indian/ Alaskan Native ^a	2.2	0.54	1.3	0.21	1.0!	0.49	1.7	0.50
Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander ^a	0.9!	0.32	1.0	0.14	1.1!	0.80	1.6	0.39
Two or more races ^a	14.1 †	1.21	10.8	0.39	11.8 †	2.02	6.0	0.70
Age								
18-24	0.8% †!	0.25%	11.3%	0.74%	0.5% †!	0.33%	4.9%	0.55%
25-34	12.0 †	1.17	33.5	0.78	12.9 †	2.37	29.0	1.26
35-44	15.4 †	1.22	27.1	0.49	14.2 †	2.94	35.9	1.03
45-54	24.0 †	1.42	18.0	0.60	31.2 †	3.12	20.8	0.99
55-64	31.0 †	1.55	8.1	0.37	26.3 †	3.13	7.2	0.90
65 or older	16.8 †	1.35	2.0	0.19	15.0 †	2.61	2.1	0.38
Mean	52.3 yrs. †	0.48 yrs.	37.9 yrs.	0.29 yrs.	51.3 yrs. †	1.15 yrs.	39.8 yrs.	0.48 yrs.

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding. See appendix table 1 for prisoner estimates.

*Comparison group.

†Difference with the comparison group is significant at the 95% confidence level.

! Interpret data with caution. Estimate is based on 10 or fewer sample cases, or coefficient of variation is greater than 50%.

^aExcludes persons of Hispanic origin (e.g., “white” refers to non-Hispanic whites and “black” refers to non-Hispanic blacks).

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

TABLE 3**Controlling offense, sentence length, and criminal history of male state and federal prisoners, by veteran status, 2016**

Characteristic	Male state prisoners				Male federal prisoners			
	Veterans		Non-veterans*		Veterans		Non-veterans*	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Controlling offense^a								
Violent	69.3% †	2.32%	56.7%	1.56%	24.7% †	3.58%	12.6%	1.73%
Violent sexual	26.4 †	1.92	11.7	0.76	7.2 †	1.95	1.2	0.33
Other violent	42.9	1.96	45.0	1.35	17.4	3.47	11.4	1.74
Property	9.2 †	0.93	15.2	0.57	12.7 †	2.59	5.8	1.15
Drug	8.6 †	1.00	14.8	0.87	29.6 †	4.36	48.9	2.00
Public order	12.9	1.98	13.3	0.54	33.0	4.75	32.7	1.80
DUI/DWI	2.6	0.53	2.5	0.40	0.5 †	0.44	0.1 †	0.08
Other public order	10.3	1.78	10.8	0.46	32.6	4.78	32.5	1.79
Total maximum sentence length (in years)^b								
2 or less	6.2% †	1.01%	10.7%	0.83%	3.2% †!	1.07%	8.2%	1.50%
2.1-5	13.6 †	1.78	19.2	0.85	10.6 †	1.87	21.9	1.90
5.1-10	16.3 †	1.37	20.8	0.83	35.2 †	3.04	28.7	0.92
More than 10	40.0 †	1.98	35.9	1.25	46.6 †	3.56	37.3	2.53
Life/death ^c	23.8 †	2.20	13.4	0.97	4.5 †	1.96	3.9	0.80
Mean ^d	22.1 yrs. †	1.59 yrs.	15.1 yrs.	0.61 yrs.	13.8 yrs.	0.89 yrs.	11.7 yrs.	0.65 yrs.
Number of times ever arrested								
1	23.1% †	1.34%	10.9%	0.40%	30.0% †	3.19%	18.7%	2.35%
2-4	41.1 †	1.38	32.1	0.64	38.4	3.14	38.3	1.61
5-9	18.1 †	1.47	26.1	0.48	18.6	3.04	20.3	1.33
10 or more	17.7 †	1.22	30.9	0.79	13.0 †	2.61	22.6	2.47
Mean	6.1 arsts. †	0.31 arsts.	9.6 arsts.	0.29 arsts.	5.5 arsts. †	0.70 arsts.	7.4 arsts.	0.60 arsts.
Number of prior incarcerations^e								
0	35.4% †	1.44%	18.9%	0.60%	44.1% †	3.50%	27.9%	2.50%
1	19.5 †	1.28	16.6	0.45	23.3	3.17	21.1	1.32
2-4	24.7 †	1.45	31.1	0.53	20.4 †	2.57	31.2	1.52
5-9	13.8 †	1.11	20.0	0.46	9.9	2.98	14.2	1.36
10 or more	6.7 †	0.84	13.4	0.50	2.3 †!	1.01	5.7	0.73
Mean	3.2 incr. †	0.25 incr.	5.1 incr.	0.22 incr.	1.7 incr. †	0.22 incr.	3.0 incr.	0.22 incr.

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding. See appendix table 1 for prisoner estimates.

*Comparison group.

†Difference with the comparison group is significant at the 95% confidence level.

! Interpret data with caution. Estimate is based on 10 or fewer sample cases, or coefficient of variation is greater than 50%.

^aFor sentenced and unsentenced prisoners with one offense, that offense is the controlling offense. For sentenced prisoners with multiple offenses and sentences, the controlling offense is the offense with the longest sentence. For sentenced prisoners with multiple offenses and one sentence, and for unsentenced prisoners with multiple offenses, the controlling offense is the most serious offense. Violent offenses are most serious, followed by property, drug, public-order, and all other offenses.

^bBased on the total maximum sentence for all consecutive sentences. Excludes prisoners for whom offense was unknown and prisoners who were not yet convicted or sentenced.

^cIncludes prisoners with sentences to life, life plus additional years, life with or without parole, and death.

^dExcludes prisoners with sentences to life, life plus additional years, life with or without parole, and death.

^eIncludes incarcerations in prison, jail, or any other correctional facility.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

TABLE 4
Military characteristics of male veterans in state and federal prison, 2016

Characteristic	State prison		Federal prison	
	Percent	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
Branch of service^a				
Air Force	10.6%	0.95%	11.2%	2.07%
Army	55.9	1.69	53.4	3.34
Marine Corps	14.6	1.12	14.5	2.07
Navy	20.3	1.48	24.1	2.65
Coast Guard	1.3	0.31	1.4!	0.74
Combat experience^b				
None	71.8%	1.45%	79.4%	2.99%
Combat veteran	28.2	1.45	20.6	2.99
Combat by conflict ^{a,c}				
Korea	0.7!	0.42	0.7!	0.68
Vietnam	41.3	3.24	36.3	7.73
Persian Gulf	18.8	2.41	27.4	6.03
Afghanistan	16.3	2.93	21.4	6.70
Iraq	27.6	3.02	22.1	5.10
Other ^d	36.3	3.23	40.0	6.26
Type of discharge				
Honorable	58.9%	1.40%	66.0%	3.56%
General under honorable conditions	15.3	1.02	11.0	2.22
General without honorable conditions	2.4	0.49	0.6!	0.59
Other than honorable	10.0	0.88	12.1	2.26
Dishonorable/bad conduct	6.2	0.91	5.1	1.74
Other ^e	7.2	0.78	5.1	2.13
Length of military service				
Less than 3 years	38.1%	1.56%	30.9%	3.20%
3 years to less than 5 years	31.1	1.62	32.1	3.30
5 years or more	30.8	1.60	37.0	3.49

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding. See appendix table 1 for prisoner estimates.

! Interpret data with caution. Estimate is based on 10 or fewer sample cases, or coefficient of variation is greater than 50%.

^aPrisoners could select more than one response.

^bIncludes prisoners who self-reported having experienced combat in a line or combat unit during their military service.

^cNo prisoner reported seeing combat in World War II. Percentages are based on the number of combat veterans.

^dIncludes other military operations (e.g., peacekeeping operations).

^eIncludes medical, psychological, and other unspecified types of discharge.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.

Methodology

Findings are based on self-reported data collected through face-to-face interviews with a national sample of state and federal prisoners in the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates (SPI), produced by the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The 2016 SPI included confinement and community-based facilities but excluded special facilities such as those operated by or holding prisoners exclusively for the U.S. military, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the U.S. Marshals Service, and correctional authorities in Indian country. Facilities in every state and the Federal Bureau of Prisons were eligible. The 2016 SPI was a stratified two-stage sample design in which prisons were selected in the first stage and prisoners within sampled facilities were selected in the second stage. The SPI sample was selected from a universe of 2,001 unique prisons (1,808 state and 193 federal). A total of 364 prisons (306 state and 58 federal) participated in the 2016 SPI out of 385 selected (324 state and 61 federal). The first-stage response rate (i.e., the response rate among selected prisons) was 98.4% (98.1% among state prisons and 100% among federal prisons).¹

A total of 24,848 prisoners (20,064 state and 4,784 federal) participated in the 2016 SPI, based on a sample of 37,058 prisoners (30,348 state and 6,710 federal).² The second-stage response rate (i.e., the response rate among selected prisoners) was 70.0% (69.3% among state prisoners and 72.8% among federal prisoners).³

Standard errors and tests of significance

When national estimates are derived from a sample, as with the SPI, caution must be used when comparing one estimate to another or when comparing estimates over time. Although one estimate may be larger than another, estimates based on a sample rather than a complete enumeration of the population have some degree of sampling error. The sampling error of an estimate depends on several factors, including the size

of the estimate, the number of completed interviews, and the intracluster correlation of the outcome within prisons. When the sampling error around an estimate is taken into account, estimates that appear different may not be statistically different.

One measure of the sampling error associated with an estimate is the standard error. The standard error may vary from one estimate to the next. Generally, an estimate with a smaller standard error provides a more reliable approximation of the true value than an estimate with a larger standard error. Estimates with relatively large standard errors have less precision and reliability and should be interpreted with caution.

For complex sample designs, there are several methods that can be used to generate standard errors around a point estimate (e.g., mean, percentage, count, etc.). In this report, Taylor Series Linearization (TSL) methods were used to estimate the standard errors for percentages and means. The TSL method directly estimates variances through a linearized function by combining variance estimates from stratum and primary sampling units (PSU) used to sample prisoners. In the SPI, the design parameters used for computing TSL variances are V1571 (geography stratum), V1572 (sex stratum), and V1573 (PSU). Readers should note that these design parameters appear on the 2016 SPI restricted use file only (for confidentiality and disclosure protection reasons), which is archived at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), study number 37692.

For counts in this report, Jackknife Repeated Replication (JRR) methods were used to estimate standard errors. To employ JRR methods, the SPI sample was broken into subsamples, called replicates, yielding a total number of replicates equivalent to the number of participating prisons (i.e., 364) in the survey. For each replicate, starting with the base weight, all of the same weighting adjustments performed to produce the final SPI weight (V1585) were independently performed for each replicate, including nonresponse and poststratification adjustments.⁴ The JRR method directly estimates variances by computing the parameter of interest from each of the replicates and then calculating the variance of the full SPI sample estimate from the variability between the replicate estimates. In the SPI, the replicate

¹A total of 15 prisons (12 state and 3 federal) that were sampled were deemed ineligible for the 2016 SPI. For more information, see *Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019).

²There were 10,661 sampled prisoners who were eligible for the survey but did not participate. Another 1,549 sampled prisoners were deemed ineligible for the survey. For more information, see *Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019).

³For more detailed information on the 2016 SPI, see *Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019).

⁴See *Methodology: Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016* (NCJ 252210, BJS, July 2019) for more information on the 2016 SPI weighting adjustments.

weights used for computing JRR variances of the counts in this report are V1856-V1949. These replicate weights are included on both the public and restricted use files of the 2016 SPI that are available at ICPSR.

Prior to this report, a comparison of results yielded from both the TSL and JRR approaches was conducted to better understand the appropriate variance method(s) to use for the 2016 SPI based on the statistics of interest. While it is expected that different variance methods and different statistical software packages can yield slightly different results, the analyses performed on the 2016 SPI demonstrated that relatively large differences (i.e., more than a 10% difference) between the TSL and JRR methods were observed for the estimates of counts broken out by the poststrata variables (i.e., geography and sex) and constructs related to those poststrata variables, such as sexual orientation and gender identity. Both methods produced similar (i.e., less than a 10% difference) standard errors for the estimates of the counts that do not involve the breakdowns by the poststrata variables, and for means and percentages.

The results of these analyses suggest that TSL overestimates the variance of a limited set of statistics of interest from the 2016 SPI, in particular, the counts broken out by jurisdiction (i.e., state vs. federal) or by sex. A limitation of the TSL approach compared to the JRR approach is that as implemented in most statistical software, TSL fails to fully account for variance contributions of the various weighting adjustments, such as nonresponse adjustments and calibration to the known population control totals.^{5,6,7} In particular, the overestimation of the standard errors results from the inability of TSL to account for the precision gained from poststratification. In addition, the TSL approach is not the ideal method to use to generate variances of complex nonlinear estimators, whereas with JRR methods, once the replicate weights are created to independently account for all weighting adjustments, the variance of all forms of estimators

can be computed. Users of the 2016 SPI data should be aware of these differences when determining the most appropriate variance method(s) to employ to generate accurate standard errors for their statistics of interest.

Readers may use the estimates and standard errors of the estimates provided in this report to generate a 95% confidence interval around the estimates as a measure of the margin of error. Typically, multiplying the standard error by 1.96 and then adding or subtracting the result from the estimate produces the confidence interval. This interval expresses the range of values within which the true population parameter is expected to fall 95% of the time if the same sampling method is used to select different samples.

For small samples and estimates close to 0%, the use of the standard error to construct the 95% confidence interval may not be reliable. Therefore, caution should be used when interpreting the estimates. Caution should also be used if constructing a 95% confidence interval, which would include zero in these cases, because the estimate may not be distinguishable from zero.

The standard errors have been used to compare selected groups of prisoners that have been defined by demographic characteristics. Differences in the estimates for subgroups in tables 2 and 3 in this report have been tested and notated for significance at the 95% level of confidence. Readers should reference the tables for testing on specific findings. Unless otherwise noted, findings described in this report as higher, lower, or different passed a test at the 0.5 level of statistical significance (95% confidence level).

Measurement of veteran status, military characteristics, and offense type

Veteran status

To determine veteran status, all prisoners were asked if they had ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Prisoners who answered yes were classified as veterans and screened into additional questions about their military service. Veterans could report service in more than one branch of the military.

⁵Chowdhury, S. (2013). *A Comparison of Taylor Series Linearization and balanced repeated replication methods for variance estimation in Medical Expenditure Panel Survey* (Working Paper No. 13004). Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. https://meps.ahrq.gov/data_files/publications/workingpapers/wp_13004.pdf

⁶Valliant, R. (2004). The effect of multiple weighting steps on variance estimation. *Journal of Official Statistics*, 20(1), 1-18. <https://www.scb.se/contentassets/ca21efb41fee47d293bbee5bf7be7fb3/the-effect-of-multiple-weighting-steps-on-variance-estimation.pdf>

⁷Heeringa, S. G., West, B. T., & Berglund, P. A. (2017). *Applied survey data analysis* (2nd ed.). CRC Press.

Military characteristics

To measure combat experience, veterans were asked whether they had seen combat in a line or combat unit during their military service. Prisoners who reported serving in a line or combat unit were asked whether they saw combat in a line or combat unit in the following conflicts: World War II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam War, Persian Gulf War, Afghanistan, Iraq, or some other military operation, including peacekeeping operations. Veterans could have served in more than one conflict or war zone.

Offense type

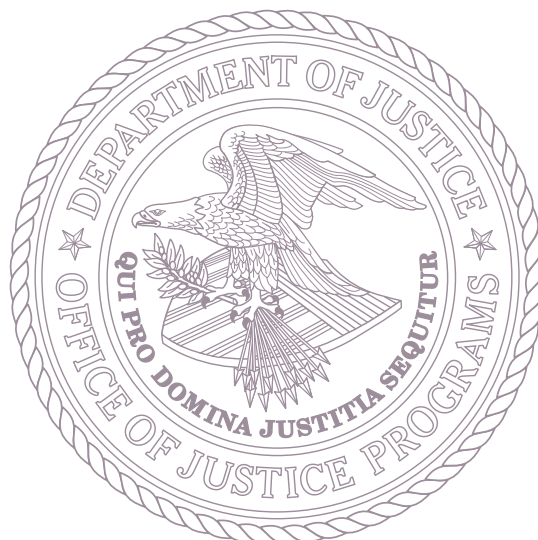
For sentenced and unsentenced prisoners with one offense, that offense is the controlling offense. For sentenced prisoners with multiple offenses and sentences, the controlling offense is the offense with the longest sentence. For sentenced prisoners with multiple offenses and one sentence, and for unsentenced prisoners with multiple offenses, the controlling offense is defined as the most serious offense. Violent offenses are most serious, followed by property, drug, public-order, and all other offenses.

APPENDIX TABLE 1
Estimated number of state and federal prisoners, by sex and veteran status, 2016

Veteran status	Total	Male	Female
All prisoners	1,421,700	1,321,800	99,900
State prisoners	1,248,300	1,159,100	89,200
Veterans	98,100	96,300	1,800
Non-veterans	1,150,100	1,062,700	87,400
Federal prisoners	173,400	162,700	10,700
Veterans	9,300	9,100	200
Non-veterans	164,100	153,600	10,500

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Survey of Prison Inmates, 2016.



The Bureau of Justice Statistics of the U.S. Department of Justice is the principal federal agency responsible for measuring crime, criminal victimization, criminal offenders, victims of crime, correlates of crime, and the operation of criminal and civil justice systems at the federal, state, tribal, and local levels. BJS collects, analyzes, and disseminates reliable statistics on crime and justice systems in the United States, supports improvements to state and local criminal justice information systems, and participates with national and international organizations to develop and recommend national standards for justice statistics. Doris J. James is the acting director.

This report was written by Laura M. Maruschak, Jennifer Bronson, and Mariel Alper. Zhen Zeng, Tracy L. Snell, and Stephanie Mueller verified the report. Lauren G. Beatty was the BJS project manager for the 2016 Survey of Prison Inmates and provided statistical and methodological input and review.

Eric Hendrixson and Jill Thomas edited the report. Tina Dorsey produced the report.

March 2021, NCJ 252646



NCJ 252646

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