

# How Many People Are Spending Over a Decade in Prison?



## Overview

**Over 260,000 people in U.S. prisons had already been incarcerated for at least 10 years in 2019, comprising 19% of the prison population.<sup>1</sup> Nearly three times as many people—over 770,000—were serving sentences of 10 years or longer.<sup>2</sup> These figures represent a dramatic growth from the year 2000, when mass incarceration was already well underway.<sup>3</sup>**

Based on criminological evidence that criminal careers typically end within approximately 10 years<sup>4</sup> and recidivism rates fall measurably after about a decade of imprisonment,<sup>5</sup> The Sentencing Project recommends taking a second look at sentences within 10 years of imprisonment.<sup>6</sup> This research brief presents state-level analysis revealing a common growing trend of lengthy sentences, as well as significant geographic variation.<sup>7</sup> The analysis also addresses racial disparities in long sentences. Because racial disparities are even starker here than among those serving shorter prison terms, focusing reform efforts on sentences of 10 years or more can accelerate racial justice. Finally, the brief presents the criminological and legal foundations for sentencing reform and offers recommendations for policymakers.

## Key findings:

- Nearly one in five people in U.S. prisons—over 260,000 people—had already served at least 10 years in 2019. This is an increase from 133,000 people in 2000—which represented 10% of the prison population in that year.
- In California, 29% of imprisoned people had already served at least 10 years in 2019. In Washington, DC, the level was even higher in 2020, at 39%. By 2021 in Texas, 25% of imprisoned people had served at least a decade.
- Over 770,000 people in U.S. prisons were serving sentences of 10 years or longer in 2019—56% of the total prison population. This is an increase from 587,000 people in 2000—which represented 44% of the prison population in that year.
- The 12 U.S. jurisdictions where two-thirds or more of the prison population are serving sentences of at least a decade are: Georgia, West Virginia, Alabama, Montana, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Utah, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, and Washington, DC.

- In 2019, Black Americans represented 14% of the total U.S. population, 33% of the total prison population, and 46% of the prison population who had already served at least 10 years.

The 12 U.S. jurisdictions in which *two-thirds* or more of the prison population are serving sentences of at least a decade are politically, geographically, and otherwise diverse, and include Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, and Washington, DC. If individuals with lengthy sentences serve their full terms (which extend *beyond* ten years and up to life imprisonment in some cases), they are likely to remain in prison after they are expected to pose a public safety risk. Evidence shows lengthy prison terms do not have a significant deterrent effect on crime and divert resources from more effective investments in public safety.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, long sentences exacerbate many of the harms of imprisonment. Long-term imprisonment accelerates health problems for which people then receive substandard health care.<sup>9</sup> People serving lengthier sentences are also at higher risk of marital dissolution and of losing contact with their children.<sup>10</sup>

The United States is an outlier among western democracies in its heavy and growing reliance on lengthy prison terms.<sup>11</sup> For example, in Germany for all but 0.01% of prison sentences, the maximum sentence length is 15 years, and life-without-parole and death sentences have been abolished.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, U.S. policies respond to a far higher homicide rate by prioritizing punishment, rather than prevention. One in every seven people in U.S. prisons is serving a life sentence,<sup>13</sup> and nearly half of U.S. states maintain the death penalty, with some continuing to carry out executions.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, a number of legislatures and prosecutors' offices have begun reducing lengthy prison terms, such as by scaling back truth-in-sentencing requirements and

implementing second-look reforms which allow for reconsideration of imposed sentences.<sup>15</sup> These efforts reflect growing awareness that ending mass incarceration and tackling its racial disparities require scaling back long sentences. To further align criminal justice laws and policies with evidence on public safety, The Sentencing Project recommends:

**Downsizing the inflated sentencing structure by:**

- Repealing mandatory minimum sentences and scaling back sentencing guidelines—and applying these reforms retroactively.
- Reducing overcharging and promoting lower plea offers by prosecutors.
- Expediting minimum eligible release dates through good time credits, earned time credits, and parole—and increasing use of discretion to curb excessive prison terms.
- Creating an automatic judicial sentence-review process within a maximum of 10 years of imprisonment.
- Limiting virtually all maximum prison terms to 20 years.

**Tackling racial inequity in lengthy prison terms by:**

- Eliminating criminal legal sources of disparity such as pretrial detention, underfunded public defense, biased prosecutorial decision making, sentencing enhancements related to criminal histories, and biased parole decision making.
- Develop racial impact statements forecasting the impact of both proposed and existing criminal laws on different populations.
- Dramatically increasing investments in effective violence prevention and interruption interventions outside of the criminal legal system.

## A Note on Interpreting on Figures

This report examines the phenomenon of lengthy sentences by presenting both the count and the percentage of people in prison who are either serving sentences of 10 years or longer or are in their 10th year or more of imprisonment. The growth in the *count* of people serving such lengthy sentences reflects both the increased imposition of lengthy sentences and the growing requirement that people serve a larger portion of their sentence before release.<sup>16</sup> The *percentage* of the prison population serving lengthy sentences is more complicated to interpret, both when comparing across jurisdictions and within the same jurisdiction over time, because a number of factors may affect the population imprisoned for *shorter* periods.

Hypothetically, jurisdictions may have wisely eliminated incarceration for people who would

have previously been sentenced to three years' confinement. This modification makes the overall system more just, inexpensive, and conducive to public safety. But all else equal, this would also amount to a higher *percentage* of people serving lengthy sentences.

Reforms of the past decade have reduced prison admissions and terms largely for non-violent crimes,<sup>17</sup> and this decarceration accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>18</sup> This trend therefore contributed to a widespread increase in the percentage of people serving lengthy sentences. Nonetheless, the *absolute counts* reveal all jurisdictions have also increased their reliance on long sentences since 2000, and state-level actors should be concerned about this population regardless of the distinct factors affecting their proportion of the overall incarcerated population.

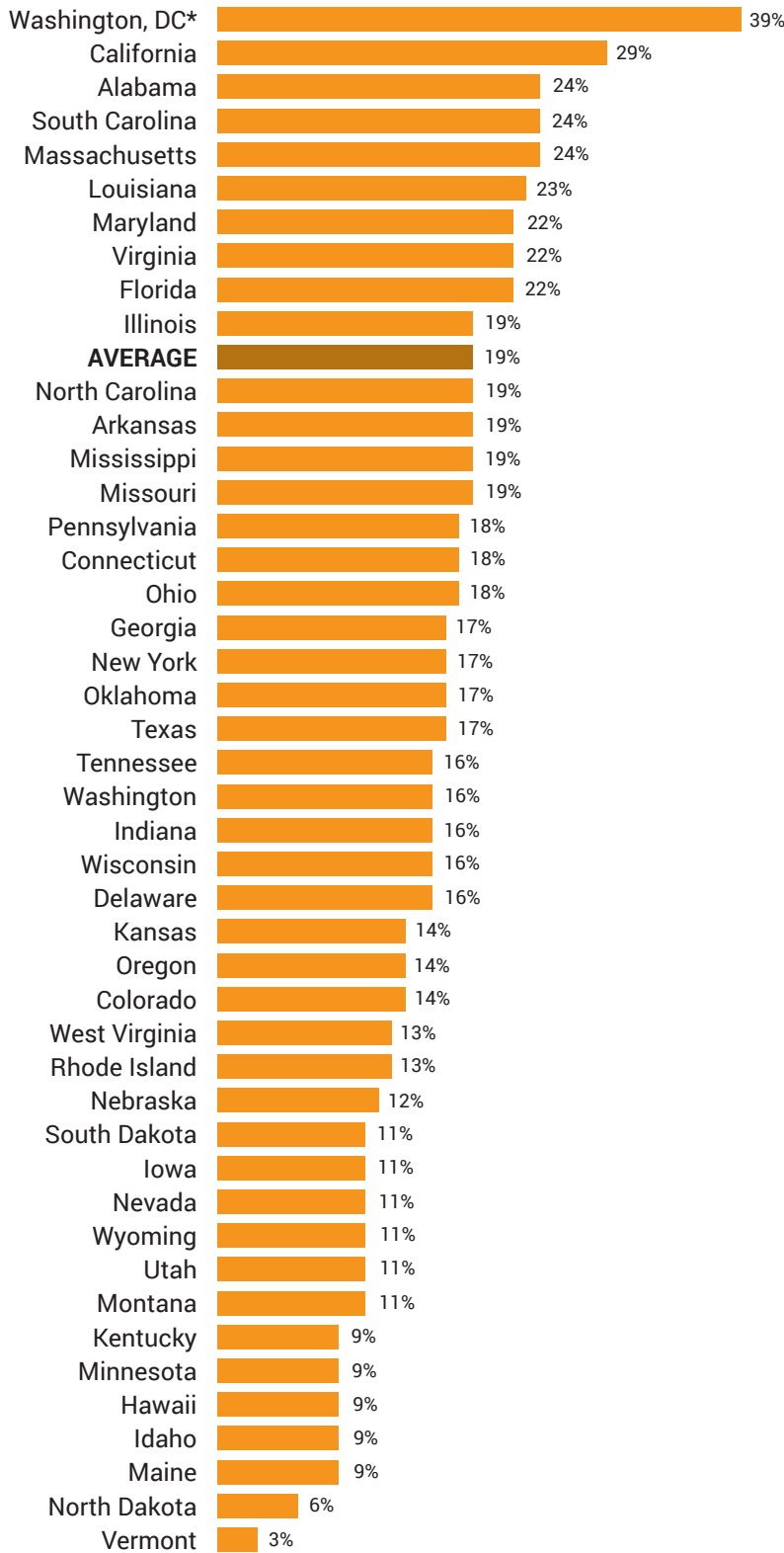
## People Who Have Served at Least 10 Years in Prison

We estimate that 262,000 people—19% of the prison population—had already served at least 10 years in prison in 2019. This is an increase from 133,000 people in 2000—which represented 10% of the prison population in that year.<sup>19</sup>

Both the count of people who had been imprisoned for at least 10 years and their share of the total prison population grew since 2000 in all states for which we have data (see Appendix Table 1). By 2021 in Texas, 25% of imprisoned people had served at least a decade—more than

29,000 people.<sup>20</sup> In Washington, DC, the level was even higher in 2020, at 39%.<sup>21</sup> This represents more than 1,000 people in a city of about 700,000 people. California also has a propensity to impose many long sentences: 29% of people imprisoned in California in 2019 had already served at least 10 years, amounting to over 35,000 people. Figure 1 lists the 44 states plus the District of Columbia for which the proportion of incarcerated people imprisoned for 10 years or longer in 2019 is available.

**Figure 1. Proportion of Prison Population Having Already Served at Least 10 Years, 2019**



\*Washington, DC's figure is from 2020.

Sources: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2019: Selected Variables*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-07-15; Tarnalicki, T. (2021, May 6). Incarceration data, BOP stock population 2020. Memo, District of Columbia Sentencing Commission.

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This analysis focuses on the decade mark, but readers should bear in mind that in some cases the proportion of people who have served 15 years, or even more, is also very high.

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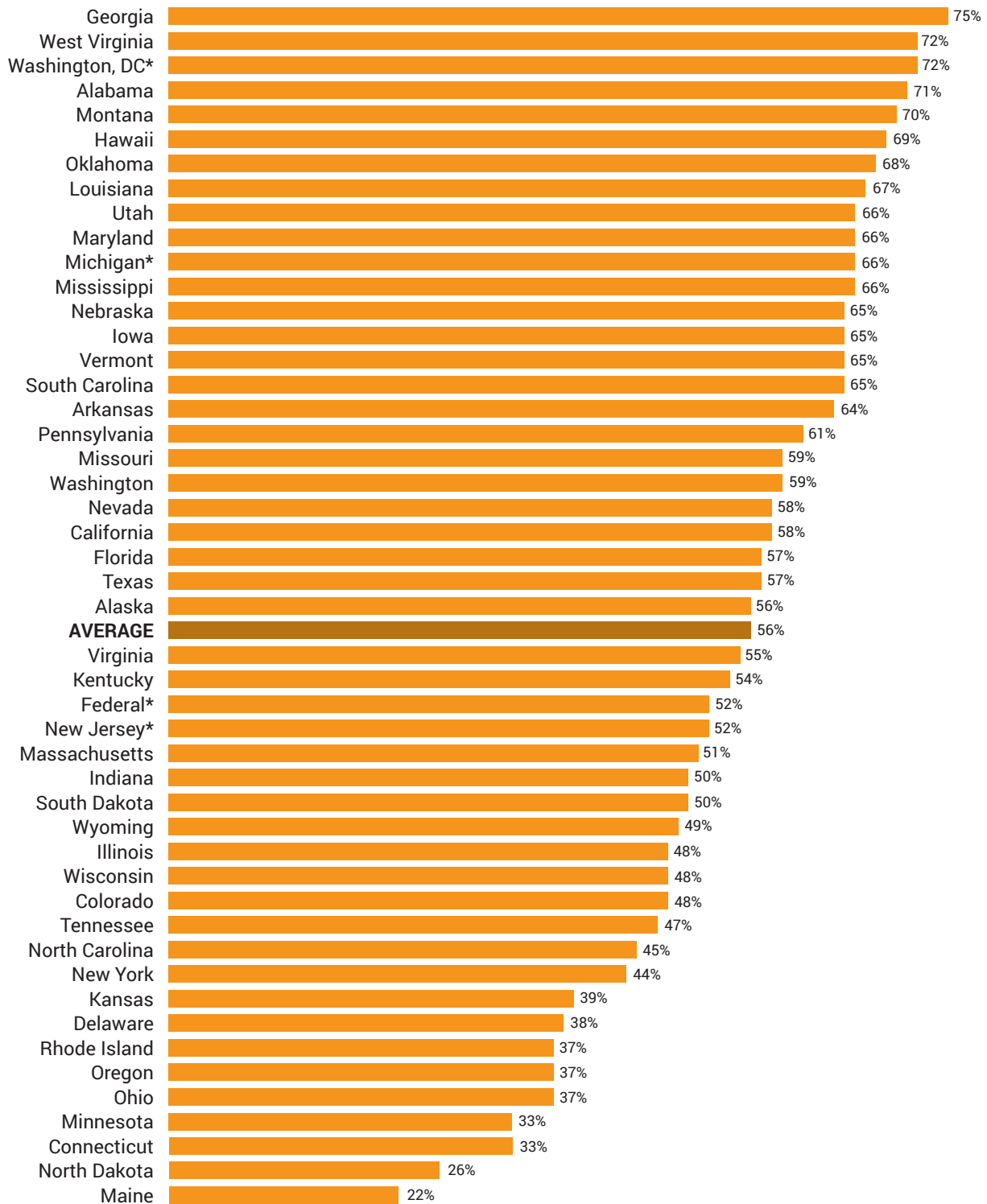
This analysis focuses on the decade mark, but readers should bear in mind that in some cases the proportion of people who have served 15 years, or even more, is also very high. For example, in California, 27% of people serving time in 2021—approximately 26,000 people—had already been confined for at least 15 years.<sup>22</sup> In Washington, DC, over one-quarter of the prison population had already served at least 15 years in 2020.<sup>23</sup>

### **People Serving Prison Sentences of a Decade or Longer**

Many people serving sentences of 10 years or longer will not serve their full sentence because mechanisms such as good time credits and parole, although narrower compared to the past, will allow for earlier release.<sup>24</sup> Still, there has been a notable increase in prison sentences beyond a decade. We estimate that 773,000 people in prison were serving sentences of 10 years or longer in 2019—56% of the total prison population. This is an increase from 587,000 people in 2000—which represented 44% of the prison population in that year.<sup>25</sup>

As shown in Appendix Table 2, the proportion of imprisoned people serving sentences 10 years or longer in 2019 ranged from 22% in Maine to 75% in Georgia. This proportion was at least two-thirds in the District of Columbia as well as 11 U.S. states: Georgia, West Virginia, Alabama, Montana, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Utah, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi.<sup>26</sup> Both the count of people serving sentences of at least 10 years and their share of the total prison population grew since 2000 in nearly all states for which data were available (see Appendix Table 2).<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 2. Proportion of Prison Population Serving Sentence of a Decade or Longer, 2019**



\*Data for these jurisdictions are for the following years: Michigan (2020), DC and New Jersey (2021), federal (2022).

Note: The federal prison figure is reduced by the DC count.

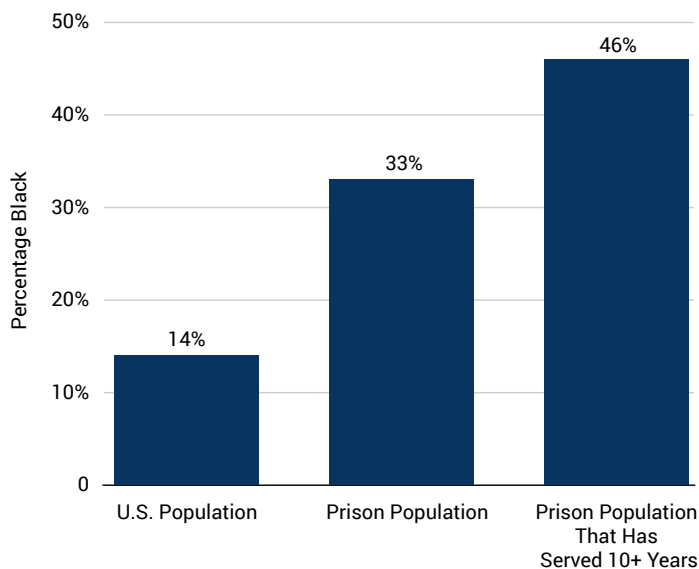
Sources: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2019: Selected Variables*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-07-15; Tarnalicki, T. (2022, June 30). D.C. Offender – Bureau of Prisons Incarceration Trends. Memo, District of Columbia Sentencing Commission; Federal Bureau of Prisons. (2022). [BOP statistics: Sentences imposed](#); Michigan Department of Corrections. (2021). [Michigan Department of Corrections 2020 statistical report](#); New Jersey Department of Corrections. (2021). [Offender characteristics report](#).

## Racial Disparity in Long Sentences

While Black Americans are vastly over-represented in the prison population, this disparity widens among those serving lengthy sentences. In 2019, Black Americans represented 14% of the total U.S. population, 33% of the total prison population, and 46% of the prison population who had already served at least 10 years (see Figure 3).<sup>28</sup>

The over-representation of people of color is further magnified among people serving even longer sentences in some jurisdictions. Three quarters of Californians who have served over 15 years in prison are people of color—69% are Black or Latinx.<sup>29</sup> In Washington, DC, 96% of those serving sentences of 15 years or longer in 2020 were Black men.<sup>30</sup> In Texas, Black people represented 34% of the total prison population in 2020, but 45% of people with 25 or more years served in 2021.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 3. Representation of Black Americans in U.S. and Prison Populations**



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates; Carson, E.A. (2020). Prisoners in 2019. Bureau of Justice Statistics; United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2019: Selected Variables*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-07-15.

The over-representation of Black Americans among the prison population serving lengthy sentences stems in part from racial disparities in serious criminal offending.<sup>32</sup> Tackling this problem requires significantly ramping up crime preventative interventions in areas with concentrated urban poverty.<sup>33</sup> This is no small feat given that the public's association of crime with people of color lends support for more punitive approaches to public safety.<sup>34</sup>

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**Biased criminal justice policies and practices exacerbate the over-representation of Black Americans among those serving lengthy prison terms.**

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Biased criminal justice policies and practices exacerbate the over-representation of Black Americans among those serving lengthy prison terms. This happens through mechanisms such as racial disparities in pretrial detention,<sup>35</sup> implicit bias in prosecutorial charging decisions and plea offers,<sup>36</sup> sentencing laws and policies that prolong prison terms for people with criminal histories,<sup>37</sup> and biased parole decision making.<sup>38</sup> Lawmakers and practitioners must work to uproot these sources of racial bias fueling lengthy prison terms among Black Americans.<sup>39</sup> To this end, The Sentencing Project urges states to develop “racial impact statements,” forecasting the impact of both proposed and existing crime legislation on different populations in order to minimize or eliminate racial and ethnic disparities.<sup>40</sup>

## **Criminological and Legal Foundations for Sentence Reconsideration at the Decade Mark**

Criminological research establishes that lengthy sentences are at odds with best practices for advancing public safety. A number of research approaches have shown that lengthy prison terms incarcerate people who no longer pose a public safety risk.<sup>41</sup> Based on this evidence, some leading legal associations and experts recommend reassessing prison terms after the passage of 10 to 15 years.<sup>42</sup>

One line of inquiry has studied recidivism among people released from prison and found significantly lower recidivism rates among people who have served longer than six to 10 years compared to those who have served shorter sentences, likely because they have aged out of criminal activity. For example, using a broad definition of recidivism (rearrest), the United States Sentencing Commission found that people who had served at least 10 years in federal prison had a reoffending rate that was 29% lower than similarly situated individuals who received shorter sentences.<sup>43</sup> When the Bureau of Justice Statistics examined recidivism rates for people with violent convictions released from state prisons, it found that those who had served more than six years were 25% less likely to recidivate than those who had served one year.<sup>44</sup> Finally, studies of people released after decades of imprisonment for the most serious

crimes have found extremely low recidivism rates, meaning that these individuals have been imprisoned until they pose a fraction of the recidivism risk of those released from shorter sentences.<sup>45</sup> These studies support reassessing prison terms within the decade mark. They do not support maintaining or increasing shorter prison terms.<sup>46</sup> In fact, a number of studies have found that community supervision produces better public safety outcomes than shorter terms of imprisonment.<sup>47</sup>

Another approach has been to follow the same group of individuals over time to determine the duration of their “criminal careers.” These studies have found that most people who commit crime desist from criminal offending within four to 12 years after they begin.<sup>48</sup> In their long-duration study of British men up to age 56, Lila Kazemian and David Farrington found among those who were convicted more than once, desistance typically took 16 years, and included convictions that would not merit incarceration.<sup>49</sup> Based on this evidence, they concluded: “The harsher sentences ... imposed on individuals convicted of violent offenses may serve a retributive purpose, but they are not justified by recidivism data or by our analyses of residual criminal careers.”<sup>50</sup> In addition, scholars examining the likelihood of being arrested after a period of time had passed since a prior arrest<sup>51</sup> have found that people with records pose the same public safety risk as others within seven to eight years after their last arrest, or less time for some offenses.<sup>52</sup>

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**The American Bar Association urges lawmakers to authorize courts to take a “second look” at criminal sentences after 10 years of imprisonment.**

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These findings correspond with research on the age-crime curve, which measures the proportion of individuals in various age groups who are engaged in criminalized activity. Arrest trends between 1980 and 2010 reveal that for a range of offenses, including robbery and murder, criminal offending peaked around the late teenage years or early 20s, then began a gradual decline in the early 20s.<sup>53</sup> The fact that this pattern holds true for violent crimes is notable because over half (58%) of people in state prisons in 2019 had violent convictions.<sup>54</sup> This proportion was even higher among those sentenced to 10 years or longer (76% had violent convictions) and those who had already served 10 years (89% had violent convictions).<sup>55</sup>

Based on the prevailing evidence, some leading legal associations and experts recommend reassessing the necessity of imprisonment for all after 10 to 15 years. The American Bar Association's policymaking body, the House of Delegates, urges lawmakers to authorize courts to take a "second look" at criminal sentences after 10 years of imprisonment.<sup>56</sup> The American Law Institute, a nonpartisan group of leading legal practitioners and scholars who strive to clarify and modernize U.S. laws through its Model Penal Code, recommends that all prison sentences be reviewed within 10 years for youth convictions, and after 15 years for crimes by adults, so that sentences reflect our "evolving norms...and knowledge base."<sup>57</sup> University of Minnesota Law School Professor Kevin Reitz, who documented the deliberations behind the Model Penal Code, has joined national parole experts Edward Rhine and the late Joan Petersilia in recommending that resentencing reviews begin after 10 years of imprisonment.<sup>58</sup> He explained that the main disagreement within the American Law Institute over the 15-year recommendation was whether it should be shorter, with some advocating for five years.<sup>59</sup> Policymakers should begin implementing these evidence-based recommendations, and advocates should prompt them to do so.

## Recommendations

To end mass incarceration, accelerate racial justice, and better invest in public safety, lawmakers and criminal justice practitioners should dramatically reduce sentence lengths. Reforms such as the elimination of mandatory minimum sentences—as recommended at the federal level by President Biden and Attorney General Merrick Garland, and more broadly by the American Bar Association and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, as well as by leading criminologists including Alfred Blumstein, Alex Piquero, and Michael Tonry—are vital to this effort.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, scaling down sentencing guidelines would also help to reduce pressure on the entire sentencing structure. In addition, changing prosecutorial practices is key to achieving front-end sentencing reform. Over 60 elected prosecutors and law enforcement leaders have recommended that prosecutors' offices develop policies to ensure that lengthy sentences, such as those beyond 15 or 20 years, "be reserved for the *unusual and extraordinary* case."<sup>61</sup>

For those already sentenced, retroactive application of sentencing reforms, increased discretionary release, and *second look* reforms enabling a sentence review, in addition to executive clemency, are important tools for correcting sentencing excesses of the past. Jurisdictions should expedite minimum eligible release dates through good time credits, earned time credits, and parole—and increase their use of discretion to curb excessive prison terms.<sup>62</sup>

All jurisdictions should create an automatic judicial sentence-review process within a maximum of 10 years of imprisonment, with a rebuttable presumption of resentencing (not necessarily release).<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, The Sentencing Project, in coalition with other organizations, recommends limiting maximum prison terms to 20 years, except in rare cases.<sup>64</sup>

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**All jurisdictions should create an automatic judicial sentence-review process within a maximum of 10 years of imprisonment, with a rebuttable presumption of resentencing.**

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An understanding that a decade is a very long time to confine a person is a vital part of that reconfiguration of our approach to sentencing.

Given the overwhelming racial disparity in lengthy sentences, the above-listed reforms will accelerate racial equity in criminal sentencing. Jurisdictions should also uproot sources of disparity within lengthy prison terms, such as pretrial detention, underfunded public defense, biased prosecutorial decision making, sentencing enhancements related to criminal histories, and biased parole decision making. “Racial impact statements” can help to anticipate how legislation—both proposed and enacted—have a disparate racial or ethnic impact. These interventions can help to prioritize more effective interventions in violence-prevention outside of the criminal legal system, such as expanding access to effective drug treatment and mental health care, mitigating financial stress, and significantly expanding community outreach and violence interruption programs.<sup>65</sup>

## Appendices

### Methods

This analysis relies on three types of sources: data collected by the Bureau of Justice Statistics National Corrections Reporting Program (NCRP), publicly available data produced by departments of corrections and other agencies, and data received through open records requests.

This brief relies heavily on the year-end prison population counts reported as part of the NCRP from 1991 to 2019 (ICPSR 38048).<sup>66</sup> The authors also examined and in some cases have presented more recent data collected through an open records request in the case of Washington, DC, and from publications by the departments of corrections or other agencies for: California, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Washington, and the federal system.

To compare 2000 and 2019 figures, the analysis was narrowed to a consistent set of states for which data were available for both years, as listed in Appendix Tables 1 and 2. To estimate the total number of people who had served at least a decade in 2000, we estimated the proportion among a sample of 24 states listed in Appendix Table 1 and applied this percentage to the total prison population in that year, 1,334,174 people. To arrive at the estimate for 2019, the proportion for the same 24 states<sup>67</sup> was applied to the total prison population in that year, 1,379,786 people. Similarly, to estimate the total number of people who were serving 10 years or longer in 2000, we estimated the proportion among a sample of 26 states listed in Appendix Table 2 and applied this percentage to the total prison population in that year. To arrive at the estimate for 2019, the proportion for the same 26 states<sup>68</sup> was applied to the total prison population in that year.

**Appendix Table 1: Prison Population That Has Already Served 10 Years or Longer, 2000 versus 2019**

	2000		2019	
	10+ Years Served Population	Percentage of All in Prison	10+ Years Served Population	Percentage of All in Prison
California	10,335	6%	35,703	29%
Colorado	1,191	7%	2,708	14%
Connecticut	764	6%	1,580	18%
Florida	7,371	10%	20,456	22%
Georgia	3,622	8%	9,497	17%
Illinois	3,165	7%	7,363	19%
Kentucky	952	6%	2,111	9%
Maryland	3,166	14%	4,043	22%
Minnesota	235	4%	855	9%
Mississippi	992	6%	3,549	19%
Missouri	2,115	8%	4,828	19%
Nebraska	225	6%	620	12%
New York	6,256	9%	7,419	17%
North Carolina	2,854	9%	6,458	19%
Ohio	5,940	13%	8,929	18%
Oklahoma	2,901	13%	4,220	17%
Pennsylvania	3,830	10%	8,670	18%
Rhode Island	125	7%	267	13%
South Carolina	1,778	8%	4,491	24%
Tennessee	2,140	9%	5,191	16%
Texas	20,923	16%	24,369	17%
Utah	231	4%	719	11%
Washington	927	6%	2,816	16%
Wisconsin	865	4%	3,769	16%
<b>Total in Sample</b>	<b>82,903</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>170,631</b>	<b>19%</b>

Source: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2019: Selected Variables*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-07-15.

**Appendix Table 2: Prison Population Serving Sentence of a Decade or Longer, 2000 versus 2019**

	2000		2019	
	10+ Years Sentenced Population	Percentage of All in Prison	10+ Years Sentenced Population	Percentage of All in Prison
California	40,700	25%	71,515	58%
Colorado	3,795	23%	9,411	48%
Connecticut	2,503	19%	2,884	33%
Florida	31,287	44%	53,553	57%
Georgia	29,329	66%	40,820	75%
Illinois	17,626	39%	18,496	48%
Kentucky	8,400	54%	12,519	54%
Maryland	12,208	53%	11,910	66%
Michigan*	20,812	44%	22,137	66%
Minnesota	1,703	27%	3,132	33%
Mississippi	7,043	41%	12,402	66%
Missouri	12,707	47%	15,301	59%
Nebraska	1,489	42%	3,254	65%
New Jersey*	10,046	33%	6,622	52%
New York	31,642	45%	19,154	44%
North Carolina	13,739	44%	15,452	45%
Ohio	23,981	52%	18,512	37%
Oklahoma	14,437	64%	17,063	68%
Pennsylvania	22,089	60%	27,922	61%
Rhode Island	181	10%	771	37%
South Carolina	10,568	50%	12,187	65%
Tennessee	11,624	50%	14,829	47%
Texas	69,652	56%	82,051	57%
Utah	3,154	59%	4,346	66%
Washington	4,155	28%	10,313	59%
Wisconsin	7,910	40%	11,256	48%
<b>Total in Sample</b>	<b>412,780</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>517,812</b>	<b>56%</b>

\*Figures in the 2019 column for Michigan are from 2020 and for New Jersey are from 2021.

Sources: United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *National Corrections Reporting Program, 1991-2019: Selected Variables*. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2021-07-15; Michigan Department of Corrections. (2021). [Michigan Department of Corrections 2020 statistical report](#); Michigan Department of Corrections. (n.d.). [Michigan Department of Corrections 2000 statistical report](#); New Jersey Department of Corrections. (2021). [Offender characteristics report](#).

## Endnotes

- 1 This estimate applies to the total prison population the proportion that had been incarcerated 10 years or longer in 45 jurisdictions for which data were available, which includes Washington, DC and excludes: Alaska, Arizona, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, and the federal system. See Figure 1 for source information.
- 2 This estimate applies to the total prison population the proportion that was serving 10 years or longer in 48 jurisdictions for which data are available, which includes Washington, DC, and the federal system and excludes: Arizona, Idaho, New Hampshire, and New Mexico. See Figure 2 for source information.
- 3 In 2000, approximately 133,000 people had served at least 10 years in prison (10% of the prison population) and 587,000 were sentenced to 10 years or longer (44% of the prison population). These estimates apply to the total prison population proportions derived from a sample of states listed in Appendix Tables 1 and 2.
- 4 Kazemian, L. (2021). *Pathways to desistance from crime among juveniles and adults: Applications to criminal justice policy and practice*. National Institute of Justice; Blumstein, A., & Piquero, A. (2007). Restore rationality to sentencing policy. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 6(4), 679-687. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2007.00463.x>; Kazemian, L., & Farrington, D. P. (2018). Advancing knowledge about residual criminal careers: A follow-up to age 56 from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 57, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2018.03.001>; Piquero, A., Hawkins, J., & Kazemian, L. (2012). Criminal career patterns. In R. Loeber & D. P. Farrington (Eds.), *From juvenile delinquency to adult crime: Criminal careers, justice policy, and prevention* (pp. 14–46). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 5 United States Sentencing Commission. (2022). *Length of incarceration and recidivism (2022)*; Antenangeli, L., & Durose, M.R. (2021). *Recidivism of prisoners released in 24 states in 2008: A 10-year follow-up period (2008–2018)*. Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- 6 Ghandnoosh, N. (2021). *A second look at injustice*. The Sentencing Project.
- 7 For related analyses of decade-long lengths of imprisonment, see Council on Criminal Justice. (2022). *Long sentences by the numbers*; Renaud, J. (2018). *Eight keys to mercy: How to shorten excessive prison sentences*. Prison Policy Initiative; Urban Institute. (2017). *A matter of time: The causes and consequences of rising time served in America's prisons*.
- 8 Durlauf, S., & Nagin, D. (2011). Imprisonment and crime: Can both be reduced? *Criminology and Public Policy*, 10(1), 13–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2010.00680.x>; Travis, J., Western, B., & Redburn, S. (Eds.) (2014). *The growth of incarceration in the United States: Exploring causes and consequences*. National Research Council. National Academies Press.
- 9 See Nellis, A. (2022). *Nothing but time: Elderly Americans serving life without parole*. The Sentencing Project.
- 10 Massoglia, M., Remster, B., & King, R. D. (2011). Stigma or separation? Understanding the incarceration-divorce relationship. *Social Forces*, 90(1), 133-155. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/90.1.133>; Connor, D. P., & Tewksbury, R. (2015). Prison inmates and their visitors: An examination of inmate characteristics and visitor types. *The Prison Journal*, 95(2), 159-177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032885515575262>; Lynch, J. P., & Sabol, W. J. (2001). *Prisoner reentry in perspective*. Urban Institute.
- 11 Travis, Western, & Redburn (2014), see note 8; Urban Institute (2017), see note 7.
- 12 Fair and Just Prosecution. (2020). *Lessons learned from Germany: Avoiding unnecessary incarceration and limiting collateral consequences*; see also Subramanian, R., & Shames, A. (2013). *Sentencing and prison practices in Germany and the Netherlands: Implications for the United States*. Vera Institute of Justice.
- 13 This includes people serving life with and without the possibility of parole as well as those serving virtual life sentences of 50 years or longer. Nellis, A. (2021a). *No end in sight: America's enduring reliance on life imprisonment*. The Sentencing Project.
- 14 Death Penalty Information Center. (2021). *The death penalty in 2021: Year end report*.
- 15 Ghandnoosh, N. (2019). *The next step: Ending excessive punishment for violent crimes*. The Sentencing Project; Ghandnoosh (2021), see note 6.
- 16 Nellis (2021a), see note 13; Ghandnoosh, N. (2017). *Delaying a second chance: The declining prospects for parole on life sentences*. The Sentencing Project.
- 17 Ghandnoosh, N. (2021). *Can we wait 60 years to cut the prison population in half?* The Sentencing Project.
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- 20 Fifteen percent of Texas's prison population had served 15 years or more in 2021. Personal communication with Tammy Houser, Open Records Coordinator at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, May 21, 2021.
- 21 Since the closure of Lorton Correctional Complex in 2001, people convicted of felonies under DC law have been under the legal custody of the U.S. Bureau of Prisons and held at federal prisons; Tarnalicki, T. (2021, May 6). *Incarceration data, BOP stock population 2020*. Memo, District of Columbia Sentencing Commission.
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- 26 In addition, 18% of Washington, DC’s prison population had life sentences in 2021. Nearly half (47%) of Michigan’s prison population was sentenced to at least 15 years in 2020. In 2021, 73% of Maryland’s prison population had sentences of 10 years or longer—57% were sentenced to 15 years or longer. Nearly one-third (30%) of the federal prison population was sentenced to 15 years or longer. Blume (2022), see note 23; Tarnalicki, T. (2022, June 30). *D.C. Offender – Bureau of Prisons Incarceration Trends*. Memo, District of Columbia Sentencing Commission; Michigan Department of Corrections. (2021). [Michigan Department of Corrections 2020 statistical report](#); Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services. (2021). [DPSCS annual data dashboard](#), pg. 5; Federal Bureau of Prisons. (2022). [BOP statistics: Sentences imposed](#).
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- 50 Kazemian & Farrington (2018), note 4, p. 9.
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- 66 Alaska was removed from the 2019 time-served analysis due to concerns about data validity.
- 67 These 24 states presented 63% of the total U.S. prison population in 2019. The estimate for 2019 is unchanged when calculated based on the 45 jurisdictions for which data are available for that year.
- 68 These 26 states presented 67% of the total U.S. prison population in 2019. The estimate for 2019 is unchanged when calculated based on the 48 jurisdictions for which data are available for that year.

# How Many People Are Spending Over a Decade in Prison?

September 2022



**THE  
SENTENCING  
PROJECT**

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The Sentencing Project promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.