

United States General Accounting Office

Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D.C. 20535

FEDERAL PRISONS

Report of the
Comptroller General



121294



United States
 General Accounting Office
 Washington, D.C. 20548

Program Evaluation and
 Methodology Division

B-236831

October 27, 1989

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel
 Chairman, Select Committee on Narcotics
 Abuse and Control
 House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Federal prisons are becoming increasingly crowded, and projections for the next 10 to 15 years suggest further significant augmentations in the prison population. Not surprisingly, federal prison officials report prison overcrowding as the principal concern they face. One suggested solution to the problem, expanding prison capacity, would require substantial funds for building or modifying prisons and for the increased costs of managing larger numbers of imprisoned offenders. Another response to crowding is to establish programs for dealing with offenders that could serve as cost-effective alternatives to traditional incarceration.

In your September 21, 1988, letter, you pointed to a need for prison reform and asked the General Accounting Office to answer a series of questions related to prison crowding in federal institutions, alternatives to incarceration, and the characteristics of the prison population. This fact sheet presents data on the number and types of offenders sentenced to federal penal institutions and focuses on the characteristics of those offenders. GAO is also performing separate evaluations of alternatives to incarceration and of plans for handling the expanding prison population.

The information presented in this fact sheet is based on data collected by the Federal Bureau of Prisons during three 1-day counts in September 1986, September 1987, and September 1988.¹ These data show that the rapid increase in federal prison populations is largely driven by the increase in the number of drug law violators who are being incarcerated. Whereas the population of drug offenders increased by 31 percent in the 2 years from September 1986 to September 1988, there was only a 5-percent increase for all other offenders combined. Another measure of the relative effect of drug offenders is that they account for 79 percent

¹Data in this report differ from those presented in a forthcoming General Government Division report entitled Prison Expansion: Issues Facing the Nation's Prison Systems (GAO/GGD-90-1). The reasons for these differences are discussed in appendix I.

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Evaluation in Physical Systems Areas (202) 275-3092. Other major contributors to this report are listed in appendix II.

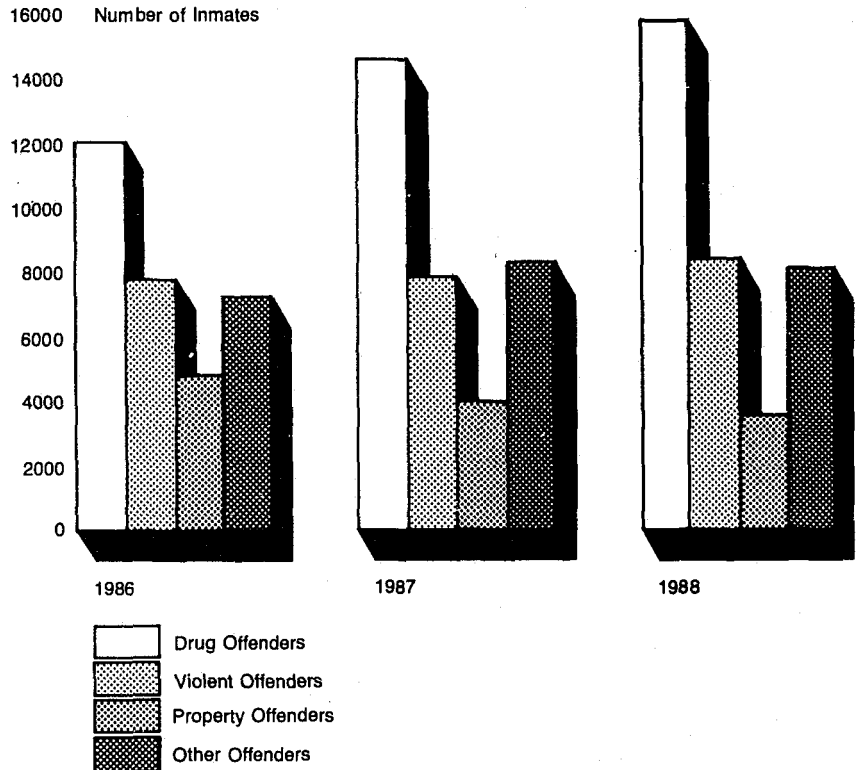
Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eleanor Chelimsky". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial "E" and a long, sweeping tail that ends in a hook.

Eleanor Chelimsky
Assistant Comptroller General

Section 1
Offender Groups in Federal Prisons

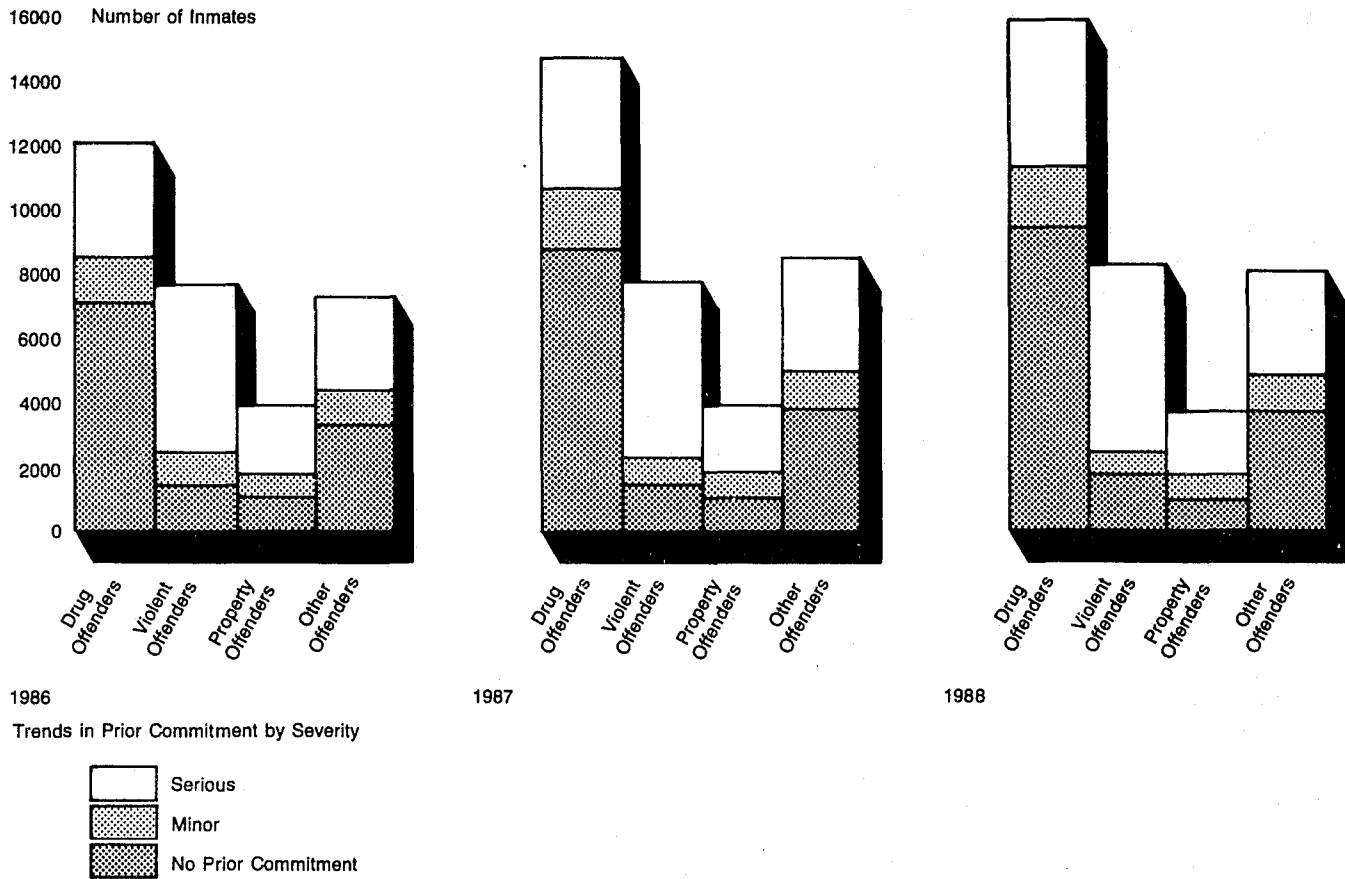
Figure 1.1: Inmates Confined in Federal Penal Institutions by Offense Category^a



^aThe data compared are from 1-day counts in September 1986, September 1987, and September 1988. The figure is based on 31,136, 35,042, and 35,903 cases for 1986, 1987, and 1988, respectively. Not reported in the figure, because data on distribution were unavailable, are 4,037, 3,963, and 3,421 cases for the respective years.

Section 2
Prior Commitments

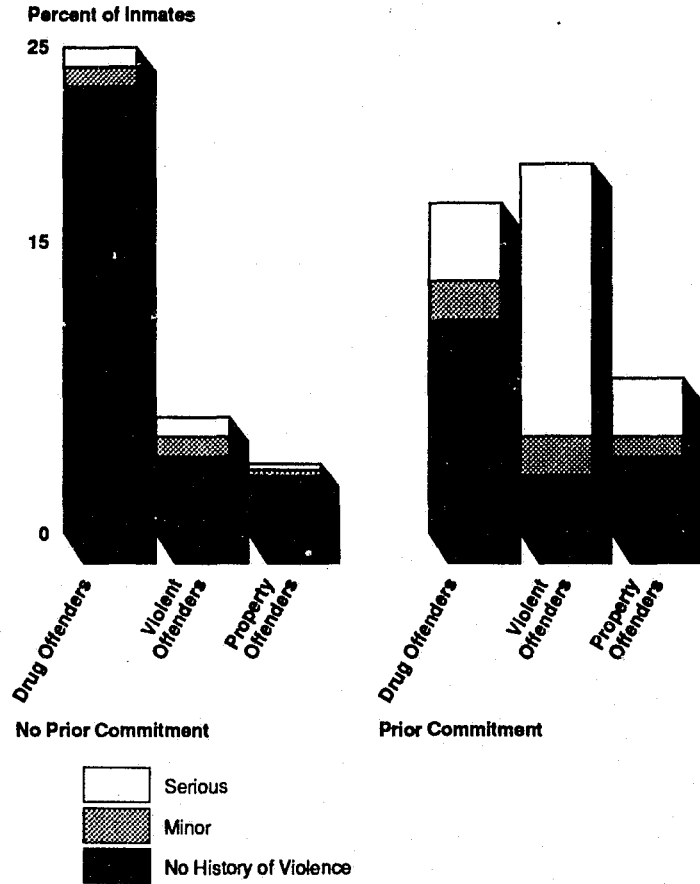
Figure 2.1: Commitment History of Federal Prison Inmates^a



^aThe data compared are from 1-day counts in September 1986, September 1987, and September 1988. Distinctions between minor and serious levels of prior commitment are based on the nature of the most severe offense for which an inmate was previously committed. The figure is based on 31,136, 35,042, and 35,903 cases for 1986, 1987, and 1988, respectively. Not reported in the figure, because data on distribution were unavailable, are 4,037, 3,963, and 3,421 cases for the respective years.

**Section 3
History of Violence**

Figure 3.1: Comparison of Violence History of Federal Inmates^a



^aThe data compared are from 1-day counts in September 1986, September 1987, and September 1988. A history of violence includes an individual's entire background, excluding the current offense. For federal inmates with no prior commitments, this figure is based on 13,164, 15,135, and 15,903 cases for 1986, 1987, and 1988, respectively. Not reported, because data were unavailable, are 1,025, 1,184, and 1,087 cases for the respective years. For federal inmates with prior commitments, this figure is based on 17,972, 19,907, and 20,000 cases for 1986, 1987, and 1988, respectively. Not reported, because data on distribution were unavailable, are 3,012, 2,779, and 2,334 cases for the respective years.

Trends in Sentencing

For an indicator of the size of prison populations in the near future, we asked the Bureau of Prisons for data on length of sentence for the offenders discussed in this fact sheet.³ The relationship between sentence length and the extent of prison crowding is direct. For example, if the increasing number of drug offenders were disproportionately sentenced to short sentences (less than 1 year), then the growth in prison population might be short-lived. If, however, the majority of new offenders were being sentenced to longer stays in prison, the prison population could be expected to grow.

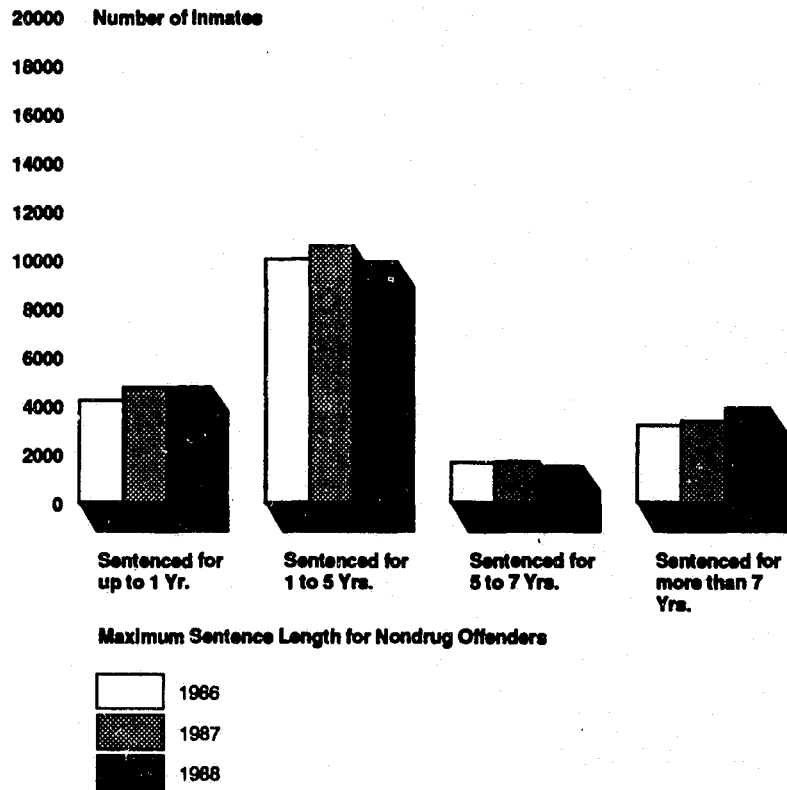
Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show trends in the maximum sentence length for drug offenders and other offenders, respectively.⁴ Figure 5.1 shows a steady increase in moderate and lengthy sentences (greater than 1 year) for drug offenders. This increase occurred during the same period that the number of drug offenders was steadily increasing. For all other inmates (figure 5.2), the numbers sentenced to both short and lengthy prison stays increased while there was a decrease in the number of offenders sentenced to moderate lengths of stay (between 1 and 7 years). These data, specifically the longer sentences for the most rapidly growing segment of the federal prison population, suggest that the prison population will continue to increase.

³All information on sentence length pertains to maximum sentence length and does not reflect changes in actual time served.

⁴Sentence lengths are provided in the categories used by the Bureau.

Section 5
Trends in Sentencing

Figure 5.2: Trends in Sentence Length for Nondrug Offenders^a



^aThe data compared are from 1-day counts in September 1986, September 1987, and September 1988. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 are based on 31,136, 35,042, and 35,903 cases for 1986, 1987, and 1988, respectively. Not reported in these figures, because data on distribution were unavailable, are 4,037, 3,963, and 3,421 cases for the respective years.

Major Contributors to This Report

Program Evaluation and Methodology Division

George Silberman, Assistant Director
W. Phillip Travers, Project Manager
Venkareddy Chennareddy, Adviser
Penny Pickett, Reports Analyst
Angela Smith-Bourciquot, Information Processing Assistant

Serious Prior Commitment Serious prior commitments include all commitments for offenses classified as "moderate," "high," and "greatest" that resulted in incarceration.

No Prior Commitment Used when an offender has not been previously incarcerated.

Violence History This dimension contains three categories. The categorization of history of violence is based on an offender's criminal history prior to the current offense. It includes information from prior convictions or findings of guilt rendered by a federal or state disciplinary committee. Documented information from juvenile adjudication is used as well, unless the record has been expunged. The severity of violence is defined according to the degree of seriousness of the act that resulted in a conviction or finding of guilt. If there is more than one incident of violence, the most serious is used to determine severity.

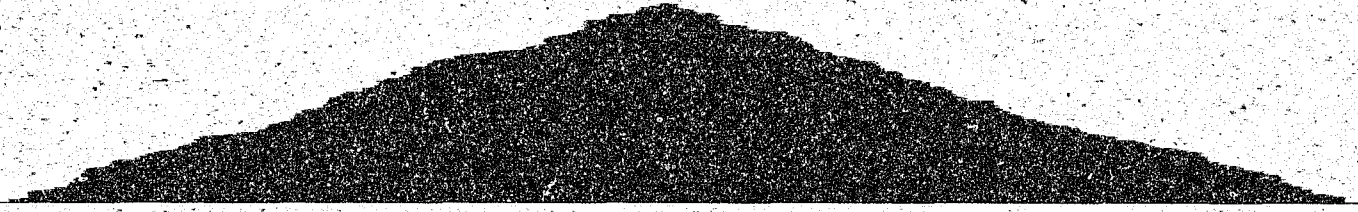
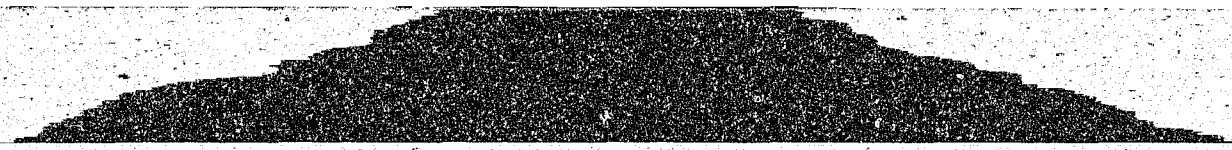
Minor History of Violence Examples used by the Federal Bureau of Prisons to classify a person's history of violence as minor include simple assaults, fights, and domestic squabbles.

Serious History of Violence Examples used by the Bureau to classify a person's history of violence as serious include aggravated assault, intimidation using a weapon, and incidents involving arson or a weapon.

No History of Violence The category for a person who neither has been committed for a violent crime nor has any record of violent behavior.

Offense Severity This dimension has five categories. Offense severity is determined by the most severe offense for which an individual is currently incarcerated. The Federal Bureau of Prisons employs a five-point scale consisting of lowest, low-moderate, moderate, high, and greatest. The Bureau defines the severity of drug offenses separately.

Lowest Severity Level Property offenses or counterfeiting less than \$2,000, bankruptcy, and use of drugs.



THESE ARE THE RESULTS OF THE TESTS CONDUCTED AT THE

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AT PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

ON THE SAMPLES OF COAL

RECEIVED FROM THE

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