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Bureau of Justice Statistics  
Special Report

# Prison Admissions and Releases, 1981

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This report is the first in a regular series describing the characteristics of persons admitted to and released from State prisons in the United States. These characteristics are important for assessing the use of prisons throughout the Nation. Traditional yearend counts are used for describing inmate populations on a given day. Such information, however, is greatly affected by those prisoners serving longer than average terms. By contrast, data on admissions and releases during a given year provide information on annual dispositions to imprisonment and the duration of sentences to incarceration. Such data further an understanding of sanctioning decisions across jurisdictions and over time.

During 1981, there were an estimated 183,000 admissions from courts and admissions of conditional release violators. Nationally, there were an estimated 142,000 conditional and unconditional releases that year. The data on which this report was based were obtained from 33 States and the District of Columbia and covered 121,211 prison admissions (about two-thirds of the estimated admissions nationwide) and 101,943 prison releases (72% of the estimated releases nationwide).

Details on the numbers and types of prisoner movements in each jurisdiction are available from Prisoners in State

and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1981, NCJ-86485.

Offender-specific data on those persons entering and leaving the Nation's prisons form an important complement to existing yearend information on prison populations and incarceration rates. Such data increase our understanding and ability to respond to fundamental questions about imprisonment posed by the public, legislators, corrections administrators, and researchers such as: Who enters prison? What kinds of sentences are imposed for different crimes? How long do offenders typically stay in prison for a given crime and sentence? Is punishment more severe now than in the past?

This report reveals both continuities and variations over time and among jurisdictions in the use of prison. Sentence length and time served were found to vary little over time for the Nation as a whole. By contrast, compared to earlier periods, imprisonment was found to be more prevalent among the adult

and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1981, NCJ-86485.

## ADMISSIONS, 1981

### Demography

Sex (table 1). Of every 100 inmates

population, the entering population was more likely to be convicted of violent crimes, and those leaving prison were less likely to exit by a discretionary parole board decision.

Future data on admissions and releases will encompass the entire spectrum of imprisonment and its use beginning with admission to prison and continuing through final exit from the justice system. This effort, known as the **National Corrections Reporting Program**, will make available, for the first time, public-access data on this important part of the sanctioning process.

The analyses contained in this special report were made possible by the generous cooperation of 33 States and the District of Columbia reporting offender-specific data on admissions and releases for 1981 and prior years. Given the value of this information for an informed public debate on correctional policy, it is our hope that all States will soon join in providing such annual data.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

admitted during 1981, 94.5 were male. This disproportion of males has been quite stable since 1926, when such data were collected for the first time (in 1926, 93.2% of prison admissions were male). The only period since that time in which the proportion of males admitted was relatively low was during World

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War II (males were 90.3% of admissions in 1942, 90.6% in 1944, and 90.9% in 1945).

Of the States reporting in 1981, Massachusetts admissions reflected the highest proportion of females (10.5%) and North Dakota the lowest (1%).

**Race** (table 1). Approximately 53.5% of those admitted to prison in 1981 were reported to be white. Black offenders composed 43.5% of the prison entries; other racial groups accounted for 1% of the admissions. Of those classified as other, 78% were Native Americans; the remainder were principally reported to be Asians or Pacific Islanders.

Since 1926, admissions to State prisons classified as other than black or white have varied little, consistently representing between 0.8% and 1% of all admissions. By contrast, the proportion of white and black admissions has changed considerably. The fraction of admissions classified as white declined consistently from about three-quarters of all admissions in 1926 to about two-thirds of all admissions between 1941 and 1960. By 1981, it was estimated that slightly over half of all admissions were white. Blacks represent a growing fraction of all admissions, composing about one-quarter of all admissions during 1926, about one-third of all admissions between 1941 and 1960, and 43.5% of all admissions estimated for 1981.<sup>1</sup>

During 1981, jurisdictions varied considerably in the racial composition of those admitted to prisons. The District of Columbia reported that nearly 97% of its admissions were black, whereas North Dakota and South Dakota reported that about 1% of their admissions were black. Hawaii reported the largest percentage of admissions of persons of other races (68.8%)—160 of 234 total reported admissions were Asians or Pacific Islanders (1 Native American was also admitted). Jurisdictions with large proportions of admissions classified as other included South Dakota (23.6%), Montana (19.1%), North Dakota (14.0%), Minnesota (8.8%), and Nebraska (6.2%).

**Age.** For the jurisdictions able to

<sup>1</sup>The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports for 1981 indicate that there were 430,105 arrests of male adults (aged 18 or older) for the offenses of murder, rape, robbery and burglary—four offenses that account for about 56% of 1981 prison admissions. Of those arrested for these offenses, 250,210 (or 58.2%) were white, 174,949 (or 40.7%) were black, and 4,946 (or 1.1%) were of other races. The distribution of arrests for these offenses is quite close to the distribution obtained for entering prisoners in 1981 (55.5% white, 43.5% black, 1.0% other). See table 36, p. 181, *Crime in the United States, 1981*, FBI.

State	Admissions					Releases				
	Male <sup>1</sup>	White	Black	Median age Other <sup>2</sup> (years)		Male <sup>1</sup>	White	Black	Median age Other <sup>2</sup> (years)	
<b>U.S. estimate</b>	<b>94.5%</b>	<b>55.5%</b>	<b>43.5%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>94.4%</b>	<b>55.2%</b>	<b>43.8%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>28</b>
Alabama	93.7	43.3	56.6	0.1	25	93.4	48.4	51.6	*	27
California	94.5	64.0	35.0	0.9	27	93.7	64.7	33.5	1.7	29
Delaware	92.5	42.1	57.8	0.1	25	95.7	43.9	55.9	0.2	27
Dist. of Columbia	94.0	3.1	96.9	0.0	26	96.7	-	-	-	-
Georgia	93.7	48.6	51.4	0.0	25	93.9	48.0	51.9	*	26
Hawaii	96.6	28.6	2.6	68.8	25	99.1	26.4	2.8	70.8	27
Iowa	92.7	82.2	15.6	2.2	24	94.7	81.9	16.4	1.7	26
Kentucky	95.6	76.9	23.0	*	25	93.7	77.0	23.0	0.0	27
Louisiana	94.5	-	-	-	-	94.9	35.6	64.3	0.1	28
Maine	98.2	-	-	-	-	98.3	97.8	1.1	1.1	30
Massachusetts	89.5	68.9	30.8	0.3	25	83.9	67.6	32.2	0.2	27
Minnesota	95.9	71.5	19.7	8.8	24	95.0	76.4	15.1	8.6	26
Mississippi	95.1	35.7	64.2	0.1	24	95.2	37.1	62.7	0.2	26
Missouri	95.5	62.0	37.9	*	24	95.1	62.3	37.5	2.2	26
Montana	95.3	78.9	2.1	19.1	26	94.5	79.8	1.6	18.6	27
Nebraska	96.6	70.5	23.3	6.2	25	95.9	74.7	20.6	4.7	27
Nevada	95.8	71.0	27.2	1.8	27	92.0	69.4	29.3	1.3	28
New Hampshire	98.5	-	-	-	-	99.0	96.6	1.7	1.7	27
New Jersey	94.4	44.7	55.3	0.0	26	95.0	45.2	54.8	0.0	28
New Mexico	93.9	85.3	11.0	3.7	28	95.4	87.5	9.1	3.4	29
New York	96.2	48.3	51.2	0.6	26	96.3	49.5	50.0	0.5	28
North Carolina	94.4	49.4	48.2	2.3	24	94.4	48.8	48.8	2.5	26
North Dakota	99.0	85.0	1.0	14.0	24	99.4	85.6	0.0	14.4	26
Ohio	92.1	42.5	57.5	0.0	25	92.1	43.4	56.5	0.0	-
Pennsylvania	95.3	51.2	48.7	*	27	95.7	52.3	47.6	0.1	28
Rhode Island	98.4	79.6	20.4	0.0	24	96.2	77.5	22.5	0.0	26
South Carolina	95.7	47.8	52.1	0.1	24	95.6	49.6	50.1	0.2	26
South Dakota	93.4	75.2	1.2	23.6	24	95.0	71.6	0.9	27.4	27
Tennessee	94.1	62.7	37.3	0.0	25	94.3	61.2	38.8	0.0	27
Texas	93.2	60.8	39.2	*	25	94.2	61.0	39.0	0.0	27
Utah	95.9	89.1	8.2	2.7	26	96.9	89.0	8.3	2.7	28
West Virginia	96.2	88.5	11.4	0.1	24	94.5	88.1	11.9	0.0	25
Wisconsin	94.9	63.5	33.1	3.3	23	94.5	62.7	33.6	3.7	26

- Data not available or could not be utilized.  
\* Less than 0.1%.

<sup>1</sup> Data on sex distribution were obtained from *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions, 1981* and reflect those admissions classified as new court

commitments and conditional release violators.

<sup>2</sup> The other category includes Asian-Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and other groups.

Age	Admissions <sup>1</sup>		Releases <sup>2</sup>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>108,901</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>101,248</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Less than 18	1,445	1.3	259	0.3
18-24	46,565	42.8	34,955	34.5
25-34	42,439	39.0	42,666	42.1
35-44	12,785	11.7	13,317	13.2
45-54	4,154	3.8	4,735	4.7
55-64	1,250	1.1	1,593	1.6
65 and over	263	0.2	3,723	3.7
Median age (years)	25		28	

<sup>1</sup> Of the 121,211 admissions reported, 108,901 provided data on age.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 101,943 releases reported, 101,248 provided data on age.

report such data, the median age of persons admitted to prisons during 1981 was 25 years (table 1). Median age for admissions changed slightly over the preceding 55 years. From 1926 to 1935, jurisdictions reported a median age at admission of 26, which climbed to 27 years old between 1936 and 1942. In 1960, the median age was reported to be 27. The median age reported for the period 1974 to 1981 has remained constant at 25 years, suggesting that inmates received in the recent past are somewhat younger than in prior historical periods.

In 1981, about 1.3% of all admissions were estimated to be less than 18 years old and 0.2% were estimated to be at least 65 years old (table 2). Approximately 43% of all admissions were between 18 and 24 years old, 39% were between 25 and 34 years old, nearly 12% were between 35 and 44 years old, and nearly 5% between 45 and 64 years old.

Table 1 shows that among jurisdictions, the youngest median age at admission was reported by Wisconsin

(23) and the oldest by New Mexico (28). It is especially important to note that age may be affected by differences in sentencing practices. In California, for example, many young adult inmates (ages 18-24) are subject to California Youth Authority jurisdiction and are excluded from State prison counts.

### Offenses and sentences

**Offenses.** Burglary (27.2% of admissions) and robbery (18.9% of admissions) represented the two most prevalent offenses for which persons were admitted to prison in 1981 (table 3). The aggregate proportion of violent offenses (murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, other sexual assault, and other violent offenses) was 39% of all admissions. The proportion of offenders entering for violent crimes varied between 24% and 29% from 1926 to 1941 and reached 32% of all admissions in 1943, reflecting more selective incarceration policies during World War II (table 4).<sup>2</sup> In 1960, violent offenders constituted 27% of admissions. Between 1978 and 1981, the proportion of violent offenders admitted remained steady at 39%.

During 1981, jurisdictions varied considerably in the proportion of violent offenders admitted (table 5).

<sup>2</sup>As table 4 shows, the court commitment rate (defined as the number admitted to prison from court per 10,000 resident adults in the civilian population) reached its lowest recorded point during World War II. This fact, coupled with the high proportion of admissions for violent offenses and the longer median sentences given in that period, suggests a relatively selective use of incarceration.

Table 4. Admission trends for selected years, 1926-81

Year	Admissions from court per 10,000 adult population <sup>1</sup>	Percent admitted for violent crimes <sup>2</sup>	Median maximum sentence (months)
1926	5.8	25%	66
1927	6.2	24	66
1928	6.5	25	62
1929	6.3	26	63
1930	7.0	27	63
1931	7.5	28	NA
1932	7.6	26	64
1933	6.5	28	NA
1934	6.3	28	65
1935	6.3	26	65
1936	5.7	25	64
1937	5.8	28	61
1939	5.9	28	62
1940	6.1	27	63
1941	5.7	29	62
1942	4.8	31	65
1943	4.0	32	67
1944	3.7	30	67
1945	4.0	30	68
1946	4.7	30	66
1950	5.3	NA	63
1956	5.8	NA	63
1960	6.4	27	63
1978	7.2	39	63
1979	7.4	39	58
1980	8.0	39	58
1981	9.0	39	53

<sup>1</sup> Defined as the number of persons in the civilian resident population aged 18 or older. Sources: *Prisoners in the U.S., 1926-82*, BJS; *Annual Population Estimates*, Bureau of the Census.

<sup>2</sup> Violent offenses: murder, manslaughter, rape, other sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and other violent offenses.

Table 3. Offense distribution, maximum sentence length, time served, and percent of sentence served, by offense, 1981 admissions and releases

Offense	Admissions <sup>1</sup>			First releases <sup>2</sup>			
	Reported number	Percent of admissions	Median sentence (months)	Reported number	Percent of releases	Median time served (months)	Percent of sentence served
<b>All offenses</b>	<b>109,233</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>55,579</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>36%</b>
Murder/ manslaughter	7,802	7.1	180	3,682	6.6	42	31
Rape	3,070	2.8	112	1,129	2.0	33	42
Robbery	20,698	18.9	68	9,793	17.6	25	44
Aggravated assault	7,587	6.9	48	4,393	7.9	17	41
Burglary	29,722	27.2	41	14,781	26.6	13	37
Larceny	9,851	9.0	33	4,855	8.7	11	36
Auto theft	1,665	1.5	38	676	1.2	12	30
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	6,395	5.9	34	3,739	6.7	11	36
Drugs	8,396	7.7	41	4,768	8.6	13	34
Public order	4,918	4.5	25	2,683	4.8	10	41
Other <sup>3</sup>	9,129	8.4	38	5,080	9.1	14	39

<sup>1</sup> Of 121,211 admissions reported, 109,233 provided data on offenses; 91,724 provided data on maximum sentence length.

<sup>2</sup> First release defined in *Time Served*, p. 6. Of 101,943 releases reported, 55,579 were first releases for whom offense and time

served data were provided. For first releases, the percent of sentence served could be calculated for 41,096 cases.

<sup>3</sup> Other offenses include other sexual assault, other violent, other property, and other miscellaneous offenses.

Massachusetts, at 72% of admissions, and South Dakota, at 18%, represented the two extremes of reporting jurisdictions. Other than Massachusetts, jurisdictions with at least 50% of their

1981 admissions entering for violent crimes were New York (58%), Hawaii (58%), District of Columbia (55%), Minnesota (53%), and Pennsylvania (50%). Jurisdictions with a third or less

Table 5. Maximum sentence, percent convicted of violent crimes,<sup>1</sup> time served, and percent of sentence served for selected State admissions and releases, 1981

State	Admissions		First releases <sup>2</sup>		
	Median sentence (months)	Percent convicted of violent crimes	Median time served (months)	Percent convicted of violent crimes	Percent of sentence served
<b>U.S. estimate</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>36%</b>
Alabama	52	30	10	24	29
California	32	43	18	39	59
Delaware	40	37	11	33	37
District of Columbia	74	55	40	52	39
Georgia	54	30	12	23	26
Hawaii	112	58	33	43	41
Iowa	111	-	18	-	29
Kentucky	56	37	10	36	20
Louisiana	-	-	21	33	46
Maine	-	-	21	31	61
Massachusetts	113	72	22	72	12
Minnesota	45	53	-	42	-
Mississippi	52	32	12	31	27
Missouri	44	34	15	27	33
Montana	69	30	11	25	15
Nebraska	33	26	15	27	53
Nevada	50	37	15	29	36
New Hampshire	-	-	11	22	20
New Jersey	55	47	11	45	19
New Mexico	54	46	24	32	39
New York	54	58	22	52	44
North Carolina	35	28	14	26	30
North Dakota	35	25	10	14	34
Ohio	59	-	16	-	14
Pennsylvania	56	50	18	46	24
Rhode Island	31	49	18	45	55
South Carolina	62	30	-	28	-
South Dakota	30	18	14	18	48
Tennessee	51	30	18	20	35
Texas <sup>3</sup>	-	-	17	23	-
Utah	60	36	18	31	19
West Virginia	112	31	16	22	21
Wisconsin	35	40	20	34	52

- Data not available or could not be utilized.

<sup>1</sup> Violent offenses were defined as murder, manslaughter, rape, other sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and other

violent offenses.

<sup>2</sup> First release defined in *Time Served*, p. 6.  
<sup>3</sup> First releases could not be distinguished from all releases.

of their admissions classified as violent offenders were Alabama (30%), Georgia (30%), Mississippi (32%), Montana (30%), Nebraska (26%), North Carolina (28%), North Dakota (25%), South Carolina (30%), Tennessee (30%), West Virginia (31%), and South Dakota (18%).

**Age and offense.** Table 6 demonstrates the age-specific nature of imprisonable crimes. Public order offenders (gamblers, habitual offenders, weapons violators, etc.) reflect the oldest median ages (30); that is, the age representing the 50th percentile, where half the cases fall above and half below. Those entering for burglary and auto theft were found to have the youngest median ages (both 23 years). Median ages for murder, manslaughter, drug, and forgery/fraud/embezzlement offenders are between 28 and 29 years; larceny, rape, and aggravated assault offenders had median ages between 26 and 27. The median age for robbers was 24.

The relationship between age and offense is further illustrated in table 7, which shows that the proportion of those admitted in each age group for murder, manslaughter, aggravated assault, and public order offenses escalates with age. That is, while approximately 3 to 4% of those admitted in the age groups 34 years old or less have committed murder, more than 10% of those in the age group 55 to 64, and nearly 15% of those in the 65 and over age group are murderers. By contrast, robbery and burglary demonstrate a different pattern with respect to age. Robbery offenses are more common among those admitted under the age of 18 than among other age groups (perhaps reflecting the predisposition to send only the most serious offenders under the age of 18 to prison). About 1 of every 3.5 offenders under age 18 has a sentence for robbery, but only about 1 of every 44 admissions in the oldest age group has a conviction for robbery. Similar to robbery, those in the younger age groups are much more likely to be admitted as burglars than those in the older age groups. Rape offenses are most common among those age 35 to 44 years and among those less than age 18. Forgery/fraud/embezzlement and drug offenders are most prevalent among the 45-to-54-year-old prisoners admitted. Larceny reflects no particular distribution with age except that the oldest admissions to prison are the least likely to be admitted with this offense.

**Sentences.** Sentence length is perhaps the most variable characteristic of admissions across reporting jurisdictions. Sentence length is not a clear indicator of how harsh a State might be

Table 6. Age distribution by offense for admissions, 1981

Offense	Number	Less than 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and over	Median (years)
<b>All offenses</b>	<b>108,901<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>1,445</b>	<b>46,565</b>	<b>42,439</b>	<b>12,785</b>	<b>4,154</b>	<b>1,250</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>25</b>
Murder	4,635	61	1,541	1,761	786	320	127	39	28
Manslaughter	3,134	34	917	1,191	571	264	125	32	29
Rape	3,067	60	1,174	1,251	417	128	32	5	26
Robbery	20,655	403	10,236	7,998	1,640	315	57	6	24
Aggravated assault	7,573	71	2,798	3,075	1,076	390	128	35	27
Burglary	29,650	486	16,075	10,244	2,219	501	112	13	23
Larceny	9,810	145	4,195	3,738	1,210	402	106	14	26
Auto theft	1,663	27	933	517	142	29	13	2	23
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	6,362	17	1,889	2,981	978	378	101	18	28
Drugs	8,380	14	2,254	4,097	1,413	477	111	14	29
Public order	4,906	37	1,285	1,923	955	482	185	39	30
Other <sup>2</sup>	9,066	90	3,268	3,663	1,378	468	153	46	29

<sup>1</sup> A total of 121,211 admissions were reported. Of these, 90% or 108,901 cases provided information on age and offense.

<sup>2</sup> Other offenses include other sexual assault, other violent, other property, and other miscellaneous offenses.

in its reaction to criminality. It is a unique formulation based upon the kinds of offenses and offenders deemed worthy of imprisonment, the degree of latitude or discretion inherent in sentencing statutes, and specific assumptions about how good time (time deducted from a sentence to incarceration for good conduct, meritorious achievements, etc.) and parole policies will interact to produce a set period of incarceration. For these reasons, sentence lengths are not comparable over time, across jurisdictions or even within the same jurisdiction over time.

Another important aspect of sentence length relates to the objective or set of objectives inherent in a sentence. The indeterminate sentence, popular during the 1950's to early 1970's, was closely linked to a rehabilitation objective, but over the last 5 years jurisdictions have been moving steadily toward sentences that focus upon increasing the predictability and deterrent value of both the sentence and the ultimate time to be served.

For maximum sentences to State prisons in 1981, the median was estimated to be 53 months (tables 3 and 8). The median sentences for murder/manslaughter (160 months) and rape (112 months) were the longest; the shortest were public order (25 months) and larceny (33 months). Median sentences for other offenses were—

- robbery, 68 months;
- aggravated assault, 48 months;
- burglary, 41 months;
- drugs, 41 months;
- auto theft, 38 months; and
- forgery/fraud/embezzlement, 34 months.

Particularly in the case of auto theft (1.5% of admissions), however, the relatively long sentences (compared to forgery/fraud/embezzlement or larceny) may reflect a very selective

process whereby those entering prison for this offense are mostly recidivists or large-scale auto thieves. This same observation applies to burglary and other property crimes.<sup>3</sup>

The median for maximum sentences in individual States ranged from 30 months to 113 months. Table 5 shows that median sentences in Massachusetts were 113 months compared to California sentences of 32 months for prison admissions. In 1960, National Prisoner Statistics data reveal that States with definite sentences (much like California's current determinate sentencing scheme) had median sentences of 34.5 months (quite similar to California's median of 32 months) and indeterminate sentence States reported medians of 71.3 months. The 1960 report concluded that in general, the length of the definite term was approximately 30% of the indeterminate maximum term (California's determinate sentences are approximately 28% of Massachusetts' indeterminate sentences).<sup>4</sup> This difference in sentencing procedures is critical to understanding variations in sentence lengths across the States.

This observation is also central to examining table 4 on admissions trends, which shows that aggregate median sentences in the United States varied little from 1926 to 1978. However, beginning with the change in Maine in 1976 and California in mid-1977 to more fixed sentencing strategies and away from the indeterminate sentence, median sentence lengths appear to de-

<sup>3</sup>Data from the 1979 Survey of Prison Inmates and from early years of the National Prisoner Statistics confirm this point. In 1926, approximately 55% of the burglars admitted had prior confinements compared to 30% of the homicide offenders and 24% of the rape offenders. In 1979, according to self-report survey data, nearly 70% of those admitted to prison for burglary had prior confinements.

<sup>4</sup>Characteristics of State Prisoners, 1960, p. 19.

Table 7. Percentage of age group confined for selected offenses, admissions, 1981

Offense	Less than 18	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and over
Murder	4.2%	3.3%	4.1%	6.1%	7.7%	10.2%	14.8%
Manslaughter	2.4	2.0	2.8	4.5	6.4	10.0	12.2
Rape	4.2	2.5	2.9	3.3	3.1	2.6	1.9
Robbery	27.9	22.0	18.8	12.8	7.6	4.6	2.3
Aggravated assault	4.9	6.0	7.2	8.4	9.4	10.2	13.3
Burglary	33.6	34.5	24.1	17.4	12.1	9.0	4.9
Larceny	10.0	9.0	8.8	9.5	9.7	8.5	5.3
Auto theft	1.9	2.0	1.2	1.1	0.7	1.0	0.8
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	1.2	4.1	7.0	7.6	9.1	8.1	6.8
Drugs	1.0	4.8	9.7	11.1	11.5	8.9	5.3
Public order	2.6	2.8	4.5	7.5	11.6	14.8	14.8

Note: Columns do not add to 100% because other offenses have been excluded.

Table 8. Median maximum sentences and time served for selected State admissions and first releases<sup>1</sup>, 1981

State	Admission			First releases		
	Median sentence (months)			Median time served (months)		
	Robbery	Burglary	Larceny	Robbery	Burglary	Larceny
U.S. estimate	68	41	33	25	13	11
Alabama	119	32	25	24	9	11
California	38	19	17	24	13	11
Delaware	56	43	24	19	10	11
District of Columbia	82	74	24	53	44	33
Georgia	79	55	29	29	11	8
Hawaii	117	109	55	42	*	*
Kentucky	113	34	15	21	7	5
Louisiana	-	-	-	39	18	13
Massachusetts	113	110	*	19	10	*
Minnesota	49	33	29	-	-	-
Mississippi	107	42	33	20	11	10
Missouri	112	32	30	32	11	10
Montana	120	58	56	26	11	10
Nebraska	51	30	26	23	17	11
Nevada	98	39	35	21	13	12
New Jersey	81	51	48	14	9	9
New Mexico	66	38	20	31	20	22
New York	61	39	33	25	19	18
North Carolina	111	32	20	34	14	9
North Dakota	*	31	27	*	10	9
Pennsylvania	72	51	24	24	16	11
Rhode Island	56	22	20	22	17	*
South Carolina	111	57	57	-	-	-
South Dakota	*	31	29	30	13	15
Tennessee	113	34	29	22	14	11
Texas <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	31	17	12
Utah	142	57	58	27	16	15
West Virginia	120	113	112	38	13	13
Wisconsin	54	31	24	28	19	16
Number of inmates	20,698	29,722	9,851	9,793	14,781	4,855

<sup>1</sup>Data not available for analysis.  
\* Median not computed on fewer than 20 cases.

<sup>2</sup> First release defined in Time Served, p. 6.  
<sup>3</sup> First releases could not be distinguished from all releases.

cline. At the end of 1981, nine States were reported to have passed legislation or administrative guidelines sharply reducing the use of the indeterminate sentence. By then, the majority of the States also had enacted a wide variety of mandatory minimum sentences designed to restrict the use of the indeterminate sentence. Whether the apparent decline in sentence length is a result of changes in sentencing practices or the result of missing data from jurisdictions cannot be determined. It does seem probable, however, that prison sentences imposed in 1981 are not generally longer than those imposed in earlier periods.

A second point that should be made regarding sentencing relates to the probability of entering prison in a given year. Table 4 shows that the rate of prison commitment (the number of prison commitments from courts per 10,000 adult residents in the civilian population) rose sharply between 1978 and 1981 compared to earlier years. The 1981 rate of nearly 9 offenders admitted from courts per 10,000 adult population represents a substantial growth in the fraction of the adult population entering prison (about 41% higher than in 1960). The growth in the commitment rate is not a clear indicator of a change in the probability of

Table 9. Commitment rates from courts, by State—admissions, 1981

State	Court admissions	
	Number	Number per 10,000 adults in population <sup>1</sup>
<b>U.S. total</b>	<b>149,186</b>	<b>8.98</b>
Alabama	4,006	14.45
Alaska	390	13.98
Arizona	2,261	11.34
Arkansas	1,746	10.69
California	13,932	7.83
Colorado	1,458	6.77
Connecticut	1,464	6.28
Delaware	563	12.91
Dist. of Columbia	1,141	23.19
Florida	9,877	12.71
Georgia	6,770	17.23
Hawaii	199	2.83
Idaho	596	9.17
Illinois	6,897	8.34
Indiana	4,095	10.52
Iowa	1,225	5.85
Kansas	1,375	7.91
Kentucky	2,453	9.43
Louisiana	2,732	9.21
Maine	404	4.94
Maryland	4,750	15.22
Massachusetts	1,496	3.46
Michigan	4,189	6.41
Minnesota	830	2.81
Mississippi	2,170	12.56
Missouri	2,880	8.00
Montana	409	7.26
Nebraska	786	6.93
Nevada	956	15.37
New Hampshire	245	3.60
New Jersey	3,467	6.35
New Mexico	388	4.26
New York	9,035	6.94
North Carolina	7,628	17.66
North Dakota	180	3.85
Ohio	8,426	10.86
Oklahoma	2,546	11.39
Oregon	1,582	8.18
Pennsylvania	3,394	3.85
Rhode Island	260	3.63
South Carolina	3,357	15.02
South Dakota	348	7.19
Tennessee	3,814	11.43
Texas	13,858	13.38
Utah	518	5.43
Vermont	283	7.59
Virginia	3,219	8.09
Washington	1,652	5.37
West Virginia	756	5.40
Wisconsin	1,884	5.53
Wyoming	296	8.71

<sup>1</sup>Defined as the number of persons in the civilian resident population aged 18 and over.

confinement given a crime or conviction, but it is evidence that a larger segment of the adult population is experiencing incarceration.

Table 9 shows that commitment rates from courts also varied across States during 1981. Jurisdictions ranged from a high of 23 per 10,000 adults in the District of Columbia to a low of less than 3 per 10,000 in Hawaii and Minnesota.

Given differences in underlying philosophy, sentencing procedures, and probability of being imprisoned, comparison of sentence lengths produces

little in the way of definitive gradients of harshness or leniency across jurisdictions. Sentences reflect an interaction of values, objectives, and crime problems unique to each jurisdiction.

## RELEASES, 1981

### Demography

**Sex** (table 1). As with admissions, the population exiting prisons was principally male (94.5% of admissions and 94.4% of releases). Male disproportionality has been evidenced by the release population since 1926 (when releases were 94% male). The only period since 1926 in which the proportion of males among releases declined occurred, as with admissions, during World War II and shortly thereafter (males were 93% of releases in 1943, 92% in 1944, 91% in 1945, and 91% in 1946). Of the reporting jurisdictions in 1981, Massachusetts reported the highest proportion of female releases (16.1%) and North Dakota the lowest (approximately 0.6%).

**Race** (table 1). Releases in 1981 reflected the same racial mix as admissions that year. Nationally, 55.2% of releases were white, 43.8% were black and 1% were classified as other. From 1926 to 1981, the proportion of releases in each of the three race groups has mirrored the pattern described in the section on admissions.

Of the jurisdictions reporting in 1981, there was considerable variation in the racial composition of those released. Louisiana reported that 64.3% of their releases were black; North Dakota was the only jurisdiction in the Nation that did not release a black offender from prison that year.<sup>5</sup> As with admissions, Hawaii reported the largest fraction of releases classified as other (70.8%). Other jurisdictions with large proportions of releases in the other category were: South Dakota (27.4%), Montana (18.6%), North Dakota (14.4%), Minnesota (8.6%), and Nebraska (4.7%).

**Age.** The median age of prison releases during 1981 was 28 years old (table 1). Historical data on trends in the ages of prison releases are not available.

Among the reporting jurisdictions, Maine (30), California (29), and New Mexico (29) reported the oldest median age for releases; West Virginia reported the youngest (25). As noted in the section on admissions, the California Youth Authority has jurisdiction over many young adult offenders (18 to 24) who, in other States, would typically be

<sup>5</sup>North Dakota reported only two black inmates admitted during 1981.

Table 10. Offense distribution for all releases, releases reporting time served, and first releases, 1981

Offense	All releases		Releases reporting time served		First releases reporting time served <sup>1</sup>	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>Total</b>	<b>85,803</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>69,692</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>55,579</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Murder	2,699	3.1	2,235	3.2	1,644	3.0
Manslaughter	2,620	3.1	2,051	2.9	2,038	3.7
Rape	1,714	2.0	1,405	2.0	1,129	2.0
Robbery	15,245	17.8	11,582	16.6	9,793	17.6
Aggravated assault	6,021	7.0	4,915	7.1	4,393	7.9
Other violent	1,961	2.3	1,589	2.3	1,538	2.8
Burglary	23,944	27.9	19,966	28.6	14,781	26.6
Larceny	8,386	9.8	6,648	9.5	4,855	8.7
Auto theft	1,580	1.8	1,310	1.9	676	1.2
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	5,675	6.6	4,798	6.9	3,739	6.7
Other property	3,786	4.4	2,947	4.2	2,771	5.0
Drugs	7,195	8.4	6,066	8.7	4,768	8.6
Public order	4,086	4.8	3,400	4.9	2,683	4.8
Other	891	1.0	780	1.1	771	1.4

Note: Of 101,943 releases reported, 85,803 cases provided data on most serious offense; 69,692 cases provided data on most serious offense and time served; and 55,579 cases were

reported to be first releases with data on most serious offense and time served.

<sup>1</sup> First release defined in Time Served, p. 6.

imprisoned; this accounts for the older median age of California releases.

Though those under 18 years old accounted for 1.3% of admissions during 1981, offenders less than 18 accounted for only 0.3% of all releases (table 2). Conversely, those aged 65 or older represented about 0.2% of admissions but 3.7% of releases. More than three-fourths of all releases were between 18 and 34 years old.

### Offenses and time served

**Offenses.** Of the 85,803 prison releases for whom the most serious commitment offense was known (101,943 releases were reported by the jurisdictions), 45.7% had been incarcerated for either burglary or robbery (table 10). Overall, just over 35% of those released had been incarcerated for a violent crime (compared to 39% for admissions).

Table 5 shows that jurisdictions differ considerably in the proportion of releases classified as violent. Massachusetts releases tended to have the highest concentration of violent offenders (72%); North Dakota releases were the least likely to have been in prison for a violent offense (14%).

**Time served.** Time served before first release represents the most important component of the entire program in admissions and releases (first releases are defined as those offenders experiencing their first exit from prison on a sentence as opposed to those who may have served prior prison time on the same sentence). That is, data on the actual period of confinement permits comparisons over time and across jurisdictions and for similar groups of offenders that are not possible by

looking only at sentence length.

States were able to provide data on offense and time served for 69,692 offenders or 69% of all those released. Of these, 55,579 (nearly 80%) were reported to be first releases.<sup>6</sup> Table 11 shows that the median time served for first releases was 17 months for all offenses. Approximately two of five first releases (39.4%) served 12 months or less, and 1.1% served more than 10 years.

● First release murderers served a median of 63 months. About two-thirds (67.1%) of the murderers released served 7 years or less. Approximately one of every seven murderers (15.1%) served more than 10 years.

● Manslaughter offenders served a median term of 25 months. About one in five served 12 months or less, two-thirds served 3 years or less, and 1% served more than 10 years.

● Rapists served a median term of 33 months or about a third longer than manslaughter offenders and about half as long as murderers. Approximately 1 of every 28 rapists served more than 10 years, and 7 of 10 served 4 years or less.

<sup>6</sup>The remainder of the section on time served will focus only on first releases, because States could not systematically report prior time served on earlier imprisonments for the same sentence. In addition, available historical data have generally used the first release as the unit of analysis for comparative purposes. In the interests of insuring the equivalence of historical comparisons and minimize the effect of missing data on prior prison time, first releases have been selected for analysis. The amount of time served by all releases would be somewhat higher than the figure reported for first releases.

Table 11. Percentage distribution of time served, in months, by offense: 1981 first release<sup>1</sup>

Offense	Number	Median (months)	Number of months served								
			1-6	7-12	13-24	25-36	37-48	49-60	61-84	85-120	Over 120
<b>All offenses</b>	<b>55,579<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16.4%</b>	<b>23.0%</b>	<b>29.4%</b>	<b>14.2%</b>	<b>6.9%</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>3.5%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>1.1%</b>
Murder	1,644	63	2.3	3.3	7.1	9.2	12.8	12.4	20.0	17.6	15.1
Manslaughter	2,038	25	7.6	13.4	27.0	18.6	11.7	8.6	9.0	3.0	1.0
Rape	1,129	33	6.5	6.8	21.1	21.3	15.5	9.7	9.7	5.7	3.6
Robbery	9,793	25	5.0	11.1	32.0	21.4	12.5	6.8	6.7	3.1	1.2
Aggravated assault	4,393	17	13.2	23.3	32.2	16.3	7.3	3.1	2.8	1.3	0.6
Burglary	14,781	13	17.6	28.7	33.2	11.6	4.4	2.1	1.6	0.4	0.4
Larceny	4,855	11	24.4	33.4	29.7	7.6	2.3	0.9	0.9	0.3	0.5
Auto theft	676	12	17.5	32.2	33.3	10.9	3.3	1.3	0.9	0.3	0.3
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	3,739	11	24.2	31.1	30.7	8.6	2.8	1.4	0.8	0.2	0.3
Drugs	4,768	13	18.0	28.9	31.4	13.3	4.3	2.2	1.4	0.4	0.1
Public order	2,683	10	29.4	28.7	27.1	7.9	3.3	1.6	1.3	0.4	0.3
Other <sup>3</sup>	5,080	14	20.3	27.5	29.5	10.9	4.8	2.4	2.0	1.5	1.0

<sup>1</sup> First release defined in Time Served, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Of 101,943 releases reported, 55,579 were first releases for whom offense and time served data were provided.

<sup>3</sup> Other offenses include other sexual assault, other violent, other property, and other miscellaneous offenses.

● Robbers served approximately the same amount of time in prison as manslaughter offenders (a median of 25 months). Approximately one in six robbers served 12 months or less, nearly 70% served 3 years or less, and about 1 of every 100 served more than 10 years.

● Offenders convicted of aggravated assault served a median prison term of 17 months, the same as the median for all offenders. More than two-thirds served 24 months or less, and 1 of every 167 served more than 10 years.

● The median time served for burglary was 13 months or about half the time served for robbery and manslaughter and 20% of the time served for murder. Nearly four of every five burglars were confined for 2 years or less prior to release, and fewer than 0.5% served more than 10 years.

● Larceny releases had a median time served in prison, prior to first release, of 11 months. Nearly 88% of the larcenists served 2 years or less, and about 1 in 200 served more than 10 years.

● Auto thieves, who constituted 1.2% of first releases, served a median term in prison of 12 months. Four of five (83%) served 2 years or less, and 1 of every 333 served more than 10 years.

● Those first releases convicted of forgery, fraud, or embezzlement served median terms equal to that of larcenists (11 months). The distributions of these two offenses are quite similar, suggesting approximately equal severity in their punishment.

● Drug offenders served a median incarceration equal to that of burglars (13 months). More than three-fourths

of the drug releases served 24 months or less, and about 1 in 1,000 releases served more than 10 years.

Table 12. Release trends for selected years, 1926-81<sup>1</sup>

Year	Percent released by parole board decision <sup>3</sup>	Percent of sentence served	Median time served by first releases <sup>2</sup> (months)					
			All offenses	Robbery	Rape	Aggravated assault	Burglary	Larceny
1926	55%	-%	19	31	24	17	20	17
1927	56	-	19	34	26	17	21	18
1928	57	-	18	-	-	-	-	-
1929	56	33	19	38	26	18	20	18
1930	55	32	19	35	27	17	21	18
1931	59	-	18	34	30	17	20	17
1932	57	-	18	32	30	19	19	16
1933	57	37	17	32	32	17	17	16
1934	57	36	17	35	28	16	18	14
1935	55	37	17	39	30	17	19	14
1936	55	38	17	40	27	19	20	14
1937	50	41	20	43	27	19	21	15
1938	49	40	21	46	28	18	22	15
1939	47	41	21	49	28	19	22	16
1940	42	41	21	47	31	19	21	15
1944	55	42	30	52	37	26	30	21
1945	55	41	30	55	38	25	30	21
1946	56	36	25	47	36	20	26	18
1951	56	-	21	-	-	-	-	-
1954	55	-	21	-	-	-	-	-
1957	55	-	21	-	-	-	-	-
1960	59	35	21	34	30	20	20	17
1967	62	-	19	31	34	15	17	13
1968	-	-	18	31	32	15	16	13
1969	-	-	18	31	33	15	16	13
1970	-	-	18	30	35	18	16	13
1974	68	31	18	27	32	16	16	14
1975	68	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1976	69	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1977	72	33	18	25	32	19	15	13
1978	70	31	18	25	34	20	15	13
1979	60	37	19	-	-	-	-	-
1980	57	40	19	-	-	-	-	-
1981	55	36	17	25	33	17	13	11

- Data not available or could not be utilized.

<sup>1</sup> Data for 1967 to 1974 obtained from unpublished data about entering parolees gathered under the Uniform Parole Reports Program. Data for 1975 to 1980 obtained from unpublished National Prisoner Statistics information. Data for all other

● Public-order offenders (such as gamblers, weapons violators, etc.) served a median term of 10 months in prison, the shortest of all the offense groups. One of every 3.4 offenders served 6 months or less, and more than 85% served 2 years or less.

Table 5 indicates the median time served for all first releases for reporting jurisdictions and the percentage of releases classified as violent. Generally, the shortest median terms (10 months each) were found for Alabama, Kentucky, and North Dakota. By contrast, the longest median terms were served by prisoners released from the District of Columbia (40 months), Hawaii (33 months), New Mexico (24 months), and Massachusetts and New York (22 months each).

Time served for specific offenses is described in table 8, which shows that for robbery the range was from 14 to 53 months; burglary, 7 to 44 months; and larceny, 5 to 33 months. The seemingly wide ranges for similar offenses may be

years obtained from published National Prisoner Statistics reports.  
<sup>2</sup> First release defined in Time Served, p. 6.  
<sup>3</sup> The percentage of conditional and unconditional releases exiting prison by a discretionary parole board decision (obtained from National Prisoner Statistics).

accounted for, in part, by differences in the offender composition—jurisdictions with higher proportions of recidivists among their releases would presumably require more time to be served.

Table 12 shows the median time served, for selected years, for first releases between 1926 and 1981. Generally (excluding the years during World War II when the number of offenders declined and sentences and time served increased), median prison terms for all offenses have ranged between 17 and 21 months. The years between 1933 and 1936 reflected the same median time served for all offenses as in 1981.

By offense, time served for robbery is about 6 months shorter in 1981 than in 1926 and about 9 months shorter than in 1960. By contrast, the median prison stay for rape in 1981 was about 9 months longer than in 1926 and 3 months longer than in 1960. Time served for aggravated assault, which had a median of 17 months in 1981, was also 17 months in 1926 and 20 months in 1960. Time served for burglary in 1981, however, was about 7 months less than the 20-month medians reported in 1926 and 1960. Larceny showed median terms of 17 months in 1926 and 1960 and 11 months in 1981.

Table 13 indicates, for selected States, changes in median time served over the 30 years between 1951 and 1981. Some jurisdictions may show rather striking changes from earlier years, perhaps reflecting changes in sentencing and release policies as well as the effects of court orders relating to prison crowding.

Another facet of the time-served discussion is illustrated in tables 3 and 5. The percentage of the maximum sentence served shows how sentence length and time served relate to one another. Overall, offenders released in 1981 served about 36% of their maximum sentences (table 3). The fraction of a sentence served varies by offense, with robbers and rapists serving the highest proportion (44% and 42%, respectively) and murder/manslaughter offenders and auto thieves the lowest (31% and 30%, respectively).

Table 5 shows that two determinate sentencing states, Maine and California, had the highest proportion of maximum sentence served (61% and 59%, respectively), while Massachusetts and Ohio had the lowest (12% and 14%, respectively). Over the years for which

<sup>7</sup>In Georgia, more than 2,800 offenders had their sentences commuted and were released early because of a court order relating to prison overcrowding.

Table 13. Trends in median time served (months) for selected years and for selected States<sup>1</sup>

State	1951	1954	1957	1960	1981
U.S. total	21	21	21	21	17
Alabama	19	18	18	17	10
California	30	28	27	27	18
Delaware	10	15	12	15	11
Dist. of Columbia	25	27	31	34	40
Georgia	22	20	19	22	12
Hawaii	-	-	-	32	33
Iowa	24	24	24	24	18
Kentucky	18	18	18	19	10
Louisiana	17	20	18	19	21
Maine	10	11	10	11	21
Massachusetts	30	29	18	17	22
Mississippi	22	30	24	23	12
Missouri	16	16	16	17	15
Montana	12	15	10	11	11
Nebraska	18	17	18	17	15
Nevada	16	17	18	17	15
New Hampshire	16	16	16	12	11
New Jersey	20	19	19	-	11
New Mexico	12	11	18	23	24
New York	31	27	30	29	22
North Carolina	28	25	17	17	14
North Dakota	12	13	16	15	10
Ohio	24	25	24	23	16
Pennsylvania	31	36	30	31	18
Rhode Island	19	21	23	22	18
South Dakota	12	10	10	11	14
Tennessee	24	24	24	20	18
Texas	16	16	20	20	17
Utah	21	29	27	24	18
West Virginia	34	36	28	27	16
Wisconsin	16	15	14	15	20

- Data not available or could not be utilized.

<sup>1</sup>Data for 1951 to 1960 obtained from Characteristics of State Prisoners, 1960, published by the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

data are available, the percentage of maximum sentence served has generally ranged between 31% and 42% (table 12).

In table 12, it is interesting to note that the rate of parole use (percentage of conditional and unconditional releases exiting prison by a parole board decision) retreated to its historical levels of 55% to 57% of releases during 1980 and 1981 compared to 72% in 1977. Accompanying the decline in parole use was an increase in the percentage of sentence served but relative stability in the median time served. This suggests that the movement toward more fixed sentences has had substantial impact on the use of parole and some impact on the length of sentences, while time served has remained fairly constant.

The effects of these changes have probably been greatest on the probability of entering prison. Table 4 shows that the court commitment rate increased consistently (from 7.2 per 10,000 adults to 9 per 10,000 adults) between 1978 and 1981. By 1981, it appears that the chance of entering prison was increasing, the sentence imposed was slightly shorter (as a result of fixed and mandatory sentences), the

Table 14. Persons admitted under a life sentence,<sup>1</sup> by offense, 1981

Offense	Number	Percent
All offenses	1,996	100.0%
Murder	1,263	63.3
Manslaughter	8	0.4
Rape	102	5.1
Other sex assault	23	1.2
Robbery	189	9.5
Assault	13	0.7
Other violent	61	3.1
Burglary	20	1.0
Forgery, fraud, embezzlement	1	*
Larceny	4	0.2
Other property	2	0.1
Drugs	288	14.4
Public order	19	1.0
Other	3	0.2

<sup>1</sup>California excluded because of inability to identify life sentence codes from available data.

\* Less than 0.1%.

probability of exiting prison by a parole board decision was decreasing, and actual time served changed little compared to previous years.

Life sentences (tables 14 and 15). Sentences to life imprisonment are interesting to examine because they are generally the most severe sanction available (death sentences are rarely imposed and highly likely to be modified to a life sentence).<sup>8</sup> In 1981, jurisdictions (excluding California) reported that 1,996 offenders were admitted with a life sentence and 1,165 were released from prison after having served time on a life sentence. Of the 1,165 releases, 844 were first releases (time served data was available for 840 of these).

Table 14 shows that most life sentence admissions were for murder (63.3%); however, a significant proportion were imposed for drug offenses (14.4%). Overall, more than 92% of those admitted with life sentences were convicted of murder, rape, robbery, or drug offenses.

Table 15 indicates that the median term served by first releases with a life sentence was 51 months or about 4.25 years. Although this appears surprising, given the offense composition of those with life sentences and the time typically served by similar offenders without a life sentence, it is not wholly unexpected. Table 11 shows that the median time served for murder is 63 months, for rape 33 months, for robbery 25 months, and for drug offenses 13 months. Given the estimated offense composition of released prisoners

<sup>8</sup>Capital Punishment, 1981 shows that 65% of releases from death row in that year resulted from resentencing or commutation and 1% resulted from executions.

Table 15. Distribution of time served for first releases with life sentences

Number	Time served (months)									
	12 or less	13-24	25-36	37-48	49-60	61-84	85-108	109-120	Over 120	Median
840	57	103	171	72	67	94	89	32	155	51*
Cumulative percent	6.8%	19.1	39.4	48.0	56.0	67.1	77.7	81.5	100.0%	-

\*Assuming that those released from prison with a life sentence reflect roughly the same composition as those admitted with life sentences (see table 14), a median time served can be predicted that is quite close to 51 months. That is, more than 92% of those entering prison with a life sentence were sentenced for murder, rape, robbery, or drug offenses. The 840 releases are estimated to distribute approximately as follows:

Murder	576	=	36,288
Rape	46	=	1,518
Robbery	87	=	2,175
Drugs	131	=	1,703
		=	41,684 / 840
		=	50 months

This suggests that time served on a life sentence closely approximates the time served on a typical sentence of years or months for the same offense.

serving life sentences, the estimated median length of stay would be 50 months. Table 11 also shows that two-thirds of those convicted for murder stayed in prison 7 years or less; table 15 indicates that two-thirds of those with life sentences served a prison term of 7 years or less.

These data suggest that there is probably, in reality, little difference between a sentence to life imprisonment and a maximum sentence of years or months. Generally, it can be expected that the time served will be approximately the same, depending upon the offense.

#### Limitations of the data

States vary enormously in their ability to provide detailed information on prisoner movements. This is partly because the mechanisms by which offenders enter and depart prison, as well as their eligibility to be imprisoned, differ among States. Seven jurisdictions operate combined jail and prison systems.<sup>9</sup> A number of States do not distinguish those physically held in their custody from those who are subject to their jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup> In addition, States differ on the minimum sentence length for which prison may be imposed. In most States, jails, houses of correction, or other locally operated facilities are principally used when sentences are less than 12 months. Finally, laws and administrative procedures are in constant flux, resulting in year-to-year as well as jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction differences in the offense mix of entering prisoners and the manner in which time

<sup>9</sup>The seven jurisdictions are Connecticut, Rhode Island, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Vermont, Alaska, and Hawaii.

<sup>10</sup>States may include or exclude from their data those prisoners held in other States, local jails, or Federal institutions.

served on a particular sentence is determined.

All States and the District of Columbia were asked to provide detailed information on each prisoner received and released during 1981 with a maximum sentence exceeding 1 year. Aggregate information received indicated that there were approximately 183,000 admissions from courts or admissions of conditional release violators from the 51 jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> These jurisdictions also reported more than 142,000 conditional and unconditional releases during 1981.<sup>12</sup> Offender-specific information on admissions was submitted by 33 jurisdictions covering 121,211 admissions or about two-thirds of the estimated admissions nationally. For releases, 33 jurisdictions reported offender-specific information on 101,943 offenders or about 72% of the estimated releases nationally.

In the interest of as much uniformity as possible, only those admissions and releases with sentences greater than 12 months were analyzed. In addition, only those releases originally received as new commitments from courts and experiencing their first prison release on a sentence (referred to as first releases) were analyzed to derive time served data. Finally, each State's offense listing was recoded into 83 uniform categories using, to the maximum extent possible, Federal Bureau of Investigation offense coding procedures for the Uniform Crime Re-

<sup>11</sup>There were 149,186 admissions from courts and 33,965 admissions of conditional release violators (table 12, Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1981).

<sup>12</sup>There were 117,984 conditional releases and 24,505 unconditional releases (table 12, Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1981).

ports. As a result, those offenses involving an attempt or a conspiracy to commit are categorized as completed offenses (for example, attempted robbery was coded as robbery).

Because of the need to present national data uniformly, the uniqueness of each State's sentencing and releasing processes may be obscured. This may affect the interpretation of a particular State's data. It is impossible to know, as well, how missing jurisdictions and missing cases within reporting jurisdictions might have affected the analyses conducted. For these reasons, readers should exercise extreme caution in comparing States and in using the national estimates. The data do not represent a scientifically derived sample. However, the large number of offenders for whom substantial data are available make this study an important resource for improving understanding of sanctioning.

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