The number of persons sentenced to State and Federal correctional institutions has been recorded annually since 1925. It is therefore possible to view the rapid growth of prison population over the past 9 years against the background provided by nearly 50 years of earlier data. In general, the trend in prison population over the entire period has been one of upward growth, about half of which reflects the growth in the general population during that time (table 1 and figure 1).

The average annual growth rate for the prison population during 1925-81 was 2.4 percent; for the residential population of the United States it was 1.2 percent. The more rapid growth of the prison population is also reflected in the incarceration rate (the number of sentenced prisoners for each 100,000 residents in the United States), which rose from 79 per 100,000 to 153 per 100,000 (figure 2).

Although the long-range trend in prison population has been upward, it has not been without interruptions, the two longest and deep occurring during World War II and the Vietnam era. Between 1925 and 1939 the number of sentenced prisoners grew by 88,000, an average annual rate of 5 percent, substantially higher than for the entire 1925-81 period even though there was virtually no growth during the depth of the depression, 1932-34. By 1939 the incarceration rate had reached 137 per 100,000, a level it was not to reach again for 41 years.

Between 1935 and 1939 the number of sentenced prisoners grew by 46,000, an average annual rate of 5 percent, substantially higher than for the entire 1925-81 period even though there was virtually no growth during the depth of the depression, 1932-34. By 1939 the incarceration rate had reached 137 per 100,000, a level it was not to reach again for 41 years.

During World War II, the prison population declined by nearly 50,000 in 5 years as most of the pool of potential offenders was drafted. By 1946 the incarceration rate had dropped to 99 per 100,000. From 1944 to 1961 the prison population increased in every year but one, although the annual gains were uneven, and in 1961 the incarceration rate peaked at 119 per 100,000.

During the Vietnam era, the prison population declined by 30,000 between 1961 and 1968. The 1968 prison population was 188,000 and the incarceration rate the lowest since the late 1920's. From this low the prison population and the incarceration rate grew rather slowly for 5 years, but in 1974 began a dramatic rise that added nearly 150,000 sentenced inmates to the national prison population in 8 years. The average annual increase during this period was 7.1 percent compared to 2.4 percent for the entire 1925-81 period. At the end of 1981 the incarceration rate was 153 per 100,000, the highest ever recorded. The first 9 months of 1982 further accelerated this trend, bringing the incarceration rate to 169 on September 30.

This bulletin presents the reader with 57 years of data on prison populations from the statistical series, "Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions." Along with the series, we have included a discussion of the trends and of the development and expansion of the series. With our continuing publication of end-of-year midyear data on prison populations, there has been new interest in the statistical series from which these data are derived. We intend the historical series to be especially useful to those engaged in analyzing recent trends.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director
Statistics released from prison. This discussion has depended entirely on the beginning in 1953); and, for selected years admission and release); the number of annual basis.

began to collected statistics on prisoners on 1890. In the years 1904, 1910, and 1923 prison population were made. Then in 1929 the Bureau has served as the data collection agent [or the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Information and Statistics Service (now the Bureau of

1 The annual rate is the number of prisoners per 100,000 population.

2 Data for 1925 through 1939 include sentenced and unsentenced prisoners. In 1940 the definition of sentenced prisoner was changed to include only those convicted for felonies. Data for 1940 through 1960 include all adult felons serving sentence in State and Federal correctional institutions.

3 The FBI program was begun by the Census Bureau. National Prisoner Statistics program consists of a count of Prime in 1960 and is based on the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service. National Prisoner Statistics Program serves as the data collection agent for the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

4 The National, Prisoner Statistics program has attempted to count persons imprisoned for serious crimes. The original definition included all persons sentenced for murder, rape, and robbery—always do, but so do some misdemeanants. Nevertheless, the series was redefined as adult felons serving time in State or Federal correctional facilities, with a felon presumed to be someone serving a sentence of more than a year. This did eliminate misdemeanants serving terms of less than a year, thereby focused the series more sharply on the serious offender.

In 1974, to further restrict the series, the term "Felons" was deleted and the States were asked to report only on prisoners with maximum sentences of more than a year. This not only eliminated misdemeanants from the count, but also all ages are above 18. The age is 18. They are frequently assigned to separate sections of adult correctional facilities or to completely separate facilities. Persons in this age group, however, are counted as adults, although just as they are in States without youth correctional systems. Nevertheless, the series was redefined as "unsentenced," the prison population data presented here is almost always due to overcrowding in the physical and fiscal pressures the prison population "cuts into" the States' corrections.
inmates in hospitals (including mental hospitals) outside the correctional system; inmates on work release or furlough, and Federal prisoners housed in private contract sites. Since the definition was changed in 1977, separate statistics on custody populations have continued to be collected yearly and published in a separate table in the annual report.

Race and ethnicity

Beginning in 1978 prison population statistics were collected by race and ethnicity (Table 3). The statistics by race have been reliably reported by all of the States; in 1981 race was not known for less than 2 percent of the inmate population. Ethnicity was more difficult to report. In 1981, eight States could not identify any of their Hispanic inmates and the ethnicity of 20 percent of all inmates could not be determined.

Each of the States is given the opportunity to revise its yearend prison population statistics one year later. Most States make such revisions, so that final statistics for a given year are not available until the preliminary statistics for the subsequent year are published. Yearend population statistics are revised by sentence length, sex, jurisdiction, and custody; they are not revised by race or ethnicity.

This discussion of historical prison population statistics has focused almost exclusively at the National level. It has not dealt with the changes and irregularities that occurred within the 1925-81 statistics for the individual States. These are documented and can be obtained along with the statistical series for each State from the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Further reading

To obtain other National Prisoner Statistics reports or to be added to the bulletin and/or corrections mailing lists, write to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, (301/251-5500), User Services Dept. 2, Box 6000, Rockville, Md.

U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Table 3. Total prison population by race and sex, 1978-81

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total White</th>
<th>Total Black</th>
<th>Total Other</th>
<th>Total Male White</th>
<th>Total Male Black</th>
<th>Total Male Other</th>
<th>Total Female White</th>
<th>Total Female Black</th>
<th>Total Female Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>137,208</td>
<td>142,710</td>
<td>3,283</td>
<td>151,534</td>
<td>136,893</td>
<td>3,090</td>
<td>5,674</td>
<td>6,483</td>
<td>2,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>163,083</td>
<td>143,700</td>
<td>3,677</td>
<td>164,251</td>
<td>143,810</td>
<td>3,077</td>
<td>6,103</td>
<td>6,134</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1The systems in this table add to totals different from those shown in Table 1 because preliminary statistics on race are not subsequently revised.

2American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders.

3For a more detailed discussion of custody and jurisdiction, see Appendix B, Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1978.