Inmates of State prisons are predominantly poor young adult males with less than a high school education. Prison is not a new experience for them; they have been incarcerated before, many first as juveniles. The offense that brought them to prison was a violent crime or a burglary. On the average, they have already served 1 1/2 years on a maximum sentence of 8 1/2 years. Along with a criminal history, they have a history of drug abuse and are also likely to have a history of alcohol abuse. They are typically housed in a maximum or medium security prison where they are likely to be sharing their living space with at least one other person.

1979 prison census and inmate survey

This sketch of State prison inmates is drawn from information collected during a census of each of the 51 correctional facilities operated by the 50 States and the District of Columbia and a sample survey conducted by a personal interview with more than 13,000 State prison inmates across the country. The Census of State Correctional Facilities and the Survey of Inmates were both conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in late 1979. These studies, in general, conform the findings of similar studies conducted 6 years earlier, while at the same time identifying certain changes in the characteristics of prison populations which have taken place in the intervening years.

The basic consistency in the findings for 1974 and 1979 suggest that these data represent a reasonably accurate portrayal of State prisoners in 1983. The picture of confinement and crowding is a less accurate portrayal of the situation in early 1982. State prison populations have risen 18% since the 1979 study was conducted without a commensurate increase in prison space. Consequently, space shortages in State prisons are considerably more acute than the 1979 data indicate.

Prisoner characteristics not typical of general population

The racial composition of State prison populations in 1979 had not changed significantly from that recorded 5 years earlier. Blacks, who made up 52% of the total U.S. population, accounted for 48% of the prison population; whites accounted for 16%; other racial groups, 1%. The number of Hispanic prisoners, however, doubled during the 5 years and in 1979 they represented 9% of all State prisoners. The rate of growth for females was substantially higher than for males, yet females represented only 6% of the prisoners, about the same as in 1974.

The largest group of the inmates, young people from 18 to 29 years of age, accounted for 63% of the population. Less than 1% of the inmates were under 18; only 6% were over 50. In 1979 as in 1974, the median age of inmates was 27.

Education and income low

The 1979 inmates were somewhat better educated than their 1974 counterparts, but nearly 3 out of every 5 had not completed high school. As a group, they averaged 1 1/2 years of schooling. The lack of a high school diploma undoubtedly contributed to their employment problems and low income during the year prior to the arrest that led to incarceration. Only 6% had been working full time. Among the 30% who had no jobs, full- or part-time, half were not looking for work. Among inmates admitted to prison after November 1977, one-fifth had no income in the 12 months prior to arrest and another fifth had earned less

To permit maximum use of these data, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has placed publicly-useable data tapes in the criminal justice data archive of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. For information on securing machine-readable data files, call the archive staff at 313/763-4515.

Benjamin H. Rosenau III
Acting Director

January 1982
In 1979, 57% of the State prisoners had been convicted of violent crimes compared with 51% of those sentenced in 1974. Among the violent offenders, 30% had committed murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter, and 14% and 45%, robbery, burglary, or theft, respectively. A third of all inmates were convicted of property crimes; more than half of these were burglars. The median annual income reported for sentence length was $10,972, compared with $6,660 5 years earlier. Ten percent of prisoners were serving life sentences.

More than half of the State inmates were under 30 years of age, the median age of inmates in 1974. Ten percent of the 1979 inmates were serving sentences of 10 years or more. Only 1 in 4 prisoners had served time previously. Of those with prior incarceration, half began that record while still legally juveniles, and 4 in 10 over the age of 18. Incarceration or holding for trial is a complex phenomenon. The proportion of inmates who were in jail at any time in 1979 is not known. The statistics may be underestimated, as many inmates who served time in jail were also in prison, and vice versa. Five 18-year olds said they did not desire to be in jail. About half of all inmates had been rearrested after their release, most of them, just prior to a second arrest, or in the time immediately before. The most common conditionality was 27% under medium security, 17% under maximum security, and 5% other either categorized or categorized as an intermediate standard. The largest group (70%) was in New York, where the median annual income reported for sentence length was $10,972, compared with $6,660 5 years earlier. Ten percent of prisoners were serving life sentences.

Inmates from all community-based facilities held under maximum security conditions, and 27% under medium security, and 23% under minimum security, and 2% other either categorized or categorized as an intermediate standard. The largest group (70%) was in New York, where the median annual income reported for sentence length was $10,972, compared with $6,660 5 years earlier. Ten percent of prisoners were serving life sentences.
in each State was the one-person cell. Overcrowding occurs in these units when the cell contains less than 60 square feet or more than one person. Two States, Arkansas and South Dakota, had no overcrowded one-person cells, but at least 97% of the one-person cells were overcrowded in Mississippi, North Dakota, Texas, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Slightly more than 97,000 persons were employed in State correctional facilities in 1979; more than 97% of them were employed full time. The total number of correctional personnel increased by some 5.5% during 1974-79, with a resultant decline from 3.2 to 2.9 in the number of inmates per full-time staff member. Among traditional confinement units, there were 58,700 full-time employees with direct responsibility for inmate supervision. On the average, each of these employees was responsible for 1.5 inmates, but the number ranged from 1.1 in Rhode Island to 3.1 in Texas.

Further reading
The first release of data from the November 1979 Survey of Inmates of State Correctional Facilities and its companion Census of State Correctional Facilities was the Veterans in Prison bulletin, October 1981, NCJ-79232. The most recent prison population data was released in the Prisoners at Midyear 1981 bulletin, September 1981, NCJ-78756.