



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin

# State and Federal Prisoners, 1925-85

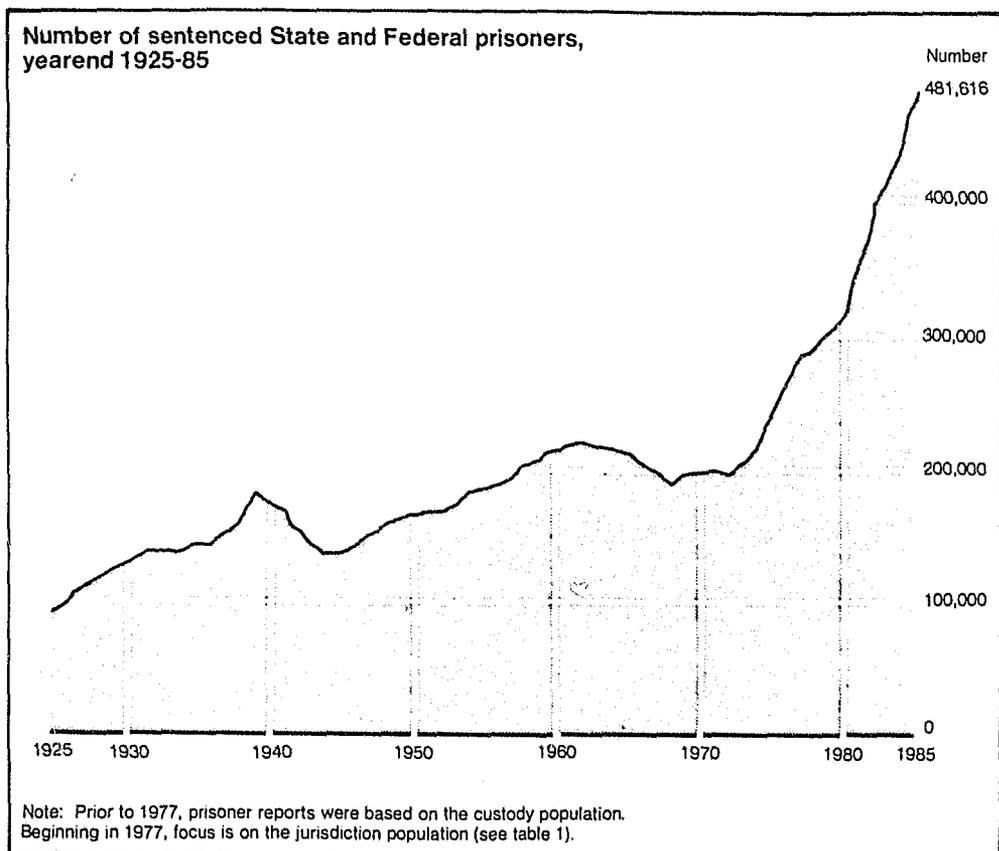
The number of persons sentenced to State and Federal correctional institutions has been recorded annually since January 1, 1926 (reported here as yearend 1925). The rapid growth of prison population over the past 12 years thus can be viewed against nearly 50 years of prior data. In general the trend 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 the same period (table 1 and figure 1).

The average annual growth rate for the prison population during 1925-85 was 2.8%; for the residential population of the United States it was 1.2%. 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 201 per 100,000 (figure 2).

prison population has been upward, it has not been without interruptions, the two longest and deepest drops 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 4.9%, substantially higher than for the entire 1925-85 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.

Although the long-range trend in



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This bulletin presents 60 years of data on prison populations from the statistical series "Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions." Along with the data, we have included a discussion of trends and of the development and expansion of the statistical series. With our continuing publication of end-of-year and midyear data on prison populations, there has been new interest in the statistical series from which these data are derived. The historical series should be especially useful to those engaged in analyzing recent trends. Within the next month, the Bureau will publish, by State, the complete time series upon which this summary report is based.

Steven R. Schlesinger  
Director

Figure 1

**Table 1. Sentenced prisoners in State and Federal institutions: Number and incarceration rates, 1925-85**

Year	Total	Rate	Males	Rate	Females	Rate	Year	Total	Rate	Males	Rate	Females	Rate
1925 <sup>a</sup>	91,669	79	88,231	149	3,438	6	1960	212,953	117	205,265	230	7,688	8
1926	97,991	83	94,287	157	3,704	6	1961	220,149	119	212,268	234	7,881	8
1927	109,346	91	104,983	173	4,363	7	1962	218,830	117	210,823	229	8,007	8
1928	116,390	96	111,836	182	4,554	8	1963	217,283	114	209,538	225	7,745	8
1929	120,496	98	115,876	187	4,620	8	1964	214,336	111	206,632	219	7,704	8
1930	129,453	104	124,785	200	4,668	8	1965	210,895	108	203,327	213	7,568	8
1931	137,082	110	132,638	211	4,444	7	1966	199,654	102	192,703	201	6,951	7
1932	137,997	110	133,573	211	4,424	7	1967	194,896	98	188,661	195	6,235	6
1933	123,810	109	132,520	209	4,290	7	1968	187,274	94	182,102	187	5,812	6
1934	138,316	109	133,769	209	4,547	7	1969	197,136	97	189,413	192	6,594	6
1935	144,180	113	139,278	217	4,902	8	1970	196,441	96	190,794	191	5,635	5
1936	145,038	113	139,990	217	5,048	8	1971 <sup>c</sup>	198,061	95	191,732	189	6,329	6
1937	152,741	118	147,375	227	5,366	8	1972	196,092	93	189,823	185	6,269	6
1938	160,285	123	154,826	236	5,459	8	1973	204,211	96	197,523	191	6,004	6
1939	179,818	137	173,143	263	6,675	10	1974	218,466	102	211,077	202	7,389	7
1940 <sup>b</sup>	173,706	131	167,345	252	6,361	10	1975	240,593	111	231,918	220	8,675	8
1941	165,439	124	159,228	239	6,211	9	1976	262,833	120	252,794	238	10,039	9
1942	150,384	112	144,167	217	6,217	9	1977 <sup>d</sup>	278,141	126	267,097	249	11,044	10
1943	137,220	103	131,054	202	6,166	9	1977	285,456	129	274,244	255	11,212	10
1944	132,456	100	126,350	200	6,106	9	1978	294,396	132	282,813	261	11,583	10
1945	133,649	98	127,609	193	6,040	9	1979	301,470	133	289,465	264	12,005	10
1946	140,079	99	134,075	191	6,004	8	1980	315,974	138	303,643	274	12,331	11
1947	151,304	105	144,961	202	6,343	9	1981	353,673	153	339,375	303	14,298	12
1948	155,977	106	149,739	205	6,238	8	1982	395,516	170	379,075	335	16,441	14
1949	163,749	109	157,663	211	6,086	8	1983	419,346	178	401,870	352	17,476	14
1950	166,165	109	160,309	211	5,814	8	1984	446,108	188	426,713	370	19,395	16
1951	165,680	107	159,610	208	6,070	8	1985	481,616	201	460,210	394	21,406	17
1952	168,233	107	161,894	208	6,239	8							
1953	173,579	108	166,909	211	6,670	8							
1954	182,901	112	175,907	218	6,994	8							
1955	185,780	112	178,655	217	7,125	8							
1956	189,565	112	182,190	218	7,375	9							
1957	195,256	113	188,113	221	7,301	8							
1958	205,643	117	198,208	229	7,435	8							
1959	208,105	117	200,469	228	7,636	8							

Note: The incarceration rate is the number of prisoners per 100,000 residential population. The figures for males and females in 1950, 1957, 1968-1971, and 1973 do not add to the total population figures shown because the yearend counts were revised in a subsequent report while the male/female breakdown was not.

<sup>a</sup>Data for 1925 through 1939 include

sentenced prisoners in State and Federal prisons and reformatories whether committed for felonies or misdemeanors.

<sup>b</sup>Data for 1940 through 1970 include all adult felons serving sentences in State and Federal institutions.

<sup>c</sup>Data for 1971 to present include all adults and youthful offenders sentenced to State or Federal correctional institutions whose

maximum sentence was over a year.

<sup>d</sup>Before 1977 only prisoners in the custody of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. After 1977 all prisoners under the jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. Figures for both custody and jurisdiction are shown for 1977 to facilitate comparisons.

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 1951, although the annual gains were uneven, and in 1961 the incarceration rate peaked at 119 per 100,000.

During the first part of the Vietnam era (1961 to 1968) the prison population declined by 30,000. The 1968 prison population was 188,000, and the incarceration rate was 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 more than 275,000 sentenced inmates to the national prison population by 1985. The average annual increase during this period was 7.4%, compared to 2.8% for the entire 1925-85 period. At the end

of 1985 the incarceration rate was 201 per 100,000, the highest ever recorded.

**Historical data**

The first attempt to count all of the prisoners in the United States was made in the decennial population census of 1850. Counts of prisoners were included in each subsequent decennial census through 1890. In the years 1904, 1910, and 1923 separate enumerations of the prison population were made. In 1926, under a mandate from Congress, the National Prisoner Statistics program began to collect statistics on prisoners on an annual basis.<sup>1</sup> Since its inception the program has depended entirely on the voluntary participation of State departments of corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

<sup>1</sup>The NPS program was begun by the Census Bureau. It was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons in 1950 and to the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service (now the Bureau of Justice Statistics) of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in 1971. Since that time the Census Bureau has served as the data collection agent for the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The complete National Prisoner Statistics program consists of a count of the number of State and Federal prisoners on December 31 of each year; a count of the number of persons admitted to and released from prison each year (by type of admission and release); the number of persons executed annually (beginning in 1930); the yearend population of death row (beginning in 1953); and, for selected years prior to 1981 and annually thereafter, the characteristics of persons admitted to and released from prison. This discussion focuses entirely on the statistics for the yearend prison population.

The difficulty in collecting prison statistics, or indeed most criminal justice statistics for the United States as a whole, arises not only from different record-keeping and statistics-gathering practices in each State but also, more important, from the different criminal justice practices in each State. Therefore, since the beginning of the prison population series, special attention has been directed at

making the population counts for the individual States as comparable as possible, given the range of sentencing laws and practices among the States. Nevertheless, each annual report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics contains an appendix specifying the ways in which data reported for each State deviate from the standard definitions. In recent years these deviations generally have been minor. In the earlier years of the series this was not always the case. Early publications often warned the reader to use caution in making direct comparisons between the statistics for one State and another.

### Definitional changes

From the beginning the National Prisoner Statistics program has attempted to count persons imprisoned for serious crimes. The original definition included adult prisoners sentenced to and confined in State and Federal prisons and reformatories. Consequently the data included persons convicted for misdemeanors as well as those convicted for felonies. There was not at that time, and there still is not, a standard definition of "felony" and "misdemeanor" that is applicable in all States. In general felonies are more serious crimes than misdemeanors. For example, all major crimes—such as murder, rape, and robbery—are always felonies. All minor crimes still serious enough to have incarceration as a possible sentence—such as drunkenness, loitering and disturbing the peace—are misdemeanors. It is for the crimes that fall between that the distinction is often blurred. Because the aim of the sentenced prisoner series was to collect data on serious offenders in State and Federal facilities, the series excluded inmates in city and county jails (who

**Table 2. Prisoners in State and Federal institutions: Total and prisoners with short sentences or no sentences, 1974-85**

	Total prisoners	Short-sentence and unsentenced prisoners <sup>a</sup>		
		Total	Male	Female
1974	228,721	11,516	10,749	767
1975	253,816	11,066	10,249	817
1976	278,000	15,167	14,036	1,131
1977 <sup>b</sup>	291,667	13,526	12,529	997
1977	300,024	14,568	13,501	1,067
1978	307,276	12,880	11,717	1,163
1979	314,457	12,987	11,997	990
1980	329,821	13,847	12,758	1,089
1981	369,930	16,257	15,018	1,239
1982	413,806	18,290	16,946	1,344
1983	436,855	17,509	15,965	1,544
1984	464,567	18,459	17,004	1,455
1985	503,601	21,985	20,300	1,685

<sup>a</sup>Prisoners with short sentences are defined as those whose maximum sentence is a year or less.

<sup>b</sup>Before 1977 only prisoners in the custody of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. After 1977 all prisoners under the jurisdiction of State and Federal correctional systems were counted. Figures for both custody and jurisdiction are shown for 1977 to facilitate comparisons.

are mostly sentenced misdemeanors or persons awaiting trial) and inmates in locally operated prisons or houses of corrections. Nevertheless, some misdemeanors were included in the series, especially in the few States that operated combined jail-prison systems.

States differ substantially in the distinctions they make between State-sentenced and locally sentenced prisoners. North Carolina, for example, imposes "State time" for those offenders with sentences greater than 90 days; Louisiana, by contrast, sentences offenders locally to parish prisons with sentences up to life terms. Massachusetts generally sentences males with sentences of 2 years or more to State prisons while sentenced females

with shorter terms are sent to State facilities. These differences in State versus local sentencing have been operationally split into two data collection series—one focusing on State and Federal populations and the other focusing upon local populations. The prisoners count focuses exclusively on State and Federal populations. Locally sentenced prisoners are counted in BJS reports on local jails.

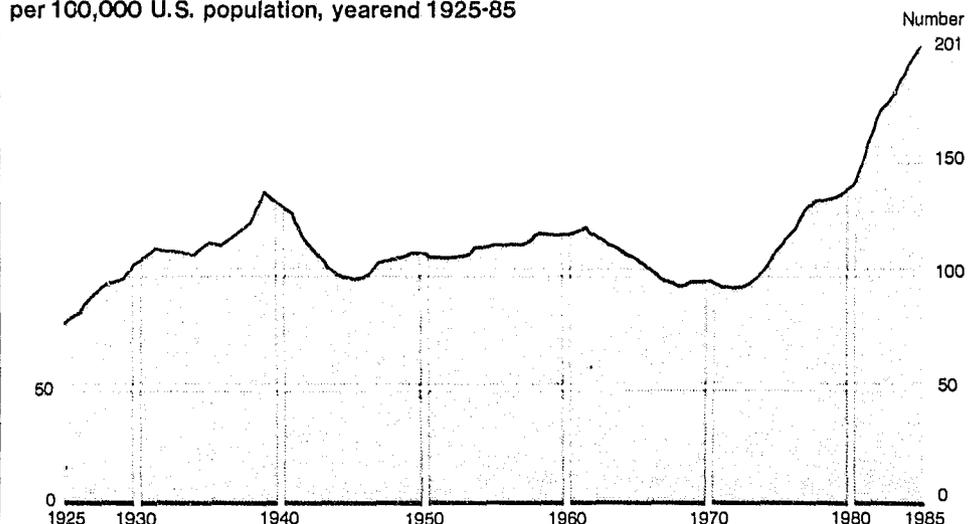
In 1940 the definition of sentenced prisoners was changed to eliminate more inmates serving time for minor offenses. It was assumed, not entirely accurately, that felons always served sentences lasting more than 6 months. They almost always do, but so do some misdemeanants. Nevertheless, the series was redefined as adult felons serving time in State or Federal institutions, with a felon presumed to be someone serving a maximum sentence of 6 months or more. This did eliminate misdemeanants serving sentences of less than 6 months and thereby focused the series more sharply on the serious offender. In 1971, to further restrict the series, the term "felon" was discarded and the States were asked to report only on prisoners with maximum sentences of more than a year. This not only eliminated additional misdemeanants from the count, it also established uniformity across States around the most widely accepted definition of a felon, someone with a maximum sentence of more than a year. In the prisoners series this group is referred to as the "sentenced" prisoner population.

The definition also was expanded to encompass persons sentenced as youthful offenders as well as those sentenced as adults. The Federal system and several States have youthful offender statutes. Youthful offenders are above the legal maximum age of juveniles (which varies from State to State) and are usually below the age of 25. They are frequently assigned to separate sections of adult correctional facilities or to completely separate facilities. Persons in this age group may be tried and sentenced as adults, however, just as they are in States without youthful offender statutes.

The definition of sentenced prisoners adopted in 1971 is currently in use. Although two definitional changes have been made since the series began, each change was designed to sharpen the original concept of the series, that is, to measure the number of serious offenders sentenced to prison.

In 1974 the prison population series was expanded to separately report on persons with short sentences, that is,

**Number of sentenced State and Federal prisoners, per 100,000 U.S. population, yearend 1925-85**



Note: Prior to 1977, prisoner reports were based on the custody population. Beginning in 1977, focus is on the jurisdictional population (see table 1).

Figure 2

with maximum sentences of a year or less, and persons without sentences (table 2). This group, when added to the "sentenced" group, produces the total number of persons in State and Federal correctional institutions.

Most prisoners with short sentences and without sentences can be found in jurisdictions that operate combined jail-prison systems—Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Delaware, Alaska, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. In these jurisdictions most of the unsentenced prisoners are awaiting trial and the short-sentence prisoners are serving time for lesser offenses. In States where jail and prison systems are not combined, short-sentence and unsentenced prisoners may be held in State facilities for safekeeping, for presentencing evaluation, for medical care, or for a variety of other reasons. At the end of 1985 some 1,990 unsentenced aliens were held by the Federal Bureau of Prisons for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

By including a count of the total number of persons in prison while preserving the distinction between "sentenced" (more than 1 year), "short-sentenced" (a year or less), and "unsentenced," the prison population data present a more complete picture of the physical and fiscal pressures the prison population exerts on the Nation's correctional facilities.<sup>2</sup>

#### Custody and jurisdiction

In 1977 another change was made to the prison population statistics. Instead of reporting prisoners within their custody, the States were asked to report on prisoners under their jurisdiction. At the time of the change an increase of some 7,000 inmates occurred.

The concept of custody is simply that of physical possession of the prisoner. The concept of jurisdiction focuses on ultimate responsibility for the prisoner. It is common for States to house prisoners from other States or from the Federal system, as well as for the Federal system to house prisoners for the States. This may occur when one State houses the overflow population of another State, although extra bed space in any system has been rare in recent years. Prisoners may also be moved for personal safety or as a temporary response to an emergency. For example, after the 1980 prison riot

<sup>2</sup>Although short-sentenced and unsentenced prisoners are combined in Table 2, they are shown separately in the annual report, *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions*.

**Table 3. Total prison population by race and sex, 1978-84<sup>a</sup>**

	Total			Male			Female			Not known
	White	Black	Other <sup>b</sup>	White	Black	Other <sup>b</sup>	White	Black	Other <sup>b</sup>	
1978	157,208	143,376	3,283	151,534	136,893	3,090	5,674	6,483	193	2,735
1979	161,642	145,383	3,677	155,803	138,776	3,468	5,839	6,607	209	3,304
1980	169,274	150,249	3,853	163,083	143,700	3,677	6,191	6,549	176	5,319
1981	190,503	168,129	4,477	183,202	160,442	4,240	7,301	7,687	237	5,663
1982	214,741	189,610	5,262	206,167	180,844	4,990	8,754	8,766	272	4,749
1983	225,902	200,216	5,663	216,522	191,020	5,336	9,380	9,196	327	5,457
1984	239,428	209,673	6,654	229,323	199,692	6,250	10,105	9,981	404	6,687

<sup>a</sup>The numbers in this table add to totals different from those shown in Table 2 because preliminary statistics on race are not subsequently revised.  
<sup>b</sup>American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders.

that severely damaged the New Mexico State Prison, correctional authorities of adjacent States and the Federal Bureau of Prisons accepted New Mexico prisoners for temporary holding. In each of these examples, however, there would be no difference between the total number of prisoners measured under the custody concept and number measured under the jurisdiction concept. One prisoner in custody in one State merely becomes one prisoner under the jurisdiction of another State.

The increase of more than 7,000 that occurred in 1977 can be attributed to several sources. The most common was State prisoners housed in local jails, usually due to overcrowding in the State prison system. Other factors included inmates in hospitals (including mental hospitals) outside the correctional system, inmates on work release or furlough, and Federal prisoners housed at private contract sites.<sup>3</sup> 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 1984 race was not known for less than 2% of the inmate population. Ethnicity was more difficult to report. In 1984, nine States could not identify any of their Hispanic inmates and the ethnicity of one-third of all inmates could not be determined.

Each State is given the opportunity to revise its yearend prison population statistics a year later. Most States make such revisions, so that final statistics for a given year are not available until the preliminary statis-

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed discussion of custody and jurisdiction, see Appendix III, *Prisoners in State and Federal Institutions on December 31, 1978*.

tics for the subsequent year are published. Yearend population statistics are revised for sentence length, sex, jurisdiction, and custody; they are not revised for race or ethnicity.

This discussion of historical prison population statistics has been focused almost exclusively on the national level. It has not dealt with the changes and irregularities that occurred within the 1925-85 statistics for the individual States. These are documented and will be released, along with the notes for each State, from the Bureau of Justice Statistics within the next few months, both as a publication and as a machine-readable data set.

#### 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. 20850. Other NPS bulletins include—

- *Prisoners in 1985*, 6/86, NCJ-101384
- *Capital Punishment 1984*, 5/86, NCJ-99562
- *Admissions and Releases, 1983*, 3/86, NCJ-100582

Machine-readable data on historical corrections will be available by yearend 1986 from the Criminal Justice Archive and Information Network, P.O. Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 (313-764-5010).

Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared principally by BJS staff. This report was written by Stephanie Minor-Harper. Marilyn Marbrook, publications unit chief, administered report production, assisted by Millie Baldea and Joyce Stanford. This bulletin is based on material developed by Chet Bowie of the Bureau of the Census.

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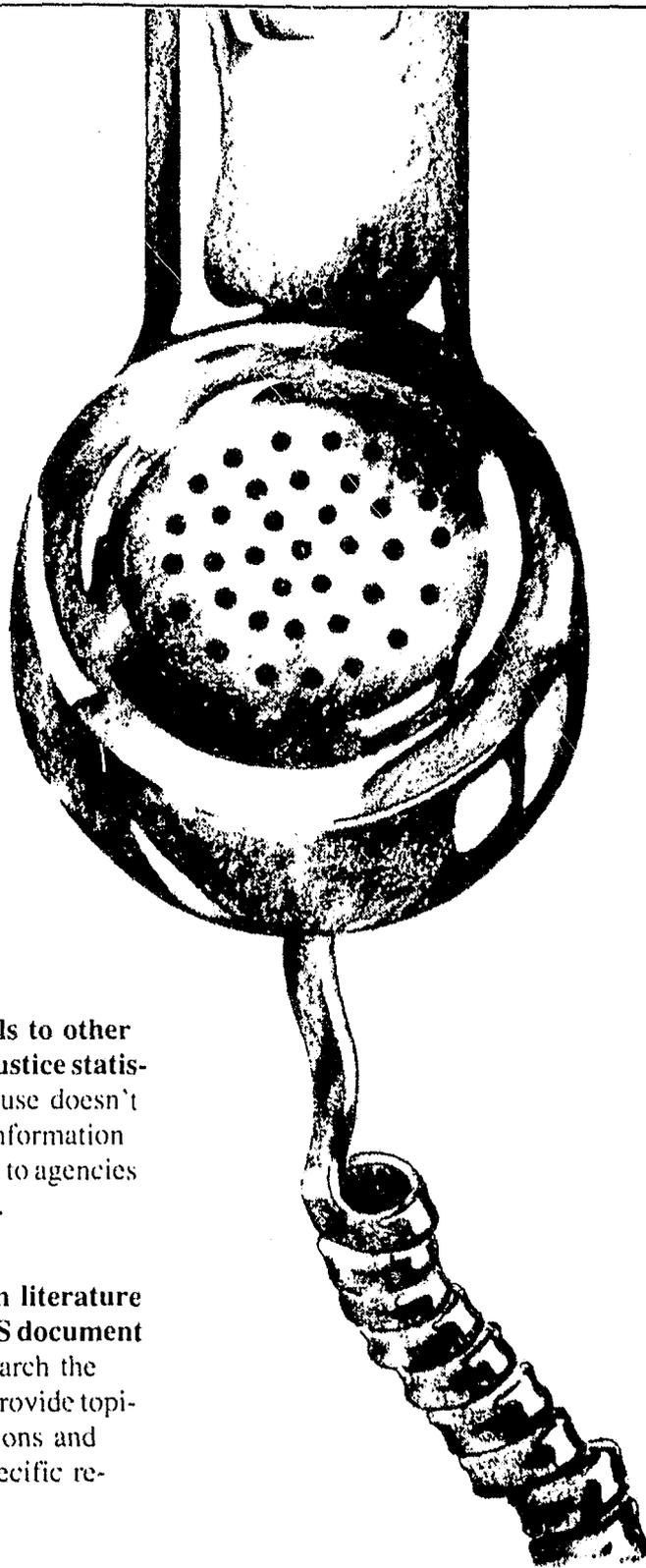
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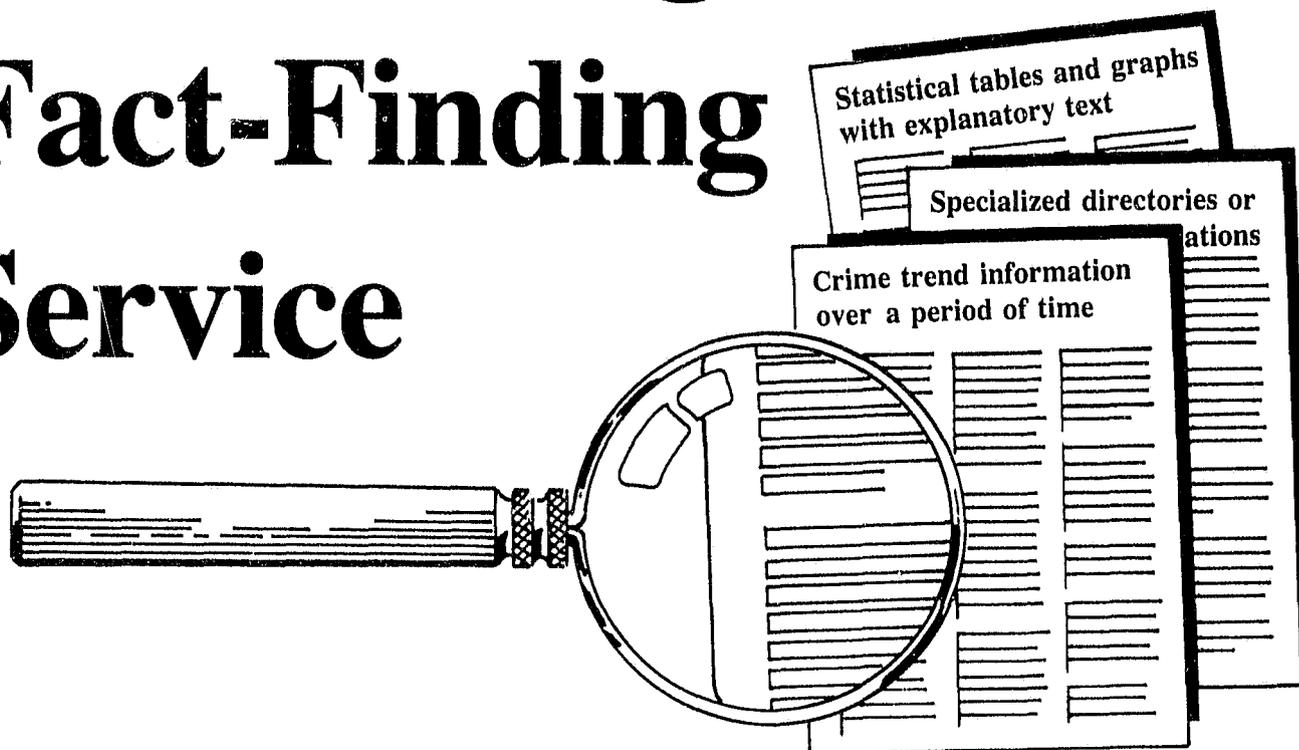
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(revised October 1986)

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### National Crime Survey

#### Criminal victimization in the U.S.:

- 1984 (final report), NCJ-100435, 5/86
- 1983 (final report), NCJ-96459, 10/85
- 1982 (final report), NCJ-92820, 11/84
- 1973-82 trends, NCJ-90541, 9/83
- 1980 (final report), NCJ-84015, 4/83
- 1979 (final report), NCJ-76710, 12/81

#### BJS special reports:

- Preventing domestic violence against women, NCJ-102037, 8/86
- Crime prevention measures, NCJ-100438, 3/86
- The use of weapons in committing crimes, NCJ-99643, 1/86
- Reporting crimes to the police, NCJ-99432, 12/85
- Locating city, suburban, and rural crime, NCJ-99535, 12/85
- The risk of violent crime, NCJ-97119, 5/85
- The economic cost of crime to victims, NCJ-93450, 4/84
- Family violence, NCJ-93449, 4/84

#### BJS bulletins:

- Households touched by crime, 1985, NCJ-101685, 6/86
- Criminal victimization, 1984, NCJ-98904, 10/85
- The crime of rape, NCJ-96777, 3/85
- Household burglary, NCJ-96021, 1/85
- Criminal victimization, 1983, NCJ-93869, 6/84
- Violent crime by strangers, NCJ-80829, 4/82
- Crime and the elderly, NCJ-79614, 1/82
- Measuring crime, NCJ-75710, 2/81

#### Response to screening questions in the National Crime Survey (BJS technical report), NCJ-97624, 7/85

#### Victimization and fear of crime: World perspectives, NCJ-93872, 1/85

#### The National Crime Survey: Working papers, vol. I. Current and historical perspectives, NCJ-75374, 8/82

#### vol. II. Methodological studies, NCJ-90307, 12/84

#### Issues in the measurement of crime, NCJ-74682, 10/81

#### The cost of negligence: Losses from preventable household burglaries, NCJ-53527, 12/79

#### Rape victimization in 26 American cities, NCJ-55878, 8/79

#### Criminal victimization in urban schools, NCJ-56396, 8/79

#### An introduction to the National Crime Survey, NCJ-43732, 4/78

#### Local victim surveys: A review of the issues, NCJ-39973, 8/77

### Parole and probation

#### BJS bulletins:

- Probation and parole 1984, NCJ-100181, 2/86
- Setting prison terms, NCJ-76218, 8/83
- Parole in the U.S., 1980 and 1981, NCJ-87387, 3/86
- Characteristics of persons entering parole during 1978 and 1979, NCJ-87243, 5/83
- Characteristics of the parole population, 1978, NCJ-66479, 4/81
- Parole in the U.S., 1979, NCJ-69562, 3/81

### Corrections

#### BJS bulletins and special reports:

- State and Federal prisoners, 1925-85, NCJ-102494, 10/86
- Prisoners in 1985, NCJ-101384, 6/86
- Prison admission and releases, 1983, NCJ-100582, 3/86
- Capital punishment 1984, NCJ-98399, 8/85
- Examining recidivism, NCJ-96501, 2/85
- Returning to prison, NCJ-95700, 11/84
- Time served in prison, NCJ-93924, 6/84

#### Historical corrections statistics in the U.S., 1850-1984, NCJ-102529, 10/86

#### Prisoners in State and Federal institutions on Dec. 31, 1983, NCJ-99861, 6/86

#### Capital punishment 1984 (final), NCJ-99562, 5/86

#### Capital punishment 1983 (final), NCJ-99561, 4/86

#### 1979 survey of inmates of State correctional facilities and 1979 census of State correctional facilities:

#### BJS special reports:

#### The prevalence of Imprisonment, NCJ-93657, 7/85

#### Career patterns in crime, NCJ-88672, 6/83

#### BJS bulletins:

#### Prisoners and drugs, NCJ-87575, 3/83

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