

The Changing Composition of California's Prison Population

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The California prison system houses 164,000 prisoners and holds under its jurisdiction a total of 301,000 people.¹ With a proposed expenditure of \$6.5 billion for 2005-2006 (up from \$5.7 billion in 2004-2005), the California Department of Corrections represents 5.8 percent of the 2005-2006 Budget.² Two surveys, conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California, of Los Angeles County residents in March of 2003 and 2005 found that crime and gangs were the top issue concerning county residents.

At the state level, public concern translates frequently into policy changes affecting the prison population, as evidenced by the recent spate of ballot initiatives addressing arrests and sentencing. In 2000, the passage of Proposition 21 increased the penalties for several crimes, especially those deemed to be gang-related, and allowed juveniles to be tried as adults in some cases. Also passed in 2000 was Proposition 36, which mandated probation with treatment rather than jail time for many nonviolent drug offenders. Voted down in 2004, Proposition 66 would have amended the state's 1994 Three Strikes and You're Out law to limit the types of felonies that could count as an offender's "third strike."

We document the changing racial and ethnic profile of the state's incarcerated population. First, we describe California's prison population, comparing it to the state's general population. We focus on demographic and human capital classifications, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, nativity, citizenship status, and educational attainment.

Focusing on the prison population, we then examine variation in geographical and corrections-related characteristics (e.g., incarceration history, offense type, sentence), identifying patterns by demographic category.

Finally, we chronicle the changing size and composition of California's prison population over the last 20 years. We highlight changes coinciding with relevant legislation, such as California's Three Strikes law and Proposition 36.

¹ California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation:

http://www.corr.ca.gov/CommunicationsOffice/facts_figures.asp

² California Department of Finance State Agency Budgets: <http://govbud.dof.ca.gov/agencies.html>

We use the Bureau of Justice Statistics' Survey of Inmates in State and Correctional Facilities, the most comprehensive individual record-level dataset of its type, in order to obtain the most disaggregated picture of this population. In addition, we use up-to-date individual record-level data from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to provide chronological context and updated results.