



## Federal Prison System

The **federal prison** system holds offenders who have been convicted **of federal** crimes. It is currently one **of** the biggest **prison** systems in the country, with more than 175,000 inmates. Most **of** these women and men are housed in a nationwide system **of** some 104 establishments. Others are held in community corrections centers, in state and local **prisons**, or under house arrest.

SIDEBARS:  
Arriving in Prison

### HISTORY

The U.S. Congress formally established the **Federal Bureau of Prisons** in 1930. By then, a fairly considerable **federal** corrections system already existed. Courts had been created in 1789, and seven **prisons** had been gradually established from the last decade **of** the 19th century. Individuals found guilty **of federal** offenses could be fined, given corporal punishment, or held in state, local, or **federal** facilities. The **federal** correctional system, although predominantly a 20th-century creation, has its roots, in other words, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The so-called Three **Prison** Act, which was passed in 1891, began the process **of** creating the **federal prison** system by identifying three sites around the country for its first penitentiaries. Development, however, was slow, and six years passed before ground breaking began on the first **of** the penitentiaries, USP Leavenworth. All told, it took inmates 25 years to complete Leavenworth Penitentiary.

Leavenworth was followed by Atlanta in 1902 and then, in 1909, by McNeil Island in Washington State, which had originally been founded as a territorial jail in 1875. These three institutions made up the entire system for many years until new laws, such as the Volstead Act in 1918, which introduced Prohibition, caused the **federal** population to grow exponentially.

The first women's **prison** in the **federal** system, FPC Alderson, opened in 1928 almost 40 years after the Three **Prison** Act. Prior to this time, women convicted **of federal** offenses were held in state and local penal facilities. Unlike the earlier penitentiaries that had grouped men in single large buildings, Alderson housed women in low-level, freestanding houses set within a rural setting.

Alcatraz, commonly viewed as a precursor to today's supermaximum secure facilities, opened in 1934. Designed to be an impenetrable and inescapable facility, Alcatraz was the destination for the most notorious criminals **of** the time. Al Capone, George "Machine Gun" Kelly, and Robert Stroud, the so-called Birdman **of** Alcatraz, all spent time there. When Alcatraz finally closed in 1963, its prisoners were transferred to the modern facility at Marion, Illinois.

Originally, Marion was a Level 5 **prison**, the highest security rating **of** the time. A series **of** violent and lethal attacks by inmates on staff and other prisoners throughout the 1970s and early 1980s culminated in the killing **of** two staff members on the same day in October 1983. After this event, the **prison** was re-rated at the previously unheard **of** security level **of** 6 and placed on continual lockdown. In 1994, ADX Florence replaced Marion as the destination "**of** last resort" for those inmates who were labeled dangerous and troublesome in the **federal** system.

The supermaximum secure **prison** at ADX Florence has the highest security level in the **federal prison** system.

It holds "inmates who have been officially designated as exhibiting violent or serious and disruptive behavior while incarcerated" (National Institute **of** Corrections [NIC], 1997, p. 1). Prisoners are housed in solitary confinement and are rarely allowed out **of** their cells. Very few inmates are sent directly to ADX Florence from the courts. They are usually transferred there from other high-security state or **federal** facilities during their sentence. Wardens wishing to commit prisoners to ADX Florence must make a special request to the North Central Regional Director and provide evidence that the individual "can be controlled only by separation, restricted movement, and limited direct access to staff and other inmates" (NIC, 1997, p. 1). According to the **Federal Bureau of Prisons** (2000b), "Inmates with severe or chronic behavior patterns that cannot be addressed in any other **Bureau** institution should be referred to ADX Florence general population, and those who are somewhat less problematic should be referred to USP Marion" (p. 12). If the inmate is designated a "failure" within Marion he may be sent on to ADX Florence.

Within 10 years **of** the creation **of** the **Bureau of Prisons**, the **federal prison** population and the number **of** facilities had almost doubled. The inmate population then remained more or less stable until the 1980s. During the second part **of** the 1980s, various laws, such as the Sentencing Reform Act, were passed that ended parole, established determinate sentencing, and created mandatory minimum sentences. As a result **of** these legal changes, the inmate population grew dramatically, more than doubling between 1980 and 1989, from more than 24,000 to almost 58,000. In response, 20 new **prisons** opened between 1987 and 1992 alone. The system continued expanding during the 1990s, with the population reaching 175,000 in early 2004 ([www.bop.gov](http://www.bop.gov)).

## **FEDERAL PRISONS TODAY**

According to the most recent weekly population figures, the **Federal Bureau of Prisons** currently houses just over 175,000 inmates. Approximately 150,000 **of** these inmates are confined in bureauoperated correctional institutions or detention centers; the rest are held in state, local, and private institutions. Despite a continuing reliance on state and other facilities, the **federal prison** system remains heavily overcrowded, incarcerating 33% more people at year end **of** 2002 than it was built to contain (Harrison & Beck, 2003, p. 1).

Overall, the majority (56.5%) **of** prisoners in **federal** institutions are white, 40.3% are black, 1.6% are Asian, and 1.6% are Native American. About one-third (32.1%) are known to be **of** Hispanic ethnic origin. Almost 30% **of** all prisoners are foreign nationals, with more than 16% from Mexico alone. Since the 1980s, all are adults or juveniles who have been charged as adults. There are no juvenile facilities in the **federal** system. Women now make up 6.8% **of** the total population, which is greater than their proportion in state **prisons**. This figure reflects an increase **of** 182% in the number **of** female inmates since 1988. In comparison, the number **of** male inmates grew by 158% during the same period (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 1998; [www.bop.gov](http://www.bop.gov)).

More so than in most state systems, a disproportionate number **of** individuals in the **federal prison** population are serving time for drug offenses. Currently, they constitute 54.7% **of** the total population. Other crimes include immigration (10.5%), robbery (6.5%), and burglary (4.5%). The most frequent sentence being served by **federal** inmates is 5 to 10 years (29.5%), with the next common period being 10 to 15 years (17.4%). Very few (2.0%) serve less than 1 year, and not many serve life either (3.2%). At the time **of** writing, 26 people are on death row. As these figures suggest, the majority **of** **federal** inmates are assigned low (38.8%) or medium (25.0%) security levels, and the rest are labeled as minimum (19.4%) or high (10.7%) security; 6.1% **of** inmates have not been assigned a security level ([www.bop.gov](http://www.bop.gov)).

## **STAFF**

Around 35,000 people work in the **Federal Bureau of Prisons**. The vast majority **of** them (71.8%) are men. Likewise, most **prison** employees are white (64.4%). African Americans make up 21.0% **of** the total number **of** staff, while only 11.0% **of** officers are Hispanic, 2.0% are Asian, and 1.5% are Native American.

The **federal** system was one **of** the first to establish a training program for correctional officers in 1930. Even

so, a formal, centralized system was not fully implemented until 1982, when the **Bureau of Prisons** established a residential program at Glynco, Georgia, where, to this day, all staff members receive the same basic training (Keve, 1991, p. 237). All **prison** workers, from the medical personnel to those running the **prison** factory, must be coached as correctional officers. They must know how to use firearms and restraining techniques. The only exceptions to this rule are the staff in private facilities, who are trained separately. They should, however, have equivalent skills to those in the public **prisons**.

Despite the **bureau**'s early move to attempt to professionalize its employees, the pay and education levels **of** many staff members remain low. Just over one-third **of** all staff (34.6%) have only a high school diploma, while fewer than one in five **of** them (19.2%) have a bachelor's degree (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 2000c, p. 55). Salaries for correctional officers are similar to other areas **of** law enforcement. According to the Web site **of** the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**, for example, **federal** correctional officer salaries started at \$27,000 in 2001. The previous year, the median salary was around \$35,000. Like the police, correctional officers may retire after 20 years service for full benefits.

## **TYPES OF FACILITIES**

The **Bureau of Prisons** operates many different kinds **of** facilities from penitentiaries to **prison** camps. Other than the sole supermaximum secure facility at ADX Florence, the highest-security **prisons** in the **federal** system are the U.S. penitentiaries (USPs). They have walls, or reinforced fences, and close staff supervision. Prisoners are held in both single-occupant and cell housing. These facilities, which include USP Marion, Leavenworth, and Lewisburg, among others, are designed to hold high-security male offenders. There is no penitentiary for women.

**Federal** correctional institutions (FCIs) are the most common type **of** penal institution. These facilities are usually low security with double-fenced perimeters, although there are some mediumsecurity establishments as well. In correctional institutions, prisoners are typically housed in cubicles in dormitory style units with a medium staffinmate ratio.

**Federal prison** camps (FPCs) and the three intensive confinement centers (ICCs) in Lewisburg, Lompoc, and Bryan have the lowest security rating **of** all the **federal** institutions other than the community corrections centers (CCCs), which are also known as "halfway houses." Because they are classified as minimum security, most **of** them have no fences, and there is a low staff-inmate ratio. Individuals may be either sent to the camps directly from the court or transferred from other highersecurity facilities. They are usually housed in open dormitories. Security is much more relaxed at these institutions than anywhere else. However, they generally offer fewer opportunities for education and recreation because they are primarily work-oriented institutions. This is particularly the case for those **prison** camps located next to highersecurity facilities in the **federal** correctional centers (FCCs), which the **bureau** has built since the 1980s. In these institutions, camps are merely part **of** a series **of** other institutions, including correctional institutions and penitentiaries.

Administrative **prisons** make up the final and most varied category **of federal** institutions. These are designed to hold inmates **of** all security classifications with special needs or characteristics. They include the **federal** transfer center (FTC) at Oklahoma City, **federal** medical centers (FMCs), **federal** detention centers (FDCs), metropolitan detention centers (MDCs), metropolitan correctional centers (MCCs), the medical center for **federal** prisoners (MCFP) at Springfield, and the supermaximum secure section **of** USP Florence, which is known as ADX Florence.

The **federal** transfer center at Oklahoma City is the first stop for most prisoners as they enter the **federal** system for the first time. Because this institution holds some high-security prisoners, its conditions are much more restricted than some may expect. Though most inmates spend only a few days at this institution, some are assigned longer periods **of** time in the work cadre to provide necessary labor. Most visits here, however, will be brief, ranging from a few weeks to a few months.

FMCs are essentially **prison** hospitals. There are seven **of** them across the national system, six catering to men only and one (FMC Carswell) to women. Though all **prisons** offer medical care, if the individual has a chronic or serious illness he or she will usually be placed in an FMC. In addition to holding ill female prisoners, FMC Carswell has a special administrative unit for women deemed to be particularly high-security risks.

FDCs and MDCs hold people awaiting trial, as well as those who have been convicted but who are awaiting sentence. They will also house a small work cadre, like the transfer center, to provide labor for the main institution. They are, in effect, jails and thus have a rapid turnover **of** population, as most prisoners are held there awaiting transfer. Many detention centers have been contracted out to private companies.

There are three MCCs in the United States, in San Diego, New York City, and Chicago. These high-rise buildings opened within a year **of** each other, from December 1974 to August 1975, and represented the first shift within the **Bureau of Prisons** to "new generation" **prison** building. MCCs cater to a large and varied population. They hold both female and male sentenced offenders and those awaiting trial or sentencing. Inmates serving short-term sentences provide the necessary work details in each facility.

Finally, offenders may be sent to a communitybased facility if they have been sentenced to six months or less. Very minor offenders may be held under house arrest. CCCs are essentially halfway houses and are contracted by the **Bureau of Prisons** to private companies. Only those people who are deemed no risk at all to the community may be sent there without prior time spent in a higher-security institution.

Individuals incarcerated by the **Federal Bureau of Prisons** will be assigned to a **prison**'s mainline population in any one **of** the foregoing types **of** institutions. A certain number will, however, be segregated from the general population in special sections **of** these institutions such as control units, administrative segregation, disciplinary segregation, or death row. A rare few men (around 0.5%) will spend time in one **of** the system's highestsecurity facilities, the Control Unit **of** USP Marion or ADX Florence.

Each institution is imbued with a different ethos, depending on its security level and population type. Some, such as FMCs, provide specialized treatment for inmates with HIV/AIDS or other physical and mental health issues. Many women's facilities offer specific opportunities to enhance family ties. More than half **of** all the institutions now have residential substance abuse treatment programs as mandated by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act **of** 1994.

## **WOMEN IN PRISON**

Women make up approximately 7% **of** the **federal prison** population. **Of** the total number **of** women incarcerated in the system, 58% are white, 39% are black, 2% are Asian, and 1% are Native American. Hispanics account for nearly one out **of** three female prisoners in **federal** custody (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 1998, p. 4; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 7).

More than two-thirds **of** women (68%) are imprisoned for drug offenses. The next most common category **of** crime, accounting for only 11% **of** those incarcerated, is extortion and fraud. Overall, women tend to commit less serious and less violent offenses than men and, in general, have lower security classifications. The majority **of** them are held either in minimum-security **prison** camps or in pretrial facilities. There is no medium-security facility for women in the **federal** system and only one high-security institution (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 1998, pp. 4–5). There are now 20 different **prisons** that hold female offenders, including **prison** camps, correctional institutions, FMC Carswell, and various MCCs.

Most women in **prison** (80%) are primary caretakers **of** children. More than half (59%) **of** women in **federal prisons** have children under the age **of** 18. Half **of** those women had lived with their children before entering **prison** (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 8). Many female inmates have experienced domestic or other forms **of** violence, in most cases including sexual assault. Nearly three-quarters (73%) **of** women in **federal prison** have

completed high school, and 30% to 40% **of** those high school graduates have attended some college or more. Despite these relatively high rates **of** education, however, like male prisoners, most women were unemployed before their incarceration (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999, p. 7).

Women in **prison** abide by the same rules as men except in the areas **of** health and beauty treatments, pat searches, and transportation. Women generally are allowed more items under health and beauty than are men, and, in light **of** concerns about sexual harassment, their pat searches are more strictly regulated. Male guards are not permitted to take part in, or be present during, a search **of** a female prisoner. Women who are transported while pregnant should be held with fewer physical restraints than other prisoners, although a number **of** reports from human rights organizations suggest that this policy is not always closely followed.

## **DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAMS**

More than half **of** the total population is doing time for drug offenses, and others are there for drugrelated crimes. It is estimated that 80% **of** state and **federal** inmates either committed drug offenses, were under the influence **of** drugs or alcohol at the time **of** their crime, committed their crime to support their drug use, or had histories **of** substance use. Under the new sentencing laws, many **of** these individuals are serving long terms **of** imprisonment, often for their first offense.

According to a 1999 report to Congress, the **Federal Bureau of Prisons** "addresses inmate drug abuse by attempting to identify, confront, and alter the attitudes, values, and thinking patterns that lead to criminal and drug-using behavior" (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 1999, p. 1). The **Bureau of Prisons** differentiates between prisoners who are incarcerated for manufacturing or selling drugs and those who are incarcerated for crimes that were a direct result **of** their drug use and recognizes that each group requires different counseling and treatment. As a result, the **federal** system offers three different forms **of** drug programs through Psychology Services, each **of** which attempts "to identify, confront and alter the attitudes, values and thinking patterns that led to criminal behavior and drug or alcohol abuse" (Pelissier et al., 2000, p. 5). Currently, drug treatment options include a 500-hour residential drug treatment program, a 40-hour drug education program, and a more loosely organized set **of** counseling and self-help classes known collectively under the title **of** "nonresidential" drug treatment.

The residential drug abuse program (RDAP) is the most intensive **of** the **bureau**'s drug treatment options. First, the inmate participates in a unit based program that generally has a capacity for around 100 people. During this time, he or she spends half **of** each day learning about drug use and the other half **of** it in ordinary activities such as work and education with the general population. Prisoners are screened and assessed at the beginning **of** the RDAP to work out their treatment orientation. To complete the program, they take a variety **of** classes, including "Criminal Lifestyle Confrontation," "Cognitive Skills Building," "Relapse Prevention," "Interpersonal Skill Building," and "Wellness," before being returned to the general **prison** population. Afterwards, they must also participate in 12 months **of** treatment, meeting with "drug abuse program staff at least once a month for a group activity consisting **of** relapse prevention planning and a review **of** treatment techniques learned during the intensive phase **of** the residential drug abuse program" (Pelissier et al., 2000, p. 4). The residential program even reaches beyond **prison**. Once an inmate is been transferred to a CCC, he or she will meet with privately contracted counselors to reaffirm the lessons **of** the drug treatment program. These sessions may also include other family members.

RDAPs are the most celebrated and, apparently, successful part **of** the **bureau**'s current drug policy. According to a recent evaluation, these programs, which last from 9 to 12 months, reduce men's reoffending after three years in the community by 16% and women's by 18%. Thirty-six months after their release, men who have successfully completed an RDAP course also are 15% less likely to use drugs on release, and women are 18% less likely to do so.

Because **of** these findings, the **Bureau of Prisons** has introduced a series **of** incentives to encourage prisoners

to participate in RDAPs. Some examples **of** the opportunities available include a small monetary award for successful completion **of** program; consideration for placement in a six-month halfway house; and what are referred to as "tangible benefits," such as shirts, caps, and pens with program logos. The most influential incentive, however, was brought in by the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act **of** 1994, which allows up to a one-year reduction in sentence from an inmate's statutory release date. This incentive has obvious attractions, and many prisoners are in favor **of** it. Others, however, are more critical **of** this reward. They point out that sentence reductions lead to inconsistent sentencing, in which participants do less time for the same crimes. Specifically, critics suggest that this policy may unintentionally reward inmates with drug problems (Pelissier et al., 2000, p. 6).

The 40-hour drug education program is somewhat less intensive than the residential program. It incorporates lectures, movies, written assignments, and group discussion. Participants usually meet twice a week for approximately 10 weeks, covering the reasons for their drug use and abuse, theories **of** addiction, physical and psychological addiction, defenses, effects **of** drug abuse on the family, and different types **of** drugs and their effect on an individual.

Nonresidential drug treatment can include meetings with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous as well as individual and group counseling offered by the Psychology Services. Finally, as part **of** their more general approach to curbing substance abuse, all **federal prisons** conduct regular random drug tests **of** all prisoners. Those with outside assignments are tested most frequently. The **bureau**'s policy appears to have worked. The 2000 *Judicial Resource Guide* (**Federal Bureau of Prisons**, 2000a) states that "the number **of** positive test results for the random tests continues to be very low for the last few years—1.3% FY95; 0.9% FY96; 1.0% FY97; and 0.9% FY98" (p. 31).

## **EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS**

The main thrust **of** education in the **federal** system has always been literacy skills and vocational training. Inmates in the first **federal prisons** were taught the basics **of** reading and writing by **prison** staff and, if possible, an employable skill that might keep them away from criminal activity upon release. The first mandatory literacy program in the **Bureau of Prisons** was established in 1982. All inmates were required to enroll unless they could demonstrate a sixth-grade level **of** reading and writing. In 1986, the standard was increased to an eighth-grade level, and in 1991 the current requirements **of** a high school equivalency (general equivalency diploma, GED) were established.

These days, the **bureau**'s commitment to basic literacy has been taken a further step: All promotions in institution jobs above entry level require a GED. Although seemingly a commendable idea, tying education to **prison** labor so closely places those with little educational experience or those from a foreign or non-English-speaking background in a vulnerable position, rendering them ineligible for many **prison** jobs.

In addition to creating an employable workforce in **prison**, reduced reoffending rates have always been another important justification for **prison** education classes. For that reason, vocational courses and apprenticeships are two **of** the main strategies that education departments pursue to help prisoners prepare for successful release. Like most aspects **of** imprisonment, the quality and availability **of** these courses vary enormously. Some facilities offer a variety **of** choices from carpentry to cooking. Others, particularly high-security institutions, are much more restricted. In any case, certificates or diplomas will not specify that they were earned in a correctional facility.

## **WORK**

Unlike other correctional systems, work **of** some sort is mandatory in **federal prisons**. Upon arrival, prisoners are offered jobs in various aspects **of** site maintenance, usually in food services. Following a certain amount **of** time (usually 90 days), they may shift to another area **of** **prison** labor, such as grounds maintenance, the

**prison** farm, or work as an orderly. They may also apply for employment in the **federal prison** industries known as UNICOR. If they do not wish to work, they must enroll in some education or training program. The vast majority work at jobs that contribute to the maintenance **of** the **prison** such as grounds, and cooking. Around 25% are employed by the higher-paying **prison** industries.

## CONCLUSION

Since the 1980s, the **prison** population in the United States has increased dramatically. The U.S. **federal prison** system currently holds more prisoners than ever before and far more than it can comfortably house. The majority **of** these women and men are serving time for drug offenses. Disproportionate numbers **of** them belong to minority communities, and few have significant levels **of** education or much legitimate work experience. Sentences have become longer, and consequently the average age **of** the inmate community is growing. All **of** these factors mean that there are a number **of** challenges facing the administrators **of** the **federal** system. How they respond to them will determine whether **federal prisons** will break down into disturbances as they have in the past, or whether they will remain relatively peaceful as they are at present.

—Letha Kennedy

—Mary Bosworth

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## Arriving in Prison

My public defender said, "Take nothing, have what you need sent after you settle." I called the BOP to confirm this, and they said they provide everything, including postage. The three-hour drive was filled with fear and anxiety. Once I arrived, I said goodbye to my friends, we hugged, and I turned and walked away. I couldn't look back, I tried not to cry. This couldn't be real; it had to be a bad dream.

It took three hours to process me, and it was all so surreal. I had to wait for R&D, wait for medical, wait for a female officer. Another prisoner, my mentor, came and took me where I would spend the next 53 months **of** my life. Leaving R&D, I saw gray concrete buildings and a dirt yard, and this stark and barren landscape mirrored how I felt inside. My mentor was talking, but I was in a fog.

At first sight, the housing unit looked like Costco with brick cubicles. The women inside were kind and generous with words and supplies. Even though I weighed 265 pounds I was assigned to a top bunk. During that first night, I laid in my bunk and quietly cried. Seven months have passed, and the fog has lifted. Some things are better than I envisioned, others are not. Medical treatment is inadequate and the administration and most staff seem to thrive on dehumanizing and exerting their power and authority. The BOP didn't provide everything, they barely covered the necessities. Family and friends can only send money. We live in constant turmoil. However, most **of** the women in here make it tolerable. Although this place has changed me, I have faith that eventually my life will go on.

Letha Kennedy, **Federal Prison** Camp–Victorville, Adelanto, California

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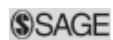
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