

Evidence

The Truth Behind Bars

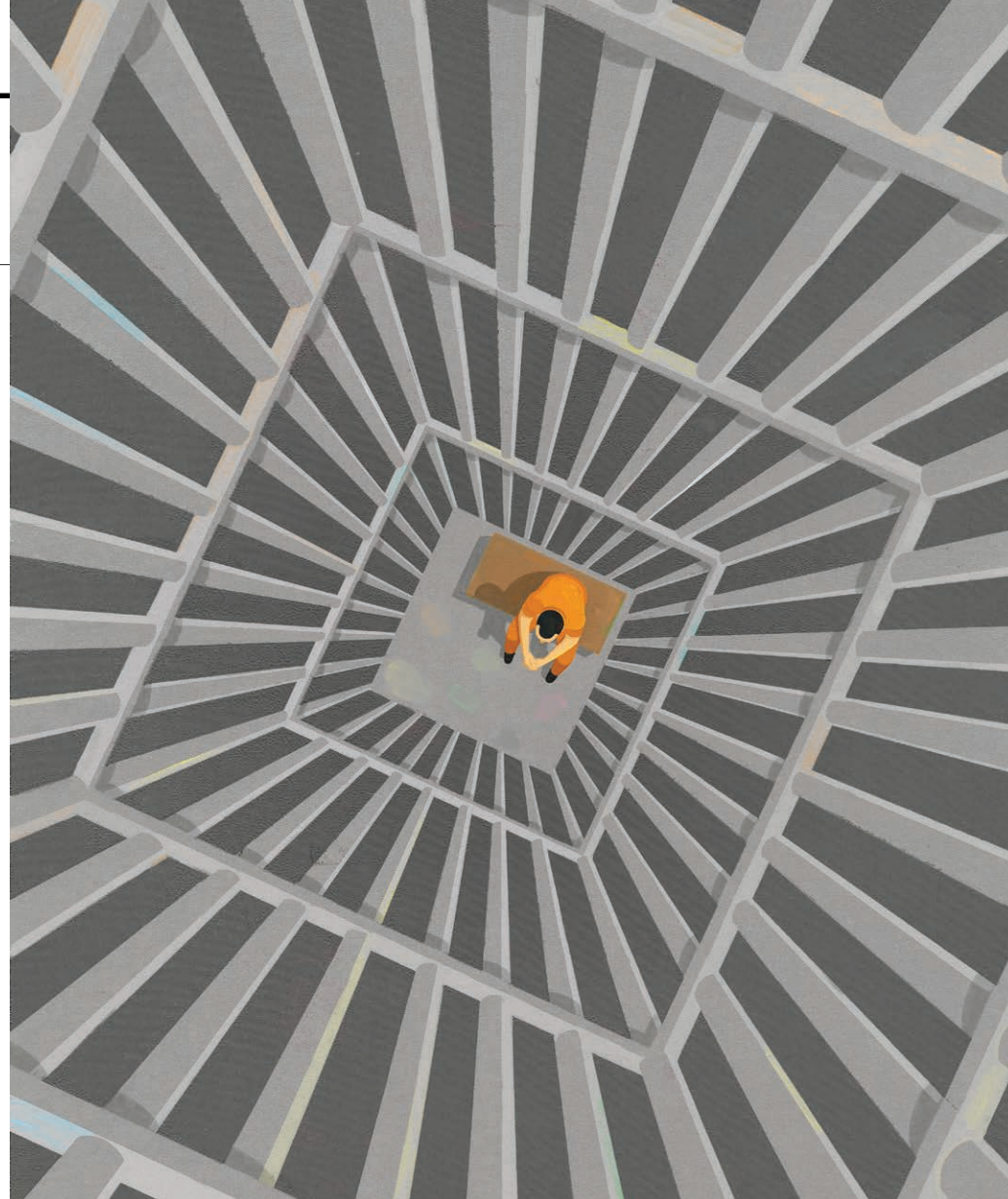
What the statistics have to say.
BY ALYSSA HATFIELD '26

Today, almost 2 million are incarcerated between state and federal jails and prisons. In 2024, 3,681,900 adults were estimated to be under probation or parole. Yet crime rates are continuing to drop, with the 2025 crime rate the lowest it's been since 1960. Currently, more than 70 million people in the United States have a criminal record. That number is estimated to grow to 100 million by 2030.

The Law Dictionary defines the correctional system as a means to both keep members of society safe by separating them from individuals who have committed crimes and to punish wrongdoers. Essential as it may be, the prison system itself is also troubled. In recent years, reformers have begun a movement to improve how facilities are run, how they treat and care for inhabitants, and how they prepare the released for constructive and healthy lives.

The issues to be addressed are manifold. Stigma haunts those with criminal records or jail experience. To most of society, "jail" means "guilty," when in fact, 78 percent of those in jail under local authority have not been convicted; they are presumed innocent. In addition to those awaiting trial, thousands with serious mental illness end up stuck in jail for months or even years waiting for a state hospital bed. The carceral system disproportionately holds people of color, people in poverty, and people with mental health and disabilities. It does not adequately heal people, make them safer, and solve issues of housing, racism, and discrimination. So, what's really going on when the cell door clangs shut? Here's a look.

Sources: Massachusetts Department of Corrections; Prison Policy Initiative; US Department of Health & Human Services, ASPe; The Sentencing Project; US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics; National Institute of Corrections; RAND; BC Law Clinics; BC Prison Education Program; Solitary Watch.



INCARCERATION RATES OVERVIEW

201,000
People federally incarcerated

1,644,000
People in state prisons or local jails

143,934
Male inmates

9,948
Female inmates

5x
More incarcerated Black Americans than whites

3x
More adults in poverty likely to be arrested than those who aren't

Facilities Nationwide

3,116
Local jails

1,566
State prisons

1,277
Juvenile correctional facilities

220
Immigration detention facilities

98
Federal prisons

77
Indian country jails

Louisiana
Highest incarceration rate

Massachusetts
Lowest incarceration rate

THE MONEY TRAIL

\$455 billion Incarceration industry annual cost
\$13.6 billion+ Pretrial detention annual cost

In Massachusetts, average annual cost per incarcerated individual ranges from **\$85,648** at Northeastern Correctional Center to **\$508,190** at MASAC in Plymouth.

For-profit Prisons

When factoring in the long-term societal and economic costs of recidivism over a 25- to 40-year window, for-profit prisons end up costing governments 1.5% to 3% more than public and nonprofit institutions.

158 For-profit prisons in US correctional system
8% Incarcerated held there
1,600% Growth in private prisons over past 3 decades

Agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) rely on private-prison contractors who, during heightened enforcement, have seen revenue expansion.

Income Per Year

\$111 billion Incarcerated people's loss
\$215 billion Loss to children of incarcerated working-age parents

INSIDE THE CELL

Health

40% People in state prisons with disabilities
56% People with mental health problems
26% Received mental health care since entering prison
50% Lacked health insurance at time of arrest

Solitary Confinement

122,840 People locked daily in solitary confinement for 22+ hours
40-70% Decrease in assaults after reducing solitary confinement in 3 states

Life Expectancy

2 years Individual life expectancy lost per year of incarceration
5 years Overall US life expectancy shortened by mass incarceration

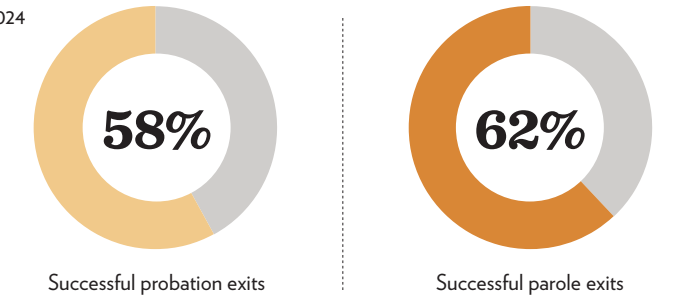
RECIDIVISM AND REHABILITATION

500,000+
People released from state and federal prisons each year

Probation and Parole

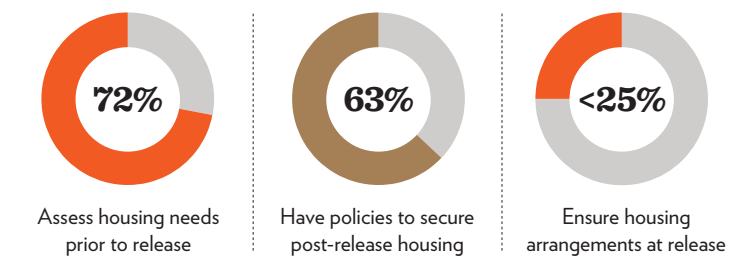
1 in 73 Adult US residents under community supervision (probation or parole)
>24% Decline in number of probationers and parolees 2014 to 2024

2024



State Departments of Corrections

43% Reduction in national recidivism rates for incarcerated who participate in education programs
100+ Incarcerated students admitted into Boston College Prison Education Program (BCPEP) since 2019
5 BC Law clinics work directly with the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated
~200 Incarcerated people in solitary represented in a class-action lawsuit by BC Law's Civil Rights Clinic



82% State prison releases re-arrested, most within 3 years
1,550 People released from DOC facilities in Massachusetts (2025)
26% Recidivism rate in Massachusetts in 2019 over 3-year span