



# Bureau of Justice Statistics Fact Sheet

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# Profile of Nonviolent Offenders Exiting State Prisons

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This report provides a description of the general characteristics of prison populations serving time for nonviolent crimes as they exit State prisons. Nonviolent crimes are defined as property, drug, and public order offenses which do not involve a threat of harm or an actual attack upon a victim. Typically, the most frequently identified nonviolent crimes involve drug trafficking, drug possession, burglary, and larceny.

To conduct this analysis, BJS utilized data collected under two statistical programs — the National Recidivism Reporting Program which last collected data on those discharged from prisons in 15 States in 1994 and the Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities last conducted in 1997. The survey was based on a nationally representative sample of inmates. This report examines the responses of inmates who indicated to interviewers that they expected to be released within 6 months.

## Offense Characteristics of Nonviolent Prison Releasees

- About 3 out of 4 inmates leaving State prisons had been convicted of a nonviolent crime (table 1). Property offenders and drug offenders each accounted for about a third of those exiting prisons.
- The single largest offense category of nonviolent offenders discharged from prisons was drug trafficking, accounting for nearly 1 in 5 nonviolent releasees (table 2).

## Demographic Characteristics of Nonviolent Prison Releasees

- An estimated 9 of 10 nonviolent offenders discharged from prison were male and about two-thirds were under age 34 (tables 3, 4).
- Overall, about two-thirds of nonviolent releasees were racial or ethnic minorities.
- Just over 4 in 10 released nonviolent prisoners had less than a high school education and an additional 1 in 4 had received a GED.
- Nearly two-thirds of nonviolent offenders discharged from prisons indicated they had been using illegal drugs in the month preceding the commitment offense and about 4 in 10 reported using drugs at the time of the offense (table 5).
- About 1 in 4 nonviolent releasees were alcohol dependent prior to imprisonment, and a third were using alcohol at the time of the offense.

## Criminal History Characteristics of Nonviolent Prison Releasees

- An estimated 95% of nonviolent releasees had an arrest history preceding the arrest which resulted in their imprisonment (table 6).
- More than 80% of those nonviolent offenders released from prison have a prior conviction history.
- On average, the RAP sheets of nonviolent offenders discharged from prison indicated 9.3 prior arrests and 4.1 prior convictions.
- Among nonviolent offenders, about a third had a history of arrests for violent crimes. One in five had a self-reported history of convictions for violence (table 7).

- On average, nonviolent offenders discharged had received a sentence of about 52 months and had served an average of 16 months, about a third of their sentence, prior to discharge (table 8).
- About 8% of nonviolent offenders used a weapon during the current offense (table 9).
- In the aggregate, nonviolent offenders awaiting release from prison were largely serious offenders as indicated by several criteria. An estimated 88% of these offenders reported one of the following:
  - use of a weapon in the current offense (8%)
  - a prior violent conviction (22%)

- committing the current offense while on probation, parole, or escape (64%)
- two or more prior sentences (65%).

### Recidivism of Nonviolent Prison Releasees

- Within 3 years of their release from prison, about 7 in 10 nonviolent releasees were rearrested for a new crime; nearly half were reconvicted; and more than a quarter were returned to prison (table 10).
- Among nonviolent releasees, about 1 in 5 were rearrested for a violent crime within 3 years of discharge (table 11).

**Table 1. Offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States**

Offense for which inmate was serving a sentence	Released offenders	
	Number	Percent
<b>All offenses</b>	272,111	100%
<b>Violent offenses</b>	61,225	22.5%
<b>Nonviolent offenses</b>	210,886	77.5%
Property offenses	91,157	33.5
Drug offenses	88,708	32.6
Public-order offenses	26,395	9.7
Other offenses	4,626	1.7

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.

**Table 2. Current offense of nonviolent offenders expecting release from State prison, 1997**

Current nonviolent offense	Percent of nonviolent State prisoners expecting release within 6 months
<b>Property offenses</b>	40.6%
Burglary	15.0
Larceny	10.1
Auto theft	3.6
Arson	1.0
Fraud	6.2
Stolen property	3.3
Other property	1.4
<b>Drug offenses</b>	36.8%
Possession	17.5
Trafficking	18.3
Other drug offenses	1.0
<b>Public-order offenses</b>	22.5%
Weapons	4.7
Violation of probation/parole	8.4
Driving while intoxicated	4.2
Other public-order offenses	5.2

Source: BJS, *Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1997*.

**Table 3. Characteristics of nonviolent offenders expecting release from State prison, 1997**

Characteristic	Percent of nonviolent State prisoners expecting release within 6 months
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	88.6%
Female	11.4
<b>Age</b>	
24 or younger	18.9%
25-34	42.3
35-44	29.6
45-54	7.5
55 or older	1.6
<b>Race/Hispanic origin</b>	
White*	34.3%
Black*	45.9
Hispanic	16.9
Other*	2.9
<b>Education</b>	
8th grade or less	8.3%
Some high school	34.0
GED	26.2
High school graduate	17.4
Some college	14.1

\*Excludes persons of Hispanic origin.

Source: BJS, *Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1997*.

**Table 4. Profile of nonviolent offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States**

Characteristic	Percent of released nonviolent offenders
<b>Total</b>	100%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	90.3%
Female	9.7
<b>Race</b>	
White	51.1%
Black	47.9
Other	1.0
<b>Hispanic origin</b>	
Hispanic	24.7%
Non-Hispanic	75.3
<b>Age at release</b>	
14-17	0.3%
18-24	20.1
25-29	23.0
30-34	23.4
35-39	16.5
40-44	9.4
45 or older	7.3

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.

**Table 6. Prior criminal record of nonviolent offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States**

Prior to the nonviolent offense for which the offender had served time and was released from State prison

<b>Prior arrest</b>	
Percent with at least 1 prior arrest for —	
Any crime	94.5%
Any violent crime	31.4%
Mean number of prior arrests	9.3
Median number	7.0
<b>Prior conviction</b>	
Percent with at least 1 prior conviction for —	
Any crime	84.3%
Any violent crime	10.2%
Mean number of prior convictions	4.1
Median number	3.0
Percent with at least 1 prior prison sentence	46.2%

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.

**Table 5. Drug and alcohol abuse of nonviolent offenders expecting release from State prison, 1997**

	Percent of nonviolent State prisoners expecting release within 6 months
<b>Drugs</b>	
Used drugs	
In the month before the offense	62.2%
At time of the offense	36.8
<b>Alcohol</b>	
Reported indicators of alcohol dependence	26.7%
Used alcohol at time of the offense	33.5
<b>Used either alcohol or drugs at time of offense</b>	55.1%

Source: BJS, *Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1997*.

**Table 7. Criminal history of nonviolent offenders expecting release from State prison, 1997**

	Percent of nonviolent State prisoners expecting release within 6 months
<b>Criminal history</b>	
Prior convictions	
At least 1 violent	22.2%
None violent	59.0
No prior convictions	18.8
<b>Number of prior sentences to incarceration or probation</b>	
0	18.9%
1	15.7
2	15.3
3	27.4
4	14.4
5 or more	8.3

Source: BJS, *Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1997*.

**Table 8. Sentence and time served of nonviolent offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States**

Characteristic of prison sentence	Percent of released nonviolent offenders
<b>Sentence length</b>	
Mean	51.6 months
Median	39.2
<b>Time served before release</b>	
Mean	16.1 months
Median	11.3
<b>Percent of sentence served before release</b>	33.4%
<b>Number of released nonviolent offenders</b>	210,886

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.

**Table 9. "Serious offender" indicators of nonviolent offenders expecting release from State prison, by type of current offense, 1997**

Type of current offense	Percent of nonviolent State prisoners expecting release within 6 months				
	Used weapon in current offense	Prior violent conviction	On probation/parole/escape at time of offense	Multiple prior sentences	Any "serious offender" indicator
<b>All nonviolent offenses</b>	8.4%	22.2%	63.6%	65.4%	88.4%
Property offenses	3.4	22.8	65.8	66.8	88.2
Drug offenses	7.6	19.0	58.7	61.1	82.2
Public-order offenses	19.5	26.5	67.5	70.0	100.0

Source: BJS, *Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, 1997*.

**Table 10. Recidivism rates of nonviolent offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States, by time after release**

Time after release	Cumulative percent of released nonviolent offenders who were —		
	Rearrested	Reconvicted	Returned to prison with new sentence
6 months	31.1%	11.1%	5.3%
1 year	45.8	22.9	11.1
2 years	61.0	38.4	19.9
3 years	69.1	48.4	26.7

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.

**Table 11. Rearrest rates of the 210,886 nonviolent offenders released in 1994 from prisons in 15 States, by charge at rearrest**

Rearrest charge	Percent rearrested within 3 years
<b>All charges</b>	69.1%
Violent offenses	19.9
Property offenses	33.7
Drug offenses	32.6
Public-order offenses	28.6

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some offenders were rearrested for more than one type of offense.

Source: BJS, *Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994*.