

## Illinois prison population trends

By Karen S. Levy McCanna

The prison population in Illinois has dramatically increased in this decade. There were 27,516 inmates in state prisons in December 1990, and 40,788 by the end of 1997 (Figure 1), according to the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC).

There were 26,333 male inmates in state prisons in 1990. By 1997 that number increased 69 percent, to 38,358.

The number of female inmates jumped by more than 170 percent during those seven years, reaching a population in 1997 of 2,430 (Figure 2). Female inmates accounted for nearly 6 percent of the total prison population in 1997.

### Inmate population

Slightly more than 60 percent of the inmates in Illinois prisons in 1997 were between the ages of 21 and 35 (Figure 3). In terms of racial composition, the majority of inmates in 1997 were African American (26,384) (Figure 4). The next largest group was white (9,837), followed by Hispanic (4,086), Asian (66), American Indian (50) and other (2).

Violent offenders made up 27.6 percent of the 1997 admissions and 28.1 percent of the exits from Illinois prison facilities. The number of violent offenders in IDOC has not significantly changed in recent years. The number increased from 20,356 in

Figure 1  
Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC)  
inmate population

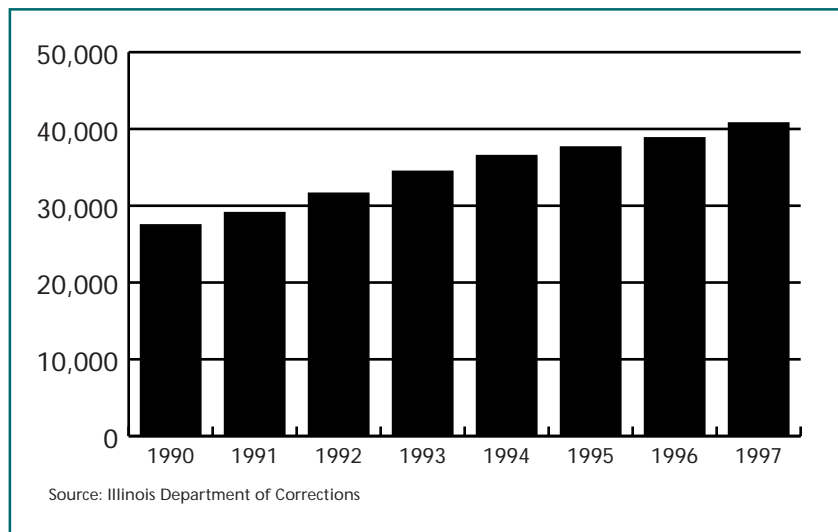
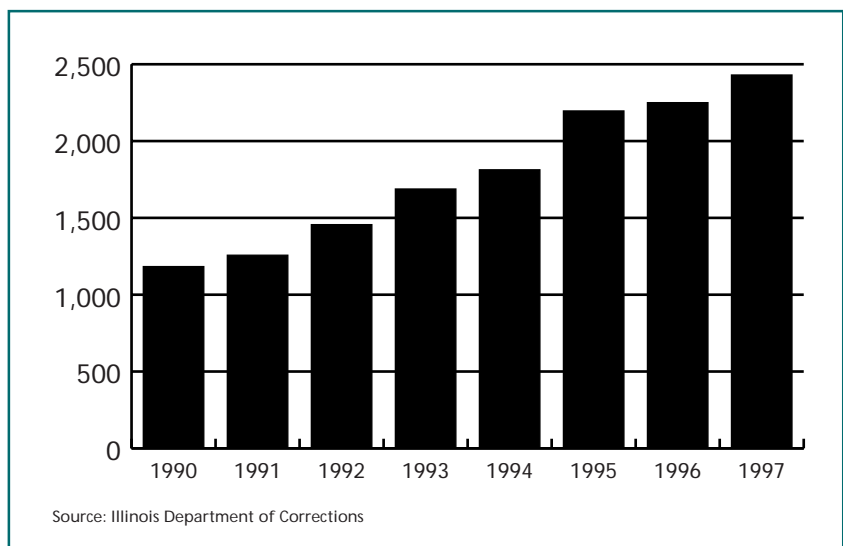


Figure 2  
IDOC female inmate population



1995 to 20,639 in 1996, and increased again to 21,056 in 1997.

The 1997 prison inmate population convicted of a crime against a person decreased to 17,620 (43.2 percent) from 53.3 percent in 1996 (Figure 5). The number of drug offenders increased from 5,271 (19 percent) to 9,848 (24 percent) in 1997 (Figure 6). Drug offenders accounted for 39.7 percent of admissions to IDOC in 1997. Also during that year, 818 sex offenders were admitted to IDOC. Sex offenders accounted for 8.8 percent of the IDOC population in 1997.

### Length of stay

The average sentence imposed on violent offenders in 1997 was 8.8 years, based on prison exits. The average amount of time actually served was three years and the average prison stay was 2.4 years. Time served is time spent in prison as well as jail, mental health custody, juvenile facilities, or custody in another state or federal jurisdiction. Prison stay is time spent in an IDOC facility. Exit numbers for 1997 indicate sex offenders had the longest average sentences and time served, followed by inmates convicted of crimes against another person (Figure 7), including murder convictions.

Drug offenders at IDOC in 1997 had an average sentence of 3.4 years and an average prison stay of one year for 1997. Due to the influx of drug offenders and their relatively short sentences, they made up the largest group of exits (38.3 percent) from the prison population.

Sentences for property offenses averaged about four years. But the actual length of stay in an IDOC facility for a property offender averaged 1.4 years. The total number of Illinois prisoners serving sentences for property offenses in calendar year 1997 was 9,177, or 22.5 percent of the total population.

Figure 3  
Age of IDOC inmates

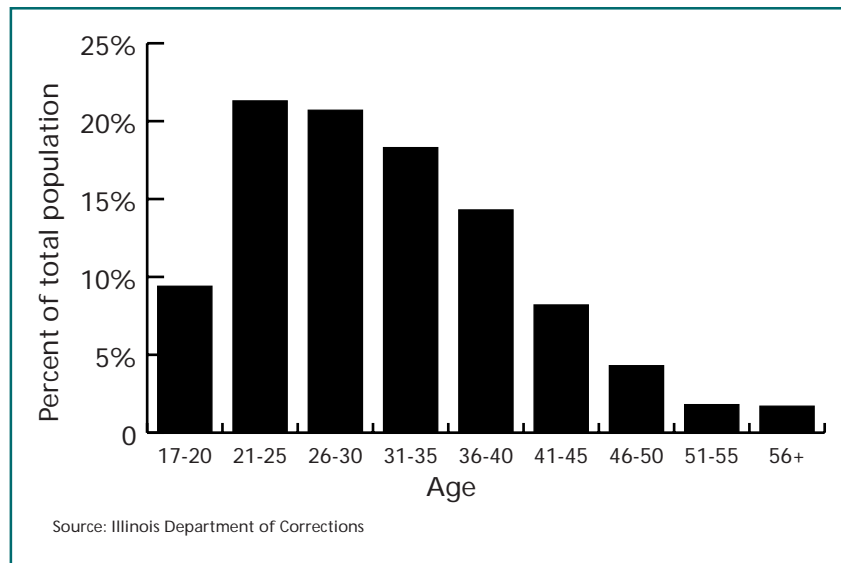
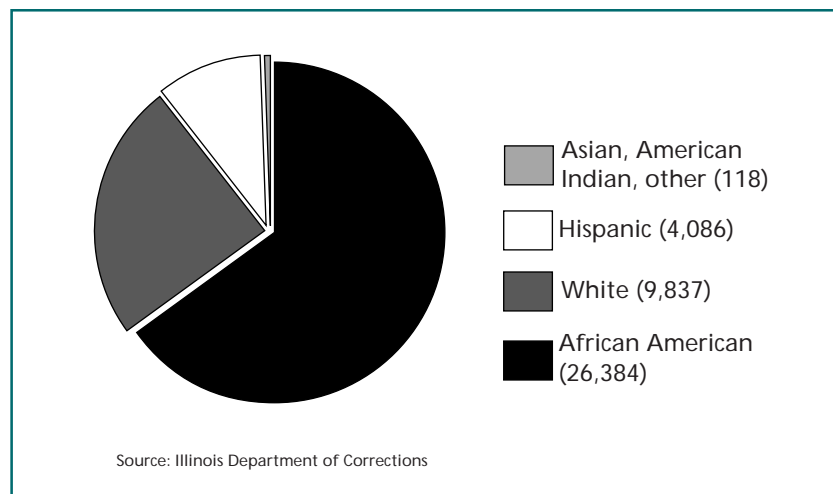


Figure 4  
Racial composition of IDOC inmates, 1997



### Sentencing

Determinate sentencing contributed to the growth of the Illinois prison population by increasing the amount of time that violent and drug offenders are required to serve. Determinant sentencing laws require offenders to fulfill a minimum or maximum amount of time sentenced before they can be considered for release.

Another factor affecting the prison population is truth-in-sentencing. The Truth-in-Sentencing statute (730 ILCS 5/3-6-3) places limitations

on the amount of good conduct credit that may be given to inmates convicted of certain violent crimes, increasing the amount of time served. Inmates convicted of first-degree murder may not receive good conduct credit and inmates convicted of other specific offenses may receive no more than 4.5 days of good conduct credit for each month of time served. At the end of 1997, 1,324 inmates were serving sentences under the guidelines of truth-in-sentencing. (Note: The Appellate Court of Illinois, Second District, declared the

Truth-in-Sentencing Law unconstitutional in March 1998, based on the legislature’s violation of the Illinois Constitution’s single subject clause. The Illinois Supreme Court affirmed this decision in 1999. The decision required inmates sentenced under the law from August 1995 through June 1998 to be reevaluated for release dates. However, in response to the appellate decision, the legislature reenacted the Truth-in-Sentencing Law in June 1998, applying truth-in-sentencing to offenders who commit offenses after the reenactment date. The reenacted law is not affected by the Supreme Court decision declaring the original 1995 law unconstitutional.)

### Earned time program

The earned time program also affects the growth of the prison population. Inmates may be granted meritorious good time credit of one day for each day served. The IDOC director also may award inmates an additional 180 days of supplemental meritorious good time credit, with a limit of not more than 90 days for inmates convicted of certain serious offenses. In addition to meritorious good time credits, inmates participating in educational/vocational, substance abuse treatment, or correctional industry programs may be eligible for a sentence reduction of one-half day for every day of program participation. The program began in 1994 and became fully operational in 1995. There were 15,120 inmates eligible for the earned time program in 1994. Of those, 3,129 actually received earned time credit.

Recidivism rates (measured as a return to prison within three years of release) for inmates who participated in the earned time program and received credit are similar to those eligible inmates who did not participate in the program. Earned time programming reduces the time spent in prison by participating inmates. The program saved IDOC more than \$11 million from its inception in FY94 through FY97.

Figure 5  
IDOC admissions and population by offense type

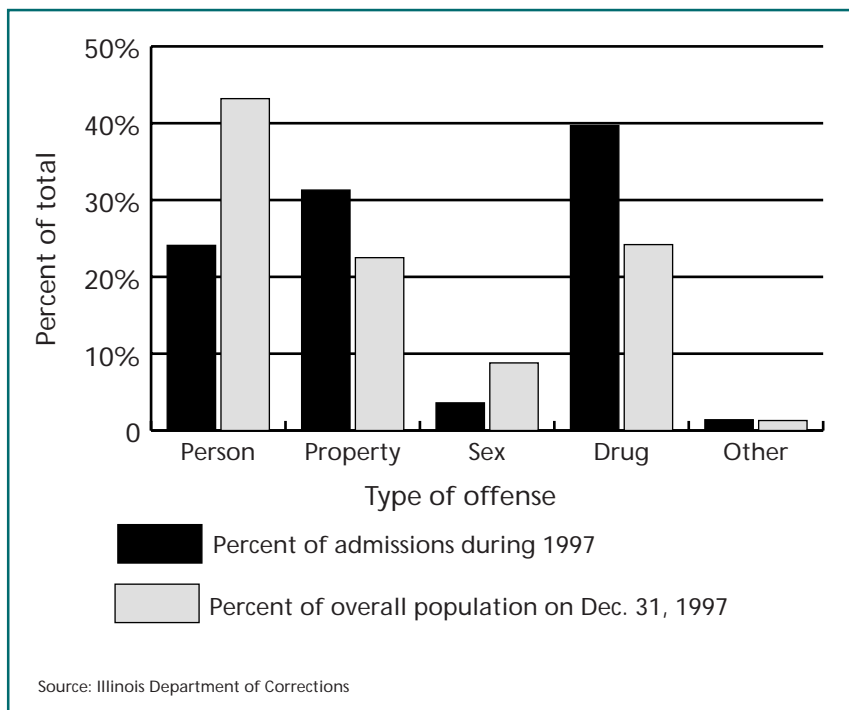
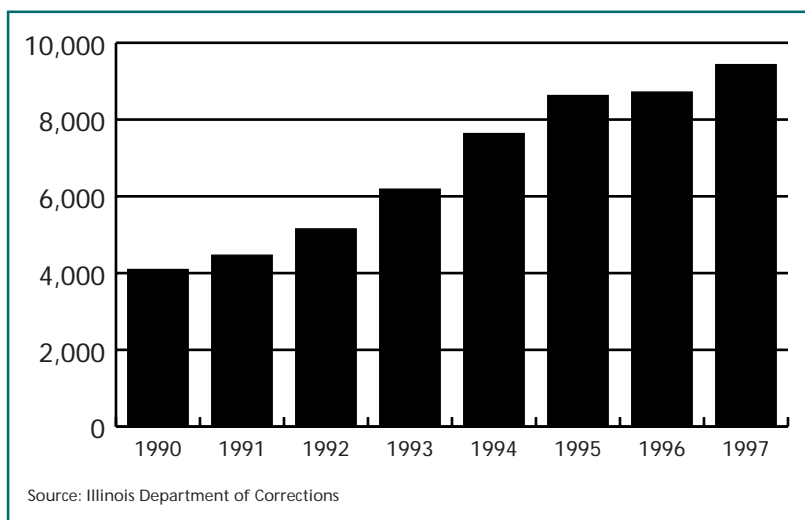


Figure 6  
Drug offense admissions to IDOC



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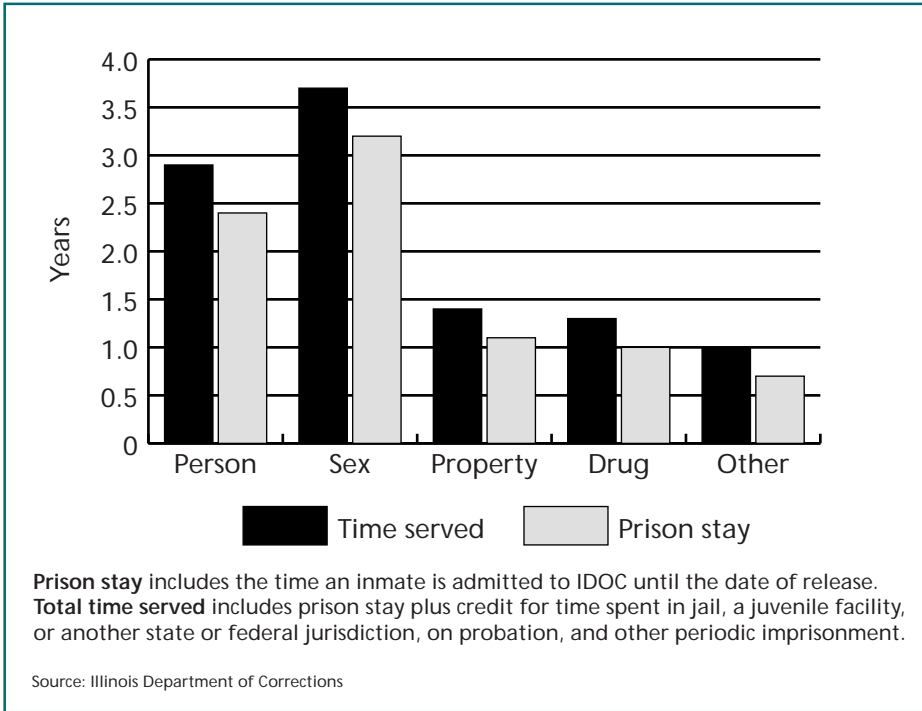
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Figure 7  
Length of stay by offense type, 1997



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