

March 20, 2026

Research in Corrections Environments: Lessons from the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative



Presentation for Talking Data Equity Series

Agenda

- Introductions
- Why Focus Research on Corrections Environments?
- Prison Research and Innovation Initiative
 - Overview
 - Methodology
 - Findings
- Lessons Learned on Reaching Incarcerated People and Corrections Staff
- Implications for Data Equity

Introduction

About Me



- Principal Research Associate at the Urban Institute
- Mixed methods researcher
- Focused on supporting incarcerated people & corrections staff on...
 - Health & wellness
 - Safety
 - Education, employment, & upward mobility
 - Connecting with their families & children

The Urban Institute

- Nonprofit research organization founded on one simple idea: To improve lives and strengthen communities, we need practices and policies that work
- Mission: To drive impact by equipping changemakers with evidence and solutions.
- Vision: A future where every person and community has the opportunity and power to thrive.
- Impact Objectives
 - Increase upward mobility
 - Create communities of opportunity and shared prosperity
 - Build a fair and just society
 - Improve people's well-being
 - Promote effective use of resources



Justice and Safety

Our work drives change to establish safe communities and an equitable and effective criminal legal system.

Subscribe ✉

Visit the Prison and Jail Research Hub: Building evidence for safer prisons and jails >

Expertise

Community Safety

Courts, Corrections, and Reentry

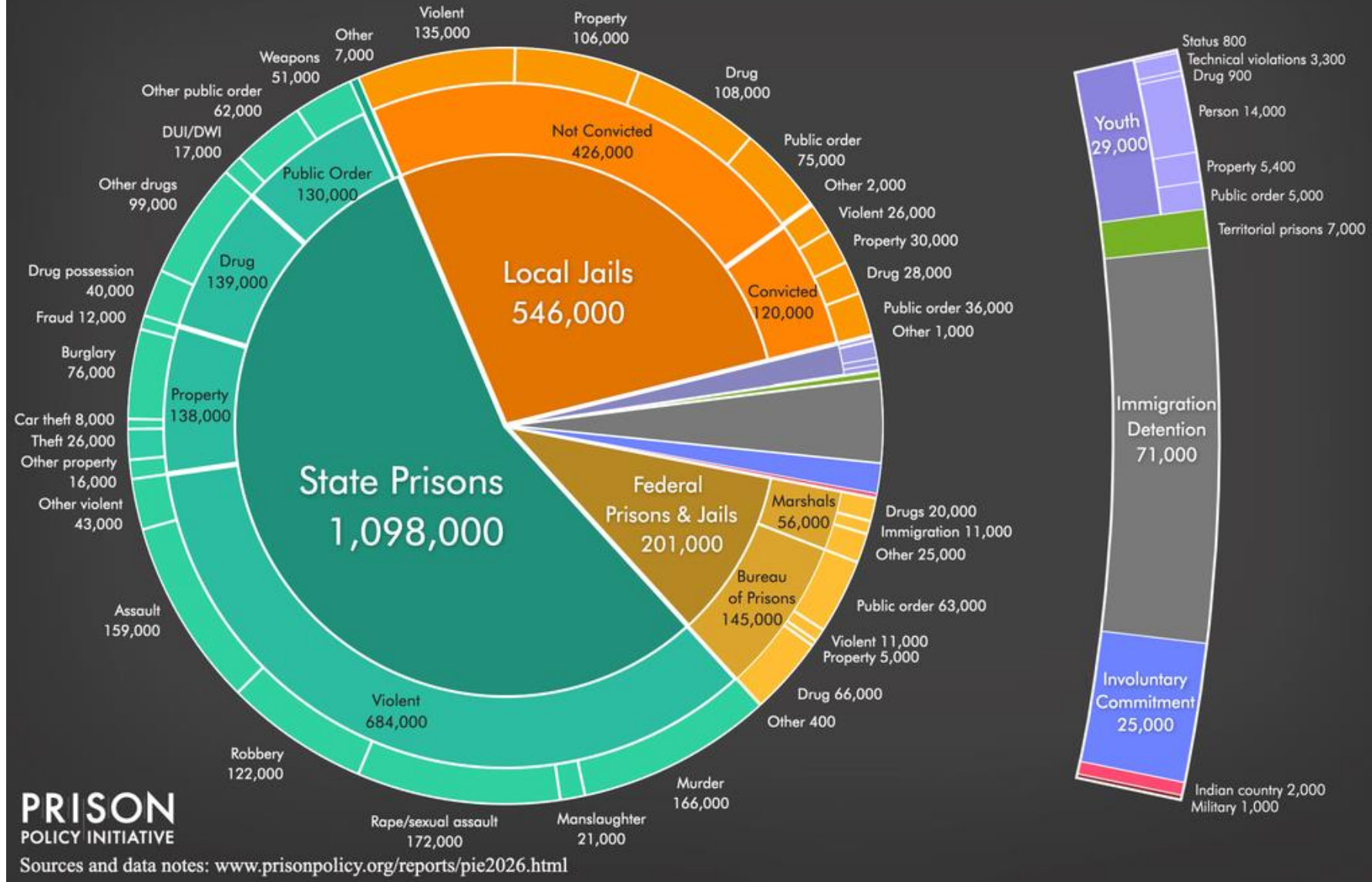
Justice Systems Data and Analytics

Victim Safety and Justice

Why Focus Research on Corrections Environments?

How many people are locked up in the United States?

The U.S. locks up more people per capita than any other independent democracy, at the staggering rate of 580 per 100,000 residents. But to end mass incarceration, we must first consider *where* and *why* nearly 2 million people are confined nationwide.



Mass incarceration directly impacts millions of people

But just how many, and in what ways?



Compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative from 2020 Bureau of Justice Statistics data; Shannon, et al. (2017) *The Growth, Scope, and Spatial Distribution of People With Felony Records in the United States, 1948-2010*; SEARCH's *Survey of State Criminal History Information Systems, 2018* (estimate of criminal records created according to the methodology of NELP's *65 Million Need Not Apply*); and FWD.us (2018) *Every Second: The Impact of the Incarceration Crisis on America's Families*

Depth of Impact

- Incarceration can lead to devastating consequences for individuals, their families, and communities
 - Loss of employment and income
 - Jeopardized housing
 - Family instability
 - Worsened physical health
 - Worsened mental health
 - Disrupted upward mobility and access to future opportunities

Most people in
prisons & jails are
returning back into
our communities

Watchdog: New Jersey prisons face deepening staffing crisis, growing humanitarian concerns

By Steve Janoski • November 12, 2025

A Cascading Crisis: U.S. Federal Prisons Grapple with Decades of Unsafe Understaffing

By Megan Gates | 16 March 2026 | Focus on Corrections Security

NC prisons face 'dire' staffing crisis

Years of vacancies, low pay and high turnover have eroded staffing levels, disrupting operations and raising safety concerns.



by Rachel Crumpler

February 5, 2026

Correctional Management

Email

County jail morale is collapsing and leaders must act

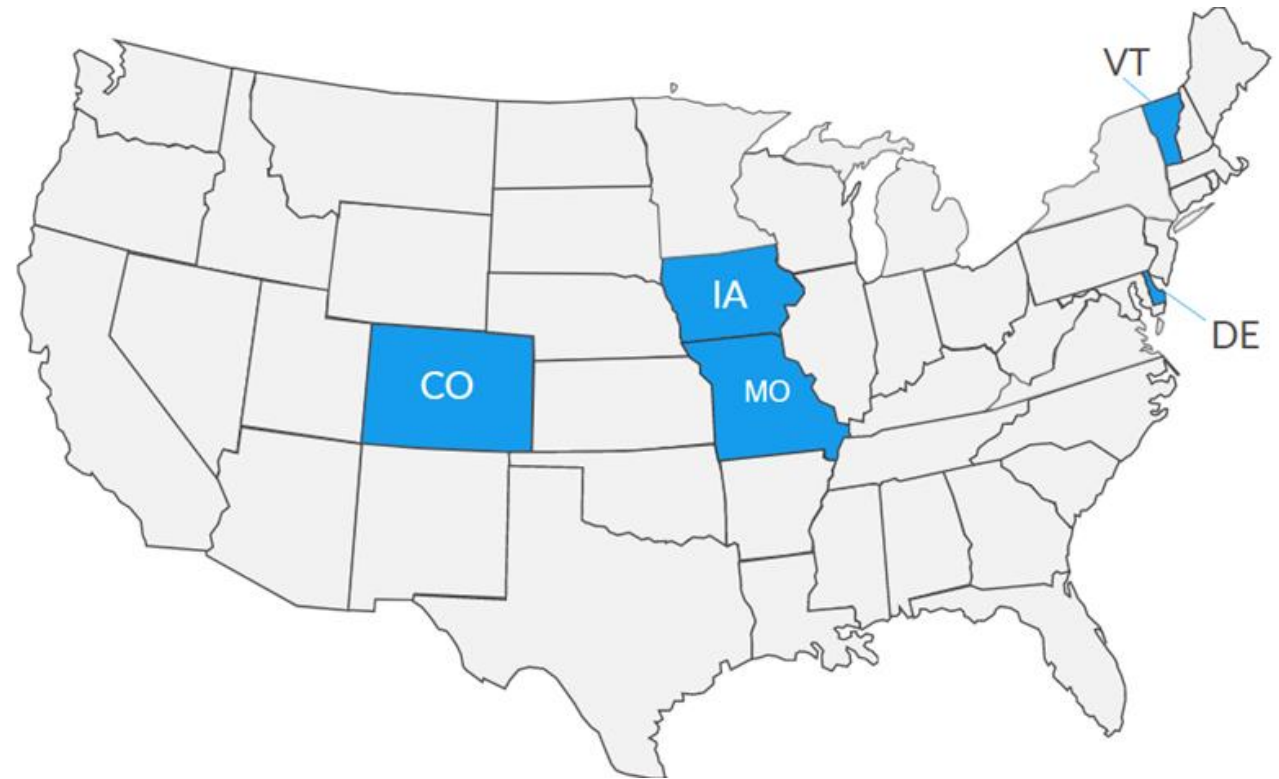
Understaffing, trauma exposure and poor leadership are hollowing out county jails from the inside. Seven

Despite their extensive reach, prisons & jails remain poorly understood institutions with limited research on living and working conditions.

Prison Research and Innovation Initiative

Prison Research and Innovation Initiative (PRII)

- Initiative to conduct participatory research on prison **living** and **working** conditions and pilot data-driven innovative strategies
- Started in 2019
- Funded by Arnold Ventures
- Five U.S. state prisons
- Community engagement
- Participatory research



Prison Partners



Research Partners



UNIVERSITY *of*
DENVER



University of Missouri

UNIVERSITY OF
DELAWARE



University
of Vermont

Methodology: Participatory Research

- “Nothing about us without us”
- Core tenants
 - Power sharing
 - Empowered participation
 - Action
- Goal was to engage incarcerated people, corrections staff, and prison leadership as equal partners in research to document and improve prison working and living conditions

Participatory Research in Action

- Co-designed surveys
- Research councils of incarcerated people and staff guiding the work
- Peer-to-peer data collection and recruitment
- Collaborative analysis and dissecting of findings
- Community-driven innovation development
- Town halls and regular feedback loops

Climate Survey Data

- Three waves of climate surveys in 5 state prisons
- Over 7,000 responses
 - 1,750 responses from staff
 - 5,268 responses from incarcerated people (IP)
- ~30 cross-site questions along with site-specific questions
- Administered between 2021 and 2024



Findings on Prison Living and Working Conditions

Prison Living Environments

- IP perceived their **basic living conditions** as negative overall
 - >50% felt they did not get enough to eat in prison
 - Two-thirds felt they did not get what they need for good personal hygiene for free
- IP Confidence in staff keeping them safe is low
 - Two-thirds felt staff at their prison did not make them feel safe
- IP hold mixed but often skeptical views of staff relationships, fairness, & institutional responsiveness
 - >50% did not feel that staff treated them with respect

Prison Living Environments

- IP perceive access to meaningful activities to be limited & are skeptical about their facility's preparation for release
- IP see major gaps in access to physical & mental health care
 - When available, access is inconsistent & insufficient

Incarcerated people and staff largely disagreed on the state of prison living conditions.

Prison Living Conditions Wave 3 Perceptions

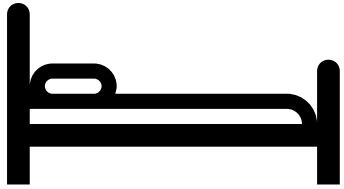


40% of IP agreed/strongly agreed that they get enough to eat, compared to **62% of staff**.

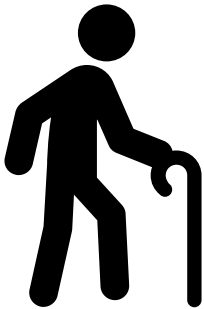


36% of IP agreed/strongly agreed that they get what they need for good personal hygiene for free, compared to **62% of staff**.

Prison Living Conditions Wave 3 Perceptions



40% of IP agreed/strongly agreed that they usually can get a good night sleep, compared to **62% of staff**.



37% of IP agreed/strongly agreed that it's easy for people with physical disabilities to get around the prison, compared to **52% of staff**.

Prison Working Environments

- Corrections staff showed mixed levels of job satisfaction overall.
 - Most take pride in their job & that they positively influence incarcerated people through their work
 - Only ~50% said they look forward to coming to work
- Staff were split on whether their workplaces ensure their safety
 - < 50% felt their prison's policies and practices support staff well-being
 - < 50% felt their prison's leadership does everything possible to keep staff safe.

Prison Working Environments

- Corrections staff rated COVID-19 responses positively overall
 - Strong majority said staff had access to sanitary items, were supplied with cleaning supplies and masks, and were wearing masks.
 - Only half of staff felt their prison's leadership demonstrated care for the well-being of staff during COVID-19.

Lessons Learned on Research in Corrections Environments

Lessons Learned

- Significant trust and relationship-building must take place
- Frequent in-person presence = showing up regularly overcomes skepticism
- Required flexibility to adapt processes in real time
- Need to recognize legacy of research and harm in corrections environments
- Be respectful of operations and security priorities
- People want to be **heard** and share their stories – they are looking for someone to listen
- Corrections staff and incarcerated people may agree more than you think!

Engaging Incarcerated Populations

- Consistent, reliable presence and engagement – tell people the next time you will be there when you are leaving
- Do not just focus on one part of the incarcerated population – try to reach all units if you can, including segregation
- Conduct exercises to build trust
- Ensure honest and transparent communication
- Do not overpromise

Engaging Corrections Staff

- Meet them where they are at – go to their units, do not expect them to come to you
- Recognize heavy workloads and limited availability
- Offer to meet outside the work environment
- Provide paper and pencil (non-internet) versions for providing feedback – these may feel safer to them

Implications for Data Equity

Data Equity Implications

- Entering closed environments is possible with preparation and sensitivities
- People in prison want to be heard and listened to, and so do staff!
- Increasing projects in these settings helps us to uplift their voices and reveal what is happening behind closed doors – both good and bad
- Doing these types of projects increases research capacity of corrections settings that are not used to research or oversight

Discussion and Q&A

Contact information
emccoy@urban.org