

California Prisons Educator Guide

California has one of the biggest, most expensive prison systems in the country. It's severely overcrowded, and the state spends a lot more per inmate than it does per student. But things have slowly begun to change. In May 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state to reduce its prison population by thousands of inmates, and California is responding.

EDUCATION SUBJECTS

Government

American History

English Language Arts

CONTENT STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards(CCS): ELA Reading Informational Text, 9-10.7-9: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums; analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical significance.

CCS: ELA Speaking and Listening, 11-12.4-6: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence; convey a clear and distinct perspective; make strategic use of digital media.

CCS: ELA History/Social Studies; RH 9-10: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary or secondary sources.

California Career Technical Education (CTE) Public Services Industry Sector (12.7.3): Discuss reserved powers and concurrent powers of state governments; (12.7.5): Explain how public policy is formed; (12.5.2): Analyze judicial activism and restraint and the effects of each policy over the decades.



KQED AND PBS RESOURCES FOR TEACHING THIS TOPIC

MULTIMEDIA

- Visit the News Education blog for explanations and background context on why the system is so crowded. Includes interactive maps and multimedia.
<http://blogs.kqed.org/howdwegethere/special-packages/californias-prisons/>

LISTEN

- News of the Supreme Court's decision (KQED News: 5/23/11; duration: 4:00, w/ transcript)
<http://www.kqed.org/a/kqednews/RN201105231730/a>
- A description of how realignment works and will be implemented (The California Report: 9/30/11; duration: 5:49)
<http://www.californiareport.org/archive/R201109301630/a>
- One-hour KQED Forum on realignment, including interviews with criminal justice experts (7/29/11; duration: 1 hour)
<http://www.kqed.org/a/forum/R201107290900>
- A day in the life of a San Francisco parole agent (The California Report: 8/26/11; duration: 7:50, w/transcript)
<http://www.californiareport.org/archive/R201108261630/b>

WATCH

- PBS NewsHour segment on realignment and concerns from individual counties (7/15/11; duration: 9:04, w/transcript)
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/law/july-dec11/prisons_07-15.html

GLOSSARY

Determinate Sentencing

A kind of criminal sentencing in which specific prison terms are given for specific types of crimes.

Eighth Amendment

Part of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights, it states: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted."

Jail

Usually a city or county-run institution that housing lower-level offenders for relatively short periods of time.

Parole

A supervision program that most ex-offenders in California are placed in for three years after their release from prison.

Prison

State or federal correctional facilities that often house more serious, longer-term offenders.

Recidivism

When released offenders return to prison, either because of a parole violation or a repeated crime. In California, the recidivism rate is unusually high: nearly 70 percent.

TOPIC BACKGROUND

- In May 2011 the U.S. Supreme Court in a landmark decision, ruled that California's overcrowded prisons violated the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (prohibiting cruel and unusual punishment).
- The Court's decision was largely based on the inadequate degree of medical care available for inmates as a result of overcrowding. Lack of services has resulted in avoidable deaths and suicides.
- California was mandated to reduce its state inmate population by about 33,000 inmates within two years (starting October 2011).
- To avoid a mass release of inmates, California passed Assembly Bill 109. The law diverts newly convicted non-violent, low-risk inmates to county-run jails and local probation programs, rather than housing them in state prison facilities. It also calls for major reforms in the parole system so as to better prevent repeated offenses (recidivism).
- Each of California's 58 counties came up with their own plans for handling the additional inmates. Counties receive funding from the state proportionate to how many inmates they plan to oversee.
- The process of realignment began in October 2011, and has generally gone according to plan. Law enforcement officials in some counties, though, have expressed concern over public safety, inmate holding capacity, and the availability of adequate state funding needed to handle the increase in prisoners.
- Since the early 1980s, California's prison population has exploded at a much faster rate than the state's general adult population. Its 33 prison facilities are drastically outdated and over capacity. Even though the number of inmates has decreased in recent years due to relaxed parole rules for non-violent offenders, the number of state inmates (about 145,000) is still at close to twice the system's intended capacity.
- The huge increase in state inmates is not a result of any significant jump in crime rates (crime rates have actually fallen significantly in the last decade). It is due in part to tougher sentencing laws (determinate sentencing and three strikes) and strict parole rules that have increased recidivism, especially among non-violent offenders.



