

# Key Research Findings

The Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) convened the Task Force on Long Sentences to assess drivers of growth in the number of people sentenced to 10 years or more behind bars, the effectiveness of long sentences in preventing and deterring crime, and their effects on incarcerated people and their families, crime victims and survivors, communities, and correctional staff. The panel examined the impact of such sentences on racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in the prison system, and considered ways to improve the post-release success of people who have served long prison terms.

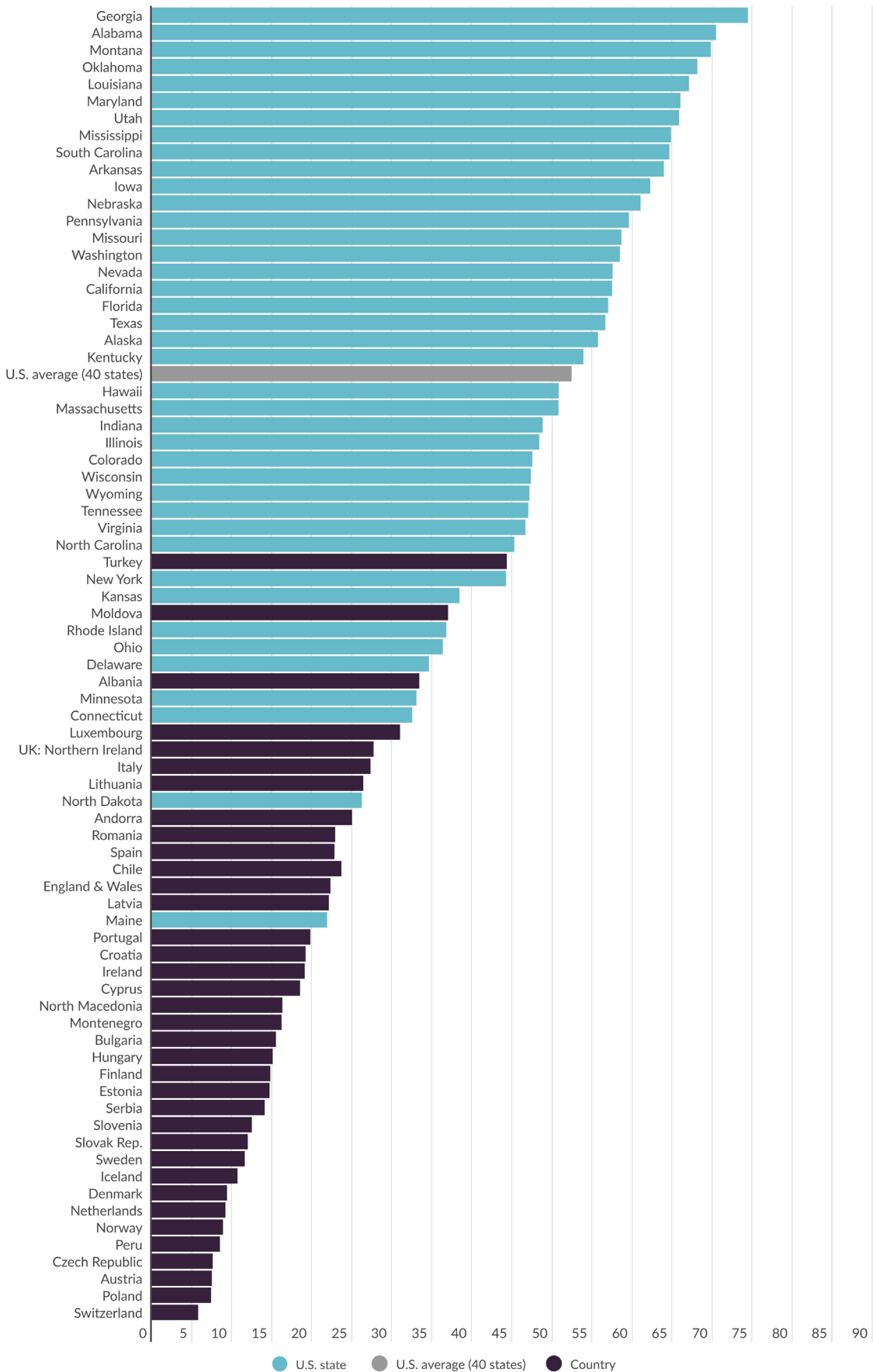
Co-chaired by former U.S. Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates and former U.S. Rep. Trey Gowdy, the Task Force met from February through December 2022. Its 16 members represented a broad range of experience and perspectives, including crime victims and survivors, people who had served long prison terms, and representatives of prosecution, defense, law enforcement, courts, and corrections. The Task Force was directed by John Maki, who previously led Illinois' nonpartisan prison oversight organization and has served in multiple other criminal justice policy roles.

To inform its deliberations and [final recommendations](#), the Task Force commissioned original research guided by four research questions central to understanding long sentences. Key findings are below:

## 1. What do long sentences look like in the U.S. and how does it compare to other nations?

- People with long sentences [account for a relatively small share](#) of state prison admissions (16% in 2020) and releases, but because they serve long periods, their numbers stack up over time.
- In 2020, 63% of people in prison were [serving a long prison sentence](#), up from 46% in 2005. However, the growth was due largely to smaller numbers of people serving shorter sentences.
- Compared to other age groups, people aged 55 and over are the [fastest-growing age group](#) serving long sentences. Between 2005 and 2020, the share of people serving long sentences who were aged 55 and over grew from 8% to 20%, a 153% increase.
- The use of long sentences [has increased in nations across the globe](#) over the last several decades, but the U.S. remains an outlier in the extent to which it imposes them.
- The U.S. [holds a substantial proportion](#) of the world's population of people serving life sentences (40%) as well as the vast majority (83%) of individuals sentenced to Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP).
- The higher rate of homicide in the U.S. [explains a large portion](#) of its greater use of long sentences compared to other developed countries. However, many U.S. states incarcerate more people and for longer periods of time when compared to Latin American nations with higher rates of violence.

## Percentage of Incarcerated Individuals Sentenced to Long Sentences (10+ Years) in Europe, Chile, Peru, and 40 U.S. States



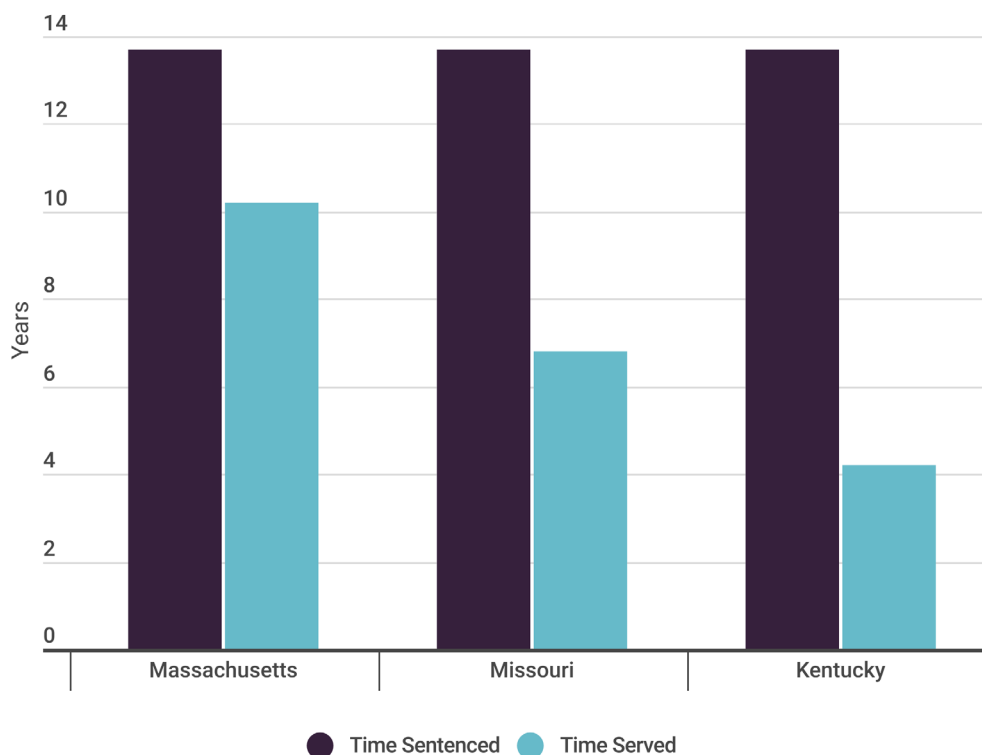
## 2. What factors shape long sentences?

- Actual time served in prison [is often quite different](#) from the sentence length pronounced in court, and therefore sentence length alone only partially explains the individual and policy implications of long sentences.
- Back-end factors—such as allocation of sentence credits and parole release frameworks—[explain more variation](#) (60%) in the prison time actually served than do differences in sentence length (40%).
- Some states are much [more likely to impose long prison sentences](#) than others. The proportion of people admitted to prison with long sentences ranges from 2% in Colorado to 66% in Michigan.
- States with identical sentence length [can have different time served](#) based on back-end factors. For example, although the average long sentence (measured as 10+ years) in Massachusetts, Missouri, and Kentucky is the same (13.7 years), the average time served in those states is 10.2, 6.8, and 4.2 years, respectively.
- For the population serving long sentences, [relatively small changes to statute](#) moved from its current average time served to the longest time-served scenario, the prison population could increase by up to 350%.

## 3. How do long sentences affect public safety?

- Long prison sentences [prevent some crime from occurring](#) through an incapacitation effect, although estimates of the magnitude of the crime-prevention effects are inconsistent and vary by crime type. The certainty and swiftness of consequences function as a more effective crime deterrent than their severity.
- Research findings on the specific deterrent effect of long prison sentences are mixed; [the weight of the evidence](#) indicates that long sentences have either no effect on recidivism or slightly increase recidivism when compared to shorter sentences.
- A small percentage (5% to 10%) of individuals [are responsible for a majority of violent crime](#) and drug trafficking. Research on the effectiveness of strategies to identify and selectively incarcerate these individuals to decrease crime shows mixed results. Longer sentences may increase drug trafficking offenses and other crimes for which incarcerated people are quickly replaced by new recruits.
- Modest reductions in the length of long prison stays [would likely result](#) in relatively few additional arrests. A study focused on Illinois estimates that reducing time served by one, two, or three years for the 376 people serving long sentences who are released annually in the state would result in 11 to 37 additional arrests. Reducing time served by 10%, 20%, or 30% would result in an estimated 17 to 63 additional arrests in Illinois.
- The additional arrests that may occur when prison stays are shortened are [unlikely to be for violent crimes](#) or weapons charges.
- The relatively small number of additional predicted arrests [indicates that the vast majority](#) of people serving long prison terms have “aged out” of criminal behavior near the end of their stays, and that shortening their prison terms can reduce the size of the prison population without significantly compromising public safety.

Average Time Sentenced (for Long Sentences of 10+ Years) and Served in Massachusetts, Missouri, and Kentucky



## 4. How are long sentences experienced?

- People serving long sentences make up nearly two thirds of the incarcerated population in the U.S., and most will eventually be released to the community. But [fewer than ten prison systems](#) have programs specifically targeting this population. Those specialized programs that do exist have not been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness in promoting institutional safety or reducing recidivism.
- People serving long sentences [have distinctive needs](#) that can make prison life and successful reentry difficult. These include needs related to aging, lengthy separation from family and community, institutionalization, and loss of hope.
- There is [significant overlap in experiences](#) described by many victims and survivors of crime and formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones. In a series of listening sessions, participants with both experiences converged on many topics, including the purposes of sentencing and the meaning of accountability. There was also broad agreement on recommendations for change, such as better opportunities for reconsideration of sentences, restorative justice and victim-offender dialogues, and improved programming for incarcerated people.
- In general, participants [agreed that rehabilitation](#) should be a purpose of sentencing, but that programming was often not in place to support that purpose. One formerly incarcerated participant said that “the lengthier the sentence, the least amount of programming you are entitled to.”