

Quiz on the U.S. Prison System

Take this quiz to test how much you know about the U.S. prison system.

“A Catholic approach begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. As bishops, we believe that the current trend of more prisons and more executions, with too little education and drug treatment, does not truly reflect Christian values and will not really leave our communities safer. We are convinced that our tradition and our faith offer better alternatives that can hold offenders accountable and challenge them to change their lives; reach out to victims *and* reject vengeance; restore a sense of community and resist the violence that has engulfed so much of our culture.”

U.S. Catholic Bishops, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” Nov. 15, 2000.

- The focus of the U.S. prison system is:
 - Retribution (punishment)
 - Rehabilitation (healing)
- True or False? The latest trend in prisons is towards highest-security, supermax prisons with individual, isolated units.
 - True
 - False
- _____ of people in prison are racial and ethnic minorities.
 - 1/3
 - 1/2
 - 5/8
 - 2/3
- The fastest growing ethnic group in prisons is:
 - African Americans
 - Native Americans
 - Hispanics
 - Caucasians
- The American prison population is:
 - increasing
 - decreasing
- True or False? Prisons in the U.S. are required to offer rehabilitation services to reform the inmate.
 - True
 - False
- True or False? Most inmates are “taught a lesson” by being in jail and therefore, few inmates recidivate (return to jail).
 - True
 - False
- True or False? With mandatory sentencing laws, the judge has greater freedom and flexibility in assigning the offender the sentence he or she deserves.
 - True
 - False
- True or False? People who have committed felonies are not allowed to vote.
 - True
 - False
- True or False? Crack and powder cocaine are both used by people across the spectrum of social classes and incomes, and use or sale of 5 grams of the two drugs receive similar sentences.
 - True
 - False
- Drug offenders make up _____ percent of those in Federal prisons.
 - 20
 - 40
 - 60
 - 80



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12. _____ U.S. prisoners is mentally ill.

- a. One in thirty
- b. One in twenty-two
- c. One in fourteen
- d. One in six

13. True or False? Those with felony convictions are restricted from accessing social benefits and economic opportunities.

- a. True
- b. False

14. True or False? 200,000 minors are prosecuted in adult criminal courts each year and many of them sent to adult prisons.

- a. True
- b. False

15. True or False? As a government cost-cutting measure, many prisons are being privatized.

- a. True
- b. False

16. True or False? Prisons are a leading rural growth industry.

- a. True
- b. False

17. True or False? Since 1980 the number of women in prison has increased at nearly double the rate for men.

- a. True
- b. False

18. True or False? A woman who gives birth in prison is given a special leave of absence of at least a month to care for her child immediately after birth.

- a. True
- b. False

19. True or False? Many women prisoners are sexually abused while in prison.

- a. True
- b. False

“We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem tried to . . . develop this line of thought, perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society.”

Pope John Paul II, July 9, 2000



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1. a. The U.S. perspective of prisons focuses on retribution and punishment of the offender. Mandatory sentencing, limited treatment and educational programs, and revoked civil rights, all serve to intensify punishment of offenders.

2. True. Supermax, or highest security, prisons, are increasing the use of control units, small rooms in which prisoners are kept in solitary confinement for 22-23 hours a day. This leaves the prisoner without access to vocational, educational, or recreational activity, prevents physical contact with anyone, including visitors, and restricts other human rights. A higher rate of prisoner abuse by guards has also been reported in these situations. (Prison Activist Resource Center)

“Our society seems to prefer punishment to rehabilitation and retribution to restoration thereby indicating a failure to recognize prisoners as human beings.”

U.S. Catholic Bishops, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” Nov. 15, 2000.

3. d. Two-thirds of people currently in prison are racial and ethnic minorities. One in every eight black male in his twenties is in prison or jail on any given day. These trends have been exacerbated by the impact of the “war on drugs,” with three-fourths of all drug offenders being persons of color, far out of proportion to their share of drug users in society.

(The Sentencing Project)

“Socio-economic factors such as extreme poverty, discrimination, and racism are serious contributors to crime. Sadly, racism often shapes American attitudes and policies toward crime and criminal justice. We see it in who is jobless and who is poor, who is a victim of crime and who is in prison, who lacks adequate counsel and who is on death row. We cannot ignore the fact that one-fifth of our preschoolers are growing up in poverty and far too many go to bed hungry. Any comprehensive approach to criminal justice must address these factors, but it should also consider the positive impact of strong, intact families. . . . The failure of our education system in many communities contributes to crime. Fighting poverty, educating children, and supporting families are essential anti-crime strategies.”

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4. Both c. and d. The hispanics and white populations in jail both grew by 87% from 1990 to 2004, while the number of black inmates rose by 60%. However, African Americans are still the most disproportionately represented as a percent of their national population. African Americans are two times more likely than hispanics and five times more likely than whites to be in jail.

(Bureau of Justice, 2005)

5. a. The population of American correctional system has increased exponentially in the past thirty years in response to shifts in policy towards mandatory minimum and determinate sentencing. The result is that over fifty percent of those in both states and federal prisons are now non-violent or drug offenders. Yet, persons convicted of a crime today are far more likely to be sentenced to incarceration, and will spend a longer period in prison than their counterparts in past decades.

“New approaches must move beyond the slogans of the moment (such as “three strikes and you’re out”) and the excuses of the past (such as “criminals are simply trapped by their background”). Crime, corrections, and the search for real community require far more than the policy clichés of conservatives and liberals.

“A Catholic approach begins with the recognition that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender. As bishops, we believe that the current trend of more prisons and more executions, with too little education and drug treatment, does not truly reflect Christian values and will not really leave our communities safer. We are convinced that our tradition and our faith offer better alternatives that can hold offenders accountable and challenge them to change their lives; reach out to victims *and* reject vengeance; restore a sense of community and resist the violence that has engulfed so much of our culture.”

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Between June 2003 and June 2004, an average of 900 people were incarcerated each week in the U.S. By June 2004, the nation’s state and federal prison and local jail population exceeded 2.1 million people. With 726 prisoners per 100,000 residents, the United States imprisons people at a rate nearly 10 times that of other democracies. More than three-fifths of countries (62.5%) have rates below 150 per 100,000.

Prison overcrowding, waning state government funds, and decreased programming in prisons have resulted from this



swelling in population.

(The Sentencing Project, Bureau of Justice)

6. False. The federal prison system operates treatment programs in only 42 of its 100 federal prisons, with a combined capacity of 6,000 participants, enough for less than 6 percent of the 110,000 inmates in the system (Federal Bureau of Prisons).

“Our criminal justice system should punish offenders and, when necessary, imprison them to protect society. Their incarceration, however, should be about more than punishment. Since nearly all inmates will return to society, prisons must be places where offenders are challenged, encouraged, and rewarded for efforts to change their behaviors and attitudes, and where they learn the skills needed for employment and life in community. We call upon government to redirect the vast amount of public resources away from building more and more prisons and toward better and more effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and programs of probation, parole, and reintegration.”

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7. False. The Bureau of Justice Statistics’ tracking of released inmates found that two thirds will recidivate within a few years, and that one fifth of those incarcerated for nonviolent crimes will be rearrested for violent ones.

8. False. With the popular “one size fits all” mandatory sentencing laws, prosecutors are able to push for a set sentence to be given according to the crime no matter individual circumstances. Court decisions in the past few years have supported giving legislatures vast authority to authorize or require even the most severe sentences without permitting the presiding judge to use discretion in order to reach a sentence fitting to the particulars of the case.

(The Sentencing Project)

9. True. More than four million Americans are denied the right to vote as a result of laws that prohibit voting by felons or ex-felons. In 48 states (with the exception of Maine and Vermont) and the District of Columbia prisoners cannot vote. In 33 states, felons on probation or

parole are disenfranchised, and in 12 states a felony conviction can result in a lifetime ban long after the completion of a sentence. Because of the racial disparities in the criminal justice system, an estimated 13% of black men unable to vote.

(The Sentencing Project)

10. False. In reaction to media portrayal of crack cocaine in the 1980s as a violence inducing, highly addictive drug that resulted in many social problems in inner cities, Congress passed disparate mandatory sentencing laws: A conviction for the sale of 500 grams of powder cocaine triggers a 5-year mandatory sentence, while only 5 grams of crack cocaine are required to trigger the same 5-year mandatory sentence. Similarly, while sale of 5,000 grams of powder leads to a 10-year sentence, only 50 grams of crack trigger the same 10-year sentence. This is despite the fact that 1 gram of cocaine powder produces .89 grams of crack cocaine, and the two types of cocaine cause similar physical reactions.

Unfortunately, these identical sentences for disparate amounts of the drug cause tend to punish the poor and minorities more than white, upper class persons. Crack is usually sold in small quantities in open-air markets, while powder is more expensive and is usually sold in larger quantities behind closed doors in locations that are inherently private. Since minorities and lower income persons are most likely to inhabit the urban, open-air areas where crack is sold, they are therefore at greater risk of arrest for crack cocaine possession than are white and higher income powder offenders. The latter inhabit working class and upper-class neighborhoods where drug sales are more likely to occur indoors instead of the street sales of the urban neighborhoods that receive disproportionate (greater) attention from law enforcement.

(The Sentencing Project)

11. c. Sixty percent of prisoners incarcerated at the federal level arrive on drug charges. Since 1980, the number of drug offenders in state prisons has increased thirteen-fold, and drug offenders now comprise one-fifth of all state prisoners. Most of these have no prior criminal record for a violent offense, but the “war on drugs” has caused more people to go to jail for lesser crimes. An increasing body of research also indicates that treatment and diversion from prison demonstrate far better results in reducing drug abuse and drug-related crime.

(The Sentencing Project.)



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12. d. One in six U.S. prisoners is mentally ill. Many of them suffer from serious illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and major depression. There are three times as many men and women with mental illness in U.S. prisons as in mental health hospitals. The rate of mental illness in the prison population is three times higher than in the general population. However, prisons are dangerous and damaging places for mentally ill people. They are often victimized and exploited by other prisoners, and prison staff sometimes punish mentally ill prisoners for symptoms of their illness, such as being noisy, refusing orders, self-mutilation, or even attempted suicide. Prisons are deficient in mental health service programs and many prisoners are left untreated.

(Human Rights Watch)

13. True. Since the early 1990s, laws and policies have been enacted to restrict persons with a felony conviction (particularly convictions for drug offenses) from accessing many social benefits and economic opportunities. These include restrictions on employment, receipt of welfare benefits, access to public housing, and eligibility for student loans for higher education.

(The Sentencing Project)

14. True. Laws in most states permit judges to approve the transfer of children from the more protective and treatment-oriented juvenile court to criminal court jurisdiction. Recently, "tough on crime" legislation has begun the transfer of juveniles at a much younger age and for less serious crimes than before. Under these laws, upwards of 200,000 children have been prosecuted each year as adults in criminal court. States such as Maryland, for example, have laws that automatically transfer a child to the adult system if the child is 16 or older and charged with a violent offense, or if the child is 14 or old and charged with a crime, such as murder, that is punishable by death or life imprisonment if committed by an adult. Research demonstrates that children in adult institutions are five times as likely to be sexually assaulted, twice as likely to be beaten by staff, 50 percent more likely to be attacked with a weapon, and eight times as likely to commit suicide as children confined in juvenile facilities.

(Building Blocks for Youth.)

15. True. The recent trend is towards the privatization of corrections. Companies like investment firm Smith Barney, American Express, General Electric, and Correctional Corporation of America have invested in, owned, and administrated prisons. After entering into contract

"We bishops cannot support policies that treat young offenders as though they are adults. The actions of the most violent youth leave us shocked and frightened and therefore they should be removed from society until they are no longer dangerous. But society must never respond to children who have committed crimes as though they are somehow equal to adults—fully formed in conscience and fully aware of their actions. Placing children in adult jails is a sign of failure, not a solution. In many instances, such terrible behavior points to our own negligence in raising children with a respect for life, providing a nurturing and loving environment, or addressing serious mental or emotional illnesses."

U.S. Catholic Bishops, "Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," Nov. 15, 2000.

with government to run jails and prisons, they are paid a fixed sum per prisoner. Critics warn that the profit motive of a private company mandates that these firms operate as cheaply and efficiently as possible, resulting in lower wages for staff, no unions, and fewer services for prisoners.

(Metro Justice)

16. True. Prisons are a leading rural growth industry. With traditional agriculture being pushed aside by agribusiness, many rural American communities are facing difficult economic situations. Economically depressed areas are falling over each other to secure a prison facility of their own. Prisons are seen as a source of jobs in construction, local vendors and prison staff as well as a source of tax revenues. An average prison has a staff of several hundred employees and an annual payroll of several million dollars.

17. True. Nationally, the 93,000 women in state and federal prison represent a figure more than seven times the number in 1980. The "war on drugs" has been the primary factor in this dramatic growth, with a third of women prisoners incarcerated for a drug offense. However, alternatives to incarceration for women have been limited, as has correctional programming designed to rehabilitate from addiction or help women prisoners deal with abuse they have experienced. In addition, large-scale women's imprisonment has created an increasing number of children - estimated at 125,000 - who suffer from their mother's incarceration and the loss of family ties.

(The Sentencing Project)



18. False. While six percent of woman are pregnant when they enter prison, there are few provisions to provide special consideration for this situation. Most states make no special arrangements for the care of newborn children. Often, laws require that the woman inmate be shackled while giving birth. After delivery, the mother and child may be separated within hours, with the infant sent to live with a family member or put into the foster care system. (National Women's Law Center)

"We believe the human person is social. Our dignity, rights, and responsibilities are lived out in relationship with others, and primary among these is the family. . . . maintaining community and family connections can help offenders understand the harm they've done and prepare them for reintegration into society. Isolation may be necessary in some rare cases; but while cutting off family contact can make incarceration easier for those in charge, it can make reintegration harder for those in custody."

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19. True. Rates for rape of women in prison vary greatly among institutions. Seven percent to 27 percent of women inmates reported sexual abuse. William Schulz, the executive director of Amnesty International (AI) USA, states, "sexual abuse is virtually a fact of life for incarcerated women in the U.S." AI reports that while sexual abuse of incarcerated women is a well known fact, accusations of rape by female prisoners often go unreported and commonly end in the transfer of the male guard to a different facility. In addition, women in prison can feel coerced into having sex with male guards so as not to lose privileges and rights. On average, 59 percent of correctional officers working with female inmates are women and 41 percent are men. In six states, male officers are still permitted to routinely pat frisk a female inmate. (Amnesty International, Corrections Compendium, and NIC Prisons Division and Information Centre.)

"The fundamental starting point for all of Catholic social teaching is the defense of human life and dignity: every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and has an inviolable dignity, value, and worth, regardless of race, gender, class, or other human characteristics. Therefore, both the most wounded victim and the most callous criminal retain their humanity. All are created in the image of God and possess a dignity, value, and worth that must be recognized, promoted, safeguarded, and defended. For this reason, any system of penal justice must provide those necessities that enable inmates to live in dignity: food, clothing, shelter, personal safety, timely medical care, education, and meaningful work adequate to the conditions of human dignity."

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Questions for Discussion or Reflection

What did you learn from this fact sheet? What were you most surprised about? Most concerned with?

Re-read the excerpts in the gray boxes through the quiz and answers. What do the U.S. Catholic Bishops say is wrong with the U.S. prison system? What do they think a better prison system would look like?

Does the current U.S. prison system "reach out to victims *and* reject vengeance; restore a sense of community and resist the violence that has engulfed so much of our culture"? Why or why not?

Civil rights (the right to vote) are revoked from those convicted of a felony. What perspective do the U.S. Bishops bring to this?

How do women, minorities, and poor people often become victims in the U.S. legal and prison system?

Prayer

Loving God, throughout history, you have repeatedly forgiven the many failings of your people and responded with healing. Help us to transform our justice system into one that is restorative and rehabilitative, not retributive. We believe that you call us to be healers of society, not seekers of revenge. Help us to challenge policies that send young people to jail again and again instead of working for their reintegration into society, and help us to transform jails and prisons from places of fear and violence to places that can foster this reintegration. Amen.

