

# Aging Prison Population Trends in Washington: Offenses, Custody Levels, and Recidivism, 1998-2018



## Objective

To describe differences in the type of offenses, risk and custody levels and recidivism rates of older incarcerated persons (i.e., 55 years of age and older) compared to younger incarcerated persons over two decades (1998 - 2018).

## Main Findings

The percent of older incarcerated individuals has increased significantly from 1998 to 2018 (4.2% to 12.8%).

There are differences in the custody and risk levels, offense type and recidivism rates amongst the 1998, 2008, and 2018 incarcerated population by age group.

## Problem

The aging prison population continues to receive national focus due to high economic costs associated with the physical, mental and social health care needs of the aging population.

While the number of incarcerated individuals has decreased nationwide since 1993, the number of aging incarcerated individuals has increased. For example, since 1993, the number of aging incarcerated individuals increased by 266% in state and federal prisons, from 3% in 1993 to 11% in 2013, an 8% increase in 20 years<sup>1</sup>.

Due to their confinement status, aging incarcerated individuals face additional health risks associated with limited access to health care services as well as risky lifestyles and behaviors<sup>2</sup>, leading to more rapid progression of health problems compared to non-incarcerated populations. Correctional departments face significant challenges in order to provide the necessary care and support<sup>3</sup>.

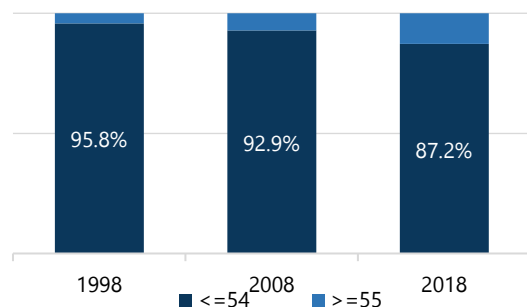
This report:

- Describes the Washington state incarcerated population over two decades (1998-2018) by age (i.e., individuals who were 54 years or younger with individuals 55 years or older) (see Figure 1 and 2).
- Examines the similarities and differences amongst the 1998, 2008 and 2018 snapshot incarcerated population by age (i.e., individuals who were  $\leq 54$  years and  $> 55$  years) in terms of crime (see Figure 3), custody level (see Figure 4) and recidivism rates.

## Methods

We examined two age cohorts of incarcerated individuals in Washington's state prisons, persons below 55 years of age and persons 55 years of age and older, from three data "snapshots" of December 1998, 2008, and 2018 respectively. Note, 104 individuals were in the 1998 and 2008 samples, 317 individuals were in the 2008 and 2018 samples, and 29 individuals were in all three samples. As is seen in Table 1 below, the incarcerated population 55 years of age and older increased by 291% from 584 to 2,285, making up 13% of the current incarcerated population in Washington.

FIGURE 1: INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS BY AGE



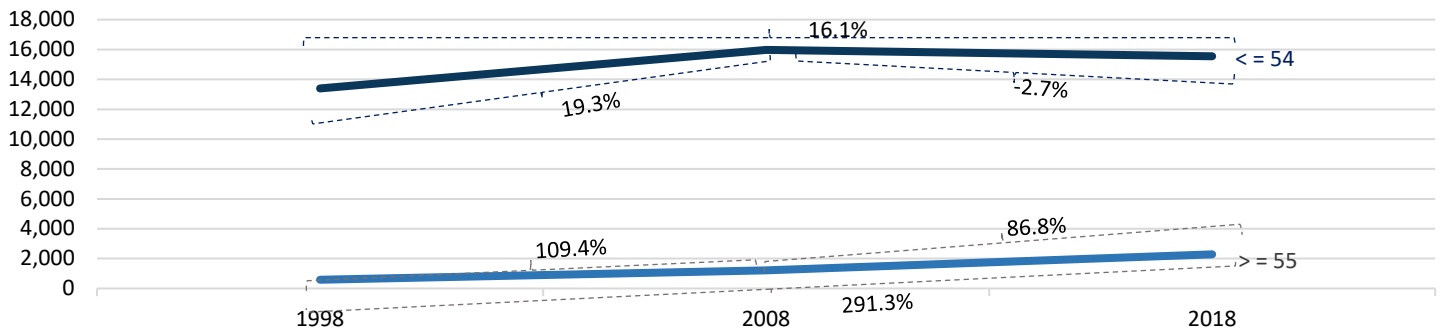
- In the 1998 snapshot population (N = 13,978), 95.8% (13,394) were 54 years of age or younger and 4.2% (584) were 55 years of age or older. The average age was 34.1 years with a mean of 33 years old.
- In the 2008 snapshot population (N = 17,192), 92.9% (15,971) were 54 years of age or younger and 7.1% (1,221) were 55 years of age or older. The average age was 36.7 years with a mean of 35 years old.
- In the 2018 snapshot population (N = 17,833), 87.2% (15,548) were 54 years of age or younger and 12.8% (2,285) were 55 years of age or older. The average age was 39.1 years with a mean of 37 years old.

Demographics of the 55 years of age and older population are as followed:

- In 1998, 48.1% were serving time for a sex offense, 35.4% had a sentence of 10 years or longer, 27.7% had served prior prison time, 70.4% were minimum custody, and 39.6% had less than a year of their sentence left.
- In 2008, 42.8% were serving time for a sex offense, 40.4% had a sentence of 10 years or longer, 31.6% had served prior prison time, 73.8% were minimum custody, and 43.2% had less than a year of their sentence left.
- In 2018, 36.8% were serving time for a sex offense, 40.2% had a sentence of 10 years or longer, 41.3% had prior prison, 69.8% were minimum custody, and 50.7% had less than a year of their sentence left.

1. Carson, E. A., & Sabol, W. J. (2016). Aging of the state prison population, 1993-2013. US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2. Williams, B. A., Goodwin, J. S., Baillargeon, J., Ahalt, C., & Walter, L. C. (2012). Addressing the aging crisis in US criminal justice health care. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 60(6), 1150-1156. 3. Skarupski, K. A., Gross, A., Schrack, J. A., Deal, J. A., & Eber, G. B. (2018). The health of America's aging prison population. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 40(1), 157-165

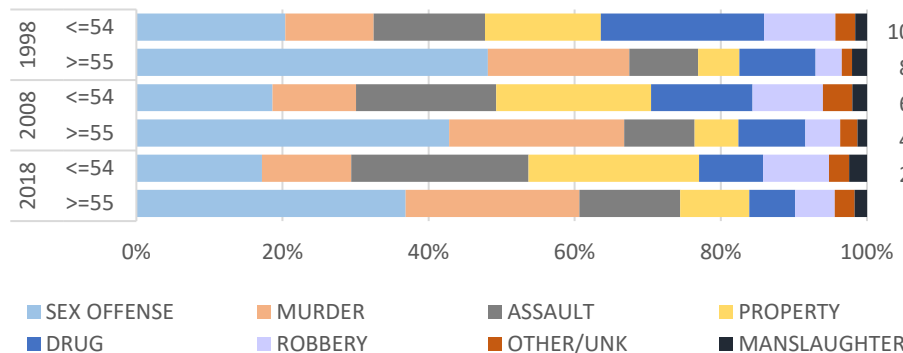
**FIGURE 2: OVERALL POPULATION CHANGE OF INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS BY AGE**



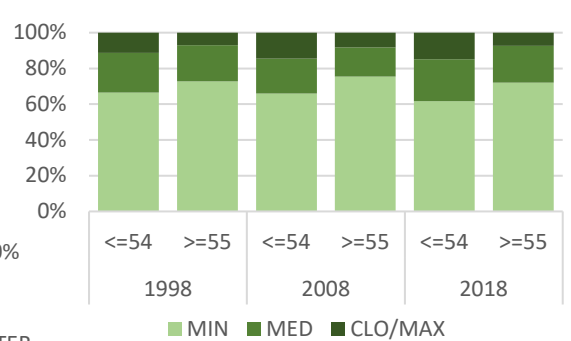
**Findings**

- The 1998 December snapshot population differed in age and offense type (i.e., worst crime), ( $\chi^2 (7, N = 13,977) = 337.19, p < .001$ ) suggesting that most incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older (79%) served time for violent offenses compared to those 54 or younger (49.3%). The 1998 December snapshot population also differed in age and custody level ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 13,512) = 33.53, p < .001$ ) showing that incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older were more likely to be placed in minimum custody (70.4%) and less likely to be placed in maximum/closed custody than their younger counterparts.
- The 2008 December snapshot population also differed in age and offense type (i.e., worst crime), ( $\chi^2 (7, N = 17,192) = 714.04, p < .001$ ) suggesting that most incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older (77.6%) served time for violent offenses compared to those 54 or younger (51.2%). The 2008 December snapshot also differed by age and custody level ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 16,248) = 53.11, p < .001$ ) showing that most incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older were less likely to be placed in maximum/closed custody (8.1%) and were more likely to be placed in minimum custody (73.8%) than their younger peers.
- The 2018 December snapshot population similarly differed in age and offense type (i.e., worst crime), ( $\chi^2 (7, N = 17,835) = 907.77, p < .001$ ) suggesting that most incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older (79.0%) served time for violent offenses compared to those 54 or younger (49.3%). The 2018 December snapshot population differed by age and custody level ( $\chi^2 (3, N = 16,617) = 50.17, p < .001$ ) suggesting that incarcerated individuals 55 years of age and older were less likely placed in maximum/closed custody (6.8%) and were more likely placed in minimum custody (70.0%) than their younger counterparts.

**FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF OFFENSES (I.E., WORST CRIME) BY AGE**



**FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF CUSTODY LEVEL BY AGE**



**Implications and Next Steps**

The rising number of incarcerated individuals age 55 and older presents challenges for criminal justice and correctional systems. In Washington, the incarcerated population 55 years of age and older now makes up 13% of those currently incarcerated and continued growth in the aging population is expected. However, recidivism rates are significantly lower within the older age category. Of the 1998 snapshot incarcerated population 55 years and older, 5.0% returned to prison on a new crime within 36 months of release as compared to 21.9% of their 1998 younger counterpart. Of the 2008 snapshot incarcerated population 55 years and older, 4.1% returned to prison on a new crime, within 36 months of release, as compared to 22.8% of their 2008 younger peers — despite the fact incarcerated over the age of 55 were more likely to have been sentenced for more violent offenses carrying longer sentences.

Future work should continue to examine the factors that have accelerated growth in the aging incarcerated population and help increase agency knowledge regarding the needs of the aging population. This includes consideration of policy changes and new programs that affect the aging incarcerated population.

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