

Lifers' Group Fast Facts: PRISONER DEATHS IN MA-DOC 2017-2022

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Prisoner deaths while incarcerated during 2017 to 2022 are shown in the TABLE. Decreasing numbers with age are explained by lower numbers of older prisoners. In 2022, 14%, 28%, 24%, 19%, 10%, 4%, 1% and 0% of prisoners, respectively, populated the age ranges listed in the table(1). Those aged 60-99 make up 66% of deaths. There was an increase in deaths during the Covid-19 pandemic. Those in their 70's amounted to 42% and 37% of the deaths in 2020 and 2021, respectively. Because of progressively falling prison populations we also corrected yearly total deaths, multiplying by the population in 2022 divided by the population in each given year. This normalized data, shown in the "Adj'd Totals" row, reveal that 2020 and 2021 total deaths were similarly increased 49% and 41% over average annual rates. Violent death rates are also shown, with deaths proportionately increased for those in their 20's and 30's (2).

DEATHS IN PRISON IN MASSACHUSETTS DOC 2017-2022

Age Range	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total	Violent ^a
20-29	3	1	-	1	-	-	5 (2%)	4/-
30-39	0	5	3	3	2	1	14 (6%)	5/4
40-49	3	3	1	3	3	1	14 (6%)	1/2
50-59	8	6	11	4	7	6	42(19%)	5/1
60-69	13	12	9	11	10	10	65(30%)	1/-
70-79	8	8	5	19	14	7	61(28%)	1/1
80-89	2	3	4	4	2	2	17 (8%)	-/-
90-99	-	1	1	-	-	-	2 (1%)	-/-
60-99	23	24	19	34	26	19	145(66%)	2/1
Totals	37	39	34	45	38	27	220	17/8
July 1 Pop. ^b	9104	8728	8397	7040	6272	5950		
Adj'd Totals ^b	24	27	24	38	36	27		

^aViolent deaths shown as approximate # of suicides/homicides(2).

^bTotals adjusted to custody population of 2022 (custody pop. 7/1/2022=5950).

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Population trends show that prisoners are aging in prison and the numbers serving first and second degree life sentences are increasing. By 7/1/2022, 19% were first degree and 14% were second degree lifers and 28% of both were aged 60 years and older.(3). This represents the bulk of those at highest risk of dying in the prisons which are poorly equipped to house them. They also have the lowest risks of re-offending. Evidence shows that homicide offenders and those over 60 most rarely recidivate(4). And, they are the most expensive to incarcerate, typically costing up to 2-5 times the average annual rate to imprison(5).

It is time to strongly consider releasing prisoners over 60 who have served substantial portions of their sentences. Current prisons are not designed to house elderly and infirm prisoners, but if present trends continue, new facilities will need to be built. It is far more appropriate to release aging and low risk prisoners, using savings to mitigate troubled communities. Improving education, providing jobs and supporting vulnerable youth will reduce future crime, driving down costs and improving public safety(6). Additionally, returning low risk ex-prisoners to their communities will stabilize these and also prevent future crime(7).



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ENDNOTES

Sources: Public records requests from the MA-DOC 2018-2023. Calculations by author.

1. Greineder D. "MA-DOC Criminally Sentenced Jurisdiction Population by Sentence and Age Group" (Lifers' Group Inc.**, Norfolk, MA, January 1, 2022).
2. Violent deaths are listed as "Suicide/Homicide" by the DOC and even with the reported medical causes of death, the status is not always clear. Results shown list the most likely cause.
3. MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION. "Fact Cards" (MA-DOC, Milford, July 1, 2022); Greineder, "MA-DOC Criminally Sentenced Jurisdiction Population..." (note 1).
4. Nellis A. "No End In Sight: America's Enduring Reliance on Life Imprisonment" (The Sentencing Project, Washington, DC, 2021); Nellis A & Bishop B. "New Lease on Life" (The Sentencing Project, Washington, DC, 2021); Durose MR, Cooper AD, Snyder HN. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 30 States in 2005" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014); Langan PA & Levin DJ. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002).
5. McKillop M & Boucher A. "Aging Prisoner Populations Drive Up Costs (Pew Charitable Trusts, Washington, DC, Feb, 2018; ACLU. "At America's Expense: The Mass Incarceration of the Elderly" (ACLU, New York, 2012); Tina Chiu. "It's About the Time: Aging Prisoners, Increasing Costs, and Geriatric Release" (Vera Institute of Justice, New York, 2010).
6. Wildeman C. "Parental Imprisonment, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage" *Demography* (2009) 46:265-280; McLaughlin M, Pettus-Davis C, Brown D, et al. "The Economic Burden of Incarceration in the U.S." (Washington Univ Inst for Advancing Justice Research and Innovation, #AJIO72016 (2016); see also Greineder D. "The Cruel Aging of Massachusetts Life-Sentenced Prisoners" ppl3-19 (Lifers' Group Inc.**, Norfolk, MA, 2022) for a discussion about why excess incarceration does little to improve public safety since it neither deters nor prevents crime; rather the destabilizing social effect of excessive incarceration has been shown to increase crime and decrease public safety.
7. Ibid.

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