

INTRODUCTION

The **Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2013** (DCRA) legally requires all U.S. prison systems to report all in-custody deaths to the **U.S. Attorney General**, along with corresponding circumstantial and demographic information. Until 2019, the **Department of Justice** (DOJ) would publish this data annually, giving stakeholders vital information regarding prison health trends. However, after administrative failures in data collection and enforcing compliance with the DCRA, the DOJ stopped publishing this data. To address the reporting void, the **Third City Project**, part of the Bellwether Collective for Health Justice, created the most comprehensive dataset of prisoner deaths by merging federal records with state correctional press releases.

OBJECTIVES

This project focuses on three goals:

- **Expand** the Third City Project database using Department of Corrections press releases from all states and Washington D.C.
- **Analyze** prison mortality trends using data analysis with the Third City Project database.
- **Build** an interactive map to visualize prison death trends and data across U.S. states.

LIMITATIONS

While this project improves public understanding of prisoner deaths by linking multiple data sources, it operates within a **fragmented reporting system**. Inconsistent death in-custody reporting practices across states and missing data challenge efforts to build a complete picture of national prison mortality.

Key barriers include:

- Incomplete or delayed records from states, creating data gaps.
- Inconsistent terminology and formats, making comparing different jurisdictions difficult.
- Missing demographic and cause-of-death data, limiting analysis.
- Many jurisdictions underreport actual deaths, reducing accuracy.

DATA SOURCES

We use the Third City Project national prison mortality database, which is made up of three critical sources:

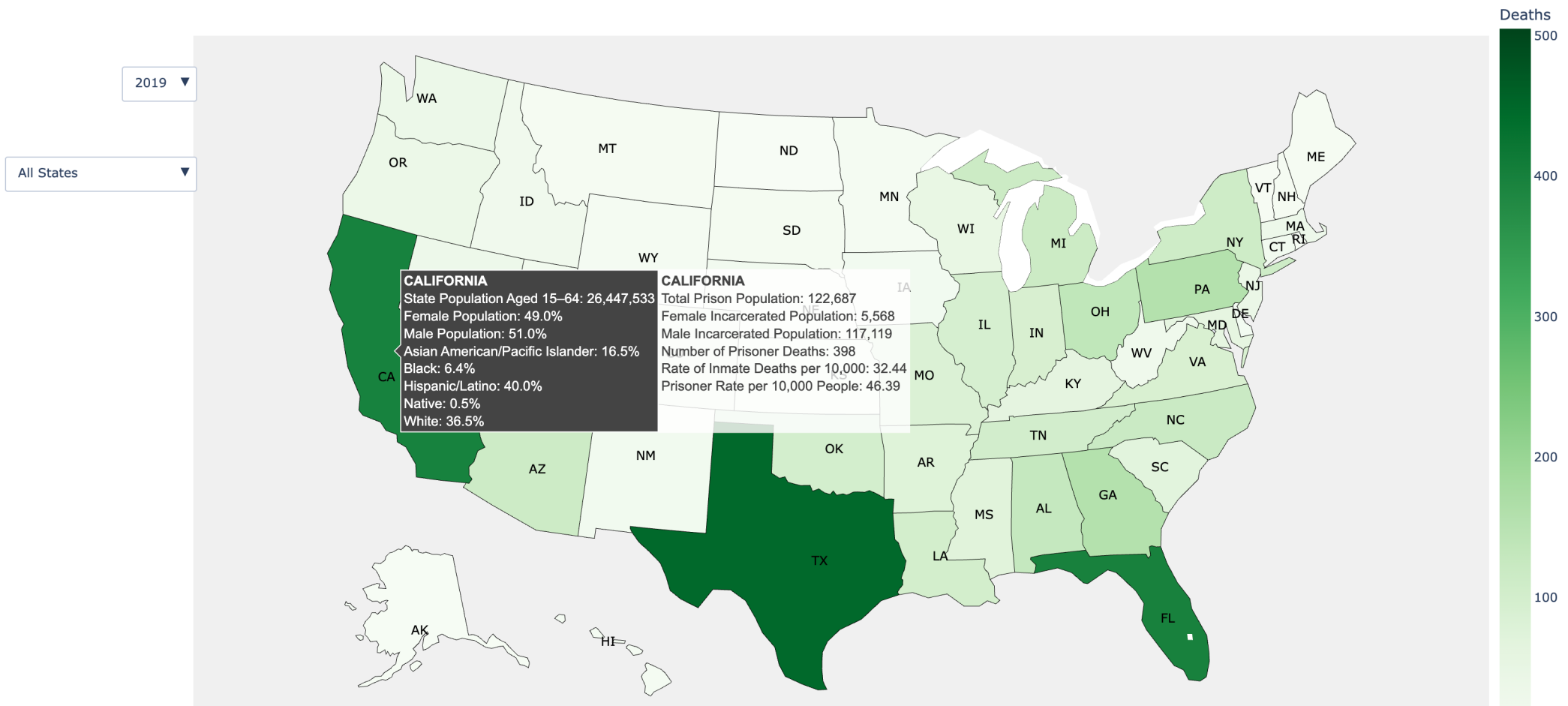
- **State press releases**, manually entered via Qualtrics into the Third City Project database, capturing names, dates, death causes.
- **Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)** data, with standardized causes and demographics.
- **Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)** records from the Deaths in Custody Reporting Program (DCRA), with varying formats across states.



INTERACTIVE MAP

Note: The map was built using the BJS dataset from 2015 to 2019, as it provided more complete and standardized data compared to the BJA records.

A central feature of this project is an interactive map visualizing prisoner deaths alongside other incarceration metrics across all states. Users can filter by year and state, with a color scale showing the number of deaths. Hovering over a state reveals two panels: **general population data** (age, gender, race) and **prison data**, including population, deaths, death rate, and imprisonment rate. This tool supports the Third City Project's mission to provide stakeholders with comprehensive, easily accessible knowledge regarding prison health.

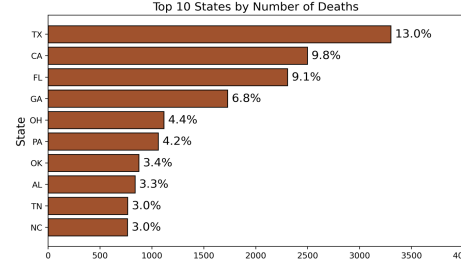
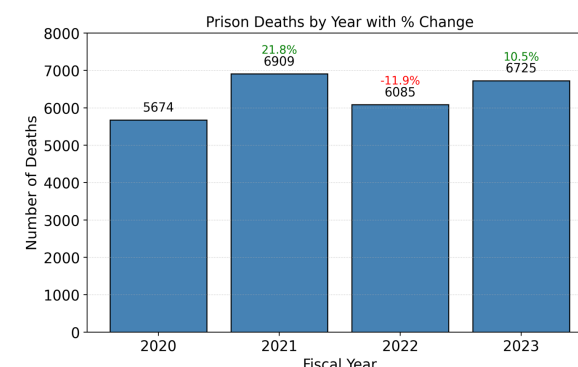


EXPLORATORY DATA ANALYSIS

Note: The analysis below is based on BJA records from 2020 to 2023

Prison Death Trends and State-Level Distribution

Prison deaths spiked after 2020, likely due to **COVID-19** and limited access to medical care. Counts dipped in 2022, then rose again in 2023. These shifts may reflect reporting delays more than real declines. Overall, the trend shows a sustained increase that calls for closer investigation.

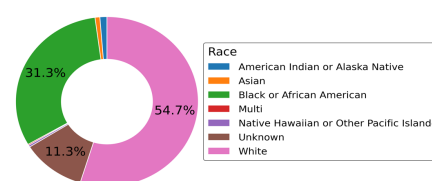


Over 50% of prison deaths come from just 10 states, led by **Texas, California, and Florida**. This reflects their large overall and prison populations, but also reveals disproportionate regional gaps in incarceration-related mortality across the U.S.

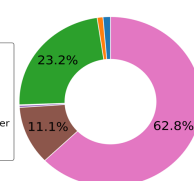
Racial and Gender Disparities in Prison Mortality

Deaths were highest among White (14,000) and Black (8,000) prisoners overall. Most prison deaths occurred among men, reflecting their larger share of the incarcerated population. Over 70% were non-Hispanic, though **20% lacked ethnicity data**. These gaps reflect differences in incarceration, care access, and prison conditions, highlighting the need for better demographic reporting.

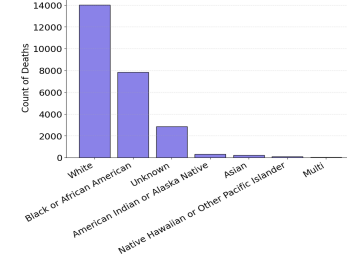
Male: Distribution of Deaths by Race



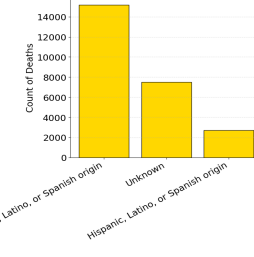
Female: Distribution of Deaths by Race



Total Prison Deaths by Race

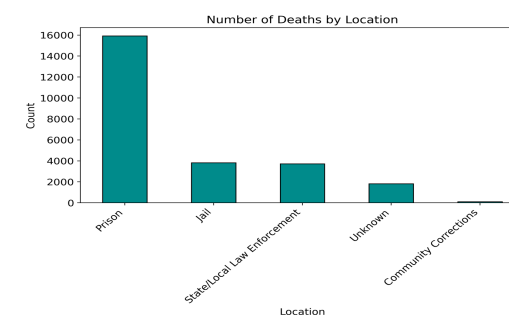
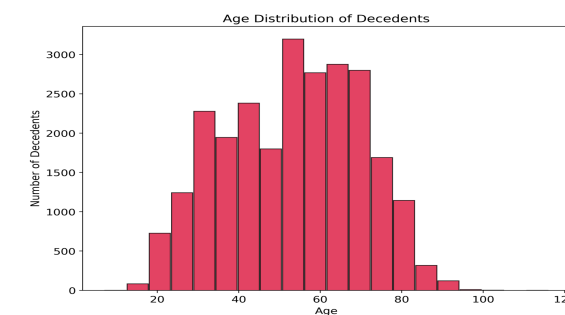
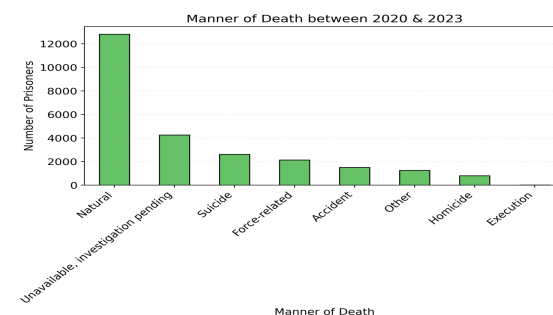


Total Prison Deaths by Ethnicity

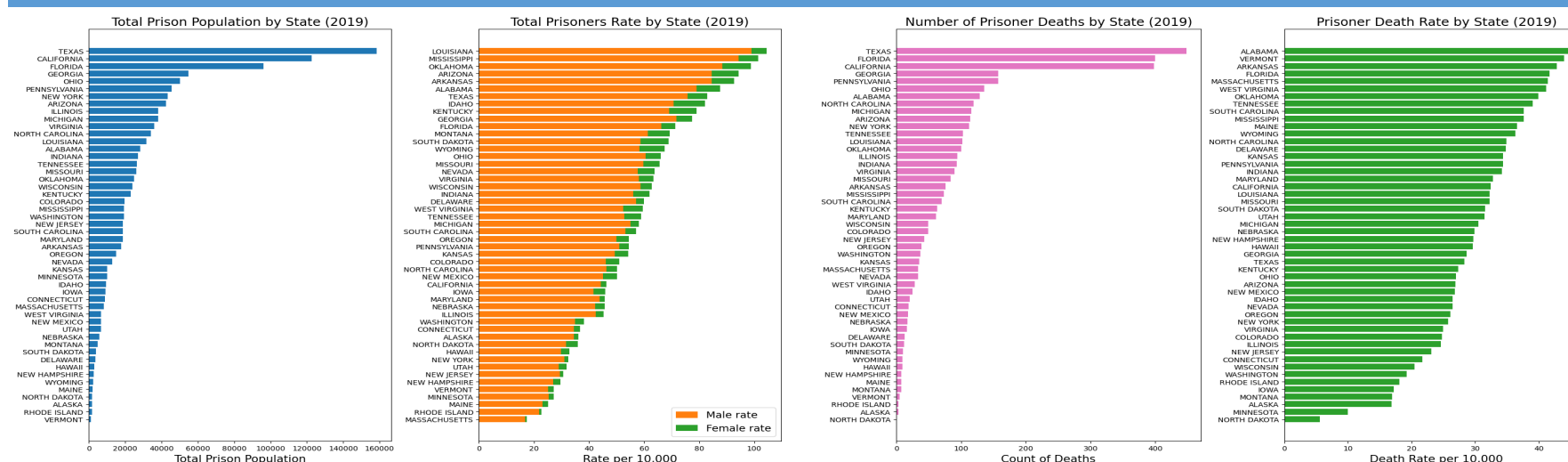


Prison Mortality Snapshot

Most deaths are from **natural causes**, in **older prisoners**, and inside **state prisons** – pointing to chronic illness and poor access to care as primary drivers.



INTERACTIVE MAP OVERVIEW



Based on the interactive map, 2019 data shows that Texas, California, and Florida lead in total prison population and deaths. But Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma have the highest incarceration rates, while Alabama, Vermont, and Arkansas have the highest death rates per 10,000 prisoners. This shows how **smaller states may look worse by rate**, underscoring the value of population-based comparisons for revealing system-level disparities.

FUTURE WORK

- **Link federal & state records**; update the 3rd City database via Qualtrics.
- **Finalize BJA data (2020–2024)** for analysis and integration.
- **Enhance the interactive map** and prepare for public release.
- **Use statistical and ML models** to continue analyzing mortality trends.
- **Collaborate with Third City** to improve the platform and draft policy briefs.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to David Cloud, Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein and Abdul Wasai for their guidance and support throughout the project!

References

1. United States. Bureau of Justice Statistics. National Prisoner Statistics, [United States], 1978-2022. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2024-01-10. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR38871.v1>
2. United States. Prison Policy Initiative. *Appendix: State and federal prison populations 2019-2023 and sources*. Prison Policy Initiative [distributor], n.d. https://www.prisonpolicy.org/data/prison_pops_2019_2023_sources.html