

Racial disparities persist in Alaska's prisons

By

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Inmates at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center in 2018. (Will Mader/KTOO)

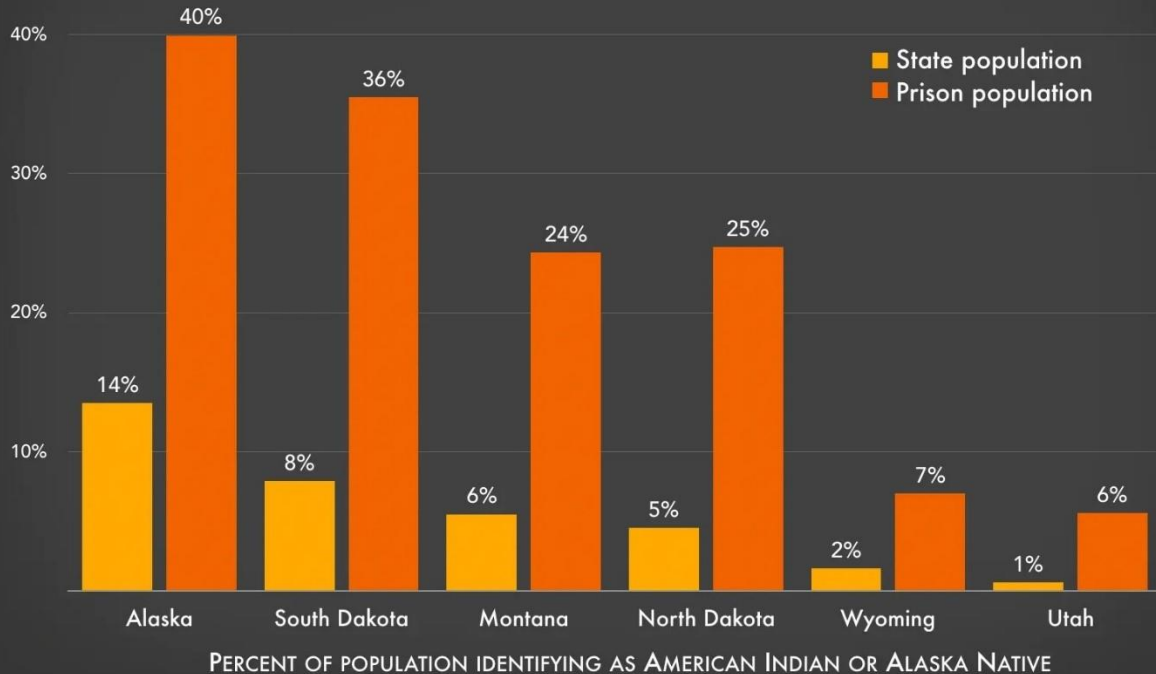
A national prison research group that tracks inmate populations says American Indians and Alaska Natives, next to Black people, are vastly overrepresented in state prison systems nationwide — and Alaska tops the list.

The Prison Policy Initiative, a Massachusetts-based think tank, drilled down on inmate population counts from 2021. It looked at every state and found that Alaska Natives make up 40% of the people incarcerated in Alaska, yet are only 14% of the state's population.

The numbers also show that, in Alaska, the total number of Native people in prison is almost equal to the number of white people in prison. In the 2021 count, 4,600 people were incarcerated in Alaska prisons. Out of those, almost 1,895 were white, compared to 1,855 Natives. Wanda Bertram, a Prison Policy Initiative spokeswoman, said those numbers are a red flag. "That suggests something not just out of proportion, but also deeply unjust about the criminal justice system," Bertram said. "I think that what it says is Alaska's criminal justice system is racist. It's just that simple."

In six state prison systems, Native people are vastly overrepresented

Percent of population identified as American Indian/Alaska Native compared to the percent of each state's prison population that identifies as AI/AN, in the six states with the greatest disparities



Sources: The Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Prisoners in 2021*, Appendix Table 1 & *American Community Survey 2021, 1-Year Estimates (Table B03002)*. Note that both sources only include single-race, non-Hispanic AI/AN individuals.

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A graph comparing Alaska general and prison populations' proportions of American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) inmates to other states. (Courtesy Prison Policy Initiative)

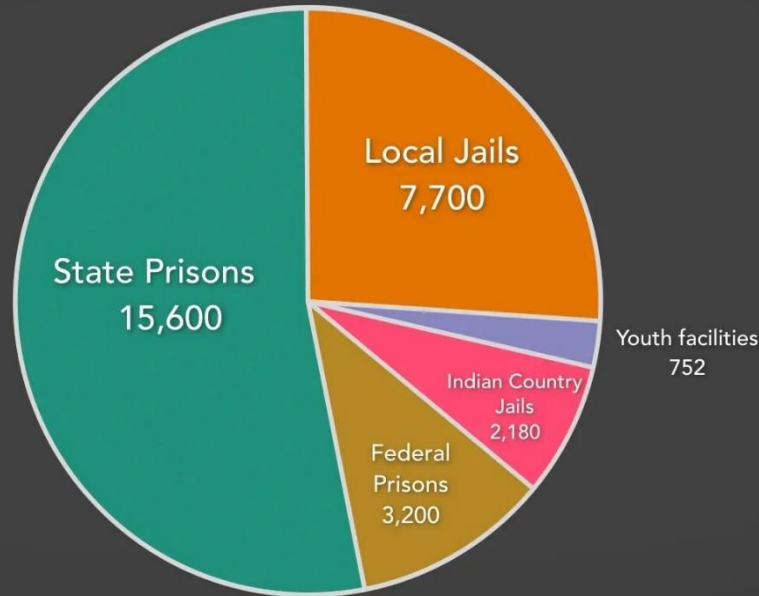
But Brad Myrstol, a researcher at the University of Alaska Anchorage Justice Center, said the picture is much more complicated, because Alaska's prison system is structured differently than most other state correctional centers.

"It's one thing to talk about disparities and try to understand how they're produced," Myrstol said. "It's quite another thing to talk about discrimination, which implies a systematic intent." He said, when analyzing data, he looks at what he calls the "three D's": difference, disparities and discrimination.

Myrstol said the "difference" for Alaska lies in how its prison system is structured. Most other states, he said, house inmates in two separate institutions, prisons and local jails. But in Alaska, the two are combined into one, known as a "unified corrections system." Alaska and five other states — Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island and Vermont — have unified systems.

How many Native people are locked up and where?

At least 29,416 American Indian or Alaska Native people are locked up in various kinds of facilities across the U.S. Because of how the data are published, this number includes people who identify *only* as American Indian or Alaska Native, excluding many thousands who identify as more than one race or ethnicity.



Data notes: There may be some double counting between the prison and local jail populations, as an unknown portion of Native people in local jails are held there for state or federal correctional agencies. Also, there is no Indian country jail data available by race or ethnicity, so for this chart, we assumed that everyone in those facilities identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native. Sources: BJS's *Prisoners in 2021*, *Jail Inmates in 2021*, *Jails in Indian Country, 2021*, and the OJJDP's *Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, 2019*.

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A breakdown of nationwide facility types in which AI/AN people are held. (Courtesy Prison Policy Initiative)

In most states, unsentenced or pre-trial inmates are housed separately.

Myrstol said there is more racial disparity in this population, usually traced to poverty. He said white inmates are more likely to be able to afford bail or legal help to get out on supervised release, but Alaska Natives and other minorities are less likely to have those resources, so they remain incarcerated longer while awaiting sentencing. Myrstol said a backlog of court cases, created by the COVID-19 pandemic, has made the problem worse.

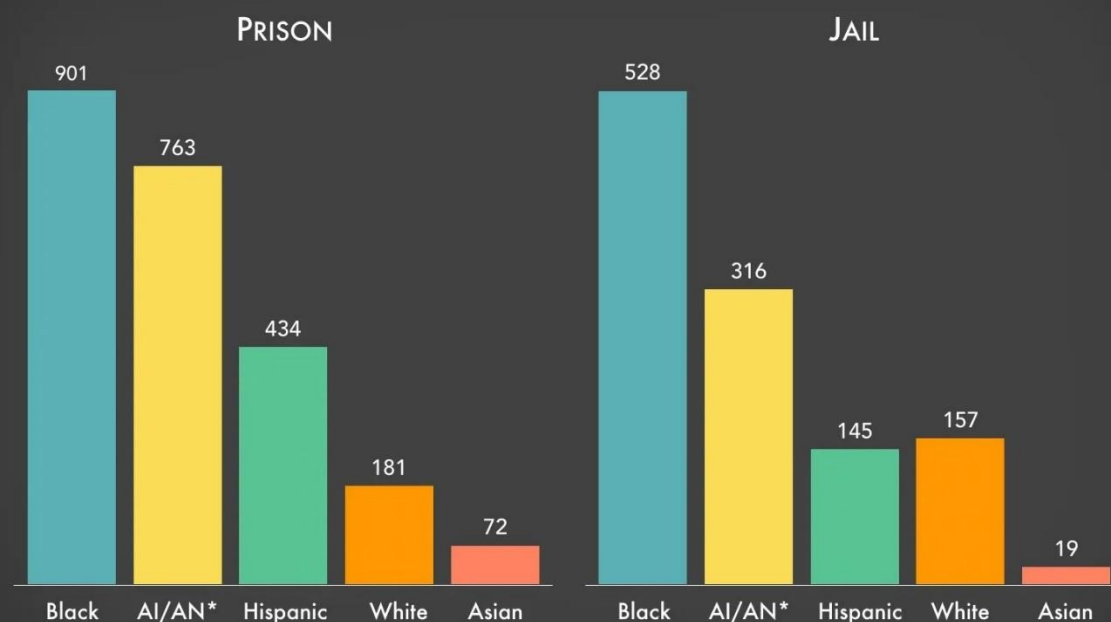
Myrstol said he can't say whether Alaska's criminal justice system is racist.

"What I will say is we see disparities throughout the criminal justice system in Alaska and elsewhere. And the reasons for those disparities are complex, but they are very important to understand," Myrstol said. "But we have to guard against oversimplistic, single-cause explanations."

But Prison Policy Initiative said regardless of how you add up the numbers, American Indian and Alaska Native inmate populations nationwide are way too high compared to overall population.

Racial disparities in incarceration rates, 2021

Number of people incarcerated in local jails and prisons per 100,000 people in each racial or ethnic category



*American Indian/Alaska Native

Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Jail Inmates in 2021*, Table 4 and *Prisoners in 2021*, Table 5

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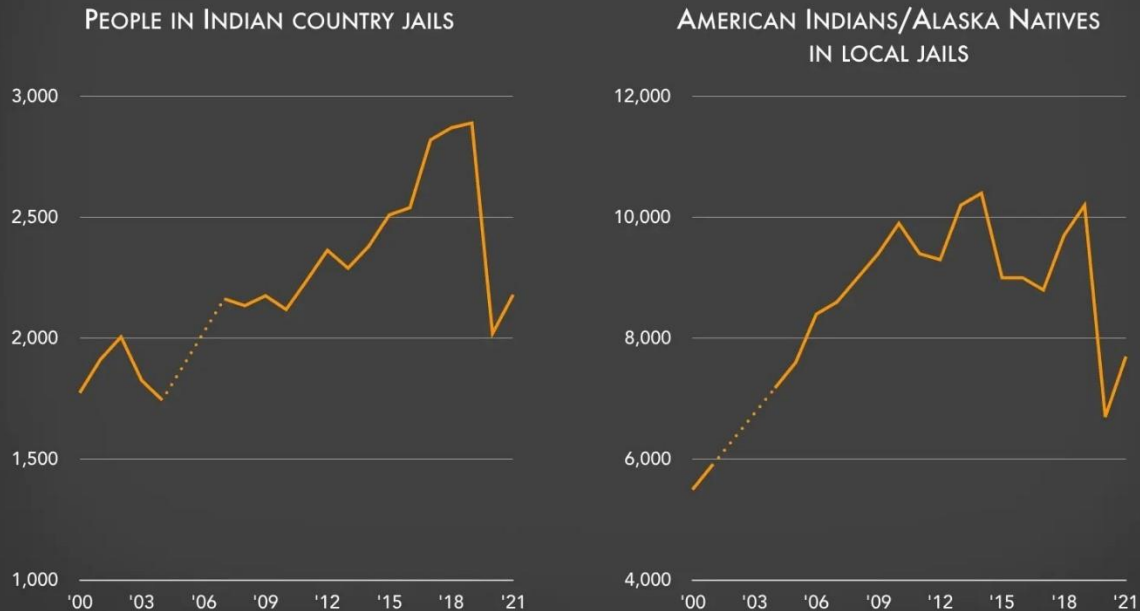
A graph of nationwide per-capita rates of prison and jail incarceration by ethnicity from 2021. (Courtesy Prison Policy Initiative)

And given Alaska's numbers, Bertram said the key to reducing those rates is understanding the root cause of these disparities – such as looking into whether high rates of homelessness among Alaska Natives drive up their numbers in prison.

“That could mean that low-level things like panhandling or sleeping on the street — or using drugs — can get you jail time, that can sometimes lead to prison time for other charges,” Bertram said. “And people who are poor are effectively railroaded into the prison system.” Bertram said nationwide incarceration rates for Alaska Natives and American Indians as a group, reported by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, have been growing at an alarming rate. “In this country, you're disproportionately likely to end up in prison if you're a Native American,” Bertram said. “And that's true, regardless of what state you're in. It's even more likely, even more disproportionately likely, if you're in Alaska.”

Incarceration in Indian country jails and Native incarceration in local jails has exploded since 2000

While all jail populations decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people in Indian country jails and American Indians/Alaska Natives in local jails appear to be rebounding.



Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics series *Jails in Indian Country, 2000-2021*, *Jail Inmates at Midyear 2013*, and *Jail Inmates in 2021*. Some data not available for certain years 2001-2006.

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A depiction of AI/AN inmates in Indian country and local jails from 2000 through 2021.
(Courtesy Prison Policy Initiative)

Since 2000, inmate populations in Indian Country jails climbed by 62%. In all other local jails, the number is even higher, at 85%.

As for Alaska prisons, Brad Myrstol said, it's easier to identify the disparities than it is to resolve them.

“(The state) Departments of Corrections have very little control on the inputs that they receive,” he said. “We live in a society where we seek equality under the law — and when we see disparities, it begs really important questions.”