

How much do incarcerated people earn in each state?

by [Wendy Sawyer](#), April 10, 2017

How much do incarcerated people earn? In 2003's [The Prison Index](#), we included wages reported by an obscure publication in 2001. Those numbers remain among the most searched-for and cited statistics we have published, although they are now almost twenty years old. Prison wages come up again and again in the context of prison conditions and policies, and were even at the center of the [nationwide prison strike](#) last fall. And no wonder: wages allow incarcerated people to purchase personal items not provided by the prison, pay ever-increasing fees, and bridge the gap after release. So, we set out to find the most up-to-date information available for each state.

For this update, we combed through the [policies](#) of state correctional agencies and any other available sources, and found information for every state. Despite the inaccessibility of data for some state prison jobs, this is the most comprehensive list of wages paid to incarcerated people available today:

	Regular jobs [non-industry]		Jobs in state-owned businesses [Correctional Industries ¹]	
	Low	High	Low	High
Alabama	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.75
Alaska	0.30	1.25	0.65	4.90
Arizona	0.15	0.50	0.20	0.80
Arkansas	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
California	0.08	0.37	0.30	0.95
Colorado	0.13	0.38	n/a	n/a
Connecticut	0.13	1.00	0.30	1.50
Delaware	n/a	n/a	0.25	2.00
Florida	0.00	0.32	0.20	0.55
Georgia	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Hawaii	0.25	0.25	0.50	2.50
Idaho	0.10	0.90	n/a	n/a
Illinois	0.09	0.89	0.30	2.25
Indiana	0.12	0.25	n/a	n/a
Iowa	0.27	0.68	0.68	0.87
Kansas	0.09	0.16	0.25	3.00
Kentucky	0.13	0.33	n/a	n/a
Louisiana	0.04	1.00	n/a	0.40
Maine	n/a	n/a	0.68	3.50
Maryland	0.15	0.46	0.20	0.82
Massachusetts	0.14	1.00	n/a	n/a
Michigan	0.14	0.56	n/a	n/a
Minnesota	0.25	2.00	0.50	2.00
Mississippi	0.00	n/a	0.20	1.30
Missouri	0.05	n/a	0.30	1.25
Montana	0.16	1.25	n/a	n/a
Nebraska	0.16	1.08	0.38	1.08
Nevada	n/a	n/a	0.25	5.15
New Hampshire	0.25	1.50	0.50	1.50
New Jersey	0.26	2.00	0.38	2.00
New Mexico	0.10	1.00	0.30	1.10
New York	0.10	0.33	Average 0.62	
North Carolina	0.05	0.38	0.05	0.38

Ohio	0.10	0.17	0.21	1.23
Oklahoma	0.05	0.54	0.00	0.43
Oregon	0.05	0.47	0.05	0.47
Pennsylvania	0.19	1.00	0.19	0.42
Rhode Island	0.29	0.86	n/a	n/a
South Carolina	0.00	0.00	0.35	1.80
South Dakota	0.25	0.38	0.25	0.25
Tennessee	0.17	0.75	n/a	n/a
Texas	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Vermont	0.40	n/a	0.60	1.75
Vermont	0.25	0.40	0.25	1.25
Virginia	0.27	0.45	0.55	0.80
Washington	n/a	0.36	0.70	2.70
West Virginia	0.04	0.58	n/a	n/a
Wisconsin	0.09	0.42	0.79	1.45
Wyoming	0.35	1.00	0.50	1.20
Federal Prisons	0.12	0.40	0.23	1.15
Average	0.14	0.63	0.33	1.41

Wages are per hour. Some states publish wage policies differently. For states that calculate wages on daily, weekly, monthly, and annual bases, I calculated the hourly rates based on work hours per day and work days per month, according to the written policies or what was reported in the 2001 Corrections Yearbook survey. For states where I could find no information on work hours, I assumed 22 work days per month and an average workday of 6.35 hours (for regular jobs) or 6.79 hours (for industry jobs) per day. I included all non-industry jobs paid by correctional agencies as "regular prison jobs" for the table, including rare and off-site jobs that pay more. In many states, most regular prison jobs pay well below the highest rates stated here. See the [Appendix](#) for policy details.

What kinds of work do incarcerated people do?

Not everyone works in prison. Facilities face budget limitations and sometimes there is just not enough work to go around. But generally, correctional facilities assign incarcerated people to work as close to a regular day as possible. These work assignments fall into four broad categories, the first of which is by far the most common:

1. Regular prison jobs. These are directed by the Department of Corrections and support the prison facility. This category includes custodial, maintenance, laundry, grounds keeping, food service, and many other types of work. Sometimes called "facility," "prison," or "institutional support" jobs, these are the most common prison jobs.
2. Jobs in state-owned businesses. Often called "Correctional Industries," these businesses produce goods and provide services that are sold to government agencies. Correctional agencies and the businesses coordinate to operate these "shops," and the revenues they generate help fund these positions. Agency-operated industries employ about 6% of people incarcerated in prisons.
3. Jobs outside the facility. Work release programs, work camps, and community work centers provide services for public or nonprofit agencies. These programs are directed by the Department of Corrections, but sometimes community employers pay incarcerated workers' wages. These jobs are typically reserved for people considered lower security risks, and/or those preparing to be released.
4. Jobs in private businesses. A small number of incarcerated people work for businesses that contract with correctional agencies through the [PIE program](#). This program allows private companies to operate within correctional facilities and provide job training and supervision. Companies must pay local "prevailing wages" for these jobs, but workers may only end up with a small portion of these wages; up to 80% of these earnings can be deducted for various fees.

One major surprise: prisons appear to be paying incarcerated people *less* today than they were in 2001. The average of the minimum daily wages paid to incarcerated workers for non-industry prison jobs is now 86 cents, down from 93 cents reported in 2001. The average maximum daily wage for the same prison jobs has declined more significantly, from \$4.73 in 2001 to \$3.45 today. What changed? At least seven states appear to have lowered their maximum wages, and South Carolina no longer pays wages for most regular prison jobs -assignments that paid up to \$4.80 per day in 2001. With a few rare **exceptions**, regular prison jobs are still unpaid in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Texas.

Incarcerated people assigned to work for state-owned businesses earn between 33 cents and \$1.41 per hour on average — roughly twice as much as people assigned to regular prison jobs. Only about **6 percent** of people incarcerated in state prisons earn these "higher" wages, however. An even tinier portion of incarcerated workers are eligible for "prevailing local wages" working for private businesses that contract with states through the **PIE program**. The vast majority spend their days working in custodial, maintenance, grounds keeping, or food service jobs for the institutions that confine them.

The wages listed above do not include any deductions, which in reality often leave incarcerated workers with less than half of their gross pay. In **Massachusetts**, for example, at least half of each paycheck goes into a savings account to pay for expenses after release. "Any and all funds" can be used to pay court-assessed fines, court costs, victim witness assessments, etc. **New Mexico** deducts 15-50% of each paycheck for a Crime Victims Reparations Fund, discharge money, and family support. These policies arguably serve legitimate purposes, but such deductions also mean that \$1 per day earned to make day-to-day life behind bars more bearable is really 50 cents (or even less).

The question of wages paid for prison labor is an important one, especially when we consider the *relative costs* of **fees charged** and **things sold** to incarcerated people. The value of a dollar is different when you earn pennies per hour. (And in six states, the wage is almost always zero pennies per hour.) In **Colorado**, for example, it costs an incarcerated woman two weeks' wages to buy a box of tampons; maybe more if there's a **shortage**. Saving up for a \$10 phone card would take almost two weeks for an incarcerated person working in a **Pennsylvania** prison.

Making it hard for incarcerated people to earn real money hurts their chances of success when they are released, too. With little to no savings, how

With no savings, how can people possible afford the immediate costs of food, housing, healthcare, transportation, child support, and supervision fees once released?

can they possibly afford the immediate costs of food, housing, healthcare, transportation, child support, and **supervision fees**? People with felony convictions are often ineligible for **government benefit programs** like welfare and food stamps, and face barriers to finding stable housing and employment. And they may leave prison with **just a bus ticket and \$50** of "gate money," if they have no other savings. So the meager earnings from prison work assignments can be essential to a person's success — and even survival — when they return to their community.

Most prison jobs teach incarcerated people very **few skills relevant to the labor market** they will rejoin upon release, so the wages they earn may be the only payoff they see. These perpetually low wages are especially frustrating when we consider the increasing expenses incarcerated people face, both inside and after release. Of course, raising wages is a **tough sell politically**, but policymakers and the public must acknowledge that **almost everyone** in prison will eventually be released. Their success and independence depends largely on financial stability⁷, which is undermined by low wages, nickel-and-diming through "user fees," mandatory deductions, and work that does little to prepare them for work outside of prisons. Forward-thinking policymakers must consider the importance of earnings and relevant job training for people they hope will be independent one day.

For details about each state's wage policies, see the **Appendix**.

Updated April 28, 2017 with information from a new source on Oklahoma's regular prison jobs (non-industry). Originally, I included information based on a DOC website statement that these jobs pay up to \$20 per month. According to DOC policy, however, most pay between \$7.23 and \$14.45 per month, and the highest possible wage for "special project pay" is 54 cents per hour. The averages have been updated to reflect these changes as well.